Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Dangerous Pleasures

A Decade of Stories

Written by Patrick Gale

Published by Flamingo

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Patrick Gale

Dangerous Pleasures

A Decade of Stories

HARPER PERENNIAL
London, New York, Toronto and Sydney

Harper Perennial
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road
Hammersmith
London w6 8JB

www.harperperennial.co.uk

This edition published by Harper Perennial 2005
3

Previously published in paperback by
Flamingo 1997 (reprinted 3 times)

First published in Great Britain by Flamingo 1996

Copyright © Patrick Gale 1996

Patrick Gale asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Author photograph by Aidan Hicks

ISBN-13 978-0-00-654769-3
ISBN-10 0-00-654769-9

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechnical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out oe otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Author's Preface

The tales which follow were written over the last ten years, sometimes to commission, sometimes on a whim, sometimes in an effort to work a fit of bad temper from my system, but always with the entertainment of a particular friend in mind. Some have been published before, as detailed below, but to tinker is only human, so they now appear in a slightly altered form.

Wig – *His* (Faber and Faber, US)
Dressing Up In Voices – *Twenty Under Thirty* (Sceptre)
Borneo – *Whitbread Stories One* (Jonathan Cape)
Other Men's Sweetness – *The Ten Commandments* (Serpent's Tail)
Old Boys – *Meanwhile In Another Part of the Forest* (Flamingo)
The List – *The Faber Book of Gay Short Stories* (Faber and Faber)

Contents

Wig 1
Dressing Up In Voices 25
A Slight Chill 45
Borneo 71
Paint. 93
Other Men's Sweetness 119
Wheee! 147
Old Boys 163
The List 189
Choking 205
Dangerous Pleasures 223

WIG

for Rupert Tyler

WANDA would never have thought of buying such a thing, never have *planned* to do so. In this case, however, her thoughts and plans were immaterial. She was put upon, the object, quite literally, thrust upon her. The salesman pounced as she was waiting for a friend and as soon as she had felt the thing's slippery heaviness between her fingers, her fate was sealed.

Wanda had never mastered the art of evading the attentions of department store demonstrators and had gone through life being squirted with unwanted scents. Where other women could stride purposefully by, freezing all overtures with a glare or a scornful laugh, she would feel coerced into buying small gadgets for slicing eggs into perfect sections or recycling old bits of soap into garishly striped blocks. On the rare occasions when she heard him speak of her to his friends, she gathered that her husband's image of her was coloured by this weakness.

'She loves gadgets,' he would say. 'If she thinks it saves her time, she'll buy it. When they invent a gadget to live your life for you, she'll be first in the queue and let herself be talked into buying six.'

In her youth she had become a not terribly fervent Christian in the same way – sold the idea by a catchy sermon involving some crafty use of props – until her faith went the way of the spring-loaded cucumber dicer and the Bye-Bye Blemish foundation cream, gathering to it a kind of dusty griminess that dulled her guilt at its under-use.

'Excuse me, Madam.' It was a less vigorous approach than usual, tired and mechanical. He was evidently too drained by a long day of false charm to be mindful of his commission. 'Would you like to try a wig?'

A chip slicer she might have resisted. She had one of those already. And a hoover attachment for grooming the cat

(not a great success) but the very strangeness of that little monosyllable seemed to pluck at her elbow. She paused and half-turned.

'I beg your pardon?'

He was a nondescript, sandy man; the kind of man one looked straight through. She did not imagine he could draw in much business and yet, now that he had caught her eye, she perceived something confidential in his very nothingness. She felt an immediate sense that, in talking to him, she became invisible too, temporarily shielded from critical view.

'A wig, Madam,' he repeated. 'Would you like to try one?' He did not smile. His manner was earnest, even urgent.

'Should I be insulted?' she asked, touching her own hair instinctively. 'Why me? Why didn't you ask someone else?'

'I did,' he said, with a ghost of a smile. 'I've sold several.' He considered the small rack of the things ranged on polystyrene heads on the trolley at his side like the grim evidence of an executioner's zeal, and stretched one over the backs of his simian fingers. 'I think *this* one for you,' he said. 'Not our most popular model, because it's rather expensive. To be quite frank with you, designs from the cheaper range tend to go to people looking for fancy dress or hoping to cover the short term effects of medical therapy. Try it on. I know you'll be surprised.'

She took it gingerly, expecting the cheap sweatiness of nylon but it was pleasantly cool, sending a kind of shock through her fingertips. It put her in mind of being allowed to hold a school friend's angora rabbit for the first time; now, as then, she was seized with an immoderate temptation to hold it to her cheek. It was blonde, of course. To that extent he *was* like any salesman. He had assumed, quite erroneously, that being a quiet-looking brunette with a sensible cut she could brush behind her ears or tame with an Alice band, she harboured a secret desire for Nordic bubble curls. Obedient, resigned to humiliation, she pulled out her hair slides then slid the wig over her tingling scalp. Feeling

slightly dizzy, she bent her head forward – she was slightly taller than the salesman – and allowed him to tuck in any locks of her hair still showing.

