Once Upon a Time in England

Helen Walsh

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Extract

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‘In your town . . . people see with their own eyes what they dread, the transformation during their own lifetime . . . of towns, cities and areas that they know into alien territory.’

Enoch Powell

‘Everyone, after all, goes the same dark road – and the road has a trick of being most dark, most treacherous, when it seems most bright – and it’s true that nobody stays in the garden of Eden.’

James Baldwin

Part One

Orford, Warrington, 1975

One

Out on the plains, the icy urban plains, a flame-haired young man was belting down the street, his two-tone shoes sliding and skidding away from his knees. His eyes were slit to the freeze, and his elbows moved freakishly fast, punching and chopping a pin-wheeling path through the night, as though his crazed perpetual motion would keep him upright, outpacing the slick of the sodium-streaked pavements.

An old lady out walking her dog heard his helter-skelter approach, saw the lad spin round the corner and flare right at her. She gasped and shrank back into a neighbour's gate, snatching up the pooch and drawing it tight to her bosom. The ice sprinter did not even see her, barely took note of the dog's startled yelp as he blitzed past in the steaming slipstream of his own breath. He was hardly dressed for the weather, wearing just a thin black shirt rolled twice at the cuffs. The top two buttons remained undone, revealing a flash of flesh as white as the snowflakes gathering in his curls.

On sight of his wild red mane the old lady's heart returned to normal, the dog was returned to the ice-bound floor. There was only one man around there with hair that hue – Jimmy Fitzgerald's lad, Robbie. There he went, running, running – always running, whatever the weather, too hot or too cold. But where was he running to? Or from what? She watched him rip round the next corner and out of sight, stood and stared at his footprints. The snow smothered his skidmarks so that soon there was no evidence of him having been there at all, only a tenuous ribbon of panic lingering in the air. The dog poked its snout up, sniffed at it and ran in little revolutions, yapping madly.

Robbie Fitzgerald was running for his life. He peeled another corner and at last the squat silhouette of the building lurched into view. The windows were blacked out and bore no testimony to the wildness that pulsed within. But as Robbie drew up outside and gathered his breath, the night reverberated with the rampant din of stamping feet and screeching fiddles and the braying spray of laughter. This was Orford's Irish Club, Saturday night. This was make or break. Robbie grinned to himself, took one last deep breath, swung the door wide open and plunged inside.

The heat and disorder slurped him up in one muddled flush. It was chaos in there – people were whooping and howling and whirling one another around. Dark slicks of spilt Guinness sloshed on the floor in contrast with the white of the night outside. To his right, a group of drunken men, arms draped affectionately around one another, belted out 'The Fields of Athenry'. On the small stage beyond, a fiddle quartet struggled to be heard above them. Robbie stood back and soaked it all up. He allowed himself a small smile as he stayed rooted to the spot for a moment, shaking his head at how little the place had changed. Then he got down to business. He needed those fiddle players. Without them, well – it would all turn to dust.

He pushed himself up onto his tiptoes and scanned the room for Irene. His heart kicked out with giddy relief as she ducked up from beneath the bar and flipped open one of those bumper-sized bottles of stout. She laughed her dirty, infectious laugh as she poured, propped up on one elbow, holding court to a gaggle of travellers, her huge freckled bust splayed across the bar top.

'Irene!' he yelled, and hoisted his head up so she could see it was him. He stepped through the black puddles, edging his way through a maelstrom of flailing elbows and thumping feet. 'IRENE!'

Irene O'Connor did not hear her name being yelled across the roof of noise. She couldn't hear a thing in there. It was the

crimson brilliance of Robbie's hair that caught her attention. Red-haired men were two a penny in her club, but Robbie's mop was such a magnificent red it almost glowed. School bus red she called it. She swivelled to meet his gaze, instinctively raking a hand through her hair. Robbie launched himself up and onto the bar. His face, his head, his hair were wrung with sweat. His eyes were big and crackling with some intense energy.

'I need you to help me,' he shouted. His words were drowned out, sucked back over his shoulder into the roistering din. His eyes flickered all over her.

'What you saying, our kid?' She moved right into him, lent her ear to his hot smoky mouth.

