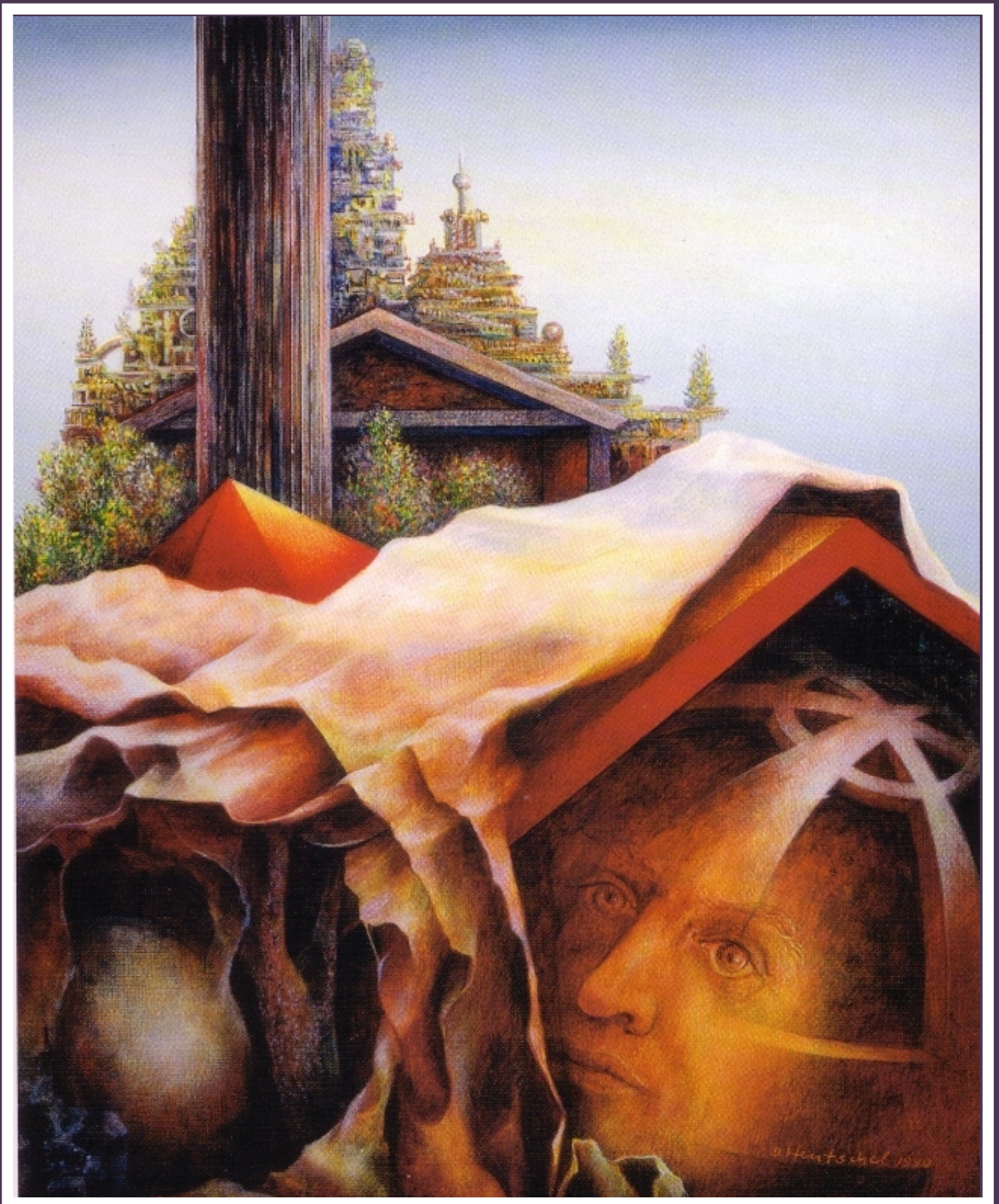


THE NOTHING NEW



DAVID HENRY WILSON

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“If we take the opening of Macbeth, we can say that what’s given is the title, the presence of three witches, and thunder and lightning. What’s determinate is the association of evil with the three witches, plus the idea that something nasty is going to happen, thanks to the thunder and lightning. What is indeterminate is the link between our eponymous hero and the wicked witches plus the something nasty...”

Given: Joseph Lehmann, aged 45, Professor of Modern English Literature at Chandlers University.

Given: Twelve postgraduates attending a seminar.

Given: Selina Grant, aged 22, postgraduate.

“But is anything given, Professor?” asks one of the male postgraduates.

They break our bones with batons,

They burn us in our beds,

They let us rot in prison,

They shoot our screaming heads.

For there’s a thousand victims that are dying every hour

To keep the pigs in power...

“Dammit, Michael, when are you going to get down to some work?”

“I will...”

“When?”

“Leave him, Joseph.”

“Leave him! Leave him to fail, leave him to waste umpteen thousand pounds a year!”

“He won’t fail.”

“It’s an encyclopaedic guitar, is it?”

Michael Lehmann, aged 16, a pupil at Queen’s College, Chandlers.

Queen’s College, Chandlers, founded in 1888, independent.

Rachel Lehmann, aged 43.

“There was a letter from Barbara this morning, Joseph.”

“Better show the postmark to Michael. Heard of Cambridge, Michael?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Well she didn’t get there by playing the guitar.”

“I don’t want to go to Cambridge.”

“I get the impression you don’t want to go anywhere.”

- *Oh yes I do – far from here. Far, far from here.*

Barbara Lehmann, aged 20, studying French and German at Trinity College, Cambridge.
A link: Joseph's father escaped from Germany through France to England. He was a tailor, and worked night and day to support his family. He died a proud man.

“But is anything given, Professor?”

Smart Robert Destefano, aged 23, postgraduate. Sitting next to Selina Grant.
Selina Grant, long fair hair, green eyes.

“I mean, a Japanese might think the title was htebcaM.”

Titters. Robert Destefano smirks. Selina Grant smiles.

“Given doesn't mean universal, or permanent. It just means what's there. For your Japanese friend, htebcaM is the given.”

“But how do we know that anything's there, Professor?” asks Robert.

“You shouldn't answer that question, Professor,” says Selina, “because maybe nobody asked it.”

Selina Grant, a dimpled right cheek, perfect white teeth. She is writing a thesis on Beckett. Are there not enough theses on Beckett already? Joseph Lehmann thinks there is room for Selina Grant's thesis. It was he who awarded her the Stokes Memorial Prize for top student after her Finals.

“I asked it,” says Robert. “But how do I know you're really there to hear it?”

Every year the same smart question.

“Well,” says the professor, “if we want our postgraduate studies to continue, we'd better assume that 'Macbeth' is there, and we're here.”

Every year the same smart answer.

“That Beckett conference in Constance, Mrs Tanner. When is it?”

Mrs Tanner, aged 38, secretary to Professor Joseph Lehmann, consults a file.

“April 15th to the 18th, Professor.”

