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Written by Jonathan Coe

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Bestselling author of *The Rotters' Club*

Jonathan COE

The Closed Circle



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The Closed Circle

by

Jonathan Coe

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High on the Chalk

High on the Chalk
Etretat
Tuesday, 7th December, 1999
Morning

Sister Dearest,

The view from up here is amazing, but it's too cold to write very much. My fingers can barely hold the pen. But I promised myself I'd start this letter before returning to England, and this really is my last chance.

Last thoughts, then, on leaving the European mainland? On coming home?

I'm scouring the horizon and looking for omens. Calm sea, clear blue sky. Surely that has to count for something.

People come up here to kill themselves, apparently. In fact there's a boy further down the path, standing dangerously close to the edge, who looks as though he may be planning to do exactly that. He's been standing there for as long as I've been on this bench and he's only wearing a T-shirt and jeans. Must be freezing.

Well, at least I haven't got to that point yet; although there have been some bad moments, these last few weeks. Moments when it seemed like I'd lost my bearings completely, that it was all spinning out of control. You must have known that feeling, once. In fact I know you did. Anyway, it's over now. Onwards and upwards.

Beneath me I can see Etretat, the wide curve of its beach, the pinnacled rooftops of the château where I stayed last night. I never did manage to explore the town. Funny how, when you

have the freedom to do anything you want, you end up doing so little. Infinite choice seems to translate into no choice at all. I could have headed out for *sole dieppoise* and ended up being plied with free Calvados by a flirty waiter; instead I stayed inside and watched some old Gene Hackman movie dubbed into French.

Four out of ten, for that. See me afterwards. Could do better. Is this any way to begin a new life?

Am I really beginning a new life, in any case? Perhaps I'm just resuming an old one, after a long and finally pointless interruption.

On board the ferry, *Pride of Portsmouth*
In the restaurant
Tuesday, 7th December, 1999
Late afternoon

I wonder how they manage to make a profit from this line, at this time of year? Apart from me and the man behind the counter – what should I call him, is he the steward or purser or something? – this place is deserted. It's dark outside now and there is rain flecking the windows. Perhaps it's just spray. Makes me want to shiver looking at it, even though it's warm inside, almost overheated.

I'm writing this letter in the little A5 notebook I bought in Venice. It has a silky blue hardback cover with a marbled pattern, and lovely thick, roughly cut pages. When I've finished – if I ever finish – I suppose I could always cut the pages out and put them in an envelope. But there wouldn't be much point, would there? Anyway, it hasn't got off to a flying start. Rather self-indulgent so far, I'd say. You'd think I'd know how to write to you, after the thousands and thousands of words I've written in the last few years. But somehow, every new letter I write to you feels like the first one.

I've got a feeling this is going to be the longest of all.

When I sat down on that bench high on the chalk cliffs above

Etretat, I hadn't even decided whether it was you I was going to write to, or Stefano. But I chose you. Aren't you proud of me? You see, I'm determined that I'm not going to go down that road. I promised myself that I wouldn't contact him, and a promise to yourself is the most binding of all. It's difficult, because there hasn't been a day for four months when we haven't spoken, or emailed, or at least texted. That kind of habit is hard to break. But I know it will get better. This is the cold turkey period. Looking at my mobile sitting on the table next to the coffee, I feel like an ex-smoker having a packet of fags dangled in front of her nose. It would be so easy to text him. He *taught* me how to send text messages, after all. But that would be a crazy thing to do. He'd hate me for it, anyway. And I'm scared of him starting to hate me – really scared. That scares me more than anything. Silly, isn't it? What difference does it make, if I'm not going to see him again?

I'll make a list. Making a list is always a good displacement activity.

Lessons I've learned from the Stefano disaster:

1. *Married men rarely leave their wives and daughters for single women in their late thirties.*
2. *You can still be having an affair with someone, even if you're not having sex.*
3.

I can't think of a number three. Even so, that's not bad going. Both those lessons are important. They'll stand me in good stead, the next time something like this happens. Or rather, they'll help me to make sure (I hope) that there won't be a next time.

