

Chapter 1

They haven't even left Glasgow. They're sitting at the traffic lights, Harris revving the engine, plumes of black smoke coming out the back. Zuckerman turns round and says, 'Here, it's my last joint. Finish it before we get going.' They hand it back and forth. A relay race in slow motion. Zuckerman is dragging, drawing in the smoke. A button pops off his shirt. He exhales. A rush of air and he deflates like a punctured tyre. He passes it over and says, 'What d'you think?'

'I've always thought of you as a good mate, Zuckerman.'

'No, I mean the joint, Harris.'

Harris lifts the long fat cigarette up to the light, examines it as if it's a prized antique and inhales. He gives Zuckerman a satisfied grin. Smoke leaks out of his nose.

When Zuckerman inhales, he coughs. A dark lump of sputum and his sunglasses hit the windscreen with a synchronistic snap. 'This is it, definitely, my last joint. But I still have my uses, Harris.' This is a first. For the last few months Zuckerman has been about as useless as a junkie without a syringe. 'Pass it over.' Willpower – that's another thing he lacks. He doesn't have any. He tried to give up, give everything up. He says, 'I wouldn't have taken you for a smoker, Harris?'

'Because of the old days?'

The old days: Harris tells Zuckerman it's been a while since they were kids. Things have changed, he says. They're still chumming up, still catching up. Years, living their separate lives.

Zuckerman pulls, tugs at his belt. It's a struggle. Clunk. He reckons Harris's waist is in the low thirties. Harris says it used to be the other way round, says he's known Zuckerman since they were fifteen. Was it that long ago? Harris still has that bush of brown hair, but now he sports a two-day-old beard, designer specs and looks like he's been kitted out by one of those fancy German fashion houses. And what's he doing to my car? Harris is driving Zuckerman's old 4x4. It's seen better days. Ruti, Zuckerman's sister, is in the back, asleep, curled up under a blanket.

Harris stops the car. Last minute shopping. It's Saturday morning, Byres Road, heart of the West End. Zuckerman wants to buy a new tape, one that doesn't remind him of the past. He dashes into Fopp records, hears the blues, into Lost in Music, hip hop and finally into Woolworths where, unexpectedly, he finds what he's looking for. At the 'Pay Here' sign Zuckerman puts his hand in his back pocket and realises his wallet is in the car. 'Damn!' The woman in front, round shouldered, collar turned up, stops arguing with the cashier and turns round. Her mouth is clenched, her cheeks are bright green and she's about to ... they recognise each other. Oh shit! 'Auntie Rae, good to see you.' You couldn't loan me for this tape? I came out without my cash.'

'Doesn't surprise me,' she says. 'How's your mother?'

Every time I see her, it's how's your mother. 'Haven't spoken to her for a while, you know how it is? Never mind, can't stop.' His mother – that other woman in his life.

Harris is driving because Zuckerman says his ankle aches. He reverses. Smash. He accelerates out of the supermarket parking bay and manoeuvres the vehicle around a couple of enraged pedestrians. To avoid the traffic and drumbeat of the Orange Walk he nips up a narrow side street. Sandstone tenements on either side. He doubles back to reach the park gates, the junction at Great Western Road. He seems to know where he's going. He make's a right turn through amber, heading towards the on-ramp and the M8 motorway, past tree-lined terraces, Chinese medicine centres, curry houses and a pub on every corner. The truck is filled to the roof with overnight supplies. They're prepared for any eventuality: fleece lined coats, winter boots, camping gaz and pots and pans packed like shiny Russian dolls.

'You want to see the malpractice suit that's landed on my desk. The jerk, I'll screw him for zillions.'

'Surgeons are all the same,' Zuckerman says. 'Knife happy.'

Harris is a successful lawyer, specialising in divorce and professional negligence, a junior partner in Thompson, Thomson, Lieberman and Trainer. In his spare time he collects domestic trivia: adding vinegar to a pot full of boiling potatoes will stop them from breaking into mush.

Wedged into the boot under a tarpaulin is a slab of rough-hewn granite wrapped in heavy-duty polythene. Behind Harris's seat, four-dozen cans of beer rattle a familiar melody. He glances in the rear view mirror. Ruti's lips purr with every out-breath. She's Zuckerman's nearest and dearest, a popsie; dreamy, youthful, prepossessing, used to be a staff nurse at the Royal. In a geometric sort of way – standing back and looking at them in outline – as brother and sister they're quite unlike. Not that Ruti eats like a sparrow, but Zuckerman likes his food. He has the stomach to show for it. Harris told Zuckerman she and him are getting reacquainted. They were out the night before and, according to Zuckerman, arrived home at a ridiculous hour.

'I'll roll another,' Zuckerman says. 'This is definitely my last.'

Zuckerman busies himself, gathering ingredients for his last joint. It isn't an easy task, rolling a joint in a moving vehicle, especially a truck that's being driven by a lunatic. 'Take it easy!' he shouts.

Harris accelerates, full throttle, up to the next traffic light.

Zuckerman adjusts the back of his seat, makes himself comfortable and burns off the edge of the cube, black-brown hash. It's Afghani Black. It stinks, it's supposed to. He teases it into a fine sticky powder and sprinkles it on to an equal amount of low tar tobacco. Full strength Marlboro would kill him. Really, this is the last one.

'You're driving way too fast!'

Zuckerman can see Harris's head turning, glancing at every pretty girl he sees.

Zuckerman doesn't just roll a joint. He manufactures it. If it isn't made according to his exact specifications, 90mm in length plus or minus five, 6mm in diameter plus or minus one, he opens it, throws away the paper, keeps the contents, roach, and starts again. The lighter pops out and he fires it up, twisted end. He passes it over. His thoughts wander: two dogs, slobbering, snarling, their coats forming a hairbrush of static on their backs. 'Did you ever have a dog?' he asks.

'Never.' Harris says.

Zuckerman tucks into one of his deep-filled, white bread, egg and cress sandwiches. Between mouthfuls he says, 'Ruti's still asleep. She gets like this in the car. She's either asleep or she's carsick.'

Ruti can hear them but she's too tired to speak. She slips in and out of consciousness. The insomnia working away. One of the few places she sleeps is in the back of a travelling car. She didn't always feel like this, half awake and far away, looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope. The reason: one morning she wakes up, slips on her dressing gown, walks down the stairs and finds her husband dangling in the noose of a towrope. Her husband hung himself.

Within minutes of driving off, Ruti yawned, felt drowsy, eyelids heavy, a feeling of utter helplessness. She didn't resist. In that foetal position, wrapped up snug, the car jiggling on its rusted springs, the world outside didn't matter much. Her inner world beckons. Recollections. But she can still hear them talk.

Harris says, 'I get like that too, when I'm not driving.'

Harris collected Ruti in his car so she didn't have to get the bus and she felt like: 'For once this feels good.' She dressed in shocking green and shades of pink with blue woolly socks scrunched up around her ankles. Harris said he knew a place that served the most fantastic lobster. He said he knew a place that served the best chilli-burger. They ended up at Sarti's pizza house where, when they sat down and looked at the menu, Harris assured Ruti they served the best pizzas in town. Harris knew the best place to eat, the worst place to get your car repaired, the most interesting movie currently showing and fastest way to cook a scrambled egg.

'Think she's OK?' Zuckerman says.

'Why shouldn't she be?' Harris says.

'Snappy! You'd think I accused you of fixing her drink. You were out late last night.'

'Your sister likes to party.'

After all, Ruti thinks, it's been a while since we last met; people develop their little idiosyncrasies. Harris is a good-looking man, a trifle weak around the eyes, and the mouth – it did turn in at the corners when he shouted at the waiter. But, for a change, Ruti was out and having a good time. She hadn't been plied with drink for as long as she could remember. The small part of her that wasn't an alcoholic said it would be OK just for one night to have a glass of wine with an old friend. There wasn't any rule against it. It wasn't written in large red letters on the wall in front of her. By the time the Sambucca

arrived along with the Amoretti biscuit with the coloured rice-paper wrapper that hit the ceiling when lit – Harris’s overt display of childishness – a blurry image of Harris kept revolving in front of her eyes. She grabbed him. She kissed him on his pretty, thick lips. They ended up back at his place.

‘We met up with some of my old friends,’ Harris says. ‘Went to an all night café and then I dropped her off at your place.’

They join the motorway in the fast lane and nearly ram a guy doing over sixty. Weekend motorists. Stop, start, stop, start. Harris throttles the turbocharged engine. He’s found a gap in the line. They’re heading east out of the city, past the giant, blue gasometer.

Zuckerman remembers first time round, Marianne mentioned how incongruous it looked. He tilts the headrest forward, settles into his seat – the foam padding gave up long ago – and he opens the ashtray. The black tape he used to piece together the crack in the fake mahogany dashboard has lost its stick. He takes hold of the joint, draws in the heady mixture and blows out a swirl of light grey mist, which spirals around the cabin until it escapes out of the barely-open rear window. His mind drifts; a rainbow of colours, except for red. For a while now, he’s had this blind spot for red. Red blood, red cars, red anything, he misses them all. Red appears as grey-blue with a greenish tinge. He’s learning to cope. That’s another reason for him not driving; he sits at the traffic lights and falls asleep waiting for them to change. Last time Zuckerman took this route *he* was behind the wheel, Marianne was in the front, Angelika was in the back and the animals were behind the grille, tongues out, panting, moulting over the seats, perfect summer’s day ... 21st July, it was a belter of a day, swimming pool skies, sunshine and temperatures in the high 70’s. They had decided on a picnic. If the weather stayed fine they might find a country hotel and stay overnight. Zuckerman’s new bride Marianne and her mother Angelika prepared lunch. Salami, sauerkraut, black bread. He’d taken a liking to hard-boiled eggs and cans of full strength lager. They packed it all into a wicker hamper and Zuckerman flung it into the car along with sticks, boots and outdoor clothing. And the guard dogs from Colditz.

*

Harris changes the tape in the stereo then nudges Zuckerman just as he is about to nod off.

‘A beer, Zvi?’

Sometimes Harris calls him Zuckerman, other times Zvi. Zuckerman thinks the latter is a term of endearment. It’s 9:30 in the morning. Zuckerman is thirsty. He’s also giving up alcohol.

‘Do you always have that grin?’ he asks Harris as he pulls free a couple of cans, ripping them open, handing one over. Zuckerman looks over to Harris, his cheesy, pockmarked complexion that fixes into a rugged smile. He keeps grinning. It’s becoming annoying. A stranger might think he’s about to burst into laughter. When he does smile, proper, Zuckerman catches sight of his perfect white teeth, nauseating. Zuckerman realises that his own teeth weren’t too good to begin with. Now, the gaps left by his missing bottom molars and numbers four, six and eight upper left make it nearly impossible to chew.

‘After concussion as serious as mine you have to learn new skills and the old ones take a while to return. Grabbing hold of a knife and fork is awkward: when your hands are bandaged it’s difficult to gauge the pressure; the cutlery slips out of your fingers and clatters on the floor. Chopsticks are easy when you know how. When I eventually left the hospital – ’

‘Hey Zuckerman. Put in another tape, will you?’

The things Zuckerman took for granted. He used to joke he had a big dick.

Zuckerman tells Harris, ‘I think my smile is one of my most redeeming features, what do you think?’

‘Sure, Zuckerman.’ Harris nods then jerks down a mouthful of beer. ‘To keep the fizz in your champagne, once opened, place it in the fridge with a silver fork hanging in the neck.’

Brown fields. Roundabouts. Articulated lorries. Zuckerman pulls down the sun visor and peers into the vanity mirror. All he sees are bloodshot eyes, dead skin and half his eyebrows are missing. Harris says he used to be a bit of a waster.

‘I remember your mother,’ Harris says. ‘She still alive?’

‘Do we have to?’ Zuckerman says.

‘She was quite a character wasn’t she, manic-depressive? She had a penchant for gardening.’

‘She probably still has; attending to her prize-winning asparagus.’ I’ve had enough of my mother – years of her. How about him? ‘In all the years I’ve known you Harris, I’ve never met your parents or any member of your family and I’ve never been to your house.’

‘I never had anyone to my house, Zuckerman.’

‘Anyway, forget that,’ Harris says. ‘There’s a yellow light flashing on the dashboard. We need a petrol station.’

‘I was in a rush this morning,’ Zuckerman says. ‘The flat was a mess. Didn’t have time to fill her up.’

Zuckerman’s flat, a loft conversion. God, it was quiet. With Marianne gone, he felt like he’d been on extended vacation and walked through the door of someone else’s apartment. The lack of chitchat. No television or radio. No Marianne talking to her mother on the phone. Ruti had spent a day cleaning but that didn’t make much difference. Without Marianne the flat possessed that unwelcoming, empty, what-am-I-going-to-do-with-the-rest-of-my-life feel about it. In a matter of days the place was a tip. He wasn’t known for his domestic prowess. The grit-blasted stone interior, polished pitch pine flooring and minimalist tubular steel furniture was covered with junk. Piles of CD’s, tapes and a scattered mess of unread paperbacks.

At night he sat out on the balcony, had a smoke and took in the view – the river, a large construction site and a new casino clad in garish marble. One night he hoisted himself up on to the parapet wall and contemplated the eighty-foot drop. He contemplated other things too: his mother-in-law, his isolation and how it had all come to this pissing point. He peered over. He forced his foot closer to the edge. He vaguely remembers a crowd of hobos slugging it out over a bottle of booze. Instead of jumping – he didn’t have the balls to – he came down off the wall and searched for their wedding album. He pulled apart the pages, taking great pains to tear the serrated edge of Kodak paper straight through Angelika’s smiling visage. Scraps of memories fit for the bin.


Well, that is what he meant to do and, in truth, he tried, he really tried but he couldn't. Sobbing, soft touch that he was, he threw himself on their unmade bed, pathetic.

There's a desperate wave of loneliness that comes over you after you've lost someone very close – demons past, present and all your worst fantasies mixed up in your head having a grand, mad cocktail party. Zuckerman felt the same when his father disappeared and he didn't wish to repeat that again.

Zuckerman associated peace of mind with something swallowed, smoked or drunk. He took weeks to wean himself off the prescribed drugs: Prozac, languorous Librium, 1000mg pills of pain-killing Co-codamol and after that, many weeks more to wean himself off the *self*-prescribed drugs; Class A lysergic acid diethylamide, cocaine, *oh oblivion!* amphetamines, uppers, downers, anything he could obtain, anything to obliterate the piss-head, miserable victim he'd become. His collection of body parts resembled a shrivelled corpse, more dead than alive: excuses for eyes – sunken sockets like two bloodshot roundels; forehead marked with so many zig-zag grooves it looked like an aerial map of the Dutch canal system; skin no more than a pasty complexion, a lifeless pelt covering a bag of bones, which felt uncoordinated and confused with every step. He couldn't remember when he lost his appetite for sex. He couldn't remember ever having sex.

Zuckerman ended up 5' 7" and under seven stones, rock bottom, self-esteem zero. He covered the mirrors with drapes. He wept and snorted and swallowed and wept. He gathered his supplies, closeted himself in his cabin, battened down the hatches and floated away on a sorrowful sea of drugs.

It goes without saying he lost his job at the estate agents.

He guessed most folk in his situation would have had to survive on handouts and a weekly Giro cheque doled out by Her Majesty's Government. Zuckerman could have turned 'sucking the system dry' into  art form, but that would never have sustained his habit. They had savings: twenty-one thousand pounds. He was loaded. It cost him dear. Money's all gone. It's not easy, keeping track of your spending when you're a junkie; when all that matters – shit, nothing really matters.

Zuckerman still can't find his wallet. 'I'm a bit short, Harris. D'you think you could –'

'Sure, why not. Diesel isn't it?'

Harris pulls into the next service station. He waits in a queue. The car at the head of the line is a Mercedes pulling a dark-green trailer, taking up three car spaces. Harris blasts his horn, just as the driver pulls away. A window opens, a hand comes out and flicks two fingers at Harris.

Zuckerman looks at his watch. It's nearly ten o'clock

Every week, Mondays at 10:00, rat-tat-thump on Zuckerman's door, the reverend, well meaning, with a gift, a newspaper and a bag of boilings. His beard looked stuck-on, his smile transparent. He had a purpose – to save Zuckerman's soul. How far have you reached on the road to recovery? Two minutes later, Ruti entered, smoke trailing and that extra long filter hanging out at the corner of her mouth.

They conferred in the living room, an invisible triangle of misery sitting on upright kitchen chairs.

'How're you feeling, Zvi?'

'Fine, reverend. You?' Every time the same stupid question.

'Have you eaten anything?' He speaks with that familiar, sad eyed, how-may-I-serve-you expression. 'Perhaps your sister can prepare something for you?'

Zuckerman is too polite to voice his opinion. She'd need a recipe book for a tomato and cheese omelette.

'So.' Reverend Reuben clasps his giant hands. 'You've been to see your counsellor?'

'Yes.' Ruti inadvertently answers. She's even busier than Zuckerman, learning the twelve rules, her AA Wednesday evening support group, her Thursday one-to-one and her Saturday morning relaxation class. Addiction runs in the family.

Zuckerman avoids looking at either of them. 'I saw her once,' he says, head down, eyes to the floor, hands on his lap. 'She reminds me of an old school teacher. The hair. The smile. Didn't work out. She sent me to a man, a smart-suited professional who wrote down every word I said like he was writing my life story. He was only interested

in what it felt like. Have I any physical symptoms associated with my underlying complaint? Asked me to drop my pants, did I fuck!

‘So the treatment still isn’t working?’

‘You know how it is, reverend?’

Ruti interrupts. ‘Reverend Reuben, even with his own sister, Zvi still has difficulty talking about his past.’

‘Talk, Zvi! It helps. Get it out in the open.’

Then it starts up again, Marianne racing through his mind, a watery film in the corners of his eyes. According to his sister, Reverend Reuben and all the specialists, Zuckerman is in denial. How can they know? How can they feel the pain?

‘Perhaps if you came to a service? It might help if you prayed.’

‘It might.’ Zuckerman says.

Reverend Reuben recites a prayer as he helps Zuckerman on with his Tephillin. Now he’s wrapped up, strapped up, in inch wide bands of leather and there’s a box on his arm and on the top of his head that contains the holiest of prayers: ‘And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes.’ Together, they repeat. ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is One.’

Reverend Reuben hands Zuckerman a set of prayer books. Zuckerman thinks: I’ve converted again and I’m going to heaven. ‘I’m paying my dues, aren’t I, Reverend Reuben?’

‘For what?’

‘For marrying out.’

‘I hardly think God is that vengeful. Catholicism is just a different route.’

‘For living a sinful life.’

‘You’re not a murderer, Zvi.’

‘For making love to a German.’

‘That war is over, Zvi. You were only a kid.’

Zuckerman squats on the rug in the middle of the room swaying backwards and forwards. He’s a child again, in a hot, dusty world, cracked lips pouting, eyebrows heavy, the smell of baked earth and ripened olives floating through the air.

Reverend Reuben tries his hardest, ‘C’mon, Zvi, you’re making a great recovery. Before you know it you’ll be back to your old self again.’

‘My old self!?’

Before he leaves, Reverend Reuben nails a Mezuzah on the door frame. Ruti sees him out and Zuckerman hears them mumbling, conferring in the hallway.

One visit is like the next, only they say more prayers. Reverend Reuben says he’s pleased. ‘You’ve found God, Zuckerman.’ Which one? They daven, they bentschen, they beat their hearts. Zuckerman is walking around with a yarmulke on his head. Three weeks later he’s got fake pigtailed dangles in front of his ears. He’s finished with that.

After Reverend Reuben’s last visit, Ruti put on her apron, pulled on her Marigolds and they tidied up. They shared chores: washing up, pills, vacuuming, snorting, smoking, wiping down encrusted grime, talking and shouting through to each other about when they were kids, growing up on a kibbutz, when they moved to Tel Aviv, moved to Glasgow – back to their mother’s home town. ‘At least you’ve still got fond memories,’ Zuckerman said. ‘I refuse to speak to her now.’

‘She’s not as bad as you make her out to be,’ Ruti said.

‘Is she still cohabiting with that big shot Iranian businessman, in the apartment in Tel Aviv?’

‘You know she is, Zvi.’