'Irene, this is serious, love. I need you to help us. There's been an emergency.'

She pulled back, and for a moment her stretched, anxious face ironed out its furrows, revealing the beautiful girl she once was. 'Good heavens no, Robbie. Not Susheela? Has she started?'

'No, love – no. Susheela's fine. The baby's still cooking nicely. It's not that . . .'

'Vincent? It's little Vinnie, isn't it? What's he . . .'

'Vincent's fine, Iye. It's nothing like that.'

'So?'

He paused, drew himself right up and prepared himself for the inevitable rejection. He looked Irene flush in the eye. 'It's like this, Iye. I need to borrow a couple of your entertainment.'

'You what?'

'Your entertainment . . .'

'Aye-aye, love, I heard you first time . . .'

'This couldn't be more serious, Irene. I need you to loan us a couple of your fiddle players. Yeah?'

She just stared at him.

Realising she hadn't laughed in his face yet, Robbie leapt to ram home his advantage. 'It'll only be thirty minutes, darlin'.

Not a minute more. That's all's I'm asking of you. Thirty minutes of your entertainment's time.'

Irene realised then, he was not joking. She also realised she was powerless to resist. His burning green eyes were all over her, beseeching her, giving her nowhere to go. She tried to play hard to get, pulling down the corners of her mouth, arching an eyebrow, but Robbie could scent victory. He grabbed her chubby wrist, pulling her face close.

'I can tell you the whole story start to finish later on Irene, love – but this is an emergency. Everything's hanging on it. My whole life depends on it. The baby's life, the baby's whole future. I promise I'll have them back to you in two shakes of a lamb's tail.'

She looked right past him into the delirious hub of the room. Robbie knew exactly what she was thinking, and she was right. There would be a riot. But he couldn't let this opportunity slip away – not now, not with the chance of a lifetime so close he could taste it. He took her head in his hands so her nose was almost touching his, as though transmitting the urgency of his crisis to her by shortwave. He gave it one last go.

'Irene, do us a favour – listen to me, will you? I need them fiddlers, yeah? Whatever profit you lose tonight, I'll treble it for you. I'll come and sing for nothing. Do you get me? I'll do five Sundays in a row. I'll do all your favourites – whatever the punters want. I'll do a frigging Elvis night if you like . . .'

She didn't bite. A resigned sadness came over her face and, recognising it, Robbie let her go, slumping back down onto the flats of his feet. He turned to go. Irene spoke to the back of his head. She knew full well what this was about. It was Dickie Vaughan. It had to be Dickie Vaughan.

'You've got half an hour, Robert Fitzgerald. Not a minute longer. And you're to bring back my men in person, no later than . . .' She consulted her wrist, but Robbie was no longer

there to hear her out. She watched him bob and weave his way to the stage and silence the lead fiddle with a hand on his forearm. As he pointed across to their boss behind the bar she nodded her consent and mouthed 'good luck' to Robbie. If that boy was not a star in the making, then she'd learnt nothing through all her years in the trade. Robbie Fitzgerald was not just a prospect: he was the real thing.

Susheela perched on the cold Formica of the kitchen table, and fixed her sleepy gaze on the kitchen clock. Robbie was fifteen minutes late. She glanced at the oven where the plates were warming and wondered whether she should take them out again. Absent-mindedly she patted her globe-tight belly, then took her weight on her slender, fragile wrists and pushed herself up from the table. She held her breath. Beyond the subsonic hum of the fridge there was only the deadweight of silence. Was that snow she could sense out there? Clicking off the kitchen light, she padded over to the window above the sink and, bending forwards, pressed her face into the darkness. She was right. High above the fence in the back yard, a miasma of snowflakes whirred madly in the aureole of the street lamp. She prised herself up onto her tiptoes and unhooked the window, her belly jutting over the sink. She fed her arm out into the cold night air and just held it there. The majesty of a new snowfall shot her through with the same childlike amazement as the first time she'd seen it, when the sheer magic of that midnight blizzard had taken her breath away. She yielded tenderly to the memory, drawing her hand back in and draping it around her hot neck.