Well, that looks good, on paper – especially this expensive, thick, creamy, Venetian paper. But I remember a line that Philip always used to quote to me. Some crusty old pillar of the British establishment who said, in his dotage: 'Yes – I've learned from my mistakes, and I'm sure I could repeat them perfectly.' Ha, ha. That will probably be me.

Fourth coffee of the day
National Film Theatre Café
London, South Bank
Wednesday, 8th December, 1999
Afternoon

Yes, I'm back, sister darling, after an interruption of twenty hours or so, and the first question that occurs to me, after a morning spent more or less aimlessly wandering the streets, is this: who are all these people, and what do they do?

It's not that I remember London very well. I don't think I've been here for about six years. But I do (or thought I did) remember where some of my favourite shops were. There was a clothes shop in one of the back streets between Covent Garden and Long Acre, where you could get nice scarves, and about three doors along, there used to be some people who did hand-painted ceramics. I was hoping to get an ashtray for Dad, a sort of peace-offering. (Wishful thinking, for sure: it would take more than that . . .) Anyway, the point is, neither of these places seems to be there any more. Both have been turned into coffee shops, and both of them were absolutely packed. And also, of course, coming from Italy I'm used to seeing people talking on their mobiles all day, but for the last few years I've been saying to everyone over there, in a tone of great authority, 'Oh, you know, they're never going to catch on in Britain – not to the same extent.' Why do I always *do* that? Bang on about stuff I know nothing about, as if I was a world expert? Jesus, *everybody* here has got one now. Clamped to their ears, walking up and down the Charing Cross Road, jabbering to themselves like loons. Some of them have even got these earpieces which mean you don't realize they're on the phone at all, and you really do think they must be care-in-the-community cases. (Because there are plenty of those around as well.) But the question is – as I said – who are all these people and what do they do? I know I shouldn't generalize from the closure of a couple of shops (anyway, perhaps I got the wrong street), but my first impression is that

there are vast numbers of people who don't *work* in this city any more, in the sense of making things or selling things. All that seems to be considered rather old-fashioned. Instead, people *meet*, and they *talk*. And when they're not *meeting* or *talking* in person, they're usually *talking* on their phones, and what they're usually *talking* about is an arrangement to *meet*. But what I want to know is, when they actually *meet*, what do they *talk* about? It seems that's another thing I've been getting wrong in Italy. I kept going round telling everybody how reserved the English are. But we're not, apparently – we've become a nation of talkers. We've become intensely sociable. And yet I still don't have a clue what's being said. There's this great conversation going on all over the country, apparently, and I feel I'm the one person who doesn't know enough to join in. What's it about? Last night's TV? The ban on British beef? How to beat the Millennium bug?

And another thing, while I remember: that bloody great wheel that's appeared on the side of the Thames, next to County Hall. What's that for, exactly?

Anyway, that's enough social commentary for now, I think. The other things I wanted to tell you are, first of all, that I've decided to face the music, bite the bullet and so on, and go back to Birmingham *tonight* (because the hotel prices here are phenomenal, and I simply can't afford to stay here for another day); and also that I may have been back in England for less than twenty-four hours, but already I'm faced with a blast from the past. It comes in the form of a flyer I picked up at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. There's going to be a reading there on Monday, the title of which is 'Goodbye to All That'. Six 'figures from public life' (it says here) are going to tell us 'what they most regret leaving behind or what they are happiest to see the back of, at the end of the second Christian Millennium'. And look who's number four on the list: no, not Benjamin (although he was the one we all thought would be a famous writer), but Doug Anderton – who we are told is a 'journalist and political commentator', if you please.

Another omen, maybe? A sign I'm not making a bold foray

into the future after all, but taking the first involuntary steps on a journey backwards? I mean, for God's sake, I haven't seen Doug in about fifteen years. The last time was at my wedding. At which, I seem to remember, he pressed me drunkenly up against a wall and told me that I was marrying the wrong man. (He was right, of course, but not in the sense that *he* meant it.) How weird would it be now, to sit in an audience and listen to him pontificating about pre-millennial angst and social change? I suppose it would just be a version of what we all had to put up with more than twenty years ago, sitting around the editorial table of the school magazine. Only now we're all developing grey hair and back problems.