Zuckerman thought about the numerous occasions he’d had to explain about his family and childhood; how his mother was born in Berlin in 1932 and then sent to Scotland when she was six years old and how she swore she recalled Kristallnacht, her last memory of the Fatherland. When she turned twenty-one she emigrated to Israel where she eventually met his father. They married nine months before the Six Days War. Zuckerman claimed he came into the world as Moshe Dayan was driving his tank back from Jordan. He also claimed he had the honour of being the first baby born in re-unified Jerusalem. That’s what he said, but he knew the figures never added up. What wasn’t a lie was that he hadn’t seen or heard from his father since he was fourteen and that their mother had to return all the way back to Glasgow with her two teenage children.

Zuckerman pictured her – watering her plants, lying on her lounge on her west-facing balcony, sipping gin and slim-line tonic, contemplating the horizon as the sun disappears over the salty green waters of the Med.

There was the inevitable comparison, Mother with Angelika – they had several things in common. Gender, history and tears, those sad little droplets. Mother also spoke in that guttural broken English. In every other respect they were worlds apart.

‘I still don’t believe her story,’ Zuckerman said. ‘My dad was a hero. He didn’t just get up and walk out on us. He was a tough-nut war correspondent, an investigative reporter.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Ruti said.

Days of childhood and early youth, Zuckerman preferred to give them a wide berth.

No sooner are they underway again, Zuckerman asks Harris to pull over. He’s feeling sick. ‘It’s all this emotional stuff,’ he says. ‘The doctor said that release is usually accompanied by physical symptoms such as nausea, headaches, vomiting.’

They stop on to the hard shoulder. Cars thundering past. Zuckerman gives Harris the thumbs up sign then he vomits into a field.

When Zuckerman thought he was down at rock bottom, an impossible perspective but nevertheless when it seemed that jumping off the balcony was his only choice – he still didn’t have the guts – he awoke one morning with his head in the WC. He foraged through his bookshelves and found a copy of Deepak Chopra’s *Seven Spiritual Laws*. He learned all seven by rote:

The Law of Pure Potentiality

The Law of Giving

The Law of Karma

The Law of Least Effort

The Law of Intention and Desire

The Law of Detachment

The Law of Dharma or Purpose in Life

He absorbed what he read, like blotting paper.

I have now discovered God, at last.

I have now discovered my God, my saviour, my peace of mind, sanity, the answer I've been searching for.

Zuckerman cut out most of the heavy, life-threatening stuff and moved over to ganja, hashish with that sickly, bittersweet smell – that harmless, recreational drug. He still spent most of his time in the flat but now he chanted, prayed, ate, put on weight, and changed his shape until he jarred the bathroom scales at an endomorphic fifteen stones. That's the munchies for you, the post hash, hash brownies, the toasted cheese, frozen pizzas blasted in the microwave, tea and chocolate Crunchie bars. All foodstuffs delivered to your door care of Tesco-junkie delivery services. When he did venture over the threshold, it was only to collect a half-ounce of smoke, a deep fried squid in batter or a chicken korma, a jar of coffee, a loaf and a litre of full-fat dairy cream. Anything he could keep down.

In the early hours he went for long walks, over cobbled pathways, always in the rain. Punching his feet through fag ends and chip packets, ducking underneath vaulted arches, steel plates and rivets. He felt alive again, drenched by the spray, that dirty brown river and the waves slap-slapping against giant stone piers.

He accompanied his sister to her evening meetings. Not for him. He went to the gym. Looking in the mirror, it's easy to see how far he'd come. He worked out, sweated it off: the layers of fat, the rolls of flesh, the fusty smell of death; it was a start ... Harris says he's getting hungry. Zuckerman's tummy is quaking. Gas is escaping.

They're licking their lips in anticipation.

Chapter 2

Harris pulls off the motorway at an anonymous roadside service station about thirty miles outside Glasgow. They've been heading north on the M9 – a concrete and tarry blot on a low-lying, plushy landscape. They get out of the car. Harris stretches, touches his toes. Zuckerman tries to copy, but gives up half way. He looks down at his feet and says, 'A few weeks ago I couldn't even see them.' Harris yawns. His leather boots are scuffed. His jacket matches. He's wearing Zuckerman's navy blue cap with the word Jeep stitched in large orange letters above the suede-covered peak. He pulls down the add-on earflaps to protect himself from the biting wind then points to a ragged silhouette on the horizon – to the escarpment of Stirling Castle. Zuckerman says, 'I've always had a fascination for castles and historical artefacts.' Harris yawns again. Zuckerman notices a promontory, further north, the Wallace monument, projecting poignantly, like a solid, stony phallus, up out of the surrounding valley floor. It starts to rain. Even with his quilted anorak, scarf and ski-bonnet, Zuckerman is still freezing. 'Cold gets to me, leaks through to my joints.' Sometimes he feels as if he's got a permanent dose of the flu, a tear-jerking pain with every step. His denim jeans are like paper, worn through at the knee. There's no point hanging about. Ruti is sleeping in the back seat. Harris locks the doors and they let her be. They've parked at the Little Chef – where else? – and hurry in for an order-by-photograph breakfast.

The waitress, a pimply girl with brown teeth who looks no more than fourteen, shows them to a cubicle next to the window. Harris watches her wiping the early-morning condensation off the inside of the glass. Before they've sat down, she returns with her pad.

'Black coffee, please.'

'And for your friend?' She stares at Zuckerman, takes her pencil out from behind her ear and starts flicking it between her teeth.

Zuckerman is busy: unzipping anoraks, stripping off pullovers and squashing them on to the seat beside him.

Zuckerman studies the annotated photographs on the menu. He used to do that when he was a kid, in an air conditioned roadside cafe; his wee-boy, mischievous grin, studying the menu, right to left – the curlicues on the Hebrew characters, marvelling at the exact likeness and positioning of every item on his breakfast plate; fried eggs with perfect yellow yokes, equilateral triangles of squelchy fried bread, two rashers of bacon substitute, the perfect circle of blood-red tomato and mushrooms.

Harris is waiting, strumming his fingers on the tabletop.

Zuckerman recalls how Angelika had such impeccable table manners and so had Marianne apart from that pinky thing. Whenever she held on to a spoon, soup or dessert, that little digit would fly up and start waving at you.

A group of people are arguing in a nearby cubicle. Zuckerman peers over. ‘They must be tourists,’ he says.

Harris, head down, says, ‘Aha.’

One glance confirms it. ‘I can tell by their foreign accents and their suntans. Who the hell has a suntan this time of year?’ They’re arguing with a waiter. They’re not happy with their meal. ‘Israelis!’

Harris continues studying the menu. He says, ‘How can you tell?’

‘It doesn’t take a genius to work it out.’ The largest of the group, a steroid type, sun-tanned pate, rippling muscles, is holding back one of his friends, a woman – fulsome with wavy, auburn hair. She’s grabbed the waiter by the scruff of his almost non-existent neck. She is about to smear his face into the breakfast platter.

‘That’s where I was born, remember? I can still make out a few words. I was back there in my early twenties, checking out family and working on a kibbutz just to see what it would be like again.’

‘I never knew.’ Harris says.

‘I hated it!’

Harris ignores the commotion. ‘They had me working alongside the women, milking cows. I thought I’d be driving tractors.’

Harris scans nearby tables, returns to behind his menu and says, ‘So what? Why was it so bad?’

Over in the corner a side plate goes flying. The sound of tableware shattering.

‘Harris, Harris, look at me, will you?’ Harris slams down the menu.

‘Remember coming home from school, your mum was there to greet you? Remember the bedroom in your house, your bed?’

Slap. The waiter yelps, raises his hands to his face.

‘Remember crying in the middle of the night? Your mum came running, picked you up, gave you a hug? Remember waking, first thing you did was sneak into your mum’s bed, snuggle in beside her?’

‘Help!’ The waiter yells. He’s lying on the floor in the foetal position.

‘It’s a long time ago, Zvi. Think that kid’s OK?’

‘Remember sitting up, watching TV and your mum going into a rage, screaming at you to go to bed?’

‘No, my father did all the shouting. But if you want to play this game ... yes, I remember decorating the Christmas tree. Yes, I recall going to bed without supper. So what?’

Waitress to the rescue, fists flying. ‘Police!’

‘Zvi, speak to them. They’re getting out of hand.’

‘You had it all.’

‘No I didn’t. Listen Zuckerman, parents are all the same.’

‘No, they’re not. I slept in a dorm until I was twelve, with a dozen other kids.’

‘Why go back to visit?’ Harris says.’

‘There was something else. A skeleton to take care of.’

A man in grey-blue uniform rushes to the scene, inspects the evidence and bows his apologies. The waiter gets up off the floor and the atmosphere in the restaurant returns to disinterested chomping.

‘Zuckerman, are you going to spend another fifteen minutes with that menu or shall we order?’

Bloody Zuckerman. He keeps on at you. Grinding you down. Bitching, moaning, as if he’s the only one. What about my mum? Unable to feed herself. Unable to swallow. It wasn’t the stroke that killed her.

*

Breakfast arrives, delivered by a zits-covered kid, hat askew. Zuckerman's in the throes of counting baked beans when Harris gives him one of his tiresome stares. Zuckerman ignores him, masticates like a cow, slurps his Diet Coke and works his way through.

Skeletons. Zuckerman's first recollection of Eretz Israel is that everything in the Garden of Eden was rosy. Notwithstanding the odd Katusha rocket fired down upon their little enclave from time to time – a terrifying event but thankfully he was too old now to remember *that* smell of fear – as a first-generation sabra he was a happy kid or so he'd been told. Memories of his dad coming home late from work, his clothes smelling of farmyard, field, milking parlour, meat processing shed. Bouncing him up on his knee in their dusty backyard. His dad calling him, 'his little faigelah'. His dad reading him one of his bedtime stories. His dad running, disappearing into the bombed out remains of a building.

But now there are other memories, new nightmares: Zuckerman is alone, sitting at the back of a bus. The windows are dirty. Outside, the landscape is a colourless blur. Angelika is driving, grinning. Zuckerman requests a stop, 'Please, miss, I'd like to get off.' They slow down to walking pace, finally to a halt. The door opens, he step off into childhood: he's three, playing in the sand with his yellow Caterpillar truck; next stop he's nine, terrified, first day in a new class; next stop he's six, smacking his pet tortoise. Sometimes the bus stops and there's nobody there, wrong street, dead end. Every journey is the same, 'Please, miss, I'd like to get off,' and Angelika with her perfidious smile. Sometimes he gets off the bus and he's eleven, screaming.

Law 6: In detachment lies the wisdom of uncertainty. Zuckerman says it's hard to let go.

During second helpings of toast and tea, Harris and Zuckerman pour over Geographia's Great Britain Road Atlas, a featureless criss-cross of colours, which at a scale of 9 miles to 1 inch is a dead loss if you're searching for a campsite. Zuckerman is looking for standing stones, lay lines and burial mounds.

For Harris, the atlas is a casebook of dirty-weekend memories. He explains: after a somewhat reclusive upbringing, in his twenties he developed into a bit of a lad. He knew dozens of spotless B & B's where a double-bedded room could be had, and no questions asked. And if he dated a girl with class and was required to wine and dine her, he would book into a country house hotel favoured in Johansson's up-market tomb, *Best Hotels in Scotland*. To Zuckerman it sounds like a naff X-rated movie: Harris entertaining a girl by a babbling brook; a chilled bottle of Reisling, duck-liver pate, a pumpernickel loaf followed by fresh cream, sugared, and poured over strawberries – bliss, coitus-sine-interruptus on a sunny afternoon. Harris draws a faint pencil line from Kyle of Lochalsh to Inverness. 'I can drive through almost every district south of this line and point to a tree, field or lay-by where I've risked the wrath of summer midges, baring all. These days are behind me now.'

'Bullshit!' Zuckerman spits. 'How many women have you had?'

'Too many to count.' Harris says.

He isn't even blushing, thinks Zuckerman. They eyeball each other. Harris out-stares him. Bastard.

'Look, Zvi, I know you're suffering a bit. I know it's all a front. You don't have to –'

Zuckerman cuts him dead. 'Suffering, you don't know the meaning of the word. I look like a wreck and I feel just as bad, my wife has gone, and I've got to listen to you mouthing off. Give me names and numbers.' Harris stares. Those piercing, blue eyes. 'Give me details of all the women you've ever shagged.' He's gloating. 'What's it like to be a man, Harris? Do you even know? Can you tell me because I can't remember!' Zuckerman pauses, looks around, catches people turning their heads away. 'What's it like? And by the way, my sister better not be on that list.'

'Hey, Zuckerman, steady on, I was only saying –'

'That's right, Harris, you were only saying, that's all you ever do, bragging about every bit of pussy you've ever had, like it makes you some sort of man. C'mon let's take them out, lay them on the table and ask someone. Look, that girl.' Zuckerman nods towards the Israeli. 'Let's call her over, have her measure our dicks. She can tell you

what a great specimen you are. What a great fucking man you are! What'd'ya'say, Harris, are you up for it?'

'Zvi, take it easy. Get a grip! You'll get over it. Finish up your breakfast and we'll get back on the road.' He tugs Zuckerman's sleeve. 'Let's just make the best of the weekend.'

Zuckerman surveys the restaurant. Maybe I am out of order, he thinks. Really, I like Harris but sometimes he's a condescending bastard. Zuckerman's face is on fire. People are watching. On his way out the door he turns around and notices the sun-tanned king and his attractive friend, both staring at him. He returns their smile.

Walking back to the car, Harris puts his arms around Zuckerman and gives him a fatherly hug. 'I realise it's hard for you,' he says. 'She was a hell of a woman.'

Zuckerman thinks, how the hell does he know?

Marianne – there were numerous things about her that Zuckerman was attracted to and her good looks were just one of them. She had several redeeming features like ... what does it matter. He wasn't proud of the way he felt. He professed he only loved her because she loved him.

Maybe she was no good for me, he thought. Maybe she was too good for me. I get drawn into situations and before I know it ... what can I do now, kill myself? He couldn't stop thinking about it. Maybe I shouldn't have married her? I'm trying to work out the confusion in my mind; was I solely responsible or was it the two of us?

They took the solemn vows.

Law 3: Every action generates a force of energy that returns to us in like kind.
Zuckerman reaps what he sows.

Marianne worked for a pharmaceuticals company, covered an area that stretched from John O' Groats down to Carlisle. She drove a two-door convertible, dressed in a navy blue Annie Hall pinstripe with a high-collared shirt and pearl earrings, and shimmied along with a leather briefcase in the wedge of her armpit. It had M.U.G. embossed in gold under its large, brass clasp. To be fair she looked older than her years. To be very cruel, he could say she was mutton dressed as lamb – so Ruti had told

Zuckerman on their first meeting. It wasn't true. Ruti and Marianne grew to be friends, meeting for coffee, shopping, the occasional concert.

Marianne had that *savoir-faire* and Zuckerman was hooked. He used to drool over girls like that – the ones who exude confidence, who know what they want, left-brained, who are not afraid to wear the trousers – everything he lacked.

Physically Zuckerman was in good shape; strong jaw, good biceps, firm triceps, worked out in the gym most nights. He'd given up a slew of jobs: librarian, mechanic's apprentice, Betterwear door-to-door sales rep, tourist guide on an open-topped bus. When it came to situations vacant his one year studying archaeology wasn't a great help. Then, at last, he found something to aspire to: climbing the corporate ladder of the estate agency business and ascending into the cut and thrust world of commercial property. Money! That's what he told her.

Zuckerman had his business card, his company car: a clapped-out BMW with a go-faster stripe, and if he stayed off the drink and drugs the night before, he was able to sniff out a good deal. Yes, he was a real go-getter, well turned out; clean-shaven, shiny-gelled hair styled by his local Italian barber. It all melded well with his dark knitted eyebrows, sallow complexion and his Boys-Own-Annual grin. He made the best of his not-so-handsome mug. Life was going somewhere.

On the side, he continued with his writing, that congenital thing. He caught the bug from his father, may his dear soul rest in peace. That's another thing Marianne and Zuckerman had in common – absent fathers. Zuckerman was still waiting for his first publication deal when Marianne walked in with her briefcase and her take-it-or-leave-it expressionless stare.

Mar-i-anne – three syllables that gave him the shivers. Zuckerman led her through a loft conversion facing the river, rolling off the architectural terms ten-a-penny, not giving her the big sell but not holding back either, on the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, verbal diarrhoea, estate agent's jargon. She insisted that sex should come after marriage. That was her opening line after accepting his invitation for coffee. Three weeks later they were making out on her art deco four-poster. Three weeks after that he moved in with books, laptop with the outline of his novel, Director's Cut of Blade Runner and his George Michael CD's. His life, shrink-wrapped in a carton.

The honeymoon period lasted a month, up until she insisted they visit her mother. He wasn't ready. Sounded like commitment. Sounded like holidays in the Black Forest, marriage, mortgages and babies. He wanted to slow things down, put the brakes on her runaway train. The word smothering comes to mind, ownership, possession, jealousy and doubt. In the pub he would say, 'To tell you the truth, I'm not sure what I saw in her in the first place.' Was it her open-mindedness, her vulnerability or ability to cherish him until the day he died? She pressed him not to see his mates, to meet her after work, to visit museums, to cook. In the morning she was rough, doggish.

Another month and he capitulated, met *mutti*, Angelika, and the rest is history. Three months later they were married. That's the problem for Zuckerman, reminiscing, dipping in, dipping out, images like puffball clouds disappearing into the troposphere. It's a very selective process.

Back on the road, Harris is pretending to read *The Herald*. It's the 21st November. The front page of the travel supplement shows a skier at Les Trois Vallees. He's been there; the best ski resort in Europe. Ruti's awake. Zuckerman has taken over the driving; he's moaning but he appears to be coping with the pain.

Ruti asks, 'Did I miss much?'

'Breakfast.' Zuckerman says.

'Why didn't you wake me?' Ruti says. Harris thinks: normally Ruti complains her brother talks too much.

'I know a roadside stall,' Zuckerman says. Ruti also likes her bacon and eggs. The two of them are peculiar. Forbidden fruit; pork, caviar, cocaine – all verboten. Tell someone they can't have it and then try and stop them.

Harris opens the window. It's started to rain. He scans the obituaries. 'I see poor Mr Levy is dead.'

'Who?' Ruti says.

'A lawyer, two floors up. Patrick Levy, an awkward character. We could never see eye to eye on anything. Came across him all the time. It says here he wrote the classic, *I'm Dreaming Again, A Guide To Interpreting Your Dreams*. Who would have thought?'

‘You obviously didn’t,’ Zuckerman says.

Harris ignores the comment. He pokes at the newspaper to get rid of a fold, and says, ‘Do either of you two dream?’

No response. Harris reads from Poem of the Day. ‘Who was it that said: people always make war when they say they love peace?’

Still no response.

Zuckerman blasts the horn at the driver in front who has slowed down at a junction, appears to have lost his way.

‘Hardly a dream, Zuckerman says. ‘I’m lying in bed in hospital in my own private room. Blank walls. Pastel shades. Sister says, “Mr Zuckerman, you’ll have to eat to build up your strength.” I’m good at manoeuvring around on a wheelchair. There’s the TV room, cafeteria, outdoor patio, bathroom and the drugs cupboard. The circuit takes me ninety seconds. Do you want to hear more, Harris?’

‘Zvi, calm down,’ says Ruti. ‘Harris, put on the radio.’

‘In my dream, after surgery come the visitors – a small procession of relatives, friends, and curmudgeons from the office where I used to work. I withhold details of my operation. They’re too scared to ask. The frowns on their faces. As if they’re adding up complicated sums in their heads. The office junior whom I thought had taken a liking to me won’t even shake my hand. She dumps the grapes and leaves – ’ Zuckerman opens the window. His voice fades into the passing countryside.

A dark mass of purple-black cloud is coming in from the southwest, chasing the car on to the Loch Lomond turn-off. It’s an absurd way to come, the most circuitous route, but Zuckerman doesn’t care. He wants to simulate the original trip mile for mile, stop for stop. He wishes Ruti and Harris shared his enthusiasm. They act like they’re going on a picnic.

‘Zvi, I’m hungry!’

As far as her appetite is concerned, his twin sister has the staying power of a ten year old. ‘You’ll have to wait,’ he says.

‘Brother, I’m about to run out of sisterly love.’

‘There’s a packet of crisps in the back. And while you’re at it, I’ll have a beer.’

Ruti opens a can, slurps down a mouthful.

‘Late night?’ Zuckerman says.

Ruti looks at Harris, saying nothing.