It was December of 1971, not long after she had started her training at Warrington General. She'd just clocked off from a gruelling shift down in A&E. She'd barely made it back to the

nurses' home before she collapsed into deep slumber. But something jolted her wide awake – some foreboding, a powerful sense that all was not right. The room was cold, so all she could see was her own breath – and hers was the only breath she could hear. At first she thought something terrible had happened to the other girls. They hadn't come home. They'd been involved in some accident. But then she heard a muffled cough; someone turning over in their sleep – Mata, from the obstreperous groan that accompanied it. And as she adjusted herself to the familiar acoustics of the dormitory, she managed to count the rise and fall of six pairs of lungs. She sighed her relief out loud, but still the gnawing sense persisted that something wasn't right.

And then it hit her. Outside on the streets, an eerie silence had descended. Where was the usual soundtrack to a Wednesday night? Where were the taxis, coming and going to the hospital? Where were the ambulances? What had happened to the wail of sirens, the shriek of girls fighting over men? Her heart bounced against her rib cage. All those sounds which had fed her insomnia those first few nights in the nursing home – the thrum of long-distance lorries on the motorway; the drone of the factories, pumping their bilge into the night; the low giddy puttering of the generator outside – none of this was audible. The whole symphony had seized up. Trembling, she wrapped her bedcover around her shoulders and tiptoed to the window. She hovered there, one hand lingering on a curtain, afraid of what she might see. The timorous young Malaysian girl, already adjusting to the shock of the new on a daily, an hourly basis, pictured scenes of mass destruction. In Warrington, any horror was possible. Some deadly nuclear fog could have descended during the night, sucking the life out of all who moved.

She took a deep breath, screwed her eyes tight and yanked back the curtain. When she opened them she almost passed out.

Everything was white. White and velvet and stock still. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Now Susheela looked out from her kitchen window at the falling snow and smiled at the memory of the dark-skinned girl in her flannel dressing gown, waking all the nurses and racing down the stairs to dance in the snow. She was just a girl back then – not so long ago. A few nights after the snowstorm, Robbie Fitzgerald had been carried onto her ward and into her life. She smiled again and slid her hand across her heaving belly and thought that one day she would recount this story to her unborn child; the story of the brown girl spinning and gambolling on the pavement, trying to catch the snow on her tongue, baffled each time it melted to nothing.

Susheela closed the window and clicked the light back on. She hoped it would snow hard and blanket the landscape white. Make it all pretty. Yes, even Orford could look pretty in the snow.

Two

Flicking a clot of fringe from his damp freckled brow Robbie Fitzgerald tried to suppress the glee wrought on his face. Catching his breath, he stood dead still, stage centre, trying to revive the cool that had carried him through his performance.

When Robbie had spotted Dickie Vaughan earlier that evening he'd dropped his pint. He'd never believed that could happen – a fresh, foaming pint of Best and it had slipped right through his fingers. But it wasn't every day that Dickie Vaughan walked into your local working men's club. There was no doubting it was him, though. The legendary talent manager was sat right there in the centre of St Stephen's lounge bar, chomping contentedly on his cigar. His famous paunch took up the entire table, and Robbie Fitzgerald was rooted to the spot. Only a month ago he'd asked his young wife to read out the profile in the *MU* magazine, where Vaughan was bemoaning the death of outstanding new cabaret talent, and predicting the slow and sad demise of the working-class social club scene if things didn't change. Robbie agreed with every word. At the age of twenty-four he was already a veteran of that selfsame cabaret scene, and he'd witnessed at first hand the shabby trail of bad comedians, pub warblers and novelty acts passing themselves off as The Entertainment. Robbie could sell out any one of the clubs in the Greater Warrington area – and beyond – on reputation alone, but it was getting harder to win a crowd over. They wanted it on a plate, where he liked to build up an atmosphere. They wanted Jack Jones and Tony Bennett soundalikes, smooth easy listening, where he revered the dark, aching soul of Van Morrison and Robert Johnson. It was Robbie's dream to team up with a

big-hitter like Vaughan. With a manager like that, he could go all the way – he knew he could. His bruised fusion of soul and blues with the maudlin strains of folk was not to everybody's taste, but Dickie Vaughan would see beyond the labels, right to the heart of Robbie's genius. And there could be no doubting that Robbie was exactly that – a spirit, a genius. A star.