Is your hair grey yet, I wonder, dear Miriam? Or is that not something you have to worry about any more?

There's a Birmingham train in fifty minutes. I'm going to make a dash for it.

Second coffee of the day
Coffee Republic
New Street, Birmingham
Friday, 10th December, 1999
Morning

Oh, Miriam – the house! That bloody house. It hasn't changed. *Nothing* about it has changed, since you left it (and a quarter of a century has gone by since then: almost exactly), except that it is colder, and emptier, and sadder (and *cleaner*) than ever. Dad pays someone to keep it spotless, and apart from her coming in twice a week to do the dusting, I don't think he speaks to a soul, now that Mum's gone. He's also bought this little place in France and seems to spend a lot of time there. He spent most of Wednesday night showing me pictures of the septic tank and the new boiler he's had installed, which was thrilling, as you can imagine. Once or twice he said that I should go over there some time and stay for a week or two, but I could tell that he didn't really mean it, and besides, I don't want to. Nor do I want to

stay under his roof for more nights than I can help it, this time.

Last night I had a meal out with Philip and Patrick.

Now – I hadn't seen Philip for more than two years, and I suppose it's pretty common, in these circumstances, for ex-wives to look at their ex-husbands and wonder what on earth it was that drew them together in the first place. I'm talking about physical attraction, more than anything else. I remember that when I was a student, and lived in Mantova for the best part of a year, back in 1981 if I can believe myself when I write that (God!), I was surrounded by young Italian men, most of them gorgeous, all of them as good as begging me to go to bed with them. A posse of teenage Mastroiannis in their sexual prime, gagging for it, not to mince words. My Englishness made me exotic in a way which would have been unthinkable in Birmingham, and I could have had my pick of that lot. I could have had them all, one after the other. But what did I choose instead? Or who did I choose, rather. I chose Philip. Philip Chase, whey-faced, nerdy Philip Chase, with his straggly ginger beard and his horn-rimmed specs, who came to stay with me for a week and somehow got me into bed on the second day and ended up changing the whole course of my life, not permanently, I suppose, but radically . . . fundamentally . . . I don't know. I can't think of the word. One word is as good as another, sometimes. Was it just because we were too young, I wonder? No, that's not fair on him. Of all the boys I'd known up until that point, he was the most straightforward, the most sympathetic, the least arrogant (Doug and Benjamin were so up themselves, in their different ways!). There is a tremendous decency in Phil, as well: he is absolutely reliable and trustworthy. He made the divorce so untraumatic, I remember – a back-handed compliment, I know, but if you ever want to get divorced from someone . . . Philip's your man.

As for Patrick, well . . . I want to see as much of Pat as I can, while I'm here, obviously. He is so grown up now. Of course, we have been writing and emailing each other constantly, and last year he came out to Lucca for a few days, but still – it surprises me every time. I can't tell you what a peculiar feeling it is, to look

at this *man* – he may be only fifteen, but that's what he seems like, now – this tall (rather skinny, rather pale, rather sad-looking) man and know that once he was . . . *inside me*, not to put too fine a point on it. He seems to have a very good relationship with his father, I must admit. I envied them the ease with which they talked to each other, shared jokes together. Blokes' stuff, maybe. But no, there was more to it than that. I can see that they look after him well, Philip and Carol. I have no grounds for complaint there. A little jealousy, maybe. But then, it was my choice, to try my luck in Italy again, and leave Pat with his father. My choice.

And now to my final piece of news, and in some ways the most momentous – or disturbing, maybe. I saw Benjamin again. About an hour ago. And in the strangest circumstances, I have to say.

I had been given the lowdown on Ben the night before. Still working for the same firm – a senior partner now, and I should think so too, after being there for so long – and still married to Emily. No kids: but, well, everyone has given up asking about that. Phil said that they'd tried everything, and been down the adoption route as well. Medical science baffled, etc., etc. Neither of them is to blame, apparently (which probably means that, deep down, without being able to say it, each blames the other). And in Benjamin's case, as with children, so it is with books: he's been labouring (!) for years to produce some shattering masterpiece, and so far, nobody has seen a word. Though everyone still seems touchingly convinced that it will appear one of these days.