“When do they want to know by?”

“The end of this month.”

“What’s the point of it?”

“Yeah.”

“I just wish I could get away from here.”

“Me, too. Like living in a trap.”

Michael Lehmann sits in the Riverside Cafe with Tony Marchant, aged 16, from Queen’s College, Chandlers. They each have a piece of cake and a glass of Coke. Beyond the window, the River Thone flows placidly beneath The Bridge, through the town, and out into the country. Outside the town, there is a path alongside the river, but this ends where the land becomes marshy and is filled with reeds as tall as a man.

Professor Joseph Lehmann’s most famous book is called ‘The Thinking Read’.

Michael once tried to read his father’s most famous book, but did not get beyond the first five or six pages.

“Have you ever thought of running away, Tony?”

“Yeah. Hundreds of times. I would if I had fucking money.”

Tony Marchant’s father teaches French and German at King’s, the other big independent school in Chandlers. He had deemed it wise for his son to go to a different school.

“Where can we get money?”

“Rob a fucking bank.”

“You going to stay on after the exams?”

“S’pose so. Nothing else to do, is there? You?”

“My Dad said he wouldn’t pay if my results were no good.”

“You’d go to the fucking tech, would you?”

“I don’t want to stay at school.”

“Nor do I. You coming home with me, Mike?”

“Will your Dad be there?”

“No, he’s got things on after school.”

Tony Marchant’s mother is dead. He lives alone with his father. He and Michael go to his house, and smoke in peace. What they smoke is not tobacco. To pay for his smoking, Tony steals from his father. Michael feels better after smoking. He borrows Tony’s guitar and sings his new song.

“Maybe we could make a record. I mean, that’s fucking good, Mike.”

“How do you make records? I mean, how do you get in?”

“Yeah. How d’you get in anywhere?”

“Where the hell have you been?”

“I was at Tony’s.”

“It’s nine o’ clock.”

“I didn’t realize...”

“Your mother had dinner ready for six-thirty.”

- I don’t like him. My own son. Look at him – sulky, defiant...I don’t know. Is it the age? Do I dislike him? Christ, I want the best for him, that’s all, and he won’t respond. I can’t talk to him. Oh yes, I can talk to him, but he can’t talk to me.

- I hate him. My own father!

“You’d better come and have some dinner anyway, Michael.”

Rachel Lehmann, hair blackened over the grey, trying to belie the lines across her forehead. 43, but looking fifty, so her husband determines. And she hangs between the two males, fearful to lose either of them.

“You show no consideration. I don’t know what’s the matter with you.”

“I’ve said I’m sorry.”

“Have you?”

“I’m sorry! And I’m not hungry anyway.”

Michael Lehmann walks towards the door. He intends to go to his room. Should he be allowed to leave, defiance intact?

“Where do you think you’re off to?”

“My room.”

“We haven’t finished talking.”

The boy stands still and waits in unassailable silence. He is no Destefano.

“We’re not your enemies. You seem to go out of your way to antagonize us. We give you...”

The boy stands still and waits.

Joseph Lehmann looks into the boy’s eyes. They are brown and cold, looking without seeing.

“Have you anything to say?”

The boy shrugs.

“That’s it, is it?”

“What do you want me to say?”

How to keep a broken silence intact, defiance intact. Is it?

– *Christ, what’s he thinking?*

- *Christ, how can I get away?*

The boy goes to his room. The boy.

Michael goes to his room. Michael.

Michael’s room, six metres by five metres, walls covered with posters of pop stars, sportsmen, rebels, floor covered with records, clothes, books, papers. Rachel Lehmann has begged her son to tidy it. Joseph Lehmann has ordered his son to tidy it. Michael’s room is chaotic. Michael’s room is Michael’s, not Rachel’s or Joseph’s.

– *If I were dead, they’d be sorry. Or she would.*

“I don’t know what to do with the boy.”

“Maybe we’re too hard on him, Joseph.”

“We? What do you want me to do? Smile at him while he ruins his life.”

“I don’t know about ruin...”

“You saw his report. His exams are going to be a disaster.”

“Please don’t shout, Joseph.”

*- Why do I bother? With him. With her. Fading, furrowed...I know every inch.
Where’s the joy?*

He raises his hands in a gesture of perhaps apology, perhaps appeasement, perhaps resignation.

“Hermann Stolz has invited me to Constance for a Beckett conference in April. I thought I might go.”

“I thought you didn’t enjoy conferences.”

“This one might be different. Do you fancy a trip to Lake Constance?”

“What about Michael?”

“True. He couldn’t be left alone, could he?”

“Though Barbara should be home if it’s April.”

“Mind you, there wouldn’t be much time for sight-seeing. You know how these conferences are.”

- He doesn’t want me to go with him. But I’d like to go. Somewhere. We need a change.

“I would like to go away, Joseph, but maybe not to a conference.”

“Well, I haven’t decided yet, anyway.”

- It’s a sham. Everything’s a sham. What do I care about them, or them about me? The boy hates my guts, and Rachel...I’m just a habit for her - as she is for me. Why do we go on? But what would Barbara think? A light went out when Barbara left.

Others do it. Oh yes, others do it all the time. And these young people...it’s a different age, different outlook.

Oh no, it’s absurd. She’s Barbara’s age, dammit.

“Come in!”

Selina Grant enters the office.

“Can you spare me a few minutes, Professor?”

“Yes, of course, come in, Selina.”

Who’s pulling the strings?

“It’s about my thesis.”

“Ah!”

“I’m not really sure that I can handle it.”

Given: Professor Joseph Lehmann, aged 45, alone in his office with Selina Grant, aged 22, postgraduate. The time: 6 p.m.

“What’s the trouble?”

Selina talks: the creativity of negativity, arbitrary points of reference, multiple indeterminacy...

Joseph Lehmann thinks: the creativity of the thighs, arbitrary points of contact, multiple attractions...The negativity of morality, reference to Rachel, the determinacy of commitment.

“Look, Selina, I don’t know about you, but I’m parched and hungry. My wife’s away and I was just about to go off somewhere for a bite. Why don’t you come with me, and we can chat about Beckett over beef and Beaujolais.”

It’s not a commitment. He has to talk about her thesis, so why not over a meal? The lie about Rachel is unimportant. It’s not a commitment.

Selina’s face flickers with uncertainty. Professor Lehmann raises his hand give-or-takingly.

“You needn’t if you don’t want to. It was just an idea.”

“Oh no, I’d like to, thank you.”

“Good. Let me just go and clean up.”

A pee and a wash. The mirror over the basin shows a full head of black hair flecked at the sides with grey. Thought lines are etched across the forehead. In Rachel they are ageing, in Joseph...? Something stirs. But there is no commitment.

Selina Grant waits in the office. Is everything as it seems?

The professor returns.

“That’s better. My car’s up at the Senate House.”

Out into the crisp evening air.

“Would Vincenzo’s suit you?”

“Yes!”