For all its mass, it felt no heavier than a straw hat. She could not restrain a soft laugh; she knew she would not buy but this was amusement as harmless as raiding the dressing-up box and, smiling at her, he seemed to enter into her childish pleasure.

'Good,' he said. '*Very* good.'

'Quick,' she said. 'Let me see.'

He was stooping below his little trolley for the mirror when she saw her friend – one used the term loosely – returning from the haberdashery department with the shoulder pads and French chalk she had been seeking when they parted company. The friend was a conventional woman with a tendency to spiteful tale bearing when she caught any of her acquaintance doing anything eccentric or irrational. Wanda froze as the friend approached, suddenly aware that the salesman had frozen too, in suggestive complicity. It was too late to pull the wig off without hopelessly disordering her hair yet she could think of no plausible explanation as to why she was standing there trying it on. The friend's worst done, she would find herself receiving pitying looks as one bravely keeping a struggle with cancer or alopecia to herself or she would be scorned as the frivolous vulgarian they had long suspected her of being. The latter would be almost welcome. Her friends were merely neighbourhood women who had taken her under their wings; ambiguous controllers she would happily avoid. She could easily hide solitary days from her husband.

The friend passed her by however, without the slightest betrayal of recognition, continuing to look querulously about for her missing companion. Wanda looked after her retreating form in amazement. Had she a bolder appearance, she might have thought it miraculous. The salesman had found the mirror and was holding it out.

'See for yourself,' he said. 'Of course, it *is* beautifully styled, but the reason it's so much more expensive is that, apart from the basic skull cap, every fibre in it is human.'

She did not look directly in the mirror but, in the second before she tugged the thing free of her head in a spasm of revulsion, she seemed to catch a reflected glimpse of an angry stranger.

'Horrible,' she stammered. 'I'm so sorry. My friend's waiting for me.' And she hurried off for a reprimand from the friend and a dour, unfattening lunch.

When he first singled her out for his special attentions – fumbling trips to the cinema, long, circular drives in his car, hectoring sessions of golf tuition – her husband had praised her normality. 'The thing I really like about you,' he would say, 'is you're so normal.'

Delivered in lieu of anything more romantic, the praise warmed her heart and briefly convinced her that normality was indeed her special feature. Pressing through on his advantage, he wooed, wed and twice impregnated her. By some sleight of hand, he managed to do all four without once mentioning love. She did not love *him* – this had been one of the certainties that lent her courage in accepting his proposal – but she nonetheless hoped that he might love *her* and be holding something back out of manly reserve. This fond delusion evaporated shortly after the birth of their second child, when he passed on an infestation of pubic lice and blamed it, with neither apology nor embarrassment, on insufficient aeroplane hygiene. She had learned to live with the delusion's residue. She had a nice house, two clean, healthy children and a generous housekeeping allowance from which she could grant herself occasional treats without detection. Although she had only ever experienced orgasm by accident, her husband continued to grant her perfunctory sexual intercourse at least once a fortnight.

*

For most wives, that evening might have been a memorably bad one; for her it was much like any other. Their daughter, Jennifer, refused to eat supper, pleading incipient vegetarianism, and was sent to bed with no alternative. At several points during the meal, Mark, their son imitated Wanda's way of talking, most unpleasantly, only to be rewarded with her husband's indulgent laughter. When she had seen the children off to bed, smuggling in an apple and some cheese to Jennifer, he pointedly admired a Swedish actress's breasts throughout the thriller she had not wanted to watch. After that, when she was ready to drop with exhaustion, he made her sit up and play Scrabble. Scrabble, like her normality, had been one of the things originally to bring them together. He had made her play it the first time he took her to Godalming to meet his mother.