So, that's the story so far. And now picture me, if you will, looking through the History section of Waterstone's on High Street. Only been back here a day and a half and already I can't think of anything better to do. I'm right next to the part of the shop that is set aside for the ubiquitous coffee-drinkers. Out of the corner of my eye I can see a girl who's facing me – *very* pretty, in a paper-thin sort of way – and opposite her, with his back to me, is a grey-haired guy who I assume at first must be her dad. I guess the girl must be about nineteen or twenty, and

there's a touch of the Goth in the way she dresses: she has lovely hair, black hair, thick and long and straight, half way down her back. Apart from that I don't take much notice of these two to start with, but when I move over to look at the books on one of the display tables, I notice her reaching down to get something out of her bag, and I notice the way her black T-shirt rides up to expose her midriff, and I notice the way that *he* notices this, quickly, surreptitiously, and all of a sudden I recognize him: it's Benjamin. Wearing a suit – which looks odd, to me, but of course it's a working day for him, and he must just have slipped out of the office for a while – and looking, in that instant, altogether . . . What's the word? I know there is a word this time, a perfect word for the way men look when they're in that situation . . .

Ah . . . I remember. 'Besotted'. That's the word, for how Benjamin looks.

And then he notices me; and time seems to slow down – the way it always does, in the moment you recognize someone you weren't expecting to see, and haven't seen for a long time, and something shifts inside you both, some sort of realignment of your expectations of that day . . . And then I'm walking over to the table, and Benjamin is standing up, and *holding out his hand*, of all things, *holding his hand out* so I can shake it. Which of course I don't do. I kiss him on the cheek instead. And he looks confused and embarrassed, and straight away he introduces me to his friend; who is also standing up, by now; and whose name, it transpires, is Malvina.

So, what *is* the situation, there? What's going on? After five minutes' broken conversation – not a word of which I can remember – I'm none the wiser. But in what is already establishing itself as a pattern, in the last couple of days, I do have something in my hand that I didn't have before. A flyer. A flyer for *another* event taking place on Monday December 13th. It turns out that Benjamin's band is playing that night.

'I thought you split up ages ago,' I say.

'We've-reformed,' he explains. 'This pub's celebrating an anniversary. Twenty years of live music. We used to have a

residency there, and they've asked us to come back and play, for one night only.'

I look at the flyer again, and smile. I remember the name of Benjamin's band, now – 'Saps at Sea'. Named after a Laurel and Hardy film, he once told me. It would be fun to see them again, in a way, although I never cared for his music much. But I'm speaking the honest truth when I say: 'I'll come if I'm still in town. But I may have left Birmingham by then.'

'Please do,' Benjamin's saying. 'Please do come.'

Then we say the usual awkward stuff about it being nice to see you, and so on, and next minute I'm out of there, with never a backward glance. Well, OK, then – one backward glance. Just enough to see Benjamin leaning towards Malvina – who he introduced to me as his 'friend', which was all the explanation I got – and showing her the flyer and telling her something about it. Their foreheads are practically touching over the table. And all I can think of as I hurry away is: Benjamin, Benjamin, how can you be doing this to your wife of sixteen years?

In my old bedroom
St Laurence Road
Northfield
Saturday, 11th December, 1999
Night time

This trip just gets worse and worse. It happened more than three hours ago, and I'm still shaking all over. Dad is sitting downstairs, reading one of his terrible old Alastair Maclean novels. He wasn't remotely sympathetic. Seemed to think the whole thing was my fault anyway. I don't think I can stay in this house any longer. I shall have to leave tomorrow, find somewhere else to stay for a while.

I'll tell you what happened, briefly. I was longing to see Pat again today, and he was supposed to be playing football for the school in the morning. It was an away game, against a team in Malvern. So I said I'd pick him up from Philip and Carol's

house, and drive him over there myself. Much against his better judgment, Dad let me borrow his car.