It ought to. Vincenzo’s is the most expensive restaurant in Chandlers.

In the car they talk about Beckett. Selina’s thesis is on Beckett’s metalanguage, which would interest Professor Lehmann in another frame of mind. He forces himself to formulate ideas, because she needs ideas and he needs the impressiveness with which ideas will endow him.

“You could well find the key in Imagination Dead Imagine. Read what Iser says. You know, about eliminating the expectation. If your problem is construction, take the image of whiteness merging in the surrounding whiteness. Not a bad title, that – The Surrounding Whiteness. You could almost take that as your starting point, or your over-all point of reference, and trace the gradual reduction of individual meaning - you know, the whiteness merging in whiteness - through the writings...”

Ideas begin to spark, and by the time they reach Vincenzo’s, Selina is confident about her thesis, Beckett’s metalanguage, and Professor Lehmann’s brilliance.

“Do you have a table for two?”

“You have reservation?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“It’s all right, we got a table for you.”

A quick glance round reveals no familiar faces. But of course, there is no commitment.

Beckett is out of the way. What else is there?

“While you look at the menu, Selina, I must just make a phone-call. Will you excuse me?”

“Of course, Professor.”

The phone-call is to Rachel, who is not away.

“Sorry, Rachel, something’s come up. I’m going to be late - maybe very late.”

Not even a lie. Now the evening is clear.

The table is in a corner. The lights are at perfect pitch. The professor returns with a smile which brings forth a show of dimple and white teeth and a feeling, suddenly, of familiarity, of intimacy.

Selina does not like to choose by herself. The professor recommends Scallops in prosciutto, followed by Spiedini di Vitello alla Romana, accompanied by a bottle of Cortese. Dessert will be Gelato alla Nocciola.

Everything is exquisite, and Joseph Lehmann’s eyes meet Selina Grant’s eyes with increasing frequency, brown shining into green, green into brown. The wine talks, softens, reaches out, and patterns begin to form...

Meaning is an imposition, a construct that is necessary but fallible. Whatever pattern we form must inevitably exclude those factors that do not fit into it, and it is these excluded items that eventually may intrude on or invalidate the pattern. This applies equally to philosophies, strategies and relationships, for they all depend on processes of selection. Even such polar opposites as love and hate can only flourish by means of restricted focus.

Joseph Lehmann, The Thinking Read

It is time to leave. The bill is paid, compliments passed, thanks exchanged with a bowing waiter who helps madam on with her coat...The restaurant has filled up, but still there are no familiar faces. Joseph Lehmann notes with satisfaction, with pride, with youthful pride, that

his companion draws interested male eyes towards her, yet remains exclusively with him.

Now what? Joseph Lehmann is 45, he has been married for 22 years, and has never been unfaithful to his wife. Before Rachel, whom he had slept with only after marriage, he had been seduced by an older woman while he was a student, and had slept with a girl after a party, again in his student days. His mother had been a severe woman. No hugging, no closeness there. Books? Books are books. How do you know which of the infinite number of situations pertains at this moment? Yes, there are colleagues who sleep with students. But they know what they're doing, they're in their world. Damn the Lodges, damn the Bradburys, they would know, they would laugh. But supposing he made a move and she rejected him, shocked, revolted? Such a pleasant evening, such pure and selfless pleasure, as soul to soul affordeth. He needs time, distance, to be able to work it all out. And is he, after all, sure that he wants to begin? To begin a process creating such indeterminacy?

The green eyes look up into the brown, and he knows that he does want that beginning. Nothing else matters. This evening he has come alive, and being alive is exciting. But if she says no, draws back and away? To be crushed, and then crushed again behind his back as she spreads the tale. Lehmann with feet of clay...He doesn't know what to do.

Selina Grant has turned to wax, and he could mould her any way he wishes. The god on the pedestal has swept her up high. This is fairyland. To commune with this intellect, and to be admitted to the private territories of family problems, personal likes and dislikes, even university tittle-tattle from the inside - and all at Vincenzo's, paid for without a flutter of the eyelid. Is he, then, attainable?

Now what? Selina Grant is 22, parents divorced and remarried to partners she dislikes. University is a haven. She has a steady boyfriend, however, in London, with whom she has been sleeping for two years. Before Simon, she had two affairs, the first when she was still at school. Simon is second division beside this colossus. And yet she had never looked on The Professor as a man - not until tonight.

- Where is this leading? He's married, but he's got problems with his family. Where is this leading? What does he want? What do I want? Where is this leading?

They emerge into the chill night, and stand for a moment in the brightly lit gold and green entrance of Vincenzo's. The man turns to the girl.

“What shall we do now?” he says.

“Anything,” she replies. “Anything you like.”

“Anything?”

“Yes.”

And so the man kisses the girl.

Michael Lehmann is in his room, amid the jungle of his belongings. He is listening to a CD. His face is pale. His school case is full of books and papers, but he hasn't opened it, and does not intend to open it.

Rachel Lehmann is watching television. The programme is about the life of Paul Gauguin.

At the precise moment when Joseph Lehmann is kissing Selina Grant in the entrance to Vincenzo's, the telephone rings in the Lehmanns' hall. Rachel goes to answer it.

“Hello, Rachel. Frank Grundy, here.”

“Hello, Frank.”

“Is Joseph there?”

“No, he had to go out to something or the other. Said he wouldn't be back till late.”

“Oh! It's not urgent. I'll ring him in the morning.”

More strings.

Joseph Lehmann and Selina Grant walk hand in hand towards Joseph Lehmann's car.

Given: Joseph Lehmann, aged 45, professor.

Selina Grant, aged 22, postgraduate.

Joseph Lehmann's car, aged 3, Ford estate.

Now what?

“I wish I could take you home,” says Joseph Lehmann. “Only my son’ll be there.”

- *Not to mention my wife.*

“We can’t go to my room either,” says Selina Grant. “Too many students in the house.”

- *Horns without a case.*

“Let’s go for a drive.”

Out into the downs, far from the town, along a bumpy track, silence and stillness amid the trees and bushes. Another kiss, melting and merging.

“Put the back seat down,” says Selina Grant.

The back seat resists. Conscience hath a thousand several tongues. But the straining fingers and the breaking fingernail eventually overcome, and Selina Grant clammers into the rear of the car to join the professor. She has already removed her lower garments, and helps him to do the same.

The meeting of the limbs is exquisite, the penetration clumsily brutal, and the ejaculation almost instant. Nevertheless they remain locked to each other. Hands grope, touch, stroke, explore.

- *I have had her.*

- *I have had him.*

The rear of the car, though carpeted, is hard, and even as they kiss, their bodies begin to feel the cold.

“Sorry, Selina. It should have been a bit more romantic than this.”

“I’m not sorry if you’re not. You don’t despise me, do you?”

“Why should I despise you?”

“For giving in so easily.”

“No. I’m the one who should be despised.”

“Why? Oh, because you’ve lost your dignity?”