Harris says, ‘I told your brother we met up with some old friends of mine.’

‘Yes, you know what it’s like, Zvi,’ Ruti says. ‘You go out, meet up with some old friends and before you know it – ’

‘So you’re giving up on your groups, your counsellors and all you’ve worked for? All since you met up with – ’

‘I didn’t touch a drop. Are you starting on me, Zvi?’

Thinking again about her evening out with Harris, it seemed like the first night she’d had in years that didn’t include opening up her heart chakra, meditating on being at one with her self, bringing the white light down through the top of her head and radiating love from her eternal, everlasting, limitless higher self. She had gone through as much pain, fear and doubt as anybody had. She had read all the self-help books, listened to all the tapes, the CDs, the compilation boxes of CD’s. She had been on day courses, weekend seminars, a seven-day silent retreat. She tried reflexology, acupressure, acupuncture, cranial massages and aromatherapy. She booked herself into a holistic health farm in Dorset and an alternative holiday in the Pyrenees. She walked over hot coals and even checked out her past lives – she always woke up at her brother’s school dance where she first met Harris. His bright blue eyes. They danced to a slow Whitney Houston number. He stood on her new red patent shoes scuffing the points black but it didn’t matter. He told her straight off, ‘You’re the most beautiful girl here.’ That’s hard to resist when you’ve never had a boyfriend, when you’ve played the tom-boy all your life, had your fingernails engrained with mud, your skirts grass-stained so bad your mother has to throw them away. The next song he’s holding her tighter but everyone’s looking and she pushes him off. Last dance of the evening, they’re together again. He kisses her. She explodes. His tongue is half way down her throat, reaching into her insides, searching every cavity in her mouth. It’s overwhelming. She thinks this must be how every girl feels when they’re kissed and then she wakes up in her present, miserable

life and can't understand why her husband, Jonathan, is dead. She tried religion and she tried pills. In the end the same old question haunted her. Why did he leave me?

Zuckerman slides a different tape into the stereo. Elton, Angelika's favourite ... *she packed my bags last night, pre-flight ... zero hour, 9am ...* he thinks – ludicrous, stupid lyrics with piano chords rising and falling. He sees Ruti searching in her handbag. 'Do you want a light?' he says. He wedges his beer under the ashtray and lifts out the smouldering joint. 'Here,' he says, handing it over, 'it's my last one.'

'And you can be such a bad influence, Zvi. You know I don't touch the stuff, now.'

'Liar.'

Ruti laughs. She finds her Silk Cut. Next minute she's sucking the air out the cabin. Zuckerman stares into the rear view mirror, at his sister whom he wants to protect from the ignominies of the world. He asks her, 'Is there anything I should know about you and Harris?'

'Yes, sure, especially when he's sitting right next to you.'

'Zvi is only being protective,' Harris says.

'There's nothing to tell, Zvi.'

Zuckerman's eyes on the horizontal, scanning roadway signs, other cars, other drivers; he's on the lookout for a roadside stall. After a couple of puffs he throws the nail-sized stub out the window. Bye-bye former life.

'You've always got to watch for unmarked police cars.'

'Especially when you're stoned, Zvi.'

He concentrates his efforts on the less than precise directional control, working the steering wheel to stay in the right lane ... *and I think it's going to be a long, long time till touchdown brings me round ...* Rocket Man – that's what Angelika called me. He turns up the volume, blocks Ruti out of his consciousness. For a minute, for a second ... *I'm a Rocket Man.*

'Zvi, don't you think it's about time you went out on a date? It's been a while since Marianne?'

'Sure thing, Ruti. Let me check my diary.'

‘Harris and me, you know it’s just like old times. Isn’t it Harris?’ Harris looks up from his paper and blows Ruti a kiss.

‘Jealous, brother?’

‘Ruti, stop being such a bitch.’

‘Zvi, stop acting the little prick.’

Zuckerman yanks the steering wheel to avoid two lunatic bikers, matching yellow leathers, speeding around a blind bend in the middle of the road.

It was hard for Zuckerman to get a fix on just how many weeks and months elapsed between the day of the accident and the start of his recovery period. By adhering to a strict diet of home made vegetable soup, wholemeal bread and a reduction of his drug intake to one three-inch joint per day, he reduced his weight, girth and unattractiveness to reasonable proportions. It was time to venture out into the general hubbub of society and regain his foothold on the bottom rung of the corporate ladder.

Firstly, there was the question of post marital relationships. Who the hell was going to go out with him knowing his history? Rather than dwell on the minutiae, he struck out boldly and placed an advertisement in *The Herald*, Perfect Partners Page ... *Wanted - Female, tall, slim, arty, who’d like a laugh with smart, successful, attractive man-about-town.* He actually had the nerve to print that. It was gratifying to realise that his mirror image wasn’t the only lonely heart around. Out of some seventy responses in handwriting varying from the prettified to a montage of cut-outs from glossy magazines, he ruthlessly narrowed down his choices to two neatly laid out, sincere-sounding, eloquent responses one of which was thoughtfully transcribed in iambic pentameter, ‘I’m fun and young and single and free – are you?’

Fear of the unknown, that burst of electrical energy pulsing along the nerves – as you depress the bell push, check your zip-fly and wait. You are so grateful to get that first glance out of the way, that first steely pinprick of reality, of met or failed expectations. One way or the other, it’s a relief. If all has gone well and you haven’t yet bolted for the garden gate you may feel like you’ve won a prize, that the gods have looked favourably on their prodigal son.

Rachel Sarah Leobovitz, forgive him. He tried but he couldn’t hack it.

Catching the first nerve-racking glimpse of his blind date, her model-like figure clad in seam-bursting blue jeans, her skimpy waste-hugging blouson, her lipstick smattered over her shiny incisors, anyone else might have thought his dreams had come true. But no. Not Zvi Zuckerman. All he saw was the neediness in her eyes, the mirrored reflection of his own desperate loneliness. He took flight and made the hundred-yard dash back to his car.

Law 1: The source of all creation is pure consciousness. Zuckerman tries meditation.

Never one to give up at the first hurdle, Zuckerman ventured out the following evening. Blind date, number two. Spruced up, showered, shaved with his triple bladed, flexi-head disposable, he took his navy blue suit out of its navy blue cover. As his nerves were getting the better of him he succumbed to a few crumbs of toot-toot Class A – for emergency and medicinal purposes only.

Now, in a mellower mood he started all over again – a different suit, same shirt, different tie.

An hour later he found himself sitting in an expensive mirror-clad restaurant, chinking chilled white wine with his ogle-eyed date, Nancy Goodhall-Smythe. Grinding his way through the conversation, he heard the following words fall out of his mouth, ‘Are you into animals – you know, dogs and cats and the like?’ Did I say that? Double entendres were not his speciality but he had to admit he blushed when her eyes lit up and her teeth sparkled, blindingly, under the piercing light of the pin-spot beam.

‘Dogs and cats,’ she echoed, ‘and houses in the country; now that’s my idea of heaven.’ This caught him off guard. He should have known better. Confused, alarmed, he had what can only be referred to as an out of body, out of mind experience.

Another one.

Part of him was sitting opposite his date; the other part – an embodiment of priest, rabbi and new age minister – was floating six feet in the air looking downwards, like a cartoon with a talk bubble coming out of it’s mouth. Their combined spirit wandered forward in time to the chilly echo chamber of a high-Episcopalian chapel, to the grey-blue carpeted steps in front of the marble clad altar, to their imaginary wedding ceremony. Zuckerman is rigid, a dappered-up, fully loaded mannequin. The veiled

Nancy is kneeling at his side. His other half is hovering above, dressed in a dog collar, black caftan, and homburg, with 'Love & Peace' stitched to his top pocket. He clears his throat and says, 'Is this what you really want?' Zuckerman's life is projected on to a movie screen, spread out before him; working all hours of the day to support nannies and private schools and nights out with the boys that consist of nothing more exciting than an orange squash and a game of Risk. Years of mind-numbing toil.

'How many times have I got to tell you before you'll listen?' his other half says.

Back in his body, he turns to Nancy and blurts out his first conscious thought, 'Listen, why don't we forget this fancy restaurant, get a Chinese take-away and go back to my place; a bit of fellatio, have a shag, then I can drop you off home and we can forget we ever met.'

What was happening to him? Things became desperate. Flogging his dead horse was still a waste of time. Women, specifically attractive women, were a no-go area. They avoided him as if he was yesterday's trash. He wasn't looking for commitment. He wasn't even looking for love. He just wanted someone to talk to, have a pint with, crack a joke with, man to ... and that's when he had the epiphany. It struck him as absolutely legitimate and moreover common sense that he should insert another advert in the paper, only this time, advertise for a male companion. What was the harm? As long as he didn't end up with some raving homosexual. Not that he's homophobic but the taste, the touch, the rough beard, the smell of sweat, a man's breath, a man's lips on his lips ... no, he didn't think so, not for him, most definitely not, never.

Chapter 3

Whilst Zuckerman and his schoolmates were learning *amo, amas, amat*, Harris was mulling the question: *Is it proper to make a distinction between sins of the spirit and sins of the flesh?*

For his twelfth birthday, Harris's mother presented him with a leather bound volume, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in Latin with a 1926 English translation. He remembers how it begins:

One night, when half my life behind me lay,
I wandered from the straight lost path afar.
Through the great dark was no relieving way;
Above the dark was no relieving star
If yet that terror'd night I think or say,
As death's cold hands ...

After Dante and the teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, lessons seemed sort of grey, unreal. Seven months ago, 21st April, Harris woke up and asked himself: *Is moral good and evil to be found in the passions? Is every passion morally evil? Is love a passion?* It was a morning just like any other morning. He gives Brad a peck on the cheek. Clean shirt, grey suit, cornflower blue tie. It's been a dry summer. He walks to work in his trainers. Out the door, down the steps and into Kelvingrove Park, a patch of burnt grass. He tiptoes round the duck pond, feeds the birds with yesterday's crust, pass old Mr Lee practising Tai-Chi. Serene. Past dog walkers and joggers. Cyclists with back packs. He meanders across manicured lawns, tramples through a bed of azaleas and exits through torn-off gates into the city. After scraping the froth off a bowlful of cappuccino, he arrives at his office around 8:30; Herald tucked under one arm with his parcel of croissant and apricot preserve. 'Good morning, Mr Trainer.' Mail, memos and fatuous conversations.

Harris deals in divorce. He has an interesting and varied clientele. It's always the money they argue about, because it's a given that the kids stay with the wife. The men try to hide it, in a pension, under the floor, in their girlfriend's names. The levels to which they stoop keep getting lower. One guy, a week before he comes into his office, went out and bought himself an apartment in Marbella along with the furniture, the speedboat and the Mercedes. He puts the lot into a holding company. The holding company is based on an island the size of a pinhead in the Caribbean. His soon-to-be ex wife will be lucky to get the clothes she's about to drop off at Oxfam. Some of them look after their kids. Others just walk away. Breaks Harris's heart.

Then you have the guys who sell off their shares or close the joint account; it's amazing what the woman doesn't know. All she is interested in is whether or not her solitaire is large enough and the first letter on the number plate. Status. As long as the bills get paid, the kids are at private school and there's food in the oversized fridge, she's happy. She never reckons that one day it will all disappear. Poof!

Harris has got some famous names on his books: TV personalities, pop singers, comedians, a very famous Scottish comedian but Harris can't name names. He lives in America and is married to ... Harris won't tell you her name either.

Increasingly he's been acting for women. They think he's this aggressive, mean, bastard lawyer. Lately he's had guys in his office on their knees, offering him bribes, five figure sums. They say, 'Give me a chance. I've another woman to support, and there's a kid on the way and the business isn't doing so well this year.' Another good line is, 'My transfer fee hasn't arrived.' Harris has seen some pathetic performances. Occasionally he gets a phone call from a friend of theirs. To warn him off. Very unpleasant, threatening stuff. Then they get a phone call from a friend of his. They never learn. Men will never be able to keep their dick out of somebody else's affairs.

That's the norm.

Seven months ago, that same day, Harris had a blazing row with the solicitor up the stair. Old man Levy. Harris had just put down the telephone when his secretary buzzed him through to say his 10am had cancelled, could he meet with a new client who had dropped in on the off chance he was free?

The woman was seated in the conference room staring at the faded pictures on the faded panelling, rows and columns of partners, dead, retired, soon to be deceased. Her perfume was overpowering. Walking around, glancing side on, Harris noticed her figure shoehorned into a black linen suit. She undid the top two buttons on her shirt exposing a necklace of creamy pearls that sparkled against the backdrop of sun-bronzed skin. Her hair fell about her shoulders, crisp, blond, immaculate apart from the roots.

‘Marianne Zuckerman.’ As she spoke she extended an arm and tilted her head to one side. A pearl earring on a pendant dropped into view.

Harris introduced himself. They shook hands.

‘I want a divorce.’ She squinted. The sun was in her eyes, green orbs in a sea of white. Harris got up, opened a window and lowered the blinds.

She searched in her briefcase, slim, brown, leather with gold initials and removed two envelopes, one large manila which she placed on her lap, the other she laid on the table not quite in front of him. ‘I’m going to leave him.’

‘Does your husband know you’re here?’

‘He suspects nothing.’ She gave him a wry smile, unfolded then re-folded her legs. The hem of her skirt drifted upwards past her knee. A splash of sunlight fell on her ankle bracelet, a circle of hearts.

‘Mr Trainer, I can’t live with him any more.’

‘Please, call me Harris.’ He stretched over the table and offered up a cigarette.

‘Let’s get down to business, Mr Trainer. Your reputation precedes you, but let me warn you, this isn’t going to be an easy case.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning we have to act with the utmost delicacy.’

‘Because?’

‘Because I say so. My husband Zvi is not a bad person, he’s just ... so hard to describe. He’s weak.’ Harris’s prospective client plucked a tissue out of her pocket and blew into it with a genteel purr. Great acting.

‘Has he ever hit you?’

‘No.’

‘Verbal abuse?’

‘No.’ She removed three black and white photographs from the larger envelope and laid them on the table edge to edge.

Harris thinks: he hasn’t changed. That same, mad grin. ‘Has he been sleeping around?’

Zuckerman’s wife opened the smaller of the two envelopes and removed a typed letter. ‘Mr Trainer, my husband loves me very much, too much. If you met him perhaps you’d understand.’

‘What’s the problem?’

‘I wish I knew,’ she said, tapping the photos with a finger. Her ring was the size of a bolt head, white and yellow gold. The three pictures were taken at their wedding. One showed Zuckerman ecstatic with Marianne, arm in arm in front of a registry office; another of Zuckerman with a beaming smile with his best man; the third, Zuckerman with Marianne and another woman, interestingly attractive, who by her looks could be either Marianne’s mother or her sister.

‘Perhaps if you were to give me a clue,’ Harris said.

She handed him the letter:

Dear Friend,

Stop making a fool of yourself. Your husband is having an affair. He’s been unfaithful for months, probably ever since you married. Have some self-respect. You’re a laughing stock. Confront him. For God’s sake, get rid of him. For the sake of all married women, everywhere.

From a friend who cares.

‘I’m sorry,’ Harris said, handing back the letter, ‘you looked so happy at your wedding.’ Zuckerman, what an idiot. Caught, just like all the rest. ‘Do you think it’s genuine, Mrs Zuckerman?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘Obviously you confronted him with the letter?’

‘Yes, immediately. He denied it. I don’t believe him. I want him followed.’

‘It could take weeks, Mrs. Zuckerman.’

‘Please, call me Marianne.’

The intercom buzzed, ‘Tea or coffee, Mr Trainer?’ Marianne silently mouthed the word coffee, and with her pinkie wiped the moistened corner between her lips.

‘Zvi isn’t a bad man, Harris; he’s just a bit eccentric. Something happened to him when he was a kid. Scarred him for life. I’m embarrassed to say this but I may have married him more out of pity than anything.’

Harris’s secretary entered and laid out the cups and saucers. Marianne looked at her; up and down and up again.

It was interesting to see a woman with so much poise, the way she drank her coffee, the way she silently and with such exactness placed the cup into the circular indent inside the saucer. She continued: ‘A few months after we were married he starts coming home late. I ignored it at first.’ Marianne picked up a biscuit and placed it on her napkin and after every few words nibbled it like a rabbit munching a titbit. ‘I thought he was having an affair but I soon dismissed that idea. Who else would have him? Now his drinking is getting worse. It’s like he doesn’t care any more. I still have to work, knocking on doors selling pharmaceuticals.’

‘To keep Demerara sugar soft place it in an airtight container with a piece of bread.’

‘Pardon me?’

The phone rang. It was Harris’s secretary to say that lawyer upstairs was on the line threatening to sue. He said he’d deal with it later. ‘Please continue, Marianne.’

‘Sure I earn a good living; the company car, the all expenses-paid weekend conferences.’

Harris nodded. At least he appeared interested. ‘On top of everything,’ she said, ‘he’s started acting strangely.’

‘Something new?’

‘He’s started reading the Bible. Mr Trainer, I can’t stand it any more. I’m moving in with my mother.’

It’s unusual when the woman has the money, like Marianne. It’s no run-of-the-mill job. She is no ordinary client. Zuckerman is not the typical adulterer. He might be

a fun person to be with but as far as Harris can see from the photographs, Zuckerman is no Brad Pitt.

Does she have grounds for divorce? *McCaulay's Case Notes* is a handy, dust-covered hardback as are the vast toms of Scottish Law Reports. Past cases act as a precedent. No luck so far.

After Marianne's visit Harris has the Friday afternoon partners' meeting. Harry Lieberman comes in, like a hurricane. He's got forty years on Harris. Harry's always stressed out, bags under his eyes, smokes sixty a day and what a temper. Just like Mr. Levy upstairs, the one who threatened to sue. Poor Mr. Levy. There was a rumour he couldn't stand the pressure, the day-to-day grind. He jumped. Then gravity took over. He passed Harris's window doing a hundred miles an hour. Made a good impression on the roof of a double decker bus. He'll be going to work in a wheelchair, if he's lucky. Harris can see Lieberman going the same way.

'Can she pay?' Harry asks. Harris nodded.

'Then take the case.' Harry storms out. He's right, but is the business worth more than an old friendship?

After Marianne's visit, Harris contacts his cousin on his mother's side, Norman Bee, a wedding photographer with a drink problem. He owed Harris a favour. His divorce cost him nothing because he was left with nothing apart from his Leica and his lenses. He had a long 600mm that came in handy. On the side, for cash, he carried out Harris's detective work. He was the most inconspicuous guy Harris could think of for the job. No trenchcoat, no dark glasses. He didn't even have a limp. His distinguishing feature was his halitosis that was chiefly due to him every morning crushing fresh cloves of garlic and spreading them on his toast – a recipe he received from his quack of doctor, another of Harris's clients.

The trail warms up but still no sign of the paramour. Norman followed Zuckerman in and an out of almost every church and synagogue in town. He brought Harris the photos; one picture showed Zuckerman arguing with a minister. In the next he was conversing with a rabbi, gesticulating wildly. In the third he was kneeling in front of a cross, praying. Zuckerman seemed to be experimenting with every denomination.

Every trip a different church until he focussed his attention on St. Michael's Roman Catholic on the Gallowgate. This Harris had to see for himself.

Norman and Harris hunkered down in a pew in the back. They saw Zuckerman taking communion, the holy cup and the body of Christ. Jesus! What had she done to him? It was Zuckerman who was supposed to be having the affair but there was still no trace of 'the other woman'.

Harris came across Zuckerman even when he wasn't specifically on the job. He couldn't help himself. He found Zuckerman marching along Queen Street loaded down with a sandwich board, weaving around shoppers bearing tidings of, 'Christ Died For Our Sins' on the front and 'Repent Sinners' on the rear, red letters on a luminescent orange background.

Other occasions he observed Zuckerman in the main thoroughfare of Buchanan Street with his portable sound system, microphone and loudspeaker, singing the Lord's hymn or crying out, 'Jesus is with you! Open your arms and embrace the Lord!' A hopeless case.

Harris's second meeting with Marianne took place on the 21st July, Harris's mother's birthday. In the case of Zuckerman versus Zuckerman – no contest, she'll get the lot. Zvi needs therapy. There are some that would disagree. *Forgive him. He knows not what he does:* Harris's mother's words. If Harris had tinnitus, the noise ringing in his head would be his mother's voice.