An inveterate snob, he had learnt from his mother that most card games apart from bridge were somehow common and bridge, he swiftly gathered, lay beyond his impatient understanding. Scrabble, however, appealed to him. He assured her it was a game 'smart' people played. When challenged he would never say why and she suspected he was influenced by the game's appearance in a hackneyed advertisement for chocolate mint creams. His mother claimed it was sophisticated because it came in a dark green box and anyone knew that all the best things came in dark green – waxed jackets, cars, Wellington boots, folding TV dinner tables and so forth. The problem was that Scrabble was one of the few pastimes at which her husband seemed dim beside her. In front of his friends he pretended to boast of her cleverness, her facility for scoring forty-five with a four letter word placed slyly across the ends of two others, but in private she knew it maddened him. She learned early on in their relationship to temper her glee at triumphing over him. She avoided forming words like gnomon or philtrum which she knew he would vainly insist on challenging and she tortured herself by passing up frequent opportunities to score Scrabbles. Try as she might, however, she could not let him win. It was a

game at which he could never excel. She hoped he would abandon the challenge, dismiss the skill he lacked as being feminine and therefore pointless but it was as if he wished to bludgeon the game into submission the way he did the television, or the dog. He knew he could beat her effortlessly at golf, drive faster and mow the lawn better than she ever would but he would not accept that in this one, insignificant area of their life, he had no mastery and was her inferior.

As usual, tonight, she trounced him despite her best efforts to help him win. She murmured soothingly that he had wretched luck with the letters he picked up but she knew he was seething from the way he splashed his whisky when he poured his night-cap and the entirely unnecessary fuss he made over some small item of household expense for which she had failed to obtain a receipt during that day's shopping excursion. She was weary to her very soul and knew she would have to make an early start the next morning because it was her day to drive the school run so she pointedly popped a sleeping tablet before pecking him a placid goodnight.

He ignored the hint, however. The cheap posturing of the film had left him restless and aroused and his humiliation at the Scrabble board had stirred in him a need for vengeance. She knew the warning signs of old. An unpleasant memory from when she was once laid low with gastric flu told her he would not be denied.

'You only have to lie there,' he said when she demurred and, tugging aside the pyjama bottoms she suddenly remembered she had forgotten to include in that morning's wash, he thrust his erection into her face. It bumped her nose once then she obediently took it in her mouth, remembering to keep her teeth out of the way. She had once been ambushed by an article on oral sex while waiting in the dentist's waiting room for her son to receive some fillings. It had changed her life – at least, it had changed a small part of her life – with the advice to make a yawning motion so as to widen the entry to the throat and avoid telltale, not to say unflattering, gagging. Tonight she found it

difficult not to choke. As he pumped back and forth, his thighs weighty on her breasts, his grasp causing the headboard to bang against the wall, she fought back spasm upon nauseated spasm, diverting her thoughts onto undone tasks, recipe cards, the alpine perennials she had yet to plant on her rockery.

'I bet *she* never has to take this,' he said, mentioning the actress. 'I bet no one ever does this to *her*. She'd be on top. She'd call all the shots.'

He spoke in so matter of fact a manner that she feared his mind was on rockeries too and the ordeal might be prolonged much further but suddenly her cheeks were filling with his vile, familiar jelly. Never one for delicate gestures, he heaped insult on assault with a comment about helping to wash down her sleeping tablets. As he rolled off her and walked to the bathroom, she took a certain pleasure in spitting out his juices into the back pages of some golfing memoirs he had been reading.

Her children were enrolled in consecutive years of the same school and she shared the school run with mothers of three of their friends. School runs were a far cry from the easy suburban slovenliness of dropping one's husband off at the station with an overcoat flung over one's nightdress. Other children were all too often hostile emissaries of their parents, spitefully observant as only children could be. Normally she presented them with as clean and careful a version of herself as she would offer her husband's colleagues at the Christmas party. This morning, however, she had dressed in a hurry, thrown into confusion by a bad night's sleep and the discovery that her son had unplugged the tumble drier so as to recharge some batteries, and so left in a sodden heap that day's blouse which she had planned to iron before breakfast.

'You were wearing that dress yesterday,' said her daughter's best friend in a tone of friendly astonishment.

'I don't think so,' she said. 'Hurry up and belt up or we'll be late.'

'Yes you were,' said the child. 'I'm belted now so you can drive on. Yes you were. I saw you when Mummy came to pick up Mark and Jennifer.'

'Really?' Wanda replied, pretending to frown at some road works. 'I really don't remember. Maybe I was. How funny. Now. What have you all got on your timetables today? Is it horrid maths?' Incredulously she felt herself break out in a nervous sweat. The girl had turned away, oblivious to the bright conversational gambit. 'Mummy changes at least twice a day,' she told the others. 'Three times if she's gardening or something. She says Daddy likes it.'

Wanda amused herself briefly with the image of the woman in question actually effecting regular bodily changes – new hair, new teeth, new leg lengths – with the restlessness of a dissatisfied flower arranger. Then the unnervingly self-possessed Morag, the next child they picked up, physically recoiled as Wanda laughed her hello in her face, and she realized she had forgotten, in the rush, to brush her teeth. She was caught out in her hasty rootle through the glove compartment for a packet of peppermints and, forced therefore to pass them round, had to admit to her lapse if she was to justify taking the last mint and thereby depriving Jennifer of one. Any ground gained by doling out sweets was doubly lost by this tasteless revelation. The girls shifted slightly on their seats and giggled except for poor Jennifer, who pressed her nose to the window and stared with forlorn fury at the passing houses, condemned now for a mother not only slatternly but unhygienic.