“To hell with my dignity. Where are my trousers?”

They both laugh, but not securely. There are more clumsy movements as clothes are pulled on, and then behind the steamed-up windows the new lovers climb back into their seats. They kiss again. Their bodies are more secure than their minds, and the moon shines, having no alternative, on the nothing new.

It is two o’ clock in the morning. Michael Lehmann is in his room, lying fully dressed and fast asleep on his bed. Rachel Lehmann is in the bedroom she shares with Joseph Lehmann. She is half asleep in the single bed that is joined to Joseph Lehmann’s single bed. She has heard the front door open and close, and has heard the clock strike two. Now she hears her husband pad up the stairs and softly step into the room.

He hopes she will be asleep. He fears that she will sense the presence of Selina in him and on him – the sweet scent of youth that has suddenly toppled him into a new world.

“Are you all right, Joseph?”

“Yes, fine. Sorry if I woke you.”

“What happened?”

Her tired voice manages to convey a worried frown even through the darkness.

“Nothing. Just a faculty meeting that never ended. Bloody Frank Grundy rabbiting on till kingdom come.

- What should I do? Should I tell him, should I wait for him to tell me, should I scream, accuse, challenge, keep quiet? What should I do? Is he going to leave me? If he wants a divorce, shall I give it to him, shall I fight him, shall I plead with him? What should I do? How long has it been going on? Am I to pretend? Who can I talk to? Supposing I challenge him now? Joseph, where were you? What will happen? Will he lie? Will he tell the truth and say ‘It’s over between us’? Will I lose everything? What should I do? Oh, what should I do?

*- Amazing! What have I been missing all these years? Messed up the sex this time...
Will there be a next time? Where the hell can I take her?*

Michael Lehmann is still asleep. He dreams that he is lying among thousands of tiny spiders.

The Lehmanns at breakfast.

Michael soon leaves. He is late for school.

“You’ve hardly eaten anything, Michael!”

“I’m not hungry.”

Joseph tries to act naturally, calmly, so that Rachel will notice nothing. He acts what he has done every day for 22 years, and it seems unnatural. Surprising how difficult it is to act oneself. He is not himself, but Rachel seems not to have noticed.

Rachel seems not to have noticed. Men and women should be what they seem. A word or two perhaps - that would not be commitment.

“Was it a stormy meeting, then?”

“Not stormy. Sleepy more like it. You know what Frank and Co are like. On and on.”

“Till two in the morning?”

“Two? No, it wasn’t that late, was it? Anyway, I’m afraid there may be one or two more late nights coming up. My postgraduates have asked if I can manage the odd evening session. They’re a bright bunch - this chap Destefano and Selina Grant and the rest, all very keen. I want to encourage them.”

“I thought Destefano was a pain in the neck.”

“Well yes, but he’s got ideas.”

“You going to be late home tonight, then?”

“No, no, not tonight. Early to bed after that lot yesterday.”

Very convincing. As to the manner born. Natural. And underneath, the exciting schoolboy feeling of guilt undetected. Rachel has noticed nothing.

Rachel needs time. Perhaps she had imagined the scent, even if the rest had not been imagined. But why else would a man come home at two and lie about where he'd been? Gambling, drinking? Not Joseph. It might have been something else, but no more might-have-beens come to rescue Rachel's despairing imagination. It was a woman, and Joseph has prepared the way for more late nights.

Selina is waiting outside the office. He knew she would be there. But his heart leaps all the same.

"Morning, Selina."

"Good morning, Professor."

Mrs Tanner, whose office stands shoulder to shoulder with his own, has left her door slightly ajar.

"Ah, Professor, good morning."

"Good morning, Mrs Tanner."

She wants the review he's supposed to have left on her desk for typing and forgot about when Selina came to the office and set the world on fire.

"Sorry, Mrs Tanner. Excuse me one moment, Selina."

"Yes, of course, professor."

Such pleasure, to play the secret game together, and patiently postpone paradise for another two minutes.

Mrs Tanner fusses - not only the review, but one or two queries about letters, and should she...will he...is there...?

She goes at last.

"Come on in, Selina."

The door closes, and they are in each other's arms. When the embrace ends, the brown and green gaze into each other, and the middle-aged man cannot believe that he has conquered the girl, while the girl cannot believe that the author of 'The Thinking Read' is her lover..

"You didn't mind me coming?"

"I hoped you would. I knew you would."

The phone rings, instrument of instant demand.

"Lehmann speaking."

"Hallo, Joseph. Frank."

"Yes, Frank?"

"It's about next term's staff seminar. I was thinking of putting together a programme on myth..."

– *Jesus, who cares?*

"...and Martin thinks it's a good idea. Plenty of scope. Would you be willing to tackle, say, Joyce, or the modern novel generally?"

"Well...er...let me think about that one, Frank. I'll get back to you."

"As soon as you can, then, Joseph. I want it finalised by the end of term. I did try to get you last night."

"What?"

"Rachel said you were out."

"Oh, yes, I was. What time did you ring, Frank?"

"Nine-ish, I s'pose. Where were you off to, then, that your wife didn't know about, haha?"

"Oh, nothing special. I'll be in touch, Frank. Thanks for ringing."

Frank Grundy, aged 55, Professor of Medieval English Language and Literature at Chandlers University. Bumbling, boring busybody.

"What's the matter?"

Selina has read the bombshell signs on Joseph's face.

"Oh nothing...well...I don't know."

They sit chastely in the tutorial armchairs, the professor and the postgraduate.

"I told my wife that I'd been to a faculty meeting. And bloody old Frank Grundy had rung my home at nine o' clock last night."

"I thought your wife was away."

"Oh God, that was another of my lies. I'm being caught right, left and centre."

"Well couldn't he have missed the meeting - forgotten about it, or something?"

"The last man on earth to forget a faculty meeting. Besides, I told her he'd been rabbiting on...Oh Christ!"

He brings out the tutorial sherry.

One step off the paths of righteousness, and already Nemesis is closing in. Yet others push their way trouble-free through one affair after another. That bastard Carey, for instance, known throughout the faculty as the Senior Lecherer.

"Why did you tell me your wife was away?"

"I thought it would make my invitation sound more natural."

- Oh! Is he another Carey?

"Can I ask you something, Joseph?"

It's remarkable how easily she uses his name. He loves the intimacy.

"Have you done this with other students?"

"No. I never thought it could happen to me. You're unique, Selina."

She smiles, and his eyes linger on the tiny hollow in her cheek.

"What would your wife say?"

"I don't know. What would what's-a-name say?"

“Simon. I don’t know either. Yes, I do. He’d say goodbye. Did you sleep last night?”

“No. You?”

“No. I couldn’t believe it all happened. That’s why I had to come this morning.”

“It did happen.”

Mrs Tanner knocks at the door.

“Sorry, Professor, but could you just sign these?”

He signs. What would Mrs Tanner say if she knew? Bun-haired bespectacled prim Mrs Tanner...