Robbie had stopped dead in his tracks. He didn't even notice he'd let his pint slip until Barney tried to usher him back out of the room.

Barney was St Stephen's Concert Secretary, a role that brought him a certain prestige, not to say considerable power in the world of Warrington cabaret. Barney booked the Turn, compered the night, ran the show in every sense – and he could never quite resist showing he was still as good as any singer, especially after a few large Whyte & Mackays when he'd cap off a perfectly good night by treating the crowd to a Sinatra ballad. At first, Robbie thought that was behind Barney's blundering attempt to stop him performing. If there was one turn he couldn't follow, it was Robbie Fitzgerald's splintered sweet soul voice. Barney had pushed Robbie back out of the lounge, reaming him some yarn about a charity night he'd forgotten.

'Serious, Rob. Pure slipped me mind. It'll just be the stand-ups tonight.'

Robbie craned his neck round Barney's shoulder, eager to make sure that it was Dickie Vaughan. 'What? You're looking to raise money for charity and there's no music on?'

Barney shrugged, beseeching him with his 'what can I tell you' face. Robbie humoured him with an eyebrow. He was too overwhelmed with terror and excitement to get angry. The biggest talent scout in the North was here in Orford, sat right there in his frigging club. Of course there was going to be fucking music!

'I'll be going on as usual, Barney mate. Fifteen minutes.'

Barney shook his head, panicked now. 'Robbie! No.'

'What you on about – no?'

Barney slumped down into a cup chair, its vermillion arms singed by a hundred cigarette butts. He held his head in his hands. 'I'm sorry, Rob. You can't go on. I . . .' He glanced up at Robbie, pink, foolish and found out. 'I sent the backing band home.'

'You what?'

'Your musicians, mate. I paid 'em off . . .'

Robbie's heart slumped with his shoulders. There was no way Barney was lying. He could see it all now, and he understood why he'd done it – why Barney would have thought he had no choice. Robbie was mildly flattered. He almost felt sorry for the blustering Concert Secretary. Still, he couldn't absolve him. It was a dirty world, clubland, but Robbie had to think about Number One. This was it for Robbie Fitz and his young family, and there was no way he was letting the chance pass by. Come hell or high water, Dickie Vaughan was going to hear him sing.

He clipped the mic back into its stand and narrowed his glare into the spotlight. He bowed, once – not so much a bow as a brief incline of his head – then beckoned his backing band forward. Another swell of applause built from the back and ricocheted around the room as Robbie's fiddler and banjo player stepped forward, joined hands and took a bow grinning like they'd never seen a crowd before, let alone been feted like this. People were standing on their chairs. Euphoria swooned around Robbie's head. It hung there, dizzying him, raining sparks over the boisterous locals and then it hit him. He'd pulled it off. Whatever Dickie Vaughan thought of him didn't matter now – Robbie Fitz had just given the show of his life.

'Thank you . . . I . . . er . . . you're very kind,' he spluttered, truly lost for words now. 'I . . . em . . . I'm sure we'd all just like to thank the, erm . . . the real stars of the show, Feargal and er . . .'

He shot an embarrassed glance at the two men standing to the left of him. They laughed and yelled out their names. 'One more time, if you will. Thank you. Put your hands together for Peter and Feargal then . . . that's the spirit. Thank you. God bless.'

Robbie grazed the audience, incredulous at the response. He'd never wooed a crowd like that before, never – and he wouldn't in a hundred years have thought St Stephen's capable of such an outpouring of sheer emotion. But then they hadn't heard him sing like that and they'd probably never heard music like that. Not there, in their local club. The regulars had grown bloated on the mandatory cabaret standards, week in, week out – but Robbie Fitzgerald had blown all that away tonight. That nervous vaulting in his guts on first sight of Vaughan had crystalised into something big and magical. At first Feargal's ragged style of five-string banjo jarred with the regulars, hoping for a smoother ride. But then Robbie's vocals kicked in. His gorgeously forlorn croon seemed to flood the room with one prolonged and delirious strafe, stroking conversations to a lull. A knot of chairs and torsos, bent to their neighbours' small talk, twisted back round towards the stage. Cigarettes hovered in mid-air, never to meet the puckering lips that sought them, and by the time Robbie had reached the final refrain of Hank Williams' 'Your Cheating Heart', a stunned silence had descended upon the small and smoky salon of St Stephen's. Standing up there now, Robbie felt as stunned as they did.