After seeing the children safely into the playground, Wanda drove directly into town, while she was still fired with humiliation and rage. Only half aware of why she was there at all, she found a parking space then half-strode, half-ran back to the department store. For a moment she froze as it seemed that the salesman and his trolley had vanished but then she saw with

a start that he was only feet away, helping a woman peel a long, red creation off her own head of nondescript grey.

Instinct and a kind of warning glance from him told her to stand back until the woman had made her purchase then, as she stepped forward he greeted her with a blandly surprised, 'Ah, Madam,' and asked if she wished to try on the same model again.

'No,' she told him. 'It's perfect. I know it is. I was just being silly before. About the hair being human I mean. I don't know why. Perhaps it made me think of nuns. But now I . . .' She faltered, her mouth suddenly dry with nerves. His face briefly clouded by concern, he asked if she would like to wear it immediately.

'Oh no,' she said, scandalized. 'Wrap it up, please I . . . I'll try it on again once I get it home.'

He wrapped it in tissue then shut it into a bag so discreet it might have contained a roll of curtain-heading tape or a box of talcum powder.

Meeting the extravagant price with a handful of notes from the horde she had pared from her housekeeping budget, she experienced a dizziness that verged on the erotic and she had to hurry to the coffee bar to eat two slices of cake to recover her equilibrium. It was only as she sat there, terrible booty on the chair beside her, softly munching, reduced like the immobilized shoppers around her to a contented sugar-trance, that she noticed the bag was not one of the store's own but of a different provenance entirely. It was black with small gold lettering which boasted outlets in France, Luxemburg and Florida. *Silence*, the company appeared to be called, which put her in mind of libraries. Perhaps it was meant to be pronounced in a French accent to sound less an imperative, more a bewitching promise. In small curly letters beneath the title the bag whispered, *Your secret is our pride*. She wondered if the store's management knew the salesman was there at all or whether he slyly played on the employees' ignorance of one another's purpose and throve in their scented midst like a parasite on a sleek but cumbersome host. As if to

confirm her suspicion, he had moved his trolley again when she glanced around her from the downward escalator. He had shifted his favours from foundation garments and hosiery to between costume jewellery and winter hats.

At first she only wore the wig at home, when she was safely alone, honouring it with all the ritual befitting a complex pornographic pursuit. She would lock doors and draw curtains. She took off all her too familiar clothes, the better to focus on the wig's effects, and wrapped her body Grecian-style in a sheet or bath towel, much as she had done as a slyly preening child. Every time she stretched it anew across her knuckles and tucked it around her scalp she felt afresh the near-electric sensations that had first surprised her in the store. She was fascinated by what she saw, transfixed before the unfamiliar woman she conjured up in the mirrored doors of the bedroom cupboards. If the doorbell or the telephone rang during the hours of her observances, she ignored them, although, lent courage by curls, she made a few anonymous calls to people she disliked, words slipping from her lips which the unwigged her could never have uttered. Had her husband come home unexpectedly, he would have caught her in as much guilty confusion as if he had surprised her in some rank adulterous act.

And yet with each resumption of blondeship she grew less timid. The woman in the looking glass would not be ignored, it seemed, and her influence proved cumulative. Wanda grew bolder. She began to make short daytime excursions in the wig and did things she imagined a woman with such hair would do. She drove to smarter districts than her husband's where she sat in pavement cafés and ordered a glass of red wine that brought a flush to her cheeks or a searingly bitter double espresso whose grounds she savoured on her tongue. She bought expensive magazines, flicked through them with a knowing smile as though she recognized the people within, then, casually profligate, left them behind on restaurant tables without even bothering to

retrieve the small sachets of free samples glued to certain advertisements.

She had a pedicure at an elegant chiropodist's, which left her feet dangerously soft in the new black shoes she had bought herself. Then, inspired by the pleasure of watching a woman crouch below her working at her feet with little blades and chafing devices, she paid to have her toe and fingernails painted traffic light red. This last impulsive indulgence seemed a miscalculation at first since it could not be shut away in her wardrobe like the wig and the shoes or easily washed off like the new, distinguished scent, but her husband seemed to like her with claws. Or at least he did not seem actively to *dislike* her with them. A few weeks ago she would have thought them entirely out of keeping with her rather homely character and what she thought of as her 'look' but now they seemed no more than a newly exposed facet of her personality. Her fingers seemed longer and more tapering than they had before, her clothes less a necessity and more of a statement.