But she notices nothing. What is there to notice?

Rachel noticed nothing. Oh Christ, Christ, Christ, she already knew. Damn Frank Grundy.

Professor Joseph Lehmann has to go and give a seminar. James Joyce. Yet again. How many more times? He and Selina Grant will meet tomorrow evening at 6 p.m., and drive off somewhere. The earth will be flat until 6 p.m. tomorrow.

-

Given: Joseph Lehmann told Rachel Lehmann that he’d been to a faculty meeting at which Frank Grundy had rabbited on. Frank Grundy had rung at nine-ish asking for Joseph. Rachel had told him Joseph was out.

Indeterminate: Rachel’s method of linking the given.

Possible determinates: Rachel knows everything.

Rachel didn’t notice (very unlikely).

Rachel thinks she misheard (misheard both ‘faculty’ and ‘Frank Grundy’? Very unlikely.)

Rachel is waiting for an explanation.

Rachel doesn’t care.

Does it matter? Yes, it matters. He doesn’t want Rachel to know. Why? Does he still love Rachel? He doesn’t want to hurt Rachel. Or he doesn’t want scenes with Rachel, or – heaven forbid – decisions.

This is inaccurate. He does still love Rachel. Of course he loves her. The fact that he's used to her doesn't mean that he doesn't love her. But it doesn't mean that he does love her. Does he, doesn't he?

Thinking gets you nowhere. Be practical. Does she know? If she knows, what's to be done? She must know. Then should he wait for her to make a move, or preempt the strike. How? With another lie? With the truth? A showdown when paradise is barely one day old? He decides to leave the first move to her.

She has decided to make no move. Joseph is the only man she has ever loved. They met when he was a postgraduate and she was the professor's secretary. Now Joseph and the children are her world – apart from some local charity work – and she is comfortable in her world. There is no other world for her to go to. If she were to precipitate a crisis, it might rebound on her, but so long as he wants to remain at home, there must be the chance that life will return to normal. Rather hope than no hope.

“There's no hope,” says Michael to his friend Tony Marchant. They have composed a song together:

There's no hope for the young,
 There's no hope for the old.
 Every brick of the future's
 Been mortgaged or sold.
 But where can we go?
 We don't know.

There's no-one to turn to,
 No-one who'll care.
 You can't drink the water,
 You can't breathe the air.
 'Don't worry,' they tell you,
 And kill you.

There's no hope for me,
 And no hope for my friend,
 So we'll skip the beginning

And turn to the end.
 In this world of hate,
 Why wait?

Dinner at the Lehmanns'. Joseph, Rachel and Michael Lehmann are seated round the table.

Menu: No starters.
 Roast beef, roast potatoes, boiled cabbage.
 Apple pie and custard.

JOSEPH: So Barbara's enjoying herself.

RACHEL: Yes.

Silence.

JOSEPH: Though she'd enjoy herself wherever she went.

Silence

RACHEL: What did you have for lunch at school today, Michael?

MICHAEL: Roast beef.

RACHEL: Oh!

Silence.

JOSEPH: And I suppose the lessons were all boring.

MICHAEL: Yes.

Silence

A heavy summons lies like lead upon the Lehmanns' evening. Michael's mind's construction may be found in his face, whereas Joseph and Rachel flicker between truth and falsehood. Only Joseph is totally conscious of life as a fiction, for he has studied the theories; Rachel enacts the theories unconsciously, while Michael has sunk so deep and so low that he has almost become the thing itself.

If Joseph and Rachel were to lift their masks, and if Michael were to give sorrow words, their conversation would still flicker between truth and falsehood. Imagination live imagine:

RACHEL: Where were you last night?

JOSEPH: Having sex in the back of the car with one of my students.

RACHEL: Do you love her?

JOSEPH: I'm crazy about her.

RACHEL: Do you want to leave me?

JOSEPH: No, yes, no, yes...I don't know.

Or imagine:

JOSEPH: I've fallen for one of my students. She's young, beautiful, fresh. She makes you seem old and tired, and she makes me feel young and alive again. Now, what do you want from me? Am I to stay, move out?

RACHEL: I want you to stay. I want you to move out. I don't know.

Or imagine:

MICHAEL: I can't compete with you. I want to go my own way. Life, as they sing, is for living.

JOSEPH: Then what do you want to do?

MICHAEL: Not this.

JOSEPH: What?

MICHAEL: I don't know.

Or imagine:

RACHEL: Michael, why are you so unhappy?

MICHAEL: I can't stand living at home, and I can't stand working at school.

RACHEL: Do you hate us, then?

MICHAEL: Yes, no, yes, no...I don't know.

Truth and falsehood are the poles. The rest is fiction. Fiction, as Professor Joseph Lehmann has explained in 'The Thinking Read', is not falsehood. It is derived from the Latin *ingere* — to form or fashion. It is no more a forming or fashioning of falsehood than of truth. To put into words is to form or fashion. The dialogues, real and imaginary, are all fiction, suspended between truth and falsehood. They are thus all real and all imaginary.

The Lehmanns at dinner enact living fiction, but they have never, in their different ways, been closer to reality than they are now in the throes of their fictions. Their reality is

their awareness of being real.

It is midnight, cold and raining. Joseph is on his way home and glowing. Selina had brought a blanket. It was a clever, warm, comfortable thing for her to have done, Joseph reflects. And it meant that she had expected sex with him – that she had wanted sex with him. He had performed well this time. Her fingernails had scored his back. A man is body as well as mind, even if he is a professor and 45 years old. But he would like to be in a warm bed with her, not in the back of an estate car on a muddy track.

It is midnight, cold and raining. Rachel had been told not to wait up (postgraduate seminar, could go on for ever), and she has gone to bed, but is not asleep. Michael has also gone to bed and is not asleep. Earlier they talked - awkwardly, because neither could display unedited thoughts. The gist of the conversation was that according to Michael, the world was a lousy place to live in, society had all the wrong priorities, and he felt that he did not fit in. According to Rachel, Michael's unhappiness amounted to an identity crisis, which is not unusual in 16-year-olds, but if he could only get on with his studies, pass his exams, through these difficult years, everything would take shape of its own accord.

Michael knows that Rachel doesn't understand. The only person in the family who might understand is Barbara, but she is far away.

Rachel does understand, but there is nothing she can do or say to help, because Michael is right. And now even her own little fortress is crumbling. It is midnight, cold and raining, and Joseph hasn't come home yet.

It is still raining the next morning, and Joseph says he will drop Michael off at school. It is the natural thing to do in the circumstances, and he is pleased to act naturally.

Michael notices at once that the wheels of the car are covered with mud.

“Giving seminars in a field?” he says.

Joseph is thrown for a moment.

“Needs a good clean,” he murmurs, and the boy says no more.

If there is to be conversation on the way, it will have to come from Joseph, but there is always this sense of dislocation. The boy shuts himself off.

“I’m sorry,” says Joseph, “if I go on at you sometimes. I’m only trying to do what’s best.”