We went south along the Bristol Road and then took a right turn when we got to Longbridge, through Rubery and along towards the M5. It was pretty weird, being alone in the car with him – weirder than it should have been. He's very *quiet*, my son. Maybe he's just quiet when he's with me, but somehow I don't think that's the whole story. He's an introvert, for sure – nothing wrong with that. But also – and this was what really unnerved me – when he *did* start talking, the subject he chose was the last thing I'd been expecting. He started talking about *you*, Miriam. He started asking questions about when I'd last seen you, and how Mum and Dad had coped with it when you disappeared. I was dumbstruck, at first. Simply didn't know what to say to him. It wasn't as if any of this had arisen naturally in the course of conversation: he brought it all up, quite abruptly. What was I supposed to say? I just told him that it was all a long, long time ago now, and we would probably never find out the truth. Somehow we had to live with that, find an accommodation with it. It was a struggle: something we both battled with, me and Dad, in our different ways, every day of our lives. What else could I tell him?

He fell silent, after that, and so did I, for quite a while. I was a little freaked out by that conversation, to be honest. I thought we'd maybe be talking about life at school, or his chances in the football match. Not his aunt who had vanished without trace ten years before he was born.

I tried not to think about it any more, tried just to concentrate on the road.

Now, there's another thing I've noticed about this country, Miriam, in the few days I've been home. You can take the temperature of a nation from the way it drives a car, and something has changed in Britain in the last few years. Remember I've been in Italy, the homeland of aggressive drivers. I'm used to that. I'm used to being cut up and overtaken on blind corners and sworn at and people yelling out that my brother was the son of a

whore if I'm going too slowly. I can handle it. It's not serious, for one thing. But something similar has started to happen here – only it's not that similar really, there's an important difference: here, they really seem to mean it.

A few months ago I read an article in the *Corriere della Sera* which was called 'Apathetic Britain'. It said that now Tony Blair had been voted in with such a huge majority, and he seemed like a nice guy and seemed to know what he was doing, people had breathed a sort of collective sigh of relief and stopped thinking about politics any more. Somehow the writer managed to link this in with the death of Princess Diana, as well. I can't remember how, I can remember thinking it all sounded a bit contrived at the time. Anyway, maybe he had a point. But I don't think he really got to the heart of the matter. Because if you scratch the surface of that apathy, I think what you find underneath is something else altogether – a terrible, seething frustration.

We weren't on the motorway for long – only about twenty minutes or so – but even so, I started to notice something in those twenty minutes. People on the motorway were driving differently. It's not just that they were driving faster than I remembered – I drive pretty fast myself – but there was a kind of *anger* about the way they drove. They were tailgating each other, flashing their headlights when people stayed in the outside lanes for a few seconds longer than they should. There seems to be a whole new class of driver who just takes up residence in the middle lane and won't be shifted, and that really seems to infuriate everybody else: people drive about five yards behind them for a while, pressuring them to move, and then, when they don't move, they swing out into the outside lane and swing back in again before it's really safe, cutting into their path. And there were drivers who were happily cruising along at seventy and then, when they noticed that someone was overtaking them, they would accelerate, up to eighty, eighty-five, as if it was a personal affront to suggest that a P-registration Punto might overtake an S-registration Megane, and they weren't going to stand for it; as if it was an insult to the rawest and tenderest part of them. I'm

exaggerating, perhaps, but not massively. This was a Saturday morning, after all, and surely most of these people were heading off to the shops, or just out to enjoy themselves, but there seemed to be a collective fury building up on this motorway. It felt tense and pressurized, as if all it would take was for someone to make one really bad mistake and it would tip us all over the edge.

Anyway: we arrived at the school, and battle commenced. Patrick was playing somewhere in midfield, and the game seemed to keep him pretty busy. He was self-conscious with me watching him, and was trying to look tough and grown-up, but then there was also this permanent frown of concentration on his face which wiped about five years off him and almost cracked my heart at the same time. He played well. I mean, I don't know anything about football, but it looked to me as if he was playing well. His team won, 3–1. I almost froze to death, standing there on the touchline for an hour and a half – there was still frost on the pitch – but it was worth it. I've got a lot of ground to make up with Patrick, and this was a start, definitely. Afterwards I'd assumed we would go off and have lunch somewhere, but it turned out he had other plans. He wanted to go back on the coach with his schoolfriends, and then he was going round to the house of this friend of his, Simon, the goalkeeper. I couldn't very well say no, even though it took me by surprise. Within a few minutes the boys had showered and the coach was gone and suddenly I was left in the middle of Malvern all by myself. With the rest of the day to kill.