Marianne starts: 'Since I saw you last he's wearing a crucifix around his neck. He's started fixing crosses all over our apartment. Every day I return home and there's another one. He's even put a picture of Jesus above our bed.'

'But I thought you were going to leave him?' Harris said.

'I should have. I can't stand it anymore. He said he's considering taking up the priesthood. For God's sake! He keeps on saying, "Christ died for my sins!" He's threatening to have an operation. He refers to it as a reversal, his uncircumcision. He needs help.'

Harris showed her the photographs.

'That just proves it. You will act for me?'

Harris straightened his pigeon-grey tie and began: ‘The way I feel about religion is this. It’s an opiate for the masses. Buddhists, Hindus and followers of Bhagwan Shree Rashneesh – they can bow down all they want. They can blow it out their ears. The Wee Free in particular. I’m up to here with it.’ Harris pointed skyward. ‘I eat fish on a Friday and enjoy a plate of veal. I don’t eat kosher and I’m not bothered if my chickens aren’t slaughtered by a Halal butcher. My mother was a member of the high church. The most god-fearing woman. God rest her soul. I used to be in the choir. Christ died for our sins.’

Marianne nodded with her fake smile, hesitated, screwed up her forehead and worked out her answer. ‘My sentiments exactly, Harris.’

‘Really?’ Dear Lord, she’s more stupid than I thought.

‘What about the affair and the letter?’ she asked.

‘I’m still working on that.’

His former friend’s wife smiled her approval, a charming tip of the head. She shook his hand. The deal was done. He could tell what sort of woman she was. The conniving bitch. Her steely eyes and her taught, muscular calves, and so well mannered, such a pretty façade. Here was an intelligent, sophisticated woman claiming she had been duped into marriage on the promise of better things to come. It’s hard to believe, Zuckerman, a scoundrel? Hard to believe they’re talking about the same guy. Harris took the case.

‘Tea, Coffee?’ he said.

Marianne looked at her watch. ‘Perhaps something a little stronger?’

‘I know a bar where they mix the best Gin Martini.’

Before their meeting ended, Marianne invited Harris to her mother’s home for drinks the following weekend. Her mother would be entertaining her out-of town friends, would he like to join them? Zuckerman would not be present.

Harris starts having these dreams: he wakes up as if from the dead. Pus coloured walls in a dust-ridden infirmary. There’s a cross on the wall. Christ is looking down on him. There’s a copy of St Gideon’s bible. A sharp stab coming from his groin. The weight of catheters and cabling dressed across his chest. And crepe bandages. And the

steady beep, beep, beep of the heart monitor – his heartbeat, slower than he can imagine. There's the reek of dead flesh, Ajax cleaner, over-cooked scrambled egg. An image of some car accident playing in continuous mind-loop triggers a reaction so violent his stomach convulses and projects a stream of coloured vomit. As he regains consciousness – he's still dreaming – Marianne, dressed as a nun, is standing at the foot of his bed. Her sad, green eyes. Zuckerman is standing behind her. Then Harris wakes, goes to take a piss.

It was more a small country estate than a house. The mile-long driveway was potholed, dotted with umbrellas of sycamores and had a corridor of scarlet rhododendrons that required drastic pruning. At last Harris arrived at a gravelled, horseshoe entrance. Parking his car he imagined a gardener might pop out from behind a bush and start raking over his tyre tracks. The front door, a tall antique covered with japanned bolt heads, was large enough to accept a removal van. Marianne introduced her older sister, Anna – Marianne said her mother had been called away on urgent business – and explained they were having Christie's over to uplift a few items for auction, some porcelain, unwanted items mainly, which never fitted in with the collection.

The drinks party turned out to be a tea party. Just the three of them. Sterling silver service served up by Anna. Triple tiered cake stands, sandwiches over doilies, sponge in the middle and fairy cakes on the top. Part way through their second cup, furniture removers arrived and removed the furniture. By the time the afternoon was over Harris thought the place looked a tad spartan and had the distinct impression he had been invited not a day too soon. The third degree grilling he was given by the sister was more akin to a cross examination in the courts; age, date of birth, rising star sign, job, income, days off per year, personal pension, retirement fund, numbers of children, brothers or sisters, desire for children, religion, church and mother's maiden name, ending at sexual preferences only because she had to pay the window cleaner, she said, for the very last time. On her return to the drawing room, what was left of it, Marianne's sister screwed up her pretty face and with a puzzled expression, turning to Harris said, 'I could swear on my husband's grave, we've met before.'

Marianne seemed embarrassed by all the questions. 'I'm a simple girl at heart with simple desires.' Right! Anyone could see that. She grabbed Harris's hand and gave him the tour. 'My sister was a schoolteacher when she met her husband. Isn't it amazing how people can change?'

'You mean with age?' Harris said.

'No, prissy! I mean with money.' Harris hadn't been called 'prissy' since he was at school. She led him through the library to the drawing room to the main hall, where the teak panelling was in need of waxing and the walls were covered with stags' heads and broken swords, up the grand staircase, along cobwebbed corridors decked with oil paintings of somebody else's family, up a further set of pine stairs with two quarter turns and on to a landing and out on to the roof of the tower, where without as much as a by your leave or conspiratorial glance she undid his belt, dropped his pants and ... he was flattered. For a minute it saddened him to think he could be stepping into the shoes of an old friend.

It saddened Harris much more when he arrived home unexpectedly in the early hours of the following morning to find Brad in bed with another man. Brad his lover, Brad his confidant, Brad the young student he had supported through his final year of university. Brad was lying on top. Harris could tell by the angular line of pale skin contrasting with sun tan and the patch of blond wavy hair on his lower back.

The one thing about bastard lawyers is they're usually only mean with their words. They are erudite, well-read, and know how to put their argument across in a perspicuous manner, whether it be truth or lies. The other thing is that most of them do not have the balls, desire or physical strength to actually pick a fight and win. Not so, Harris Trainer. Brad is recovering from a limp and the sight out of his left eye, thankfully always his poor side, is temporarily damaged. The other man, the person found lying under Brad with his arse also pointing to the ceiling, no longer writes with his right hand.

Never one to dwell on the less fortunate in life, Harris put his back into his work and crippled a dozen more partners in divorce. Protestations fell on deaf ears. He was as

determined as ever to suck out the lifeblood, deplete the bank balances and crush the opposition of anyone who stood in his path. He had a particular dislike for one fellow lawyer who deceived his wife – something about letting down the profession. He was a senior partner of a firm with practices in a dozen different towns and cities, swore he only had a one-night fling but relented when Norman dug up affidavits from six other parties, his former friends and colleagues, who for fear of being implicated, swore that he had been ‘on the game’ for years and had a second home, wife and two children living in Northampton and a holiday villa in Portugal. The man has since committed suicide.

In between court appearances Harris returned for a real drinks party.

Bunches of flowers everywhere. Fruit heaped in piles on the floor. Vegetables laid out on solid wooden tables. Very colourful but bare. Marianne said her mother was still away on business. The out-of-towners travelled all the way from Majorca, dropping onto the lawn in their Sikorski helicopter. The count of wherever had a mop of greasy hair, jeans and T-shirt with an entourage of sylph-like babes sucking up behind. Another troupe arrived on their Harleys, in black leathers and chains, smoking cigars and marijuana. When they cracked jokes Harris could hear their chains jangle. The rich could be so much fun and had such good connections.

Again, Marianne seemed quite embarrassed by it all. ‘I don’t go in for all this fancy stuff,’ she said.

‘My sentiments, exactly,’ Harris said, unconvinced by the sound of his own voice. Most of the afternoon they sat around, listened to a mixture of classics and heavy rock and got stoned. Harris felt quite at home lording it with the wealthy. They may not have been aristocracy but he reckoned they acted like it. Lunch was a help-yourself affair. The desert of tiramisu, glazed meringue and vanilla ice cream was accompanied by coffee, mints, four lines of cocaine each and persons talking, chatting, befriending other people’s partners and disappearing to study the crumbling architecture in the bedrooms. Come early evening Harris awoke in the master suite with Anna lying by his side, her blonde locks curled, flattened under his weight, her breath stale and fruity, the bed damp with sex, the curtains drawn back, the window open and the sounds of a bird twittering in the eaves. Turning his head to the other side of the bed, gazing at the particles of dust, glistening, suspended in the air, his eye followed the path of a fading ray of sunshine,

down, down, down to the edge of the bed, falling to a pinpoint of golden reflection, to an anklet in the shape of a heart.

From that evening onwards Harris never saw nor heard from Marianne or her sister again. He assumed the case was closed. She and Zuckerman had patched things up. Often happens.

It was careless of Harris not to tell his cousin, Norman. Weeks later on 2nd October, Norman parked his car, a Cavalier with broken rear suspension, outside Zuckerman's flat and waited. Norman was precise about the date because he kept a running total of his hours in his diary where he had earlier noted that Zuckerman had been absent from the streets for some time.

Zuckerman appeared around midnight.

Norman paid a council worker fifty quid to borrow his rubbish cart and his uniform and followed Zuckerman disguised as a road sweeper. It was a different world out there in the middle of the night; cars cruising, rent boys, prostitutes up alleyways, clubbers coming home at all hours singing and Zuckerman, poor Zuckerman, a sullen, shadow of a man – that was Norman's description – trolling his lonely way by the riverside, huddling down in shelters.

Daytime Zuckerman came out about noon, a slob, dirty like a street bum shifting aimlessly through the streets. He had a fondness for graveyards, sitting on a bench sharing his sandwiches and a can of beer with a friendly tramp.

On the 21st October, supping his café latte, sitting at his favourite corner in his favourite cappuccino bar, looking out on the hard-pressed office workers rushing through the crowds on their way to work, Harris slipped on his reading glasses, a large, black framed, specially coated pair from Armani and scanned his way down the columns of the Perfect Partners page. A Wednesday ritual. Now who else, Harris thought, would be foolish to sign their advert with the initials, Z.Z.Z.

And so, first thing, after arriving at his office that crisp autumnal morning, Harris was prompted to check the Zuckerman file to ensure that all matters had been dealt with. Six months to the day, he noted, Marianne had first walked into his office. Harris asked

his secretary to get ready the file for archiving but beforehand, check the audiocassette and ensure that all correspondence had been dealt with. This she duly intended but as she, like Harris, took ill and was off sick the very next day, these matters were dealt with by Demi, the temp; Demi with the 30 E cup brassiere and the skirt that always felt too loose; Demi who was filling in for her sister because she too was off ill with that very catchy virus; Demi who had nothing better to do that particular day and was on a week's break from her hotel receptionist's job up in Iverrary. In her haphazard fashion, useless but well meaning, she typed out the letter to the client, Mr Z Zuckerman, confirming that they were closing their file. Unfortunately, she was in such a fluster to catch the bus home from her work she omitted to weigh and stamp the letters and parcels but she was sure they would all arrive at their various destinations at some time or other, knowing the goodwill of the Royal Mail.

Chapter 4

‘The weather’s lifting.’ In the distance the mist clears a snow-capped mountain that resembles an anklebone and the heel of a platform shoe. Zuckerman zips up his jeans and points to a break in the clouds towards a silver-green breach in the sky. By the time he gets back into the car Harris is in the driver’s seat ready at the wheel. They move off, Harris corrects the steering, too late, and the truck ploughs into a soft verge, the tyres throwing up a plume of mud-brown spray.

Having left the Little Chef a while back, they motor north-northwest making their way along two-lane byways through countryside famous for fir trees, lochs and toffee-coloured cattle. There is this new procedure to work through after a comfort break. Harris steadies himself behind the wheel, re-arranges his back into the ideal driving position whilst Zuckerman prepares, rolls and throws away another joint. Zuckerman thinks: no one said giving up was going to be easy.

Harris says, ‘Ruti was hungry. Doesn’t matter now. She’s fast asleep.’

A voice from the rear, ‘No, I’m not.’

They drive for miles, uttering hardly a word until Harris gives Zuckerman an enquiring stare and says, ‘You’re coping well.’

‘With what?’

‘Marianne.’

‘What’s Zvi been telling you?’ Ruti says to Harris.

Zuckerman talks over his shoulder, acknowledging Ruti’s presence whilst pretending she isn’t there. ‘Ruti tells me I’m improving every day but she has a habit of making light of things. She thinks I should go into hospital; jokes about electric shock treatment. If it’s not bums or tits then it’s penises! All men are the same, she says, the sum total of our collective brains hanging between our legs.’

‘Hear, hear!’

‘Under the circumstances, that’s a pretty harsh thing to say, Ruti, considering all your brother’s been through.’

‘Yes, and he’s been through such a lot, poor boy!’

‘Ruti’s teasing me. See what I mean, Harris?’

A milk-turned-sour feeling churning in the pit of Zuckerman’s stomach, the car wallowing to a sickly rhythm. Opening the window, he takes a mouthful of air. A farmer is spreading silage out the back of a tractor. A rush – the smell of the country. Zuckerman motions to Harris. Harris stops the car. Zuckerman gets out, heaves his eggs, his beans, his don’t-know-what over a stone dyke. He stares at the sheepish expressions of the black-faced, four-legged creatures munching on threadbare patches of grass. He heaves again. Wave after wave. Several false alarms then an awareness, that familiar empty feeling. He wipes his mouth clean and climbs aboard.

Harris says if he has any more problems with indigestion he should eat plenty of onions.

Around midnight Zuckerman strolled up to Charing Cross and his rendezvous with his prospective companion. It gave him the creeps when he had to walk beneath the Kingston Bridge. Ten lanes of super highway, spalling panels, all of its weight supported by these massive piers of reinforced concrete, a forest of ellipsoids. This is what Manhattan will look like after a nuclear war; skeletons of skyscrapers stripped to the bare bone.

Insomniac's Café was a bright, tacky affair with an eclectic mix of Chinese, Pakistani and wan-skinned kids. Somebody who stuck their finger into a 13amp socket in the 60’s inspired the decor: fret-cut steel signs and garage-door sized windowpanes painted out in purple. The large square interior had a high ceiling and garish, speckled-brown linoleum on the floor. Hung on the drip-marked walls, a sickly shade of sky-blue, was a collection of fetishist paintings, entitled Post-Natal Depression; nudes with glum expressions and extended tummies lying around in supine and doggy positions having their dead foetuses telepathically sucked out of them via octopus-like black tubes.

Here was one fellow piss-artist Zuckerman could relate to.

Sitting in Insomniacs was like being held captive in his own dead-head brain. Subdued, half alive, and continually lost in time. A home from home. A rest home.

He was supposed to meet the man at 1am. All communication had been by postcards. He had inserted the advert: *Male, fed up with women, seeks male companion for friendship, drinks and laughs*, and received numerous responses. It was an arduous and embarrassing task but he eventually narrowed the field down to a neatly scripted hand where the writer defined his favourite pursuits as reading, writing and chess. Zuckerman wasn't a grand master but he liked the idea of speaking to a guy with at least half a brain. The physical description was rather woolly – tall, prominent featured, he wasn't much caring for an Adonis. He said he would be reading a copy of Nabokov's *Despair*, evidently an intellectual. Zuckerman was to be carrying the same in paperback.

Zuckerman ordered a plate of tacos and a Bud from a busty young waitress in shirt and tie uniform then he grabbed hold of a discarded Herald. Opening it up at the Perfect Partner's Page – yes, there was the advert. Looking up, he noticed two men sitting by themselves, neither of them reading, neither of them prominent featured.

He waited. He sweats when he's nervous. He ordered another beer and was about to call it a night when this person walked in. Zuckerman was scratching his memory. He knew the eyes but not the stubble. He knew the complexion but not the wrinkles on the forehead nor the bush of brown hair. He was lean, strong, not unattractive. The picturesque figure walked in his direction. He was dressed in sweatshirt and jeans, casual yet snappy, and carried a small briefcase. Evidently he was looking for someone. Who wasn't? He saw Zuckerman staring at him and he stared right back, smiled and continued past Zuckerman, sitting down at the table opposite. Once the man had ordered, it was back to where they left off, eyeball to eyeball. Zuckerman's underarms were dripping. It was intense. Zuckerman busied myself in the columns of the newspaper. He took the pile of replies out of his pocket and flicked through. He'd forgotten the book.

Every now and again Zuckerman turned a page and looked up at the man – he'd pulled a magazine out of his briefcase, obviously not *Despair*. He looked like ... no, still don't recognise him. Zuckerman looked up again and now the man was calling out to him from the other side of the café. 'Zuckerman, it is you, isn't it?'

'Hello?'

The man was stuttering expletives. He walked over. 'Zuckerman my old buddy, it is you!'

Law 5: Inherent in every intention and desire is the mechanics of its fulfilment.
Zuckerman was bewildered.

They did the man-to-man thing and shook hands. He sat down and they faced each other across the table.

'It's me, Harris Trainer. God, you look good. And you've put on a few pounds?'

'You've hardly changed.' Zuckerman lied. He couldn't remember what Harris looked like. He couldn't remember Harris.

'How long has it been?'

'Years?' This had to be a mistake or maybe the man was just being polite. It had to be one of the two. Anyone who knew Zuckerman before, if they were telling the truth, would have said: 'You look like you've been hit with a baseball bat!' Sincere might have sounded like: 'Jesus, what happened to you. Stop eating!' The man downed the last of his beer. Zuckerman thought: maybe he is an old school friend? Maybe I've done too much stuff?

'Meeting someone?' the man asked.

'No, I couldn't sleep and I got hungry.'

'Must be at least ten years since we last met, apart from that time I bumped into you and your wife. Are you hungry?' Harris searched around for a waitress.

Zuckerman couldn't recall him ever meeting Marianne. He asked, 'How about you? Meeting someone?'

Harris flicked his wrist through the air, as if signalling his disappointment then in a languorous, rather doleful manner said, 'Couldn't sleep either, a lot on my mind.' He had a brief look at the menu then added, 'Anyway, it's great to see you after all these years.' This time he didn't sound so enthusiastic. Harris Trainer, maybe it was his lack of girth, but yes, it had to be – Harris Trainer. Perhaps he was being sincere, kind hearted. Perhaps Zuckerman didn't look so bad after all.

They ordered beers, chips and ketchup. Zuckerman noticed Harris kept sniffing, rubbing his nose, a well-defined proboscis, if ever he saw one. Still hungry a while later, Zuckerman ordered a full, Scottish breakfast.

Between eating and drinking they chatted about the old days. Zuckerman imagined he was in an amusement arcade operating a penny slot machine; Harris would say something, the coin would drop, and a memory would fall into place. Sometimes, three in a row: afternoons at William Hills, drinking sessions into the small hours and Rizla roll-ups on the last bus home. The fog in his head was slowly lifting. Zuckerman got into the spirit of things. They ordered more beers. It was a two-hour session down hazy, memory lane.

Harris recalled Zuckerman's eighteenth birthday party. Harris said he arrived in fancy dress, made up like Madonna; rag doll hair, eyelashes, crucifix, false tits in a lacy bra. He accompanied Zuckerman's ex girlfriend, Lucy. Zuckerman thought: now which one was Lucy? Harris said Zuckerman never got past first base. The penny dropped. She was also made up like Madonna, less convincing: hairy armpits, bare midriff, brassy earrings, bangles. She had half a bottle of vodka to drink and kept making passes at Zuckerman. That got Harris riled. He grabbed hold of Zuckerman's throat threatening to squeeze his lights out – at his own party; that was one major embarrassment. Whilst all this was taking place, 'Lucy!' – they called out chorus-like – was spewing her fish and chips over Mother's Axminster Carpet before fainting on the spot. And that was where they left her, in the goo and bile and fermented cod and carbohydrate. Sure, they eventually helped her up. Ruti took her to the bathroom and then sent her home in a black-cab.

That was also the night Zuckerman discovered Harris had taken a liking to his sister.

'How is your sister?' Harris asked. 'It would be great to see her again.'

'Ruti's fine; married for a minute, husband sort of left her, no kids and could do with some company.'

They were all drunk that night. The party on its last legs, Zuckerman caught Harris with his fingers practically in the till – a pair of skirts rolling about on the cold, tiled floor; Ruti's half naked arse staring up at him; Harris with his top torn open, gyrating, bouncing, working up a lather. Zuckerman wanted to kill him. He dragged him by the hair, smashed his face into the bathroom cabinet. Twelve stitches. His arm was nearly severed by a piece of broken glass. Sixteen stitches. That was after he kned him

in the crotch, where it really hurts. He stopped short of murder only because Ruti intervened. These were the days. Head to head, tit-for-tat. It made their friendship even stronger. Harris promised Zuckerman, swore on his bible, on his little brother's life that he wouldn't go near Ruti again.