“How do you know what’s best?” asks the boy.

“Fair question,” says Joseph.

Fairer than the boy could imagine. How can a 45-year-old married man and father having sex with a 22-year-old student claim to know what’s best?

“I just know that in this life you have to work in order to succeed, and you’ll be better off passing exams than failing them.”

It’s a good answer – a natural answer. So what does he expect the reaction to be? Should the boy’s eyes suddenly light up, and should he suddenly cry: “Yes, Dad, you’re right, and what a fool I’ve been!”

Michael stares ahead at the rain on and beyond the windscreen, and they maintain silence until they get to Queen’s.

“Anyway, have a good day,” says Joseph.

The boy nods, and gets out of the car.

“Do you want me to pick you up afterwards?”

“No, thanks.”

Michael thinks no more about the mud on the wheels, or about the fact that his father came home long after midnight. He doesn’t need an explanation. He is preoccupied with other matters, weightier matters, matters of being, of essence, of rhyme and rhythm, of Beckettian manifest unanswerable.

Dear Hermann,

Thanks for your invitation. I'll be delighted to come, and I'll send you the title of my paper in a few days.

Don't worry about accommodation. I'll fix my own.

Give my love to Monika.

Yours ever,

Joseph

Selina is under siege. Simon wants to come down for a weekend, and Robert Destefano is pestering her to have coffee with him, though coffee doesn't mean coffee. She has put Simon off, and she has made it plain to Destefano that she is not interested. She only wants to be with Joseph.

Where is this leading? Would he leave his family? It's far too soon for decisions, but not for dreams.

Selina lives at The Briars, which used to be a hotel but which is now a residence for post-graduates. Her friend Jane Wisheart (doing a PhD on Goethe's 'Faust') also lives there, and Jane has noticed – for what friend could fail to notice? - the change in Selina. She wants to know who is the man, but Selina won't tell her.

“April is such a long way away,” says Selina.

Of course she will go to Constance with Joseph, and he will rent a car and book a hotel outside the town, far from the eyes of people who know him. They will have four full days – four full nights – together, but this is February, and lovers' absent hours are full of weary reckonings.

Dare he risk a weekend? Everything has been normal at home, and he has got away with his blunders so far – the seminar that never was, the mud on the wheels... They have not been spotted in restaurants, and no policemen or homicidal maniacs have banged on the car windows during their lovemaking. But this is not how they want it to be. The excitement of

the forbidden is becoming overshadowed by apprehension of discovery, not to mention the desire for love in comfort. It is at this point that the puppet-master steps in.

The half-term holidays are coming up at Queen's and at King's, and Tony Marchant's father has invited Michael to join him and Tony for a week in Paris. With Michael gone, Rachel thinks it will be a good opportunity for her to travel up to Yorkshire to see her parents, who are in their seventies and becoming increasingly frail. Will Joseph manage on his own?

"No problem."

"Perhaps you can get one of your pretty girl students to come and cook for you."

She is looking straight at him, and their eyes lock. She knows! But then she smiles, and so he smiles, too, and wishes he had the luck.

He notices that Rachel's smile is extraordinary. It smoothes out her face, making it young again, and Rachel is beautiful. Her eyes are brown like his, but they are a deeper, softer brown. She has high cheekbones and a straight nose, and her mouth has a pleasing bow that reveals a shining smile.

"What are you looking at?" she asks.

"You," says Joseph. "I was just thinking how beautiful you are."

He means it. She turns away, momentarily pleased, but when a little later her faces settles back into its grooves, the cheeks sag again, and the skin loses its lustre. He feels sorry for her, and protective, and guilty. But he is already committed.

Rachel knows what is going to happen, and her decision to go to Huddersfield is deliberate. She would go for a month or more if she thought it might end the nightmare, but perhaps even a week will accelerate the process.

"Well I think it would be a good idea to sort it out now, Joseph. Who's going to do what, you know. I mean, I'd like to tackle the Arthurian side, if you do Joyce and I get Tamasin to

cover Homer and Virgil, though I wonder if any of these modern chaps – Rushdie, Amis...or of course any of the Americans...I don't know them, but you might think of someone – we need to be as eclectic as possible..."

Frank never stops. Perhaps he's lonely. Nothing seems to exist outside The Department, which may explain why his wife left him and took their daughter with her. The students like him, because he's a character, and he's devoted to them, and he wears a bow tie, which is a sure sign of eccentricity. Joseph likes him, too, but not this evening, not occupying an armchair in Joseph's office, not when the last tutorial is over and Selina will have caught a bus and let herself into the Lehmanns' house with the key which Joseph slipped into her hand earlier today.

"I'd better be going," says Joseph.

"I thought you said Rachel was away."

"Yes, she is, but I've got a few things to do."

Frank tightens then relaxes his mouth as if preparing and unpreparing an important announcement. Then he tightens again.

"Look, Joseph, I don't mean to pry, but..."

"But what, Frank?"

"It's a small world."

"Meaning?"

"Well, somebody saw you and that rather dishy blonde girl – Selina, is it? None of my business, of course, but I thought I'd just mention it."

"What did the somebody say, then?"

"Well, they asked me point blank if you were having an affair. I said I hadn't a clue, but knowing how close you and Rachel are, I was quite sure you weren't."

"Thank you."

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Having an affair with Selina?"

Joseph frowns and stares at the brown shoe on Frank's right foot, which is describing tiny circles in the air. A sign of embarrassment, or enjoyment, or moral superiority?

Joseph could do with a lesson from Michael in the art of the silent response, but he knows

that a silence now will be equated with a confession.

“She’s having trouble with her thesis. I’m trying to help her, that’s all. But thanks, Frank.”

“Beware the eyes of February.”

“And the tongues of March.”

“Indeed.”

There can be no fulfilment that runs contrary to expectation, and yet in reading it is the unexpected that brings satisfaction. We expect only to be surprised, and that which might be disconcerting in real life is integral to our enjoyment of literature.

Joseph Lehmann, The Thinking Read

She is there, in his house, in his kitchen. He wants to make love to her at once, but she is cooking pasta for him, like a good wife, and he must play the good husband, and freshen up, then come to the table and be served. She watches his face to see if the pasta is good, if he is pleased, if she has done well.

“You’re hiding Vincenzo in the kitchen!” says the Professor, and is rewarded with a dimpled aperitif.

Halfway through the meal, the phone rings. It is Rachel. Is he all right? Is she all right? Are her parents all right? How is he coping on his own? (*Is he on his own?*) Is there any news from Michael? How is the weather/Huddersfield/the university?

“Mum and Dad send their love.”

“Give them mine too.”

There is a shadow. Damn Frank, and whoever talked to Frank.

“Is something wrong?”

“No. Well, yes, Frank Grundy says tongues are wagging. Somebody must have seen us.”

“What did you tell him?”

“You were having trouble with your thesis.”

“That’s true.”

“It’s all right, no-one can know anything. We just have to be more discreet.”