Behind the veils of smoke Vaughan's eyes nettled with tears. Like the rest of the room, he was gone. Robbie Fitzgerald had him transfixed, utterly caught up in the ferocious beauty of his voice. He had never heard a voice so visceral and honest, so needy and hungry and splintered with pain. He didn't think it possible to transform the jarring, maudlin wail of bluegrass into something so profound and sensual. That voice planted a hankering in his groin, ripping the skin from his flesh in one violent tug. And as the smokescreen lifted, Vaughan appraised

the young flame-haired minstrel with mounting disbelief. He took in the flat boxer's nose; the wild green eyes; the litter of scars that marked his face and the fading shamrock inked between his thumb and forefinger. He observed Robbie's cheap cheesecloth shirt, his high-waisted pinstripe bags and his two-tone shoes gleaming defiantly in the spotlight, and he wondered how this crude male could radiate such beauty.

As the crowd erupted Vaughan felt that rare but shrill sensation of mad, mad excitement coursing up his spine. He'd known it on a handful of occasions, sometimes to his chagrin as record companies and publishers beat him to the catch. He wasn't letting this one slip away. He scanned the room. There was every kind of punter in the club, young and old – jazz lovers, big band fans, young stylish Motown mothers all jostled with the regular weekend drunks who'd dance to anything. Robbie's plangent, quavering voice had got to each and every one of them. With Vaughan's canny guidance, the lad had the power to seduce the nation. Dickie laughed at the random nature of his find. You walk into a club – any old club – and this! He shook his head, still emotional. He'd seen it all, Dickie Vaughan, but this wonderful business of show never failed to surprise and delight him.

Susheela glanced nervously at the kitchen clock – a china plate, with gold stencilled numerals. Another ten minutes had elapsed, and Robbie was seriously late. A slow trickle of perspiration rolled down her neck, halting in the cleft of her cleavage. She turned off the oven, feeling foolish at her disposability, her fringe role in the evening's events. Robbie was out there, living it. It was work, but he loved it. It was a life. It was his life. Susheela? She stayed at home with their son. She waited for Robbie's return. She warmed the plates. How love's young dream had delivered for her! A chaste little box at the heart of the worst estate in Orford, where she played out time, day after day, waiting for

the new baby to announce its arrival. Another little Fitzgerald half-chat. Even when they were joking, the Orford people frightened her. With Robbie by her side it was different. It was grudging, but she had respect. When he was out at work she was completely and utterly alone. Even her friends from the ward found a trip into the badlands of Orford a trip too far and the first time round she'd lingered on in the cocoon of the hospital well beyond her confinement time. She couldn't tell Robbie – he was working all hours as it was – but apart from little Vincent, the only brown faces she ever saw were the doctors and nurses at Warrington General. It was all very well for Robbie; he had a life to lead. For Susheela this was the highlight of the week. Warming the plates for their Saturday night takeaway.

But when she glanced across at the slumbering figure of her Little Man, little Vincent Fitzgerald, her heart was swept away by the force and the swell of her love for him. She shuffled across and covered his head with kisses. How could she even have thought those things? She loved her time at home with her inquisitive boy. At five years old Vincent's personality was steadily forming, giving her a glimpse of the young man he might become. Already he displayed a preference for adult company, rebuffing the offers from next door's brood to come and play, choosing instead to stay indoors with his mother. He spent long slabs of the school holidays fussing around in his bedroom with only his Noddy books and the gentle puttering of the radio for company. Susheela marvelled at his quiet, industrious nature and imagined that he might become a doctor or a lawyer. The thought shot her stomach with a little frisson of delight.

She dawdled back to the kitchen, sighed hard and relit the oven. She clicked the light off again, and watched the snow. It spun around the roofs of the low-rises like the squall in a paperweight. She strained her eyes. Beyond the low-rises she thought she could make out the lights from the tower blocks, slowly

blinking awake, standing sentinel over the estate. She wondered if they, too, were snowgazing. She'd come to despise Orford but she loved the different inflections of the tower blocks. Sometimes, in the summer, they'd refract the red sunset off their windows like a wild fire, and she'd ache for Kuala Lumpur – the big glass towers behind the temple which would ripple like an army of glass spaceships in the midday haze.