Harris and Zuckerman continued to blether like two crapulous old men sitting on a park bench. Around the age of nineteen Zuckerman went to university, the wilderness of academia and they lost touch with each other. But Zuckerman was intent on filling in the gaps. He had an audience. Company was company.

'I had a variety of jobs,' Zuckerman said, 'and wrote in the evenings, still working on that first novel.'

'I'm a lawyer,' Harris said. 'It's OK, but I keep thinking I'll jack it in. I've been engaged three times, married once – big mistake, each of them lasted a few months.'

Zuckerman found that hard to believe. Harris didn't strike him as the marrying kind. 'I've gone through the mill myself, Harris.'

'Don't get me wrong, Zuckerman, I'm glad they left me. I prefer it this way.'

'Which way?'

'Just wasn't working out, you know how it is?'

'No.'

'I was hoping you might. Doesn't matter.' Another flick of his wrist.

'What doesn't matter?' Harris talked in riddles.

'I've still got my flat. It's up by Park Circus. Life's good, but too many narrow escapes. Took me four goes to realise I wasn't cut out for that sort of thing.'

'What sort of thing?' Zuckerman said.

'How about you?' Harris said.

Harris was an incredible guy for answering a question with a question. Zuckerman wished it was otherwise ... if it wasn't for that last question. They were having such a good time. 'Harris,' Zuckerman said, 'I've something to tell you.'

'Zvi, another beer?' Harris searched for a waitress.

'This'll be news for you, Harris. It's my wife.'

The waitress was standing next to them, gaping at Harris. 'Was that a Becks or a Bud, Zvi?'

'It's my wife. She's gone.'

'I'm sorry.' The waitress closed the flap on her order book and walked off.

'Did you hear me, Harris?'

'Yes, I'm sorry. Can we discuss this some other time? We've only just met up again and I'm not very good at this sharing stuff.'

'Harris, a few moments ago, you said you met Marianne. When? Where?'

'It was a fleeting, "Hello." Where did you say she moved to?'

'I didn't. There was an accident.'

'We're both a bit pished right now, Zvi.'

'If I can't share these things with a friend, who can I share them with?'

'I'm so sorry. Here, take this.' Harris handed Zuckerman his folded, cotton handkerchief. 'Don't go all melancholic on me. I'm no good with tears. Have you got no family, friends, a dog?'

Harris mentioned the dogs. Those fucking dogs! 'Marianne – it wasn't perfect but now she's gone. I have this recurring nightmare. The police dragging the wreck out of the water.'

'For heaven's sake, Zvi.'

'Marianne bashing her head to a pulp. The windscreen shattering.'

'No more, please, Zuckerman.'

'Shards of glass cutting her skin to shreds. Helicopter paramedics folding her intestines into a polythene bag.'

Harris stood up. 'I'm going to be sick.'

'No, don't go, Harris. It's so easy to take someone for granted.'

'Jesus, Zvi. I'm sorry. Listen if it makes you feel any better –'

'They had to use acetylene gas and cutting gear to get Marianne out. And Angelika.'

'Who is Angelika?'

'Her mother.'

Zuckerman looked up at his new found friend. The colour dribbling out of his cheeks. Harris squirmed in his chair and slid backwards. Zuckerman's sweatshirt was soaked. He could smell his own fetid perspiration.

‘Zuckerman, enough! Please.’

‘I have to tell somebody. We were trying to work things out ... I feel I’m responsible. They’re all dead!’

Harris was shaken, his face like a blank page. He said he needed some air and he sympathised with Zuckerman, but everything at once was proving unbearable. He must have felt some genuine pity because he suggested they meet up again, soon. When it was over and he had calmed down, Zuckerman took hold of Harris’s hands and rubbed his knuckles until they almost cracked. Zuckerman was so grateful.

At the time Zuckerman didn’t know whether Harris believed a word he’d said.

The car passes a lone piper in full regalia, playing for spare change. His kilt is flailing in the wind. They don’t stop.

‘Your novel,’ Harris says. ‘Tell me about it. I may be able to help you out, introduce you to one of our clients.’

‘I’m glad somebody asked,’ Zuckerman says. ‘It’s a story about a young man whose wife dies in a horrific car accident. After the funeral the young man, he’s in his late twenties, is sent a box containing his wife’s papers. Among the items there’s a letter addressed to him, and a set of diaries, dog-eared pages covered with blood.’

‘To remove blood stains from clothes first soak for thirty minutes then rub in detergent.’

‘The young man discovers his wife was having an affair. He attempts to trace his wife’s footsteps but the information doesn’t add up. Diary entries are missing. He can’t find the identity of the other party. He tracks down all the people who might have been with his wife before her death, her friends, doctor, lawyer – ’

Harris interrupts, ‘Did I ever tell you my father was a minister?’

‘The wife worked as a sales person travelling the country. She was away a lot of the time.’

‘Did I ever tell you my father was in the army?’

‘Harris, are you taking the piss? There’s another secret, even more disturbing, which the young man believes he is on the verge of discovering.’

‘What company? Harris asks. ‘How long was she away for?’

Ruti is unusually quiet. Zuckerman looks round – she's fallen asleep. 'A pharmaceuticals company. One or two days at a time. Why?'

'Facts can be far more interesting than fiction. Your sister tells me you have a fertile imagination.'

'And she hasn't? Perhaps that's what she would like you to believe, Harris? Wait until you've read it. There're some secrets one shouldn't let out the bag.'

Harris is driving with little care for other motorists. Two of them have landed up in a ditch. He says, 'I'll give you a note of my publisher on our return.' He's crunching through the gears. In the distance a rainbow arcs into a field of green.

'What publisher, Harris?'

'The one that published volumes 1, 2 and 3 of *'My Daddy's a Handy Daddy'*.' He's already published. Zuckerman chokes on his deep-filled, tuna mayonnaise, cress and cucumber sandwich.

Ruti accompanied Zuckerman on his second trip to Insomniac's. She was as enthusiastic as he'd ever seen her when it comes to men. He never realised she'd held a candle for Harris for so many years. They met, Harris and Ruti hugged. It was as if Zuckerman didn't exist.

Harris was fashionably turned out in black with his hair gelled flat, no puff-ball frizz. They chatted; Zuckerman ordered drinks and a coffee. When the waitress returned he noticed something very strange. Strange, because he couldn't recall when it last happened to him. She gave Harris a dark, salacious stare, like she was undressing him. She even licked her lips.

Half an hour had passed, Harris and Ruti were still engrossed. Zuckerman reordered drinks. A young waiter, male, brought them over. Zuckerman couldn't make up his mind whether he was gay or not. He wasn't effeminate, he wasn't camp, he didn't have manicured fingernails. He wore an eye patch and his name was Brad. He was just a nice guy wearing that same salacious grin directed straight at Harris. They say it takes one to know one and Zuckerman reckoned he was a good judge of character. OK, so maybe his pal Harris was gay. So what? But why Zuckerman should catch that very

same look from that very same waiter on his way out, he didn't know. He knew he wasn't gay.

And then it all made sense. Ruti had slipped out to the bathroom. Zuckerman was bored, strumming his fingernails on Insomniac's greasy spoon tablecloth. He showed Harris a photo of him, Marianne and Angelika out on a picnic. Harris spilled his drink over a bald headed man wearing spectacles. Zuckerman was sure he was listening in on their conversation. Zuckerman rambled on about how shortly after Marianne died he began to suffer from insomnia. Never awake and never asleep. He was pretty dramatic about it: 'Every time I looked into a mirror my reflection had faded into a series of out of focus Picasso-esque four-dimensional facets. All of them indistinguishable, but not quite whole. I was losing my identity, my memory. I'd already lost my looks. I was scared.'

Zuckerman thrust his down-turned hands into Harris's face, exposing the slowly healing, brownish scars and exclaimed, 'See! I was scarred.'

'You look just fine to me.'

Zuckerman wondered: is Harris just being polite? Am I overdoing it? Harris's response to Zuckerman's catalogue of terrors was simply to change the topic of conversation. Zuckerman apologised, saying he would never mention it again. But he did, and continued in the same vein. He told Harris he found little respite in a vacuous routine of cat-napping, drug taking, whisky swilling and transporting himself into that don't-give-a-monkey's attitude about the whole damn world.

'Enough, Zuckerman!'

Zuckerman broached the subject of sexuality. He told Harris how he noticed the waiters staring at him. No excuses, Harris came right out with it.

'Since we're being open and honest,' Harris said, 'I may as well tell you. I've had that problem since I was a kid. People are attracted to me. I can't help it. Our little secret, yes?'

Zuckerman thought: he looks harmless enough and he's right, I go too far. Damn it! If I could only find some way of moving on with my life.

Ruti returned with a beam on her face. It was her suggestion – for the three of them to spend the weekend in the country. Zuckerman thought: great idea. He could

return to the site of the accident and lay a commemorative stone. Harris offered to share the driving.

The weather doesn't lift, although things are looking up for Zuckerman: a way into the world of publishing, a way out of mediocrity, property, fake smiles, open topped tourist buses and postmodern architectural crap. He knows what he doesn't want: another nine to five job. He knows what he does want: he just wants to get laid.

Harris driving, sun shining, forests of spruce. Pine trees with their tops lopped off by low-slung mist. Up hill, down valley, around one loch then another, same as before only the season is different. Driving up a 1 in 4 incline, behind a retinue of caravans, Harris is bemoaning the lack of pace. On reaching the summit they come to a halt in a car park next to a matching set of portaloos.

They're perched atop the Rest And Be Thankful. It's good to get a mouthful of fresh mountain air. The road they've travelled up appears like a snake blasted out of the hillside. It forms a ledge for cars that in the distance appear like Dinky toys. From where Zuckerman is standing, high up on the hill, he feels as free as a bird. He imagines being strapped into a Gypsy Moth single-seater flying through the sky between the snow capped peaks and the road down below which twists and turns like a serpentine river on its path of least resistance to a distant shore, to the horizon beyond. Zuckerman recalls it was a shame Marianne wasn't able to share the view. She had a fear of heights, the vertigo made her quite dizzy. She was happy to sit in the car with a copy of *Der Spiegel* whilst Angelika and him lay on a rug on the wild grass, enjoying the rays and the scent of a summer breeze.

Ruti and Harris wish to enjoy a few moments to themselves. Zuckerman wanders off to explore. Surely it's no coincidence that just out of sight, around the bend, he spies a motorised canteen and a man serving an all day breakfast bap? Even in his current guise as 'Purveyor of Fast Food' – written in gold lettering on the side of his bottle green van – with rolled up sleeves, tied-back hair and long pointed sideburns, Zuckerman recognises the unmistakable former prefect, head boy and bugger among buggers at the school he attended when he first arrived from Israel. It's good to see him stooping so low, selling rolls filled with concentrated cholesterol, a precursor for blocked arteries;

black sausage, square sausage, dripping bacon and butter washed down with a none-too-delicately squeezed tea-bag in a polystyrene mug. As Zuckerman approaches the head of the queue the aproned figure turns his back and cracks open an egg. ‘Just what the doctor ordered?’ Zuckerman says, hoping he may answer ‘yes’ so that he can award himself a self-satisfying glimpse of the man’s imaginary death caused by a massive heart attack.

Law 4: Nature’s intelligence functions with effortless ease, with carefreeness, harmony and love. Zuckerman thinks, if only!

With his back still towards Zuckerman, the man says, ‘Wouldn’t touch them with a bargepole, Jim. My personal trainer won’t allow me.’ On turning, the man pauses and says, ‘Do I know you? We get a lot of famous people stopping here, why only last week that famous actor, Sean – ’ He conjures up a fictitious name, somebody Zuckerman has never heard of.

‘Remember me from last year?’ Zuckerman says. ‘I was with a very attractive woman.’

‘Perhaps.’ The man nods. ‘They’re always attractive when you’re not married to them.’

‘I *was* married.’

‘Yes, of course you were mate. What did you say your name is?’

Am I so disfigured, out of shape, unrecognisable? Zuckerman doesn’t answer. The mobile chef, chopping knife in hand, winks at him and says, ‘Now I’m sure I remember your friend here.’ He points to Harris who has silently walked up to them, standing behind his pal. Chef bends over the counter stretches down towards Zuckerman and places a conspiratorial hand over his mouth. The stench of alcohol. ‘Your friend here, I’m sure I remember him.’ The man pulls himself upright. ‘Yes, come to think of it I remember you both. The High School, wasn’t it?’ The man puts down his beer and wipes his fingers on his health-risk apron. They shake hands. ‘So where’s your good lady then?’

Dead, Zuckerman wants to say. Dead, murdered, buried.

The itinerant chef, his name is Huntly or Hunter or some such thing beginning with an H, Zuckerman can’t remember, is chuntering on about his form teacher, recounting the old school song, which Zuckerman could never recall and all the while

he's preparing filled rolls – it's a blood-curdling feast for under two quid. Zuckerman is about to hand his fiver over the high-level counter, ready to escape, identity intact, when the man exclaims, 'Zuckerman, yes, I do remember you!' He broadcasts his name to the world.

Zuckerman stands there, mouth agape.

'It's been a long while,' he says. 'Didn't you leave rather suddenly?' People say Zuckerman left school due to personal circumstances; his family were broke and had to relocate. 'Aw, fuck it mate! You were lucky to get away.' People are polite enough not to say he was expelled. Chef lowers his voice, spread-eagles his knurled fingers on the counter and says 'What was it for, again?'

'What was what for?' Zuckerman says.

'Your leaving school so suddenly?'

His German teacher, Angelika. Zuckerman wants to tell all, shout it to the world.

'So you two are still friends?' He nods to Harris who has crept away without being noticed, heading back towards the car. Zuckerman explains that he and Harris have recently met up again. The chef coughs up phlegm, spits it out the back door then leans down to whisper, 'I used to be quite fond of Harris.'

The man is obviously drunk, thinks Zuckerman. Why should he remember Harris and not me?

'Now, I remember,' chef says. He persists, 'The woman you were with last year, didn't she have a German sounding name.'

For a vendor of sausage meat his memory is keen. 'I was not expelled,' Zuckerman says. 'Perhaps you're confusing me with somebody else?'

'That's not impossible.'

'I left due to personal circumstances.'

'Whatever you say, son.'

Zuckerman is reeling. He tells him, 'I wish I could say it's been good to see you.'

'Don't take that attitude with me.' Chef breaks off the conversation to serve a woman wearing a headscarf and a disapproving frown, standing next to Zuckerman at the front of the queue.

Hunting, that's his name. 'Hunting,' Zuckerman says, 'weren't you a couple of years above me?' Perhaps he never studied German. Perhaps he left before Angelika arrived.

'No need for games, son, no need for names; call me Jim. Jim Fast, purveyor of fast food, get it? Look, son, I'm sorry I gave you a hard time at school. Peer pressure. Some of my best friends are –' He returns Zuckerman's fiver. 'It's on the house.'

Zuckerman walks back to the car, ranting and raving at the preposterous story. The cheek of the man. He writes him off as a lunatic with a twisted sense of humour; his way of entertaining his customers, fabricating lies. In a fit of temper Zuckerman's insatiable appetite gets the better of him. He devours the rolls. On the way back to the Jeep he meets Harris. 'It was awkward for me, Zvi. I didn't want to hang about. I had a run in with him at school, bad memories. I just couldn't face him again.'

'You have to be some sick bastard to fabricate a story like that!'

'Yes, you sure do, Zvi.'

Zuckerman is hollering: 'Lies, lies, nothing but lies,' explaining to Ruti and castigating the chef for his slanderous tale about him being expelled. As only she knows how, she sweet-talks him down to a tolerable level of anxiety.

'And what happened to my food?' she asks.

'There was a queue outside the toilet which took forever, and I was still hungry.'

Ruti insists they return to get something to eat. They walk back a different route: in a circle, away from the summit, around the edge of a loch where a bald man wearing waders, up to his chest in the water, is fishing for pike, then back towards the motorised canteen. Zuckerman is astonished to see that the chef and his portable cafe have packed up and disappeared. He searches for the woman with the frown, but she's also vanished. He asks a couple, a mother and son, perched on a rock eating sandwiches; did they see the chef decamp?

'Yes, you've just missed him, such a nice man don't you think? Tows his stall with a new Mercedes.'

Zuckerman's turn to drive. He takes the detour off the main road, down towards Lochgoilhead and right, through Hell's Glen. Dun coloured hills rising up steeply to the darkening heavens. The summer before it was a tranquil, lush valley. A burbling stream. A drink from Moses Well. Marianne bathing, up to her knees in a rock pool, gasping for air, the water was so cold. Stretching out among the ferns, Zuckerman dried her off. Late afternoon, the sun dropped out of sight. They pass the very spot. Second time around it's a very different scene; at the end of the valley at the top of the glen, the wind is gathering strength. Flurries of snow play with each other, pushing and pulling, forming dense, low-flying clouds. The swirling vortices buffet the vehicle, toying with it like a tortured giant.

Zuckerman suspected the woman who abused him to be German. His memory confounded him but he had this insight for as long as he could recall. It was only now that he had reached his twenty-ninth year that he could look back and know that he was where he was that day because of everything that happened to him in the past. What a fuck-up it was. And you can't change the past. Memories: a tangled web of roots; tendrils reticulating, multiplying; then they wither and die.

He was beginning to understand – what happened in that Nissen hut all those years ago. Her name was Lotte; again his memory might deceive him – Ruti had no recollection whatsoever. After the war ended in '45, this woman, a skeleton with a covering of flesh – a wrinkled, weathered glove – would have travelled from Germany to Palestine. Homeless, bereft of all family she would have been welcomed as a survivor of the Holocaust and when Zuckerman came into the world on 21st June 1969 she would have already been entrusted with all the love and faith through years of unflinching service as carer and *metapelet* – school teacher and matron-in-charge of the little dormitory. By all accounts she betrothed herself to the service of others, just like in her previous life, when as a blue-eyed, blonde-haired Aryan in the 30's, she betrothed herself to Hitler and the Party; the grand seduction of youth. Was she other than who she said she was? He had no evidence, only the recollection of numbers missing from her forearm and the smell of her sex as she cupped his head in her turned-down hands and forced his

face between her legs ... our little secret, she said. Was he ten or eleven? ... a vulnerable little puppy.

Inside the cabin, heater blasting. Ruti and Harris laughing and yakking away to each other, oblivious to the storm.

I wonder what Ruti sees in him? I wonder what Angelika saw in me? I wonder if Angelika ever noticed Harris?

Monday, first day at your new school, the beginning of a new term, day one, period five – German. You are the new boy – the odd-one-out with the permanent tan, the oversized uniform, the matching school cap seven eighths too big and the regulation black shoes fresh out the tissue wrapper. Frau Angelika calls out your name. Your stomach churns as she leads you, arm-in-arm, through a sea of unknown faces to stand by her side at the front of the class.

Fat little Harris: is he there, belching in the front row?

She puts her arm through your arm. You are an inch taller than she is. Her perfume is expensive; you are used to your sister's brand X. She introduces you, "Herr Z Z Zuckerman," in a broken English accent that us Brits find – Zuckerman prefers to use the personal pronoun 'us' although it doesn't ring true. Out of embarrassment you lower your head, downwards, to her red patent high heels with the narrow slip of strap and minute silver buckle. Everything about Angelika is red, is rich, is excessive. Red lipstick over red lips, red woollen cardigan with twenty glass buttons, the top five were undone. What the fuck does it matter what she was wearing!?! Enough! You were the new boy with the weird name. Angelika was the German teacher, little red riding hood and wolf in sheep's clothing. She brushed her lips against your ear and whispered, 'You look so much older than your years.' At fifteen you really think about these things!

Zuckerman swerves to miss a sheep. 'Harris,' he says, 'remember our German Teacher?'

'Not really,' Harris replies. 'I tried French for a year then switched back to Latin.'

*

Discounting the other women in his life, his mother, his aunts, his sister and a handful of cousins, Angelika was Zuckerman's awesome introduction to the opposite sex – up to that point he had attended an all-boys school with an all-male staff. Fridays, after school, Angelika would go horse riding but she would change into her gear before she departed; leather boots, riding crop and hardhat. Grrrrrrrr!