“Listen. I want to read you something.”

She pulls a thin volume out of her bag.

“Love is of all the passions the most powerful passion and indeed no passion is more powerful than the passion of love. This is the mode in which the mind is most strongly affected and indeed in no mode is the mind more strongly affected than in this.”

“He says the same about sloth.”

“Oh, you devil!”

She laughs, and flings her arms round him.

“Is there nothing you don’t know?”

“I don’t know,” he says, “whether I really like Beckett’s shorter pieces, or whether I think I ought to like them, or whether in fact I positively dislike them.”

“Why would you dislike them?”

“Perhaps because I’m a Vladimir – waiting for something that doesn’t come.”

“I’ve come.”

“Yes.”

And he can’t believe it. She is a vision in green, and she has come to be with him. Today is Monday, and they can have each other until Saturday night. Is this true?

“But one day I shall be gone.”

“Why do you say that?”

“One day we shall all be gone.”

“Ah!”

Rachel’s father has silver hair, and a slight stroke has left him lop-sided and fragile. He too

will be gone one day, and sooner rather than later, but the dark shadowed eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses are firm in their focus and their insight.

“Are things all right between you and Joseph?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because it’s clear that something’s worrying you, and I don’t know what else it could be.”

They are sitting round a log fire, with Rachel in the middle chair, and the warm glow has brought a redness to the cheeks of her mother, who is knitting. They have no television. Sometimes they talk, sometimes they listen to the radio, sometimes they play records (classical), but often they sit quietly together with no apparent need for conversation. They were always like that, but their quietness was warm and comforting. They would only speak when something needed to be said. Even now Mum says nothing, but just nods gently.

“Joseph is having an affair,” says Rachel, and the mere speaking of the words makes her cry.

A bony hand reaches across and rests on her arm.

“I wasn’t going to tell you,” she says, once she has quietened down again. “I didn’t come here for that “

“You’re sure about it?”

“Yes.”

“You know who she is?” asks Mum.

“I think it’s one of his postgraduate students.”

“A young girl, then,” says Mum. “It won’t last.”

Rachel astonishes herself by laughing.

“You’ll have to forgive your mother,” says Dad. “She can’t help knowing more than the rest of us.”

Rachel laughs, and cries.

“I don’t know whether to keep quiet, or confront him,” she says.

“Let it take its course,” says Mum, and Rachel is surprised at the immediacy of the

response. “He’s not a fool. He knows what he’s doing.”

Dad says nothing, and Rachel wonders if...But it would be unfair to ask. Would it, though?

“I don’t know,” she says eventually. “It’s happened with colleagues, and they’ve gone off – left their wives.”

“Joseph won’t leave you,” says Mum. “He’ll find out where he belongs.”

“There’s a lot of tension between him and Michael. Michael’s not...Michael’s...”

But she doesn’t know what Michael is or isn’t. She only knows that something is wrong.

“Joseph’s so hard on him. And maybe he just wants to be free of us.”

“You won’t hold him by confronting him,” says Dad. “Mum’s right – it has to take its course, whichever way.”

She looks directly at him, and he hears the unspoken question.

“I did, yes – very briefly, a girl in the office. It wasn’t till years later that your mother let on she knew.”

“How old were you?”

“Mid thirties. I’d never have left you. It was one of those things – stupid.”

“Joseph’s forty-five.”

Is a man of forty-five more likely, or less, to want a new life? Besides, what is the girl like? You can’t discount the possibility that she is someone special. Isn’t Rachel someone special then? Rachel is forty-three.

“The girl may get tired of Joseph,” says Mum.

“She’ll think he’s a god.”

“Then she’ll find out he’s not.”

Rachel is less shocked by her father’s infidelity than she would have expected, but perhaps she will be more shocked later, when she has had time to imagine what at present is barely a news item. She tries to picture him as a young man, but that is now impossible. He is old, silver-haired, sitting in his armchair and staring into the logfire.

“It happens all the time,” he says suddenly. “That’s no justification – just a fact. We get tempted. We don’t...”

Just for a moment, his voice is caught up by an emotional net, but he frees himself:

“We don’t mean to hurt anyone – we just fall because we’re weak.”

“How did your affair end?”

“What they call mutual consent. There was no future in it. We both knew it was just an affair.”

“Mum never said anything?”

Mum doesn’t even take her eyes off her knitting.

“What could I have said? Better to let the old fool think he’d got away with it!”

All of them laugh.

“But I won’t say I didn’t suffer. It wasn’t a good time for me either.”

Rachel would like to be old, safe, comfortable. She would like the present to become a story instead of a truth. Even if it’s a true story.

“Now,” says Mum, “tell us about Barbara.”

Tony Marchant’s father had had an ulterior motive for inviting Michael to go to Paris with them. The boys can keep each other company and explore Paris, while he explores Nicole, the former *assistante* at King’s College.

With money in their pockets (both fathers have been generous), Tony and Michael can smoke, drink, gormandize and, on the third evening, make arrangements for Michael to lose his virginity – Tony having lost his on a previous trip. The lucky lady is chosen at an unofficial beauty contest near the Gare St Lazare: she is young, blonde, and wrapped in a leopardskin coat which is short enough to reveal thighs tapering down into high black boots.

Tony fixes the price, warns the girl that his friend is inexperienced (“*Il ne sait pas beaucoup!*”) and arranges to meet Michael in a couple of hours.

The girl takes Michael to a room in a hotel, and in the light turns out to be less young than he had thought – but she smiles at him and talks gently to him as she helps him to undress.

“*C’est la première fois, hein?*” she says. “Ze first time?”

“Yes.”

“*Quel honneur!*”

She laughs, and he likes her laugh and her accent. He likes her scent too, and he is excited when she makes him unbutton her coat and her dress. She has firm breasts with big nipples, and encourages him to touch them. Her flesh is white and soft and smooth.

“Oh!” she cries. “Your ’ands are cold!”

She rubs them between her own, and laughs again as she holds them against her breasts. Then she leads him in a kind of waltz to the double bed that almost fills the room.

“*Alors, mon petit,*” she says, “you know what is *une capote anglaise?*”

Michael doesn’t know.

“A condom?”

Michael knows.

“You ’ave to wear condom...*Je suis propre, moi, hein, mais...c’est nécessaire.* I will put it on you.”

Expertly, she rolls the rubber out over his outstretched penis, and then she strokes him and makes him stroke her.

“Don’t be *timide!*” she says. “Nice, *hein?*”

And yes, it is nice. And when she guides his penis into the warm, moist, tight sheath between her legs, it is more than nice. It sets him on fire, and she has to tell him to slow down.

“Doucement, mon petit, doucement. Slowlee!”

But he is far too excited to slow down, and out comes the stream of passion, to be caught in a rubber teat that can barely hold it. He groans and pants, and she hugs him and pats his back.