So: back to my usual state of affairs. The loneliness of the single woman. Too much time, not enough company. What was I going to do? I had a sandwich and something to drink at a pub on the Worcester Road, and in the afternoon I went for a walk along the hills. It calmed me; cleared my head. Perhaps I'm someone who only feels happy inside herself when she's halfway up a hill. Certainly I seem to have spent a lot of time, these last few weeks, climbing up to different vantage points. Maybe I'm at a point in my life where I need that Olympian perspective. Maybe I lost my bearings so thoroughly when I got involved with

Stefano that I can only recover them by getting a sense of the bigger picture. The picture today was pretty big, I must say. Would you remember that view, I wonder, Miriam, if you were ever to see it again? We used to go there when we were kids, you, me, Mum and Dad. Freezing cold picnics, ham sandwiches and thermos flasks, the four of us tucked away behind some big rock on the escarpment for shelter, the fields spread out below us, beneath grey Midlands skies. There was a little cave in a hidden part of the hillside, I remember. We used to call it the Giant's Cave, and somewhere I've got a picture of us, standing outside it, in our matching green anoraks, hoods pulled up tight. I think Dad's thrown most of them away, the pictures of you, but I managed to hold on to some of them. Saved from the wreckage. It seems to me now that we were both terribly scared of him, always, and it was that fear that made us so close. But that doesn't make the memories unhappy. Quite the opposite. They're so precious that I can hardly bear to think of them.

I don't believe you could have just walked away from all that. It makes no sense. You wouldn't have done it, would you, Miriam? Left me to fend for myself? I can't bring myself to believe it; even though the alternative's worse.

By half past three, it's getting dark. It's time to gather my strength and go home and spend another evening with Dad. The last one, I've decided. I've been thinking that if things had been better, we might have spent Christmas together, but that's not going to happen. He and I are a lost cause. I'll have to find somewhere else to stay. Maybe Pat and I could go away together somewhere. We'll see.

So, anyway, I'm on my way home. I told Dad that I'd pick up something for us to have for dinner, so I pop into Worcester, and I buy some steak. He likes steak. Considers it his patriotic duty to eat it, in fact, as rare as possible and as often as possible, now that the French have banned it. That's Dad for you. And I'm leaving the outskirts of Worcester and I've already had a bit of a skirmish with someone who tried to overtake me on a roundabout and I'm getting jumpy about it again, getting that

sense that everyone behind the wheel of a car these days is for some reason on edge. And as I head further out of the city, there's a car in front of me going very slowly. The streetlamps are lit by now and I can see that the driver is a man, a man on his own, probably not very old; and the reason he's driving slowly is that he's talking on his mobile. Otherwise he would probably be speeding along because he has quite a fancy car – a Mazda sports. But this phone conversation, whatever it's about, is evidently quite distracting. He's driving with only one hand on the wheel and keeps veering over to the left-hand side of the road. We're in a forty-mile limit but he's doing about twenty-six. But it's not the fact that he's slowing me down that's annoying me, so much: it's because what he's doing is so unsafe, so incredibly irresponsible. Isn't it illegal, in this country? (It is in Italy – not that anyone takes any notice.) What would happen if a child were to run out in front of him? He speeds up for a moment and then slows down again, drastically and for no reason, and I almost crash into his bumper. He has no idea that I'm behind him, as far as I can see. I brake sharply and the plastic bag of shopping I've put on the passenger seat next to me shoots off and spills its contents over the floor. Great. And now he's picking up speed again. I think about pulling over and putting the food back in the bag but decide against it. I watch the driver ahead of me, instead, fascinated in spite of myself. He's reached an animated point in the conversation and is making hand gestures to himself. He has no hands on the wheel at all! I decide that I want to get away from this situation as quickly as possible: if there's going to be an accident, I don't want anything to do with it. The road is single-carriageway, at this point, passing through the outer suburbs, and there's a window of opportunity with no other cars in sight. It's not the safest thing to do but I've had enough of this joker: so I indicate, swing out to the right, and try to overtake him. He's slowed right down again so it should only take a few seconds.