Maybe Marianne was put up to it? Was it a coincidence that they met? Maybe Marianne and her mother formed a coterie with the sole purpose of ... Zuckerman didn't know what to think. It was unlikely but he wouldn't put it past them. In his mind, trying to work it out, trying to defend himself, he always ended up at the same question ... was he solely responsible for Marianne's death?

They went practically everywhere together. Even if he had wished it otherwise, he didn't see how he could have engineered the circumstances differently. Angelika and Marianne were like siblings. Their faces were alike yet not unlike, just as sisters ought to be. At their first meeting Marianne told him, quite candidly, that ever since her father died – before the young schoolboy met Angelika – she and her mother were inseparable, like twins born a generation apart. They certainly acted that way and Zuckerman and Marianne being married made little difference. The more he pondered over this particular aspect of his affair the less inclined he was to believe that Marianne was unaware of his infidelity. What he does know is this: Angelika was the mastermind, vixen and vulpine instigator of all their woes.

He did get himself into a desperate muddle, transposing one name with another. Once you tell one lie, you have to tell another, then another and before you know it ... at their third or was it their fourth meeting, Angelika set aside the textbooks. The additional one-to-one tutoring after school was her suggestion. She looked the young Zuckerman straight in the eye and said, '*Mein liebe kind.*' Now where had he heard that before ... when he was ten or was it eleven? She said he'd profit by continuing lessons at her home. Remember, you are only fifteen, a shy, introverted lad from a foreign land, from a dysfunctional family. You haven't spoken to your father in over a year. Harris is your only friend. You do not belong. You crave acceptance, understanding and your

hormones hunger after sex. You are tall for your age, a tight-budded lily, not a blossoming rose. For too long you have been confined to sunless, attic bedrooms.

It was an experience Zuckerman would never ever forget, ample compensation for the other physical ailment that afflicted him.

Love is. Who knows what love is? It's easy to confuse love with lust. Zuckerman never accepted the statement handed out by the school executive that Angelika wilfully and with wanton disregard corrupted the morals of a fifteen year old. He never said no. There he goes again, protecting her from all the blame. He placed her on a pedestal, apotheosis Venus. She could do no wrong in his eyes. Bitch!

Law 7: Everyone has a purpose in life, a unique gift or special talent to give to others. Zuckerman used to pray, 'Blessed are the Meek.'

Why was she ever attracted to him in the first place? Was she ever attracted to him? Zuckerman asked himself a thousand times. Angelika's desire for him was as inexplicable as it was incomprehensible. She said she followed her heart. She said German people do that and damn the consequences, in particular displaced Germans living in an alien land. Maybe that was it? Maybe she and Zuckerman understood what it was like to be strangers in a foreign land. But does it really matter? Does any of it matter now? Marianne implored him to meet with her mother, she begged him, cajoled him, she all but dragged him to meet her, and when he did, when he caught that very first glance, his life changed irrevocably. With one sweet smile he was enslaved. For the second time.

How many men imagine, no, not imagine but actually know what it's like to make love to their prospective mother-in-law? Zuckerman proposed to Marianne the very next day.

The three of them went on honeymoon. Marianne said they were close, more like sisters than sisters. There were times when Zuckerman couldn't tell them apart.

They cruised the Mediterranean; the charade began. Marianne liked to lie on deck, reading. Angelika and Zuckerman would be in the cabin, fucking. Angelika liked to dip her toes in the pool. Marianne and Zuckerman would be in the cabin, fucking.

See-saw, the rhythm of the waves, the motion of the hull, the eating, drinking, dancing, all would end up in the cabin, fucking – pure farce.

The anodyne for fatigue as prescribed by the ship's doctor was to return to work – he stated Zuckerman was an extraordinary case – as life aboard a luxury liner obviously didn't agree with him.

Life on dry land was no less demanding. Zuckerman had a disease. He done wrong! He deserved what was coming. God forgive me, he'd say. He had stepped on board that fateful chariot and like Phaeton held on to the reins for dear life. Look at the consequences.

Much of the time Marianne was out of town on business. At least every other week she spent one or two nights away from home, residing in a Travelodge, Holiday Inn or a Stakis Steakhouse with bread and breakfast fare. Marianne was a hard, good and honest worker. So what! It was Angelika who had the chemistry, powder keg stuff. Zuckerman begged her to stay away, to give them a chance. It worked, but only for a fortnight. He had to face it; he was all but a bigamist. He knew he should be flung into goal, handcuffed, hung, drawn ... that mote of flabby flesh between these thighs is proof; his dues have been paid but still it's not enough.

Zuckerman kept his distance but it was hard, too hard for the likes of him. I'm only human! – he protested. He had no resolve, no self-restraint and not a speck of moral fibre. Marianne knew nothing, or so he thought. Zuckerman will swear on his father's grave, (if he could find one) Angelika was like a bitch on heat, a fellatio addict with a waspy penchant for the circumcised. Every day was August the 12th, the start of the shooting season and Zuckerman was the target, the captive audience.

He loved Angelika yet he hated her; he worshipped the ground she tread upon; he would do anything, anything at all to satisfy her every whim, satiate her hunger and placate her anger. He was her slave, her toy boy, the puppy dog that ran and fetched. If she beckoned him roll over and drool he would have obeyed. If she said go the end of the pier and jump, he would have obeyed. He had a sickness, *shreklecheh zach* – a terrible thing, an infirmity of the heart. But he hated what he'd become. She wore him out. They were headed for disaster. It was all a game for her. Zuckerman wanted to finish it,

walk away. He couldn't stand the deceit. Gaaaaaa! They say you never forget your first love. Don't even try, he'd say. Zuckerman was given a second chance – to capture what he had lost as a teenager. But at what expense? Lies, deceit and death: too high a price to pay for a stolen kiss, a casual smile. He needed to cauterise the wound, to rid himself of the impediment and quite by accident his prayers were answered. And still he pines for her, even now that she is gone.

Zuckerman turns on the headlamps and says to Harris, 'I'll tell you more about my novel.' Ruti shrugs.

'There is more?' Harris says, his eyebrows meeting as he screws up his forehead.

The visibility is so poor that Zuckerman stops the vehicle but keeps the engine running with the headlights now on full beam. 'I ask the question,' he says. 'What does the young man do after he finds out the identity of his dead wife's lover? Incidentally, the young man was abused as a child.'

'The suspense is killing me,' Ruti says. 'Tell me for the nth time.'

'He hatches his revenge. He finds out where the person lives, works, who the person's friends are, and then he stalks them.'

'Enough!' Ruti says. 'You're sick! Drive on.'

Ruti and Harris continue chatting, about her marriage and his relationships. Zuckerman isn't interested. He has a fur ball sitting in his stomach. It lies there alongside his breakfast, his baps and all the other worries in his life. Driving, but hardly concentrating on the road ahead, his mind wanders. The journey, their destination and that chunk of stone in the back. His keeps conjuring up these thoughts and he's hapless in stopping them. He's standing alone on a platform in an underground station and each thought is a train and there's a non-stop, endless loop of trains; as soon as one train leaves the station another one takes its place. The train driver is a woman, a mysterious figure, dressed in uniform with jackboots, silver buttons, SS insignias and peaked hat. She is always there, piercing the tunnel darkness, headlamps on; a rushing onslaught, a cacophony bearing down on him, haunting him. He looks at the ragged scars on his hands, she is there; his tongue skims around the smooth surface of his new plastic teeth; she is there. Angelika – you can't get enough of what you really don't need.

Again, Zuckerman has to swerve to miss a sheep. The fences by the side of road are on their last legs. Posts are missing or lying on the ground. Strands of wool have collected around the spikes and trail in the wind like threadbare flags.

Zuckerman stops in the middle of nowhere. He fires up another joint. *Oh oblivion!* No he doesn't, he thinks about it but he's had it with that stuff; enough is enough. In his head they're at the epicentre of a tornado. He calls it Charlie. Three into six goes two. Crystalline chunks of cocaine ground down under a razor's edge; particles arrayed in parallel lines on a copy of Playboy, neat, tidy and a matter of fact. Wind lifts the skirt of the Jeep, playing with them. 'It's all right, we're safe,' he says. 'Even a hurricane can't blow this baby over.'

'How can you be sure?' Harris says.

Zuckerman rolls up a five-pound note; sticks it into his left nostril. Freeze frame. Enough is enough. 'I don't need this stuff.'

Harris stares at Zuckerman; his stern, white-lipped expression says it all. Ruti gives him her sisterly look of approval; an affirmative nod and a wink of the eye. Zuckerman has six lines of coke staring him in a row. What to do? It isn't a life or death situation but one of them is the odd one out and he knows who it is. Zuckerman picks up the five-pound note; screws it up again, tight. He hesitates. Those who hesitate are ... 'Jesus, you two!' They don't say anything. They don't have to. Their eyes say it all.

Harris says, 'Which reminds me, painkillers ground down, cocaine, white powder, they all look the same – a soluble aspirin dropped into a vase of cut flowers will keep your blooms fresh.'

Zuckerman opens the door, an icy wind blasts in and he chucks the lot. It disappears into the snow. Ruti smacks a kiss on his cheek and they exit out of the mist, down the pot-holed track through a neighbouring valley.

The weather clears then closes in again: a turgid, black sky: the beginning of another mighty maelstrom. They wind their way along the northern shores of Loch Fyne, the water the colour of molten tar. A mini twister is roiling, spitting out everything that floats in its path – underwater debris, fish and plastic. The rain hammers at the windscreen then hailstones the size of steely marbles punch at the roof.

‘Camping’s kicked into touch,’ Zuckerman says. ‘A stupid idea from the start. How about a place to stay?’ Like Ruti, he’s never been keen on the great outdoors, especially when the temperature drops to freezing. ‘Since I’ve dragged you out this far, my treat. I’ll book us into a hotel. I know a great little place where the rooms have been newly refurbished and the food is great.’ Well, of course he does, doesn’t he? The same place Marianne, Angelika and Zuckerman stayed first time round. Harris had mentioned it also – one of his weekend retreats.

‘A whisky and a hot bath,’ says Ruti. ‘That’ll do me.’

Harris has a glint in his eye, winking at Zuckerman, scaring the hell out of him. ‘C’mon sis,’ Zuckerman says, ‘we can share a double just like old times?’

Ruti ruffles his hair, laughs with a husky, coughing sound and says, ‘There’ll be a bar. I’m sure you can find someone to talk to. Anyway, we’re a bit old for that now, don’t you think? And if I had to choose, well – ’

Zuckerman drives into the car park, turns off the engine, opens the boot and carries in the bags.

Harris sits, grinning.

Chapter 5

The storm had passed by the time they arrived at Inveraray. In the light of the full moon, the entire town – the work of the very late 3rd Duke of Argyle – is a picture postcard of black on white set in historical eighteenth century aspic. The weather is freakish, a halcyon-front approaching. In the still of the night a haar slides over the edges of the flat-calm loch. It spreads its web-like fingers into crevices and cracks, over the old prison walls and along the hollowed-out cobbled alleyways.

Harris signs them into the whitewashed George Hotel. A talkative receptionist who formally introduces herself as Demi, the accent on the second syllable – a mousy haired teenager with a complexion like white bread, dressed in a mini-kilt with a low cut top – shows our weary threesome to rooms on the first floor.

‘Just my luck!’ Zuckerman says to himself. The room where Marianne and he slept is vacant.

Compared to where he could have slept – a plastic three-person tent on frozen tundra – the twin bedded room is palatial, decorated in muted red and ripe oak tones.

Marianne was particularly impressed with the fixtures and fittings. He did wonder about her taste. The furniture remains unchanged: a distressed collection of ersatz German Provincial and Victoriana that interior designers find so fashionable and estate agents wax lyrical about. The richly carved picture frames contain an eclectic mixture of copies of Van Gogh and Van Dyke and scenes of Dutch harbours with four-masted schooners taking on supplies. It’s emotional: seeing it all again. Zuckerman feels secure in the knowledge that Ruti is sleeping in the adjoining room.

Harris is lying on his bed reading a newspaper. Zuckerman is relaxing in a hot tub in the en suite bathroom. He has opened the small sash and case window and is lying up to his neck in suds, contemplating his manhood. He overhears someone whistling – sounds like to his heart’s content; Flower of Scotland. The tonal outpourings stop, replaced by the clatter of pots and pans, then a heated discussion between – naturally, Zuckerman can only surmise – chef with a gruff, foreign accent and another person,

probably the commis chef; sounds like a young man in his late teens. The heated discussion relates to ingredients for this evening's soup then the talking comes to an abrupt halt. A lull. '*Sprachen die Deutsch, dumm?*' The chef sounds exasperated. Zuckerman thinks: he obviously comes from the Netherlands. Much slamming of doors, more clanging of pots and pans, then silence. Minutes later, the commis chef is talking to Demi. Zuckerman reaches over and grabs an embroidered towel off the rail. He dries out his ears. It's taken him years of perseverance and he can distinguish every syllable:

'Hey James, d'yethink you can give me a hand wi ma spellin' on this here menu?' There was a pause, then a thump; James, he assumes, laying down a tureen.

'Aye! Sure hen, anythin' firra kiss. Y'got a few mistakes. Broccoli has two c's an' thersumin' about asparagus that's naw right either, y'ken? But I wouldna worry, the chef's so pished he probably canny tell the difference. And by the way, hen, it's Cream a' Cauliflower and Broccoli with Parsley and the other one's Asparagus Soup consommé. You got'em roond the rang way, y'know. Or maybe your right? Ach, what the hell! Whose carin'??'

Zuckerman is about to turn on the hot when the silence is broken by a sharp clap; could be a sharp slap on the cheek because the last words he hears are, 'Touch ma tits one more time and I'll cut your bollocks aff with that meat cleaver.'

Zuckerman hasn't touched asparagus since he was fifteen but it does get him thinking. *Asparagus officinalis!* Mother's favourite vegetable; my forbidden fruit – boiled in water, fried in fat with a sprinkling of salt and pepper equals one massive hard-on.

That other physical ailment that plagued Zuckerman: he had this medical condition called priapism when he was fifteen. The problem with priapism is that you never know when it will creep up on you next. He didn't know the exact moment it started or why he should be afflicted by it but he could make an educated guess. Priapism: the condition where you get an erection and that's it, that's your state of play, you can't get rid of it, you're a permanent piece of erotic sculpture.

He put it all down to Angelika. His mother put it down to asparagus. Now ask yourselves, which one is it likely to be?

Zuckerman kept his discovery secret but after a few days Ruti walked in on him as he stepped out the shower. That was the trouble with his sister; she couldn't keep a secret. Initially he was proud of it, amused at his good fortune, as were most of her friends and their older sisters who took a sudden liking to him. They used him; they abused him. For all he knew they had never forgotten him. If there's such a thing as a vaginal memory, he was there where it counted, a lifetime yardstick.

He didn't complain. He was mighty proud of his *membrum virile*. It felt steel hardened, as if he'd been given a titanium implant moulded to the exact contours of his mushroom-headed missile.

At first, this might seem hilarious. It's no joke. There were welcome lapses in its physiognomy. By concentrating on other matters such as chess, car mechanics and his rather splendid stamp collection, Zuckerman could relax, sometimes for extended periods. But come Monday, period five, after lunch – German with Angelika, what else! – that was it; a boner the size of a twelve-inch ruler. OK, he exaggerated; perhaps it wasn't that big, perhaps it didn't stay up for days at a time but that's how he remembers it; an excruciating, throbbing pain.

Minutes before the bell at the end of lunch break, Zuckerman would closet himself in the toilet and strap his penis to his leg with a school-tie tourniquet or a heavy-duty elastic band. Other times he could just ease it into a less obvious position.

There is nothing more uncomfortable.

Then, during class, with jumper stretched to its limit, he would feign normality ... and he wonders why he had difficulty learning German.

Mother thought it was a curse. She was right! She hauled him, screaming, to see the GP who – he swears to God – said it could be the late onslaught of underdeveloped puberty, caused by a sudden surge in his testosterone levels. He said the problem would die away sooner or later. Even at that age Zuckerman distrusted doctors.

As the weeks rolled by and the novelty of fame wore thin, Zuckerman's testes suffered a severe twisting into testicular torsion. The pain in his pelvis became unbearable. His steadfast member became his Midas touch. He couldn't as much as glance sideways at a girl without having the damn thing go upright. He was akin to one of Pavlov's cocker spaniels, only he couldn't handle the stimulus and he was sick and fed

up with the reward. In order to take his mind off the ‘wee, big man’ – a nickname laughingly handed out by his loathsome aunts – Zuckerman was forced to stay indoors and watch *The Beechgrove Garden* or befuddle his under-taxed brain by concentrating on questions delivered by that once famous TV non-personality Bamber – your starter for ten – Gascoine on *University Challenge*; anything to take his mind off the fairer, fucking sex.

He was in so much pain he thought of having it surgically removed. It was all he ever wished for. Big mistake.

Consultants were consulted, second and third opinions were sought. Zuckerman recalls sitting on the red velveteen couch of a famous Harley Street neurologist, Dr. Gordon Gorodinsky, a leathery handed, refined gentleman of Scottish-Russian descent; a follower of Sigmund whose dun coloured skin had the texture of well-done steak. The man had a portrait of his father hanging on the wall. He was also one of Mr Freud’s apostles but looked like a raving quack, sporting plus fours and a monocle – quite unlike his son who was a friendly, balding man with wire-framed bi-focals and a tartan bow tie. Dr. Gorodinsky organised a series of blood and skin tests. Zuckerman was even hooked up to an electro-stimulation-modifier to have it record the output from a succession of external visual stimuli – a series of black and white photographs of bouffant-topped bikini clad women with pouting lips in fashionable poses. He was subjected to the attachment of tactile probes, their suckered ends placed on his inner and outer thighs and strapped on to his dangling gonads.

It did the trick. For Zuckerman, just the thought of being wired up to the equipment was all he needed to suppress his sensory cortex. The entire episode lasted nearly three months.

As a further precaution, Zuckerman stopped eating asparagus.

In room number twenty-six Zuckerman is lying on top of the ruby coloured counterpane. Harris rolls a joint. For a lawyer he sure has a lot of vices and a lot of clever aphorisms. ‘If your kid is sick on the carpet, sprinkle the area liberally with soda-water to neutralise the smell before mopping up.’

‘I don’t have a kid, Harris.’

Zuckerman capitulates and inhales. He knows he's given up but it's no good to smoke or drink on your own. 'I'll make it up to you, Harris,' he says, 'paying for us to stay in this fancy hotel. I can't find my wallet anywhere.'

'Well, it's only for one night.' Harris says. 'It's not such a huge expense and after all, it's for a good cause.' Zuckerman wonders, which good cause is that?

They watch an old Benny Hill Show, puerile stuff, the two of them rolling about in fits. The smoke is going to their heads. 'C'mon,' Harris says. 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours.' Harris mimics a sketch on TV.

Zuckerman thinks: he wants me to take my pants down and show him my dick? This is what I was afraid of. Under normal circumstances, if we were kids ... what would be the harm? But they're not kids and Zuckerman's suspicions about Harris are turning out to be real. Zuckerman twists around on his bed, places his legs flat on the floor and is about to peel away his Y-fronts and expose the little pigtail when he stops. It goes without saying that he's only ever done this in the privacy of his own flat; he gives it a shake, cupping it, his right hand around the edge of shrunken skin, gripping the small pointed phallus and tugs. He starts to-ing and fro-ing. He conjures up images of Angelika in her white brassiere, white filigree panties, suspender tags, tights, legs that go right up to her ... she wants him to play dirty, slap her about. The thing expands. Zuckerman counts off the centimetres starting from four, five, six, seven, seven and a half. Doesn't matter how much he keeps flogging, there's no improvement passed eight. Zuckerman is counting centimetres. He can see that glint in Harris's eye and thinks: maybe it's a mistake and changes his mind. He keeps the little plodder well hidden. Harris sighs. Sounds like he's disappointed, thinks Zuckerman. Perhaps he's about to whip out his own full-length member and start bludgeoning the beefsteak? This is not something Zuckerman relishes. *Male, fed up with women, seeking a male companion for friendship, drinks and laughs.* I should have seen it coming. Maybe Harris wants to bridge the divide, this three feet chasm between our beds and ... it doesn't bear thinking about. Curiously enough, just at that moment Zuckerman feels a warm tingling sensation, something devilishly pleasurable. Seconds later, after the feeling disappears, he says, 'I'd rather not, Harris.'