It was only a matter of time – two weeks, in fact, before she dared to leave the wig on when she picked the children up from school. As she waited by the gates, other mothers complimented her on her bold new style. She did not duck her head or offer bashful thanks and explanation as she might have done before but merely smiled and said, 'You think so?' for their opinions were now entirely unimportant to her wellbeing. The children, especially the other girls on the school run, usually so slack in their compliments, touched her with their enthusiasm.

'It's amazing!' they cried ingenuously. 'You look like a film star!'

She knew that children's ideas of glamour were hopelessly tawdry and overblown, that, in the undereducated estimation of little girls, anything forbidden them – lipstick, bosoms, cigarettes, false eyelashes – was of its very nature beautiful so that mere prostitutes acquired a near-royal loveliness for them. She

knew she should not take their effusions as a compliment. She knew she should play along for a moment or two then expose the wig for the fraud it was. After all, she would still have shown herself to be that rare thing among mothers – a good sport with a potential for sexiness. But then she saw how her daughter was sitting, squeezed into her usual corner of the back seat, mutely glowing at the praise her mother was receiving from these all-important peers. She even received a rare gesture of affection from her son; a warm, dry hand placed on her shoulder as he boasted of the points he had received for a geography test. She imagined the disappointment, disgust even, on their faces if she suddenly tugged the wig off. They might not praise her as a good sport; they might simply declare her mad. She was not yet so far from her own childhood as to have forgotten that madness in mothers was even less forgivable than bad hats.

So she drove on. Wigged. A game, laughing lie made flesh. She laid rapid plans. If she could make it through the night undetected, she would cash in the rest of her rainy day fund, call at her usual salon the next day, throw caution to the winds and have her own hair dyed and styled to match the wig. At the thought that she would thereby become the woman in her looking glass, the stylish, effortless woman of her daylight excursions, she felt herself suffused with a warm glow that began in her scalp and ran down her neck and across her breasts and belly. She gazed at the suburban roads unfolding ahead of her and smiled in a way that might have scared the children had they been less absorbed in their own chatter by now. She dreaded her husband's return however. She dreaded his mockery or anger. Once supper was safely in the oven and the children were bathed, she locked herself in the bathroom to check with a mirror that no tell tale label or lock of her own hair were showing. The look was perfect however. She reapplied her new carmine lipstick, gave the back of her neck a squirt of scent then stood back to admire her full length reflection, stepping this way and that. He had a treat in store. He had a whole new wife.

Which were his own words exactly. At first he was perturbed. He wanted to know what had suddenly made her do it.

'You,' she said lightly. 'You said you wished I was blonde like that actress. So I am. I can always change back if you don't like it.'

'No', he said, looking at her in an uncertain, sideways fashion as he mixed his gin and tonic and poured her a sweet sherry. 'No. Don't do that. Was it very expensive?'

'Not very.'

He had no idea how much women's hair cost to fix. He naïvely thought it was maybe twice what he was charged by the barber in the station car park.

'Supper'll be about five minutes,' she said. 'I'm running a bit late. And I don't want a sherry. I want a gin.'

'But you like sherry. You always have sherry,' he insisted.

'I'd rather have what you're having,' she said. 'If there's enough that is.'

'Sure. Of course there's enough. There's always enough.' He tipped the sherry back into its sticky lipped bottle and poured her gin. 'I dunno,' he said. 'I go to the office and when I come back I find a whole new wife.'

She simply smiled. 'Plenty of tonic,' she said girlishly. 'Or it'll go to my head.'

Over dinner he admired her nails too, apparently only noticing them for the first time now that she was blonde. He tried not to stare but she felt him watching her whenever she walked over to the cooker or the fridge.

'What are you staring at?' she asked at last, amazed that he had made no comment on the unpleasantly chemical pudding she had made by whipping milk into the brown powdered contents of a convenient packet and tossing in a few biscuits soaked in cherry brandy.

'You've killed her,' he joked. 'Haven't you? You've gone and killed her and put her outside in the deep freeze or something.'

She paused at the dishwasher with her back to him and shuddered involuntarily.

Don't be silly,' she said as soon as she could. 'You'll give me the creeps. Coffee?'

'Please.'

'In here? Or are we playing Scrabble?'

'No games tonight,' he said, affecting a yawn. 'I thought perhaps an early night . . .'

She had always wondered how oral sex would feel when performed on her but in all the years of their marriage he had never offered and she had never thought it entirely proper to ask. Tonight, emboldened by the unprecedented interest he was showing in her hands, her feet and her borrowed hair, she realized that she needed no words to ask him. While he was giving her breasts more attention than the usual cursory lick, she simply placed a hand on his head and pushed. He hesitated for a moment as though unable to believe what she was suggesting so she pushed again, quite firmly, so that her wishes should be unmistakable. The surprising pleasure he proceeded to give her had little to do with anything he was doing to her and everything to do with what she was doing to him. She had always supposed that sex was a matter of submission, patience even, but now it dawned on her that it was eight-tenths power.