She tried to recapture the warm careless blush of before. It was impossible. She felt helpless. Somewhere out there the love of her life might slowly, irredeemably be slipping away from her. Typically, he would leave the club just as soon as his set ended and he'd trousered his fee, stopping only for fish and chips on the way home. He knew Susheela lit the oven at 10.45 and put the plates in at 10.50. It was now a quarter to midnight.

She tried to resist the dark thoughts lapping at her subconscious, but as the minutes toiled by she caved. She'd seen it with her own eyes, seen how those barmaids looked at him – those hot bold looks they shot him. Did they care about Susheela's feelings? She doubted they even noticed her. And she'd seen how his very presence rendered even her own friends giddy and girly. It had shocked her at first how Robbie didn't pick up on this, how totally impervious he was to their admiration. But now she was married to him, she could see that Robbie didn't think of himself as handsome. He'd stand with her in the mirror and point to his slain, pulpy nose which he saw as a tell-all about his background.

Susheela had fallen in love with that man, and that nose. Each dent and bump told out their history. She'd been there, on duty, the night they wheeled him in, barely conscious, his nose splayed across his left cheekbone pumping blood into the stung slits of his eyes. She'd sat in as the ENT consultant probed his fingers around the bloody mire and shook his head, frowning upon it as though it were an unsolvable puzzle. And she'd been there in

the room weeks later when his cast had peeled back to reveal his new face. She'd watched him confront the mirror and sensed his disappointment. She'd wheeled him back to the ward. He'd been embarrassed to look at her. The flirty, ebullient quips he'd lavished on her from behind his plaster cast were replaced by a sad, brooding silence. He seemed disgusted with himself, and was at pains to let her know he hadn't caused the fight. He'd been jumped by four lads. Susheela loved him for that, for his embarrassment. Saturday night dragged dozens of Robbie Fitzgeralds into Warrington General – the brawlers, the drunks, their girlfriends, their victims – often all four bound up in the one bloodied casualty. Most of them showed little remorse and took great pride in regaling the medics with blow-by-blow re-enactments of their heroics. Sometimes, Susheela would catch them post-surgery, appraising the splendour of their war wounds, surrounded by admiring comrades. Often they'd seem dejected once their gaping, gushing injuries had been swabbed and stitched so prettily they were barely grazes. Not Robbie. He seemed to shrink away from the dangerous edge his nose now lent his battle-scarred face, at odds with the tender and reticent soul beneath.

It was that contradiction in Robbie that had hit every nurse on Ward 23. Everyone flitted round the flame-haired honey, the more so when news seeped out he was a middling local songster. On the day of his discharge there was a frenetic scramble for his number. Susheela was faintly revulsed by the audacity of her pals, and quietly jealous, too. Oh how she wished she could exhibit herself like that: the saucy walk, their bottoms twitching as they passed, the little glance back over their shoulder making sure he'd had his fill. She couldn't even muster the mettle to reassure him about his nose! She wanted to tell him what a proud, handsome specimen it was, and how it complemented the brilliance of his eyes. Instead she had overcompensated for her nervousness by adopting a brusque, no-nonsense tone with Robbie

and, to the baffled ire of more worldly nurses, the ice queen act paid off. When Robbie left the ward that day, Susheela's had been the only number he took with him. He'd weaseled it out of the stony-faced matron – a feat that still made her smile, whenever she thought on it.

Those first, tentative dates and days out were as close as Susheela had come to the magical romances of her storybooks back home. Although she wanted to dance and dress up and show out, she quickly understood that Robbie preferred to avoid the crowded pubs and discos in town, and just as quickly, she came to love that in him, too. The solitary, yearning poet, striding out into the countryside, filling his lungs with fresh air. She could see the care drop away from his shoulders the further out they travelled, into Derbyshire and the Peak District or the Derwent Valley – great potholes and dripping, echoing caverns one day, heart-stopping panoramas from a crumbling hilltop wall the next.