'I was only kidding,' Harris says.

Liar. Zuckerman knows there's no point in him explaining anything to Harris and he's not about to make a fool of himself. He'll admit to a lack of use, a lack of libido – since Marianne and Angelika departed he finds it impossible to get an erection, at least, not like he's used to.

Harris sprawls out on his bed, laughing. On the TV a collection of girls wearing swimsuit bottoms, holding towels over their breasts are being chased around the figure of Eros. Zuckerman looks at his old school chum, oblivious to his inner turmoil.

Zuckerman gets up to dress. The explanation he'd like to give Harris is spiralling out of his head. He says nothing; keeps his thoughts to himself. He thinks back. If only I was fifteen again.

Zuckerman is shouting over the din of evening revellers. The three of them have journeyed down to the lounge bar, a baroque mixture of stone, crossed swords and tartan rugs. They're waiting for a table, pinned up against the countertop whilst two surly kilted barmen do their best to serve the locals and crowds of American and Japanese tourists pressing them from behind. No wonder it was peaceful outside because inside, the place is thrumming. Looks like the entire town is here, climbing over each other to order a pint, a whisky or a wee half and half. Zuckerman is telling Ruti about the extraordinary conversation he overheard in the bath and is about to point out its significance vis-à-vis his old priapic condition, when she says, 'C'mon, Zvi, no more stories, let's eat!' She stubs out her cigarette, makes ready to move.

It's two against one. 'C'mon Zvi,' Harris says. 'You can tell me the rest after dinner. I'm hungry.'

Zuckerman never got to finish narrating the story and it probably wouldn't have mattered to them; Ruti is gazing at Harris like a star struck teenager, drawn to him along some invisible tractor beam. No, Zuckerman has that wrong, it's the other way about. Her eyes are like magnets drawing Harris in and he's running his fingers through her jet-black hair. Who said he could touch?

His sister, she's a real beauty. She has no facial marks or wrinkles save for two pronounced laughter lines when she smiles and then you see her near-perfect white teeth. Teeth, that's about the only thing Ruti and Harris have in common. Whatever does she

see in him? OK he is good-looking, but on closer inspection Zuckerman can see precursors of haggard senility; hair thinning over his crown; a flurry of grey at the temples; his skin is babyish yet he has the start of crow's feet around the eyes and a couple of burst blood vessels on his left cheek. He's handsome but he's not wearing well. 'Just let me finish the story,' he says. But they've gone.

They're shown to a table. Zuckerman is working his way through the menu when he hears that recognizable sound of guttural and sibilant. He looks up to see four familiar faces being led to the table next to him by the man with the suntanned pate; only on closer inspection he appears more simian than human.

This is not turning out to be Zuckerman's day. He's given up drugs and alcohol and now he'll have to listen to stories about ... what he wouldn't give for the cup final, his Parker Knoll recliner and a bottle of Schnapps. He's had it. He gets up from his chair and is about to excuse himself when the Israeli chick stops him. She comes over to him and introduces herself, 'My name is Miki,' then apologises for the ape's behaviour earlier that day at breakfast. Her apology is irrelevant. Zuckerman is hooked. She's an Amazon, the paratrooper he dreams about.

The monkey talks, 'My name is Moshe.' Zuckerman half hopes he'll go, 'Ooh-oooh, ah-ah.' Zuckerman can be very judgemental. He is also a little irritated and jumps to the conclusion that Moshe is Miki's partner. He talks with an American/English accent and sounds as if he has a megaphone concealed in his gravelly, basso voice box. He extends a giant hand, a working hand. 'We're from Tel-Aviv, airline crew, a four-day outing, a mini-holiday.' He stares with his equivocal black-brown eyes. Quite disarming. Harris butts in and asks for an introduction.

Zuckerman says something trifling, 'It's good to meet you. You must be the captain?' How inane!

'No, Miki is our captain. My friends and I are cabin crew.' He turns and points to his companions. 'I'm the senior officer. Ever flown El-AL?'

They introduce themselves: pre-names are misunderstood, surnames are mispronounced and eye-to-eye contact has unusually significant undertones. Each of them, in turn, comments on Zuckerman's accent. 'You're one of us?'

Miki turns to Ruti, 'And you also?' Zuckerman hears Miki questioning Ruti as if the Diaspora never reached Scotland.

They order a round of drinks and together they study the menu. Zuckerman thinks: it's an interesting combination; four gay Israelis, Miki, Harris, Ruti and me. What do I call myself? – an ex-Israeli, an Israeli ex-pat, a displaced person? I have a British passport but I don't feel very British, never have done but I think they're swell, I really do; that stiff upper lip, the turning of the other cheek; these clever little clichés; bacon and eggs; soccer; hooligans, Oxford and Cambridge; their London Times and their Sunday Sport; the nursery rhymes they learn as a child.

'Hey Zvi, what's that you're drinking?' shouts Moshe.

'Guinness.'

Not me! Part of me still reads from back to front, still scans the newspapers from right to left ... his childhood flooding back. Zuckerman leans over to Ruti saying, 'What do you think of Miki? I'm going for the asparagus soup. It's my only fucking chance.'

'Don't start that nonsense, Zvi. Have you taken your pill?'

Through the haze of cigarette mist – the Israelis all chain-smoke – Moshe and his Popeye muscles are holding centre stage. He's constantly turning to Harris, smiling and flirting, sending coded messages, which Zuckerman finds alarming and intriguing; a rush of goosebumps. Again this bizarre, unfamiliar warmth comes over him, just as it did when he was in the bedroom with Harris. All the while, Moshe's partner, a dreamy effeminate with matching barbells through tongue and eyebrow sits diagonally across the table clocking eye movements like a tennis umpire counts balls over the net. The normal-looking couple at the far end of the table appear to be taking vicarious pleasure from watching Moshe and the barbell queen. They quit staring and become engrossed in each other's company probably realising the all too familiar pattern in their own relationship.

The soup arrives. Zuckerman asks for seconds.

The scene at the dining table isn't at all what Zuckerman had envisaged when he decided to retrace his steps to the site of the accident. Sitting next to Miki, he has a prickly sense of déjà vu ... I can see red again! He sees Miki's red leather pants, her red nail varnish and he catches a whiff of her perfume. His toes curl. He has butterfly pains

in his stomach. Small talk escapes him. He says, 'I was brought up on a kibbutz, lived there until I was thirteen.'

'Me too!' Miki says. 'My parents still live there. I visit every month.'

'I don't miss it.'

'There's something about you, and your name,' Miki says. 'This morning in the restaurant, I said to myself where have I seen that face before?'

'Ah, the smile,' Zuckerman replies, 'that accounts for it.' He almost has to turn away. Her eyes radiate a desert glow, tablespoons of hot, scented honey, the Middle East etched on her sand-coloured skin.

'It seems that we are not so far apart, you and me,' says Miki. 'My kibbutz was called Kfar Saba. And yours?'

'Kfar Saba.' Zuckerman lies. She is too irresistible.

'Kfar Saba?' Miki repeats. 'Are you *the* Zvi Zederbaum?' Although he's never had it confirmed, Zuckerman will take a substantial wager that there isn't another person on the planet with the initials, Z.Z.Z.

'That's me!' he cries.

The 3rd Law, the Law of Karma states that we sow what we reap. And when we choose actions that bring happiness to others, the fruit of our karma is happiness and success. Zuckerman thinks: this lie will get me far.

In a frenzy, Miki gets up from her seat, pushes the table aside, straddles Zuckerman, forces herself into his face and feverishly hugs and kisses him. 'We must have slept together,' she exclaims, 'you and me in the same dorm, maybe even in the same bed.' She's ecstatic, like a kid who just won her first coconut at the fairground.

Not one to hold back, Zuckerman reciprocates.

Found at last, kindergarten companions, almost. Should have been a comforting moment. Instead, a shooting pain pulses through every lousy fibre of Zuckerman's body as he thinks that she, too, might have been subjected to that same lance of deception. The Fraulein who robbed him of his innocence.

The others, by this time, must have thought ... Zuckerman doesn't really care what they're thinking. Nuzzling into Miki is like the best homecoming he could ever imagine. It's odd he should think of the word 'homecoming', but that's exactly how it

feels. It's as if he's been transported back in time, to his cosy cot, his bedside cabinet, toy cars, dolls, playthings and nursery rhymes, his childhood friends, his extended family, back there in that hot dusty shack.

Miki and Zuckerman are entwined in conversation to the total exclusion of the others. By the end of his steak and kidney, they're discreetly rubbing each other's thigh. He notices she is wearing a red T-shirt with 'I'm Miki, Fly Me' emboldened on the back.

Once more, Zuckerman is confident, alive. Dear God! He can feel the old, dead horse metamorphosing into a stallion, chomping at the bit. And all the while he finds himself in the company of men with whom he is at ease, with whom he can relate to ... we speak the same mother tongue. I'm among men, real men, fighting men, some of them at least. More drinks, more laughter more caresses under the table.

Zuckerman is taken up to bed, raving, drunk. Somebody undresses him, tucks him in and kisses him goodnight.

Zuckerman would wake up with Angelika by his side and notice the rise and fall as she breathed, the white cotton sheets like diaphanous silks gently pressing on the tangents of her ghostly curves. The sound of serenity, the ebbing and flowing. No more. In these moments before she awoke he would write the sweetest, sickliest love poem:

See me

with your dark, dark eyes.

Hear me

with your quiet, quiet mind.

Now

talk to me

in whispers.

From next door, Zuckerman doesn't hear snoring, he hears someone writhing in ecstasy. Now he hears two persons writhing in ecstasy. Is that my sister, howling? He opens his eyes. He looks up to the ceiling. He looks across to the other bed and Harris is not there.

The bastard. I'll kill him!

Harris Trainer and Zvi Zuckerman were the best of friends.

A new dawn, a new day. Country folks on their way to Mass. Zuckerman is sitting alone at the breakfast table reading the Oban Journal when in walk Harris and Ruti. The bastard looks like he's had a good night's sleep and an enervating wake up call. His cheeks are aglow. He's wearing that self-satisfying, smug, tight-lipped expression. I'll bet he's starving. 'Where did you two get to last night?' Zuckerman says.

'More to the point, where did you get to?' Ruti says.

'Where do you think?' Zuckerman says. 'Fast asleep in my bed!'

Was I?

'With who?' Ruti says.

'By myself!'

'Pish!'

'It's not pish, Ruti. Who were you with this morning?'

'What are you talking about, Zvi? And, anyway, even if I was with someone, it's none of your business.' Ruti blows Zuckerman a set of smoke rings in the shape of the Olympic flag.

'I suppose you're going to tell me I'm hearing things?'

Am I?

'Well, are you?' Ruti says.

Harris is behind Ruti, standing like a piece of sculpture. 'You two can argue all you want, I'm starving.' Zuckerman supposes he doesn't want to get involved in a family argument.

Ruti and Harris sit down at the table.

'Who took me up to bed?'

'Miki and Moshe,' says Ruti. 'They each took one arm. You were legless.'

'Was I?'

Very.

‘Very!’ Ruti says. ‘You went up to bed before me. I went out for a walk and when I got back I peeked into your room to check on you but you weren’t there.’

‘I remember getting up, wandering about looking for a bathroom,’ Zuckerman says. ‘I forgot about the en suite. When I got back into bed everything seemed different.’

‘How different?’ Harris says.

‘You mean I slept in the wrong room?’

Meanwhile, Demi is unsteadily walking towards Zuckerman. The plate in her hand is piled high with breakfast, grease smeared over the edge. Demi’s breasts are jangling like bowling balls in her bra-less carrier-bag top. She’s squeezed her legs into a pair of skin-tight jeans. Zuckerman imagines, in her rush to get dressed she snatched at the first thing laying over her dressing table, the one with the cracked mirror and brass pull handles. Her hair is tousled; her make up left over, the rheum is oozing out of barely open eyes. She walks with a sleepwalker’s swagger. She drops the plate on to the table and says, ‘Hullo,’ with the enthusiasm of the brain-dead. She looks like all she wants is to return to her familiar, crumpled bed in her bedroom at the end of the corridor. Underneath the table Zuckerman’s manhood tells him he wants to accompany her.

‘Something is happening to me,’ Zuckerman says.

‘Something is always happening to you, Zvi.’

‘I admit, I do feel rather hung over this morning.’

‘Good morning sir, good morning madam.’ That salacious stare. Ruti and Harris quickly inspect the menu. Demi takes their order and trips back to the kitchen.

‘You look a mess,’ Ruti says. ‘Didn’t you change?’

‘I must have dumped my clothes in the wrong room,’ says Zuckerman. His most immediate recall is waking with a throbbing hard on: blue and purple veins criss-crossing like a tangled mess of quick-cook spaghetti – a first since Marianne left him. He eases another slice of sausage between his lips. For whatever reason, and he can’t fathom one, he’s ravenous.

‘Listen, Zvi,’ says Harris, ‘about that novel of yours; I’ve been thinking. I don’t want you to get upset with me, but don’t you think you should put it aside and start something else?’

We were doing so well, thought Zuckerman.

‘Yes, Zvi,’ Ruti says. ‘Don’t you see what it’s doing to you?’

‘Even I can see it’s taking over,’ Harris says.

‘What are you two up to?’ says Zuckerman, returning to his newspaper.

Harris picks up a newspaper. Ruti pours out the tea and begins to stir. Her early-morning mantra. Zuckerman turns to Harris, whispering, ‘Can you keep a secret?’ Harris nods, biting into his toast. ‘The young man fucks the lover.’

‘So this man ends up sleeping with his dead wife’s lover?’ Harris says.

‘I wouldn’t say he slept with her lover. He fucked her lover.’

‘Was the lover male or female?’ Harris says.

Zuckerman shrugs his shoulders and says, ‘That would be telling.’

‘Sick bastard!’ Ruti says.

Zuckerman and Harris, face to face, four inches apart. Harris says, ‘The word ‘sick’ doesn’t begin to describe it.’

‘Bullshit!’ shouts Ruti. ‘I don’t know what you two are up to but that’s it. Zvi, I’ve heard enough. Let’s go!’ Ruti crumples her napkin, searches for her handbag.

‘About last night,’ Zuckerman says, ‘I can hardly remember leaving the dining room let alone getting into bed, but I definitely remember waking up this morning. I don’t know where. Come to think of it – ’ With perfect synchronicity, Miki and Moshe walk into the dining room, and Zuckerman pictures a scene: three persons, him included, writhing in sweaty ecstasy. And a minute ago he was thinking about Demi.

The 1st Law, the Law of Pure Potentiality states that when we realise that our true Self is one of pure potentiality, we align with the power that manifests everything in the universe. If Zuckerman keeps on imagining, everything will come true.

Miki stands directly behind Zuckerman, kisses him tenderly in his ear, says, ‘Shalom,’ in that secretive you-and-I-know-what-happened-last-night way. His mouth goes dry. It does that sometimes. Moshe puts his arms around Harris and Ruti, smiles to everyone and says, ‘Hello. Sleep well?’ Harris is smirking. Zuckerman thinks: bastard! First chance I get I’m going to punch his lights out. He’s been up to no good. He won’t admit to anything.

Moshe gives Zuckerman a colluding wink. Zuckerman's cheeks turn purple. Miki and Moshe go to another table where they're joined by the rest of their party.

Ruti and Harris finish their breakfast. Zuckerman puts in an order for seconds. They swap addresses, say their farewells and Ruti, Harris and Zuckerman continue on their way.

Chapter 6

It's a one-hour journey from Inveraray to the crash site. Ruti and Harris say they wouldn't want to travel much farther. Driving, heading south along Loch Fyne. Windows wound down. Clatter of diesel engine. Indigo-blue sky, pink and black shadows, checkerboard mountains reflected on water. White peaks in the distance. Hoarfrost spread out like needle-cord carpet over pavements and roads and roofs. From a nearby shore the mechanical sound of an outboard motor ... phut, phut ... wooden boat pushing through still waters, trailing a v-shaped wedge of surf, its cargo of two: fisherman and faithful friend. Turn a corner, pungent aroma, fire-burning stove – one part per billion billion of wood-smoke rising through motionless air.

Zuckerman notices Harris twisting around in his seat looking for the optimal driving position. There isn't one, there never was. Perhaps another joint? The haze of not-so-distant memories. The same old music: Angelika and Marianne still playing in his head. 'It never worked out the way I planned,' Zuckerman says.

'You've got to make the best of things.' Harris says. 'Accept things the way they are.'

'More words of wisdom, Harris?'

'Use egg boxes as seed trays then plant them directly into the soil where they will decompose harmlessly.'

He's sucking up, thinks Zuckerman. Harris has a slue of handy hints for every occasion bar this one. Zuckerman throws the contents of the ashtray out the window, says, 'I don't know why I brought all these cans of beer; we've hardly touched them.' He sticks his head out into the eddying slipstream, straining to keep eyelids open, catching the sights and smells of the West Highland landscape: lochside giving way to hillside giving way to grassy verge to standing stones to lochside again and all the while these snapshots of hell turning over in his mind like a revolving card index; nightmare images of the moments leading up to the accident on that ill-fated summer's day.

They drive in silence, a sickly goeey soup of silence, an interminable silence, interrupted only by a squeak of springs and that familiar clatter of the diesel engine firing, backfiring. Now and again they are overtaken. Now and again a car screams by in the opposite direction. They motor on. Zuckerman fixes his mind on other things. Things in the present, things he can see, smell or touch. They pass through hamlets of pointed gabled houses, dry-stone walls, privet hedges and cotoneasters intertwined with leafless apple trees. Nature asleep. Another puff of brown smoke spirals out from another chimneycan, the top decorated with heart shaped vents, an estate agent's dream. Sunshine reflects on windowpanes, just like it did in the heat of summer. A woman with a burlap shawl crosses the road with her two faithful black Labradors at her heels, their tongues out, wagging messages with their tails; their misty, panting breath disappearing into the frosty air. They reach Lochgilphead, turn right at the cross and head up to Oban. As they pass the turn-off up to Crinan Zuckerman knows it can't be far. Fear has drained him. He takes his yarmulke out of the glove box. 'Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God the Lord is One.'

Zuckerman directs Harris through Kilmartin Glen. They pass Moine Mhor Nature Reserve. This time of the year it's a bleak, barren landscape, a painting of empty bogs. The summer before it was a peaceful glade, one of special ornithological interest. Marianne, a keen bird-watcher, with binoculars, artist's crayons and parchment pad, spent endless hours observing, studying and drawing. Zuckerman can picture her, lying prone behind a boulder, spying on a pair of grey herons feeding at the edge of the marsh. He and Angelika sat in the car, holding hands. They sneaked off into the glades to take the dogs for a walk. They got as far as the second wooden bench, the one dedicated to the Oban Ladies Birdwatching Society where they sat down to enjoy the stillness and the sanctuary of nature: the swee-wee-wee of the common sandpiper, the chip-per call of the snipe, the kraaak of the heron, the dogs panting, the sandpapery sounds of skin against skin.

Zuckerman's imagination is running riot. He has memorised the topography as if it's a piece of software encoded on to a computer chip implanted into his brain. In his waking dreams he goes over and over this same stretch of road – if only that pothole weren't there, if only the road were a few inches wider. It's too late for if onllys.

Zuckerman barely has enough energy to mouth the words: 'It should be easy to spot. After a series of bends the road winds down to where the surrounding hills give way to open countryside and then there's a sharp curve to the right. On the high side of the road there's a field with a group of standing stones then farther on at the next sweeping bend there's a larger, more prominent stone standing by itself. The views are spectacular.'

Heading towards their destination, down an incline of newly laid tarmac, a valley, a bridge over a glacial ravine, rushing stream gushing under, picking up speed, a gash in the earth, the steep incline of hills rising up, cosseting them, around sweeping right-handers, sweeping left-handers, a deft foot on the brake pedal, a right angle bend where roadway narrows into single lane and then another ninety degree bend on the left and then, they're coming out of the womb, it all opens up, the view is spectacular – over the sailboats at Ardfern, the rugged coastline of Loch Craignish, the wide open mouth of the Sound of Jura, the maw of the Atlantic and beyond.

'Bloody hell, Zuckerman!' says Harris. 'The standing stone on that rocky knoll; it's awesome!'

'Stop at the next bend!' Zuckerman screams.

'Does it remind you of something?' Harris says.