She woke with a headache. She wondered if it had anything to do with the gin then thought that perhaps the wig was too tight. Could her head have expanded? *Did* heads expand? Like hot feet? The headache intensified as she dressed. She scowled as she brushed her teeth and teased the wig back into shape on her scalp. Downstairs the pain broke out as sulkiness, when she complained about being expected to polish her husband's shoes, and naked temper when she shouted at her daughter – her beloved Jennifer – for complaining that there was no fat-free milk for her cereal. Where these displays would normally have

been beaten down by louder ones from the offended parties, she was amazed to see her husband mutely take up the boot polish and her daughter reach for the gold top with something like terror. Landed with the school run again by some cooked-up excuse from another mother, she thought her head would burst with the added burden of the children's chatter. She paused at some traffic lights to rifle her bag for painkillers which she gulped down without water, heedless of curious stares from behind her. Odious Morag – whose favour her children only cultivated because her parents had a swimming pool and threw vulgarly ostentatious birthday parties for her – had already riled her by insisting on sitting in the front like an adult because she said the back of the car 'had a bad smell'. She then began to tease Jennifer for having a crush on a teacher.

'That's enough,' Wanda said, wincing at the pain her own voice caused, booming behind her eyes. 'Stop being horrid.'

'But it's true,' Morag insisted. 'She always tries to sit in the front row.'

'I don't!' Jennifer protested.

'She *does*. And yesterday she stayed behind to ask him questions before break.'

'I said that's *enough*!' Wanda said and found herself slapping Morag on her soft, pink thigh.

For a moment there was stunned silence as Morag looked from thigh to driver and back again. It had been a fierce little slap; Wanda's palm still stung seconds later.

'I'll tell,' Morag said at last.

'Good,' Wanda told her, giddy with the release of uttering words she had too long swallowed. 'Then maybe you'll get another slap for being a telltale as well as an ill-bred little madam.'

Morag made as if to cry at this but Wanda silenced her.

'Stop it,' she hissed, astonished at the scorn in her tone. 'You're too *big* to play the baby.'

The euphoria of the others was palpable behind their silence

as Morag stifled her petulant sniffles. Pulling up outside the school, Wanda defied the pain in her head.

'Jennifer,' she said. 'I'm *glad* you're showing an interest in your lessons. I'm *proud* of you, darling.' Jennifer shone with pleasure even as Morag seemed to shrink in significance.

Wanda tore the wig off with a gasp as soon as she was clear of the area. Glancing in the mirror to flick her own hair back to a semblance of life, she saw a livid, purplish welt where the thing's netting had been grinding into her forehead. From time to time as she drove, she would rub hard at it with her fingertips. She had a tendency to raise her eyebrows when people were talking to her, especially when she had no interest in what they were telling her. Possibly this habitual action had made the wig's chafing worse, producing this shaming record of insincerity.

Back in her house, before she had even loaded the breakfast things into the dishwasher, she hurried to the telephone and called her hairdresser's. To her dismay, no one, not even a junior, could see her for anything more than a dry-it-yourself light trim for two days. She had a deep, almost pathological sense of consumer loyalty, never being lured by a bargain rate into forsaking the tradesmen she had always patronized without a commensurate sense of guilt which she felt obliged to own when she next entered her usual shop.

'I bought half a pound of these in that other place on the parade,' she would confide in a confused salesperson. 'I never normally shop anywhere but here but, well, you know how it is. I just saw the price and in I went.'

Often as not she would add some placatory lie about the bargain goods having proved inferior to those from her usual stockist as though the thought that her dereliction had been punished would comfort them over her momentary infidelity. It was with a heavy heart, therefore, that she reached for the *Yellow Pages* and looked up the numbers of rival salons. She would not tip, she told herself, however good they proved;

that way the disloyalty would seem less wounding. But neither Bernice of Bromley, Shy Locks or Louis D'Alsace could fit her in. After a few more, similarly disappointing calls, she gave up, called back her usual salon, and made a morning appointment for the next day. It was only another forty-eight hours, she told herself. If she had fooled her small world so far, she could fool it a little further.