She could understand why Robbie craved the wide open spaces and cold fresh skies. His other life was indoors; the factory by day, then, most nights of the week, the clubs. And if she thought she loved him when his great huge hands would belt her dainty waist as he lifted her, effortlessly, over a mountain stile, her heart almost stopped the first time she heard him sing. She'd had to beg him, daily, to let her come along. Then one Saturday afternoon, sat on the ridge up by Daresbury, he sighed out loud, 'If they stare, right? Take no notice.' And it dawned on her he was saying yes. Stare at her? She didn't care about that! Of course people were going to stare, she was the only brown face in town, just about. But she was going to see Robbie sing, and she could barely keep the giggles down inside.

He made sure she had a good table, made sure the steward at the Legion treated her like a VIP, but Susheela didn't even want a Coca-Cola. She'd sat there, rapt, waiting – and when her man came on, he nearly blew her soul to dust. It was spellbinding. It

was heartbreaking. Nervously, at first, glancing, rather than staring at his lover, he romped through a few Motown classics: 'Band of Gold'; 'Jimmy Mack'; 'River Deep Mountain High'. And his voice just blistered right through her, turning her stomach sick. That was her Robbie, there. That was her man! And then he did it. He came to her side of the small stage, crooked his left knee and took all his weight on his right hip, closed his eyes, tilted his head back and sang 'When a Man Loves a Woman'.

And when he opened his eyes, he saw his little brown angel, streaks of mascara-black tears flooding her beautiful face.

She loved that time, those first few weeks and months. She loved Robbie, loved his heart, his dreams, his plans. She loved to cling to his waist as they raced through the countryside on his motorcycle, past streams, and glades and hillocks – the England of her dreams. She loved it when he'd suddenly pull over and race her to the top of a hill. One time, they'd stood there, drinking in the view, holding it down, his strong, thick wrists around her waist as he held her from behind, his chin resting on her shoulder.

'Ours, that,' he'd said.

She'd nodded, and gazed out upon the green, green pastures, a land of verdant plenty spread out beneath them.

'We should do it, you know. You and me.'

And she could feel, with her back to him, just exactly what he was trying to say. Within the year, they were married.

Susheela could deal with the way women looked at Robbie. She even allowed herself to feel smug. That'd be as close as any of them ever got – looks. But gazes, glances, admiring darts of the eyes belonged to the daylight. They were harmless gestures – the ritualistic extremes of daytime coquetry. It was night-time she feared most keenly. Night-time aroused them to verbal liberties and dispatched them to the flesh. Night-time meant drink, and

Susheela's time on the ward had taught her there were no limits to a Warrington girl's ambitions once she'd had a drink. Now the picture was emerging, she succumbed fully and tormented herself with its crude and rampant immediacy. Her half-sozzled husband talking, smiling with a young girl – blonde and fair and flat of stomach, her hand brushing his arm, kohl-caked eyelashes fluttering an unmistakeable promise. She buried her head. What could she do about it? She was pregnant, for goodness' sake, pregnant with Robbie's child! She pictured him with Chrissy Taylor, the barmaid with the huge breasts, always displayed to their best in a low-cut top.

She padded back to the window, bereft. Her Robbie was out there and she only had herself to blame. Her work pals had warned her all right. 'His needs don't stop just cos you're pregnant, love,' they'd jeered when she was carrying Vincent. She'd made the mistake of telling them she found intercourse uncomfortable. 'There's more than one way to milk your man!'

Her huge brown eyes had blinked back the tears, trying so hard to force a plucky smile, but their vile prognosis curdled in her ears. She'd tried to relieve Robbie, oh God how she'd tried. Many a night his hard member had pressed tentatively into the flesh of her rump, just to let her know – and she'd lain there, listening to his soft anguished whimpers, wanting so badly to comfort him. Her hand would reach down to him, but somehow she couldn't go through with it. The vulgarity of it was more than she could bear. Her husband's member would slink back, rest sadly against his thigh. Oh how she'd give anything for one more chance. Poor Robbie. All that unslaked love and desire churning his groin, raging through his veins, waiting to explode like a bomb. All those brazen blondes out there, waiting to detonate him.