But as I'm overtaking, he notices what I'm doing and he doesn't like it. Without dropping the phone, he puts his foot

down and starts racing me. I'm the one going faster, still, but Dad's Rover doesn't have a lot of power in it, and it's taking me a lot longer to overtake than I'd like: and now there's a van coming in the other direction. Swearing to myself at the sheer stubbornness of this macho idiot, I change down to third gear, hammer down hard on the accelerator, and rev forward at forty-five, fifty miles an hour, just squeezing in ahead of him as the van closes in, flashing its headlights on to full beam to tick me off.

And that was that. Or would have been, if I hadn't done two really stupid things as I was in the middle of overtaking. I glanced over at the man on the telephone, making eye contact for a second or two. And I pipped my horn at him.

Now, it was only a little, frail, girly sort of pip. I'm not even sure what I meant by it. It was just my feeble way of saying, 'You wanker!', I suppose. But it had the most amazing, instantaneous effect. He must have finished that call and chucked his phone on to the passenger seat immediately because a couple of seconds later this car is *right* up behind me – about six inches away, I reckon – and his lights are on full beam, blinding me in the rear-view mirror, and I can hear his engine screaming. A real howl of anger. And suddenly I'm scared. Terrified, actually. So I try to accelerate away from him – quickly reaching some ridiculous speed, like sixty miles an hour or something – and he doesn't give any one of those inches. He's still coming up behind me, bumper to bumper. I wonder if I dare try flicking the brakes on, just to give him a shock, just to make him pull back a little, but I daren't do it, because I don't think it would work. I think it just means he would crash into the back of me.

I suppose this can only go on for a few seconds, although it feels much longer. Anyway, then I'm out of luck. We come to a set of traffic lights where the road splits into two lanes, and the lights are on red. So I pull to a halt on the inside lane, and Mazda man screeches up next to me and jerks the handbrake on and next thing I know, he's getting out of his car. I'm expecting some lumbering oaf with a neck thicker than his head, but in fact he's a scrawny little thing, only about five foot four. I can't remember

anything else about him because what happened next is all a blur. First of all he starts hammering on my window. I glimpse his face for a horrible, stretched moment and then I stare straight ahead, willing the lights to change, my heart pounding as if it's going to burst. Now he's shouting – the usual sort of stuff, fucking bitch, fucking slag, I'm not really taking it in, it all sounds like white noise to me – and then I can't stand waiting for the lights to change again so I go straight across on a red light, thinking that it's clear, only another car is coming at me all of a sudden from the left, and it has to swerve to avoid me and slam on the brakes with a screech and then its horn starts blaring as well but soon that's faded away because I'm driving off like a maniac, no idea what speed I'm doing, and it's not until I've gone about a mile and left the city well behind that I wonder why my side of the windscreen is wet when it's not raining and then I realize it's because the guy managed to spit all over it before I drove off. His parting shot.

There were quite a few lay-bys before I got to the motorway but I didn't stop in any of them because I was scared that he might be following and if he saw me there he'd pull over too and try to complete his unfinished business. So I drove on, which was a crazy thing to do because I was crying and shaking all the way back into Birmingham, and endlessly looking around to see if there was a Mazda sports coming up behind me on the outside lane, headlights flashing, guns blazing for battle.

Maybe some women would have turned around and given him the same treatment in return. But I genuinely think that if I'd wound the window down he would have attacked me. He was beside himself, completely out of control. I've never seen –

I stopped there because I was about to say I'd never seen a man look that way before. But that isn't true. As I said, I only glimpsed his face for a moment, but that was enough to see into his eyes, and yes, I *have* seen that kind of hatred in a man's eyes – just one other time. I saw it a few months ago, in Italy. But that's another story, and I should save it for another day because my hands are already stiff from all this writing.