To soothe her nerves she left the wig on the hall table for swift snatching up should there be any surprise callers then she threw herself into a satisfactory penance of housework. She scrubbed the bath, pulling a skein of matted hairs from the plughole, cleaned the nasty fluffy bit of carpet behind the loo, wiped the tops of the door surrounds and descaled the shower head with a powerful caustic she had recently heard of being used in a desperate suicide bid. Then, with no break for coffee, she set about taking every saucepan and labour-saving device from the kitchen cupboards, cleaning it, washing down its shelf, then putting it back again. She even wiped the sticky residue from jam and marmalade pots. The varnish on her new nails chipped off in places but she slaved on, taking a kind of delight in finding other unpalatable tasks to tackle. She skipped lunch, eating only aspirin because she still had the residue of her morning's headache, and forged on with polishing her husband's collection of silver plate trophies and the fiddly cake stand with matching slice which his aunt had given them on their wedding day. (Wanda had kept it in the back of a cupboard, polishing it still more rarely than she used it because it had too many little nooks and crannies and something in her rebelled at using even a discarded toothbrush to clean it.)

Suddenly she saw it was time to be picking the children up again. Cursing clothes, time, duty, she ran to the hall, tossing aside her apron and snatching up the wig. The wig no longer fitted. She glared at her pink-cheeked reflection as she stuffed her hair back behind her ears and tried again. She even checked to see if the label were the right way round. She glanced at her

watch and let out a whimper. She caught herself toying with the possibility of driving into school as she was only with a headscarf on in the vain hope that the children would prove less sharp-eyed than usual. This was ridiculous! Wigs did not shrink. It was not in their nature. And heads, healthy adult heads, did not grow. Brooking no nonsense, she tried one more time.

Never had the saying that one must suffer to be beautiful been so rigorously brought home to her. She succeeded in donning the wig and styling it much as before but it might have been made of cheese-wire it dug so fiercely into her. The headache, which had never entirely left her all day, paled by comparison with such immediate pain. Driving to the school, she felt herself multiply martyred. She was not yet so vain as to have become irrational. She wondered if she were sick. Women such as she had become, women with scarlet nails and borrowed splendour, were never ill. They had everything organized, and disease was not part of their plan. They vomited with tidy aggression in other women's bathrooms then partied on, lips painted afresh. They scorned hospitals. Illness bored them and the surgeon's knife filled them with selfish fears. They died violently, she sensed, in a kind of anger at a world that had cheated them. Women who made love in blonde wigs and took pains to deceive their children died crushed beneath the wheels of trains or skewered by the steering columns of their lovers' cars. A trickle of warm moisture ran from under the wig across her temple. She glanced fearfully up at the mirror, half expecting to see blood, but it was merely sweat and she dabbed it away with a handkerchief.

She was one of the last of the parents to arrive but there was not a breath of complaint from the children and she remembered her show of strength that morning. She noticed its effect almost immediately; a change had come over the pecking order in the group. To her surprise she saw that it was her daughter who now held sway, telling people where to sit, holding power of ultimate disapproval or permission. And it was Morag, normally

so haughty and spiteful who was now the po-faced wheedler and appeaser.

'Mrs Spalding, I know it's very short notice,' she began, with such soft shyness that Wanda anticipated mockery, 'but my parents are taking me to the cinema tonight and I wondered if you'd let Mark and Jennifer come too. We've all done our homework already. We did most of it in break and we finished it in the last lesson because Mr Dukes was off sick. Daddy would drop them off afterwards. So you wouldn't have to do anything.'

Wanda acquiesced so easily they seemed quite startled. Jennifer began to plead automatically before realizing her wish was already granted. Wanda could think of nothing but the cruel way their voices played upon the pain in her head. The possibility of emptying the car that little bit sooner and facing an evening of relative tranquillity was an unlooked-for blessing. Her immediate impulse on swinging clear of Morag's parents' long drive was to snatch the wig off but she checked herself with the thought that she would only have to pull it on again for her husband's benefit, possibly with even greater difficulty and pain than before.

When she reached home, she walked swiftly round drawing all the curtains and turning on a few lights to create a pleasant, welcoming atmosphere, then she kicked off her shoes and lay in the middle of the drawing room carpet, breathing gently. The scents of potpourri and cleaning products soothed her. The tang of carpet freshening powder was a reminder that she had not rested all day. She closed her eyes, concentrating on breathing slower and slower, counting to herself as she drew in the fragrant air. The pain in her head began to subside and, fancying she felt the wig loosen perceptibly about her skull, she slipped into a sensuous doze.

She had given no thought all day to what they were to eat for supper. Normally it was something she did after the children had been taken from her after breakfast. She would load the dishwasher then allow herself a cup of coffee and a couple of the biscuits she kept hidden inside the drum of the electric potato

peeler and she would pore over recipe books and a shopping list. Given though she might be to the blandishments of kitchen gadgets, she had never been one of those modern mothers (slatternly mothers, she thought of them, lucky, happy slatterns) who contented themselves with a hoard of frozen meals and a microwave oven. Apart from *Instant Whip*, the nearest she had ever allowed herself to fast food was a pressure cooker, and *that* she only used for steaming puddings and root vegetables. When she woke to find her husband standing over her asking if she were all right and what was for supper because he couldn't smell anything cooking, she stared up at him and felt panic in her very soul.