Zuckerman gives out a pathetic whine. Harris peels off the road and parks on an indent of loose gravel.

They've arrived. The sun is at its zenith, a low strung orb, a yellowy spotlight in the pinky-blue sky. In the short winter's day it gives off little heat. Zuckerman gets out of the car, opens the boot and asks Harris to give him a hand with the stone. Ruti is picking flowers on a grassy knoll. After taking out and setting aside the camping equipment the two men push, slide and grapple with the weighty slab. Harris grimaces, incredulous. 'It's fragile,' Zuckerman yells. They deposit the package on the sloping verge. Zuckerman shouts over to Ruti. She skips over to them like a dreamy schoolgirl. Without taking his eyes off her, Zuckerman lifts up the veil of polythene to reveal a rough-hewn epitaph. With his eyes still focussed on his sister, he says, 'What do you think, Ruti, appropriate?'

1998 AD

*

Here marks the spot
of the earthly departure
of Marianne
a lovely innocent wife
sadly missed and much loved
May her soul rest in peace

*

Angelika the bitch
And her dogs
May they forever burn in hell

Ruti covers her mouth. Her face creasing with despair, she faints on the spot. That no good Harris blows into her mouth, massages her chest and within seconds she regains consciousness.

A minute later, there's some colour back in her cheeks. 'You just couldn't let her go,' she says. 'Could you, Zvi? You couldn't just let her slip away?'

'What!'

'Angelika. You couldn't just forget about her, forget about all the anguish you caused.'

Zuckerman turned to inspect his handiwork. 'Jesus.' He reads the bottom three lines. 'I can't believe it myself. I didn't do it!' he hollers.

'I give up,' Ruti says. 'You're crazy. I tried, mother tried, the doctors tried. You're sick. You actually chiselled out the entire thing, didn't you, Zvi?'

'No! I went to the quarry, purchased the stone, hacked it into shape and hammered out the letters but I didn't put Angelika's name on it or those killer dogs. It must have been Harris. He did it! Admit it, Harris, this is some kind of sick joke!'

Harris stands there, incredulous.

'Why are you accusing Harris?' Ruti says.

'Tell Ruti, Harris. You know the truth.'

'Zvi, why would Harris –'

'Harris, for heaven's sake man, don't just stand there, tell her.'

‘Zvi!’

‘Don’t you see, Ruti? Harris is jealous.’

‘Zvi, you’ve flipped!’

‘Is this a joke?’ Zuckerman says. ‘A conspiracy? Is that it, Harris? You screw my sister then you form a pact with her. Now, if you play dumb, she won’t find you out? You screwed Marianne, too, didn’t you? And if you screwed Marianne then you must have screwed Angelika.’

‘Damn it, Zvi,’ says Ruti. ‘The doctors told you to keep taking the pills.’ Ruti paces around in a circle, dragging her feet, marking out crosses on the grass. One moment she’s babbling out loud the next she has her head down, muttering into her chest.

‘I’m still taking the goddamn Lustral,’ Zuckerman says. Then he thinks: which pill is she talking about?

‘Well, if you’re still taking them, what this?’ Ruti points to the epitaph. Harris slips away, walking towards the wilderness.

‘The psychologists, the psychiatrists, the counsellors, they’ve all told you the same thing. You just refuse to hear it! You’ve glorified Angelika, exalted her into some sort of evil deity. It’s your way of coping with the loss of your wife. You’ve transferred your feelings of resentment, pain and hurt from your childhood on to a representation of a matriarchal figure; someone close to you. Your loving mother-in-law. Such a generous, kind woman. Why couldn’t you have written something like that, something appropriate to remember her by? Not that blasphemy. You resent mother, too, don’t you, after all she did for us!’

‘That’s a lie, Ruti! Angelika was an evil bitch.’

‘You just refuse to hear it, Zvi.’

‘You’re really sick, Ruti! Sick in the head, to think I’d do a thing like this. I’m mourning the loss of my wife, not beatifying her damn mother. I’m trying to forget my mother-in-law, not erect a permanent reminder to her memory.’

Am I?

Denial. Denial. Denial.

‘For Christ’s sake, Harris, tell her!’ Harris is nowhere to be seen.

‘And another thing,’ Ruti says. ‘I’m fed up with you and your damn novel. Don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to, turning the characters around, changing the protagonist from female to male. Why don’t you just write it like it is: it’s about a woman who was abused as a child, who blocks it out of her memory, who has a partner who killed himself. Nobody knows if Jonathan took a lover. He hung himself. It’s over. And by the way, Dad didn’t die in any war, he didn’t work in any intelligence unit and he wasn’t even a reporter. He was a farmer and a fucking toy salesman and he wrote fairy stories in his spare time. He was a dreamer. He couldn’t earn a living. Mum divorced him and we left. Oh yeh, nearly forgot, in his spare time he abused little girls.’

‘Ruti, you’re the one who’s imagining things; you’re the one who needs medical attention. Who said my novel was anything about you? You just couldn’t accept it when Mum took us away after Dad disappeared. We were young and we hardly knew him. A toy salesman, an abuser; you must be mad!’

‘This is all getting out of hand,’ says Harris, reappearing from behind a bush, fiddling with his zip. ‘I thought I was doing you guys a favour, driving you up here. I wish I’d stayed at home.’

‘So, now you’re talking. Tell her will you?’

‘Perhaps you did it in a fit of pique, Zvi?’ Harris says.

Zuckerman turns to his sister. ‘I can’t believe you’re taking his side, Ruti. You’re in this together, aren’t you?’

‘We can get another one made up,’ Harris says. ‘I may be able to help you out, introduce you to one of my clients.’

Zuckerman thinks: how many clients does this bastard have? Palpitations, a splitting headache, Zuckerman is losing control. Perhaps they’re right. Perhaps they’re both right. What’s done is done; this’ll be the end of it. Time to move on.

So much for old friends. Zuckerman goes to the boot of the car, finds the hammer and cold chisel and batters away at the lower part of the inscription. He draws his hand over his work and carefully brushes off loose fragments of grit and sand. This’ll be the last time I caress my Marianne, her softest skin, her dimpled chin ... tears, more tears, more bloody tears! ‘Is that better,’ he says. Ruti is buckling at the knees, hands clasped, as if in prayer.

‘What are we going to dig with,’ Harris says, ‘our fingers?’

Zuckerman rummages in the boot. ‘I’ve packed a hand-spade and enough cement for a batch of concrete. We’ll set the base into it.’ He drops the materials on the ground, looks round to the horizon – a flat white line, sheep grazing, ridges of rolling hilltops. He kneels down beside Ruti.

Harris joins them. ‘Christ man,’ he says. ‘I’m sorry. You’ve got to believe me. They fooled me too. Let me give you a hand. It’s only right someone should leave a mark and there’s no one around here who’s going to object.’

‘Zvi, you’ve got to move on with your life.’

‘Let him be,’ Harris says, ‘can’t you see your brother is distressed?’

The countryside hums in tacit agreement. A solitary bull, standing proud on a rocky outcrop swishes its tail bellowing moooooo. A pair of magpies flutters overhead then dive bomb out of sight behind a lichen-covered rock. The collective breeze rushes in from the sea, ruffles through the grassy tufts then dies away. The universe conspires to provide them with a memorable moment of stillness. Just as well because a few seconds later a people carrier comes hurtling round a corner veering towards them at breakneck speed. As it draws level it screeches to a slithering halt. Out jump Miki and Moshe running towards Zuckerman, Harris and Ruti as if they’re welcoming newly inducted members of a lost desert tribe.

This is not how Zuckerman planned it. In his mind he had painted a picture of grace, tranquillity, him saying a few words to Marianne and *mutti*. They would go for a walk along the rocky shoreline, watch the setting sun dip into the ocean and then his life would begin again. He would return to work, maybe go fishing, move abroad, take it one day at a time. Instead, Miki with her comforting double D cup bounces over to him and greets him, planting her collagen-filled lips on his. Moshe, in turn, gives Zuckerman a bear hug he’ll never forget. Now he has bruises on top of scars. They congregate in a stifling group embrace then move away from the main road to find a site for the dig.

It may be pure cheek, it may be sacrilege, it may even be against the law but Zuckerman chooses to excavate atop the ancient boulder-strewn cairn some two or three paces away from the magnificent Kintraw stone: that standing stone; that girthy

monument, that horny megalith, the guide line to the stars. They dig with some urgency as the weather is closing in fast. Every one of them a mini excavator, helping with whatever implement they have to hand; Zuckerman with his spade, Miki with her compact and Moshe with his metal comb – until they dig a hole the required size. They collect materials for the concrete; cement, sand and small stone chips that Harris gathers from around the site. Zuckerman inserts the stone into the ground so that it stands upright facing the Kintraw – a fitting dialogue. Then Ruti – she eventually agrees to help – pours two litres of Evian on to the mashed-up collection of materials to create the near-perfect semi-dry mix. Moshe pours the tacky lot into the hole and wedges the headstone plumb with a loose boulder. And then the rain is with them, a brew-ha of a storm only minutes away.

During the dig Zuckerman observed a coach loaded with tourists passing and pulling in at a lay-by. The passengers must have debussed, because he next notices them walking up the hill towards them, in groups of three and four, each of them wearing a see-through two-piece vinyl rain suit. Perhaps they think we're grave robbers or we're enacting an ancient Druid rite of passage? They're the Americans from the hotel, come back to check out the home of their ancestors. A mass of black and purple cloud descends, enveloping them. Spits of rain conspire and form themselves into balls of frozen hailstones and still the rain suits come. A busload of Japanese tourists joins the assembly of mourners. The Scottish-Israeli-American-Nippon convention – let's call most of them interested voyeurs – are now gathered on the necropolis ready to pay due homage to Zuckerman's wife, Marianne the bitch, and the two Rottweilers. A flash of lightning, a clap of thunder and seconds later, the eye of the storm is upon them. Ah, the salty smell of the Atlantic!

The crowd shuffles its way into concentric rings around grave and standing stone. Moshe, Miki, Harris, Ruti and Zuckerman form their own separate inner circle. Zuckerman steps forward into the wind. Harris steps forward. God is using Zuckerman for his ashtray, the horizontal rain as a battering ram, burning the skin from his face. He mouths a few sodden words, which nobody can hear. He throws a handful of heather on top of the empty grave, steps back and lowers his head in silence. But there is none. And nature's course is less than clear. As if to trick these earthly mortals, to the west, beyond

the blackened sky, a hue of pink appears and a chink of sunlight dapples over giant white horses. But overhead, directly overhead, over the shafted obelisk of Pictish stone, a clap of thunder erupts and nature tricks them again. Zuckerman feels the blast originating in the very centre of his brain. A split second later its deafening cry is immediately followed by a lightning bolt, so quick, so sharp, so goddamn bright, as it earths itself on the very lithic tip of Kintraw which smoulders, shears, cracks and topples over on to the grey, granite gravestone, flattening it into a pile of rubble, barely missing Ruti and several other mourners in the process. The crowd scatter, tripping and tumbling down the hillside, over the wire fence and on to the roadway and off home. Only our little band remains.

Another huddle, another confab. In the dying moments of the thunderstorm they agree to head back to the hotel and drink the night away. Miki offers Ruti a change of clothes that she happens to have packed in the boot of her car. Ruti returns with her and Moshe.

Before they part Ruti takes Zvi aside. She gives him one of her sisterly hugs and says, 'I'm sorry, I apologise for shouting at you back there. You've been through a lot. Please, no more stories, no more lies. It's over now.'

My own flesh and blood, calling me a liar. Zuckerman promises himself, as soon as they return he'll take her to see his psychologist.

And this is where this story might have ended. Zuckerman, a slacker, an excuse for a male, a man of little self worth, brushing cement dust off the remains of his wife's DIY gravestone. Harris, an enigma. Zuckerman still doesn't trust the guy. Still chasing after his sister. And Zuckerman's dearest sister, Ruti, his little princess, quite sick in the head; it must have been too much for her. Normally she never says a bad word about anybody. Let's not forget Miki whom Zuckerman has taken a distinct liking too, and Moshe – underneath that big butch exterior there lies a heart of gold. Last but not least Marianne, the two dogs and the bitch. We've heard enough about them.

It's time to move on.

Epilogue

All the foregoing, as outlandish as it may seem, would never have made the headlines. Zuckerman would admit it was a wet, sad and sorry day for all, except that in the midst of hell, fire and damnation he was visited upon by his worst bout of priapism yet. His mounting megalith, whilst it may not have been of Pictish proportions was nevertheless dimensioned to tear-jerking size. If Miki saw it, he'd be done for. And what about Demi or Moshe or Harris for that matter? In the middle of all the chaos he managed to pop it out of its steamy, saturated cubby-hole and cover up its identity by pulling down his pullover, fastening tight his raincoat and acting in the most nonchalant manner, which, given the circumstances, was no mean feat. Gaaaaa! And he thought over meant over.

Unfortunately, Harris is in no fit state to drive. By the time they get back to the Jeep he crashes out on the ground. 'That's it!' he says. 'I'm fucked, washed out, dead beat, if you want to get back to the hotel, you'll have to drive.' It's a *fait accompli* Zuckerman accepts with a great deal of trepidation.

Zuckerman climbs up into the cabin too exhausted to argue. Once again he's familiarising himself with the controls and all the while this painful bulge in his breeches refuses to go away. His entire body is shivering, his teeth are chattering and the coloured dyes have run out of his clothing and turned his wrists and fingers blue. Harris is in much the same state. Zuckerman covers him up with the rug then starts up the engine. Thankfully he hears that familiar noise of the machine parts thrashing as the motor bursts into life. He turns on the headlamps and they sit there waiting for the engine to warm up and the heater to start working.

'In the glove compartment in front of you,' Zuckerman croaks, 'there's some whisky – only to be used for emergencies.' Harris grapples with the catch, lifts out a tarnished silver flask, unscrews the top and takes a mouthful. Zuckerman waits impatiently, then downs what remains of the fiery liquid. What to do?

Harris strips off his saturated outer garments. Zuckerman quickly rolls a joint. He takes the first puff then hands it over to Harris like it's a vital piece of resuscitating equipment. It hits the mark, quickly. His brain turns to mush. He's hoping Harris's does also. Zuckerman makes a three point turn and heads back to Inveraray. In the few moments of daylight remaining he turns around and take a last, final look. He swears on his mother's life that no matter how long he lives, he'll never ever come this way again. What a relief it is to see the black pitch of darkness descend over the countryside.

Inside the 4x4, whisky, heat and hashish combine to thaw out their nerves. Zuckerman settles into a rhythm of twists and bends, turning the steering wheel with the minimum of effort, changing the gears with a synchronistic fluidity. Mind you, it's a powerful motor. It keeps running away from him. Every now and then he has to haul it back with a dab of the brakes. Under the bonnet that old engine keeps throbbing, under his raincoat ... dear God, he's in agony.

'Harris,' he says, 'there's something on my mind. I've been meaning to tell you but with everything that's happened, there just hasn't been the opportunity.'

'I'm listening,' Harris says.

'It's really more of a personal favour I have to ask from you.'

'Yes, go on, anything you want buddy, you name it.'

'Well, I feel a bit awkward.'

'Don't be stupid. Ask me. I'll do whatever I can to help you. You know I would, don't you?'

Zuckerman takes another blast of the joint. Self-control has gone. That letter, that fucking letter. He winds down the window, takes a deep breath, inhales and passes over the joint. 'Good, I was sort of hoping you might say that.' Harris looks as if he is reaching the point of passing out. It's now or never. 'Well, it's this.' Zuckerman opens up his coat and fumbles around for the interior light switch.

'My God, Zuckerman! What's that!'

'The best I can do.'

There follows one of these life changing pregnant pauses. Yes, another one.

'What the hell!' Harris says. 'Size isn't everything.'

Here they are, the two heroes of the day, Zuckerman, sad bastard, and Harris about to become lucky bastard. They are about to connect at the deepest spiritual level – self-pitying, mutual gratification and disbelief. Zuckerman says to Harris, ‘I wanted to tell you before we left Glasgow. I tried to tell you back at the hotel.’

The rain has started up again. Even with the wipers on and the headlamps at full beam, without any white lines Zuckerman finds it tricky to see where he’s going. ‘It’s about this thing I had when I was kid,’ he says. ‘I thought I was finished with it. After Marianne died I thought I was finished with all of that. Dead meat. But last night, after meeting up with Miki and Moshe and my having that soup ... my God, I had two bowlfuls – oh, if Angelika could see me now. Harris, I’m writhing in agony. You’ll have to do something.’

Harris stares, mouth open. ‘What are you talking about?’ he says. ‘Soup, Miki, Angelika?’

‘OK, if it makes you feel any better, forget Ruti; perhaps she isn’t as sick as I first made out. Think about me. I’ve been getting these vibrations, these feelings for men, feelings for you, feelings I can no longer hide. I have to act upon them. Now. This instant.’

Zuckerman breaks off conversation, tugs at the steering wheel to avoid hitting the rock face on the outside of a bend. ‘Relieve me, please. Now,’

‘Well, if this is what you want.’ Zuckerman catches Harris smothering a hee-haw laugh.

The rain is getting heavier. A smear of oil and dirt on the windscreen make it difficult for Zuckerman to judge his breaking distances. He sweeps into one corner then sweeps into another. The car is a like a runaway beast with a will he can’t control.

‘Well, if you’re sure this is what you want.’

‘Yes, please!’ Zuckerman is in tears with the pain: spasms in his pelvis and his testicles tearing each other apart.

‘Hee-haw!’ Harris shouts out a war cry, rubs his hands with glee. He pulls up his sleeves, lifts himself around in his seat and then – Zuckerman will swear to God – Harris licks his chapped lips as he goes down.

He lifts for a breather. 'I reckoned you were in some sort of transition phase,' he says.

'Harris, please just get on with it.'

Outside it's lashing, cats, dogs, hailstones. Inside the cabin, Harris is also lashing, the sweat pouring off him. He's working his way up and down, he's beating that mother like a pro, but not as good as Angelika. No one can beat like Angelika. Driving along, Marianne is in the back asleep, dogs are in the back asleep, sun's lashing down. Angelika leans over as calm as you please, unzips Zuckerman's trousers and takes out his dick. He's weak. What's the harm? She goes down on him, sucking him up and down, up and down. He's driving, acting as if nothing is happening, looking out the window but his mind is elsewhere; it's focussed on the tip of her tongue, on the tip of his penis, at the entrance to his urethra, at the centre of his fucking pleasure dome. The woman is a master.

Of course, Harris lacks staying power. He interrupts to affirm his loyalty, 'It's a pleasure, matey ... do you know you can get rid of toilet smells just by lighting a match?'

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

It isn't the most pleasurable experience; what with Harris's rippling torso flattening Zuckerman's thighs. But it's a small price to pay. This is what friends are for, especially those who are drugged up enough, fucked up enough to stand in at times of real crisis. Zuckerman has just noticed, the stereo is blaring, Elton singing to his heart's content – *Rocket Man* – yup, that's what she called me. Angelika licking her chops. He didn't see the oncoming artic with the thirty-foot load of lumber chained to its chassis, but he did hear its klaxon, the piercing get-out-of-my-way-you-asshole-or-I'll-run-you-off-the-road blast of its horn. It's all so vivid. Zuckerman hit the brakes and she bit, like a Rottweiler bites, four inches from the end of his shaft and as they swerved off the road she went flying through the windscreen with the end of his penis, no doubt, stuck in her throat. They were still motoring at a fair old lick as they bounced over the boulder-strewn verge, down the steep embankment towards the water where they ended up six feet under. Picture the scene: the screaming and the cacophony of smashed-up body parts

and engine parts fusing together in a water-filled wreck. Funny he should think of that just as Harris is howling with frenzy, out of his head, no doubt driving up his own ladder to ecstasy, from nadir to summit in a few easy strokes. Zuckerman, he's just looking for relief, focussed on purpose, dedicated to achieving results, listening to his favourite tune. And how about the heavens above and the timeless ephemeral bodies that inhabit that Elysian palace? What do they have in store for our perspiring couple? A cloud, a thousand, thousand gallons of water condensate is about to drop its load but hesitates – only for a second or two – until an artic, fully loaded, fully equipped with its king-of-the-road klaxon hurtles round a bend, aquaplanes on greasy tarmac and heads straight towards these two old chummies, just as Zuckerman is stuck in the highest moment of ecstasy, just as his jissum explodes into his companion's gob.