'I . . . I fell asleep,' she stammered, climbing to her feet and padding, shoeless, into the supperless space across the hall. 'Morag's parents have taken the children to the cinema. I had a headache when I got back and I lay down and I must have fallen asleep. Sorry.' She looked about her. The lack of lights and steam, the lack of sizzle, formed a dreadful, silent accusation. She could not pretend that the automatic oven switch had failed to come on when there was palpably nothing in there waiting to be cooked. There was not even a piece of meat. She opened the fridge door then closed it again hurriedly as he came in behind her. There was nothing. No bacon. No chicken breasts. Not even some humbly reassuring mince.

'I work my guts out all day,' he was saying, as to some invisible jury, 'and it's been a bugger of a day too, and I come back to find you fast asleep, looking like nothing on earth, and the table not even laid.' She darted a hand to her head and was relieved to find the wig still in place. 'What's got into you?' he asked.

She decided to brazen it out. 'I forgot,' she said.

'You *what*?!'

'I forgot. I've never done it before and I won't do it again. But I forgot. I spent the whole day cleaning and scrubbing and I completely forgot about supper. And I've had a terrible headache. Why don't I fix us both a nice drink? Better still, why

don't we live a little and go out. The children are safe with the Hewitsons until 9.40. If we went now I'm sure we could get a table. I've had a bugger of a day too.' From somewhere deep within her she found a reserve of flirtatious gaiety. 'Come on,' she said. 'You mix us both a nice gin and put your feet up while I go and put on something pretty then we can pretend we're young and free again and you can take me out for dinner. Somewhere cosy. Somewhere French with candles!'

There was a pause, perhaps for only a second, in which she was intensely aware that the fridge had developed a louder buzz than usual, which she knew was the sign that it was reaching its point of built-in obsolescence, then he began to shout at her. He called her filthy things – filthier things than he ever did when they were having sexual intercourse. He implied she was a failure as a wife, a mother, a woman even, and then he slapped her. He had offered her many insults in his way and in his time but he had never, until this evening, touched her in violence. She fell back against the sink. Then, all at once, the shock of his big bony hand against her jaw seemed the ultimate denigration and she took a knife from the wooden block beside the bread bin and pushed it into his stomach. It was a big knife, her biggest, and the block was a particularly cunning one with a discreet mechanism which sharpened each blade as it released it for use.

She had often heard of the similarities between pork and human flesh, in particular their skin structure and the thickness of their fatty deposits. After the initial resistance, which might as well have been caused by the starched cotton of his shirt as by any strength of skin and muscle, the knife slid in with appalling ease and swiftness. The sensation was not unlike slicing into a rolled pork loin. Her husband gasped and staggered backwards, then forwards, then slumped to the floor. Never having taken a first aid exam, he did not know better than to pull the knife out. She had punctured his liver. By the time he was writhing and coughing on the linoleum, his suit was turning purple with his gore. She tried to staunch the flow with tea towels, but he was

beyond her help. He seemed to spit in her face as he died but perhaps he was only coughing.

She called for an ambulance and the police, telling them her husband had been stabbed but not by whom, then she looked up the relevant cinema in the local newspaper and telephoned to leave an urgent message for the Hewitsons that an emergency had arisen and they were to hang on to Mark and Jennifer until contacted by the authorities. Turning back, she saw the big red thing on the kitchen floor and was suddenly sick, just as she had imagined women with blonde wigs should be. She vomited nothing but acrid juices, having eaten nothing all day, but it ruined the parts of her clothes the blood had not already stained, and she determined to change into something cleaner before the emergency services arrived. Both hospital and police station were a good fifteen minutes' drive away. Skidding slightly, because her feet were wet, she hurried across the kitchen and up the stairs to the bathroom. She tugged her blouse over her head and stepped out of her skirt. She began to wash her bloodied hands in the sink then realized that there was so much of the stuff on her that a shower would do the job better.

Having been descaled only that afternoon, the jet was extra strong and she welcomed its buffeting. It was only as she raised her hands to her face that she remembered she was still wearing the wig. Blinking the water from her eyes, heedless now of how badly she treated the thing, she took a handful of curls and tugged. She recoiled with a gasp. Crying out as though the water were scalding her, she flung back the shower curtain and struggled to see herself in the looking glass. The mirrored surface had steamed up and her flailing hand could not reach it so she tugged once more at the curls and felt once more the unmistakable agony of her own outraged scalp refusing to yield.