“Bravo!” she cries. *“Bravo, mon petit!”*

A 16-year-old boy in bed with a whore, a 45-year-old university professor in bed with a 22-year-old postgraduate. “Of all the passions the most powerful passion.” Sloth, love, lust?

The frail, silver-haired man sits in his armchair in front of a logfire, and his daughter tries to imagine him in the lustfulness of youth. The red-faced lady knitting on the other side is quiet and placid, seemingly without passion, and yet once upon a time...

The whore’s name is Jacqueline. Just as the boy is not the boy but Michael. They will never meet again, but they will remember each other. Jacqueline has a story, if only someone would tell it, but she is now the whore, and Michael is the boy. For Rachel, Selina is the girl. For Selina’s divorced parents, and for Simon, there is a professor who is not even thought of as a man. Kill ten thousand and we might sigh; we will weep for one with a face and a name.

“Perhaps,” says the professor, “it’s literature’s most valuable achievement to allow us to become other people without ever losing ourselves.”

“I don’t think I become anyone else,” says Robert Destefano. “I just watch from a distance.”

“Stalin is said to have murdered ten million people. Would you say he was mad?”

“Probably, yes.”

“Would you say Macbeth was mad?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

Destefano hesitates, shrugs. Selina Grant raises her hand.

“Yes, Selina?”

“I think we experience Macbeth from the inside – we know what he’s afraid of, so we understand why he acts as he does. With Stalin we just know the facts, but we don’t feel anything of what went on inside.”

“That doesn’t mean you become Macbeth,” says Destefano.

Most of the others agree with him. Feeling is not the same as becoming. Nor are insight and understanding. Perhaps, says a girl called Eileen, an actor might temporarily “become” someone else, but a reader or spectator surely maintains a degree of distance.

“I wonder,” says Selina, “if literature doesn’t make us recognize ourselves in other people – more than we can do in real life, because we’re involved.”

He could kiss her there and then.

They are discussing what is loosely called the ‘anthropology’ of literature, which takes the process of reading several steps beyond the scope of ‘The Thinking Read’. Until a few weeks ago, Joseph would have said this subject was of immense importance, for he has been delving into the complexities of humankind’s need for fictions. But now, as Selina would say, he is involved, and he can barely recognize himself in himself.

“Does it matter anyway?” says Destefano.

“Does what matter?” asks Selina.

“Whether we become or we don’t become, recognize ourselves or don’t recognize ourselves. I mean, does it matter?”

“Yes,” says Selina. “Literature matters to me, so I ought to find out why it matters.”

This time Destefano is in a minority. Roger Snelling – a quiet, bespectacled man of whom Joseph thinks very highly – goes even further than Selina:

“We can’t live without our fictions,” he says. “We need to understand why, if we’re to understand ourselves.”

Professor Lehmann could not have put it better.

The week is drawing to a close. The boy tries to find the whore again, but she must be off duty. Alternatively, she is with another customer, which disturbs him. There are other whores at the same place, but he doesn't fancy them because they're old, or coarse. Jacqueline was pretty, and he liked the way she laughed.

The whore was the highlight, but the Paris holiday has taken Michael into other new territories. He and Tony have been on their own most of the time (Mr Marchant and the *assistante* do not need assistance), and as strangers in a great city with money in their pockets, they have tasted sweet wines.

"I don't want to go home," says Michael, as they sit in a warm bar on the Champs Elysées drinking rum and coke, and watching the girls go by.

"Paris is fucking magic," says Tony.

"Freedom's fucking magic."

"And fucking's fucking magic too, eh?"

"Yeah. I wish we could stay."

"Money – fucking money."

Youth is a prison. A ten-year-old wouldn't know it, and a twenty-year-old can break free, but a sixteen-year-old only knows that he's trapped. Breaking free would be illegal, foolhardy, dangerous.

Who wants to sleep on the banks of the Seine in mid winter?

The week is drawing to a close. Rachel needs to go home, doesn't want to go home, dreads going home. She rang Joseph on the Monday and the Tuesday, but not on the Wednesday. It was a test, and he failed it. She rang on the Thursday, but there was no reply, and when she rang on the Friday he said he'd been at a meeting. She couldn't tell if his voice sounded natural, because nothing is natural any more, for him or for her.

The thought crosses Rachel's mind that if her father were to have another stroke now, she would have to stay on. She can't understand why she has thought this, and she hates herself for it. Her parents love her, so does she not love them? She has cried in bed every night, and

now it's the last night, Saturday, and they are all in the same places, circling the logfire.

"I don't think I can go on pretending," she says suddenly. "You said I should, but I don't think I can."

Dad nods, as if in agreement. Mum carries on with her knitting as if she hasn't heard, but she has, and Rachel waits.

"I'm so sorry," says Dad, and his voice is trembling as he again reaches across to touch her arm. "I wish...I wish it hadn't happened."

Rachel can't tell if he is thinking of the past or the present.

"Well," says Mum at last, "it wouldn't be any use pretending, I suppose, if you were no good at it."

Selina has lived with Joseph for six days, and on the seventh she shall depart. For six days she has taken his wife's place at the table, in the kitchen, in the living-room, and in bed, but on the seventh the wife will return and the mistress will go back to her bed-sit at The Briars. That is what happens to mistresses.

The mistress and her lover have decided to spend the sixth evening at home, but that may have been a mistake. They are sitting at the table, and the lover's right hand is clasping the left hand of the mistress, who is crying.

Selina has not lived alone with a man before. She has slept with Simon, but not lived with him. Waking up with Joseph, having breakfast with Joseph, going home to Joseph, being with Joseph through the evening, sometimes working, talking with him about the work they're doing, and then going to bed with Joseph and making love to Joseph – this is an addictive joy, because she loves him. She does not want to be separated from him.

Joseph has lived with Selina for six days, and on the seventh he shall send her away. And then? He will carry on the pretence with Rachel, and with the boy – he can live with that. But what will happen to him and Selina? What can he offer, promise, expect?

She is crying because they have just talked of the future, and the future is indeterminate. Of course it is, for they are only at a beginning, even if it seems otherwise to Selina. She has not lived as long or known as much or tied herself so closely.

“I’ve written to Simon,” she says. “I’ve told him it’s over.”

He knew it would happen. It was bound to happen if she loves him, and she loves him.

“How will he take it?”

“I don’t know. I think he’ll probably come knocking on my door.”

“So would I if I were him.”

“Would you?”

He realizes that he has embarked on a parallel track, because they are talking of commitment, but the wheels are now running.

“Why, Joseph?”

“Because I wouldn’t want to lose you.”

She squeezes his hand, but doesn’t look at him.

“You don’t have to lose me,” she says. “But I may lose you. I may lose everything.”

She’s just a young girl, and he could break her heart. He’s supposed to say now that he can’t live without her, that he’ll leave Rachel, that he’ll set up home with her, marry her...

For some reason, he thinks of Barbara. If Barbara’s professor were doing to her what he, Joseph, is doing to Selina, Joseph would kill him. But that is not a solution.

“I don’t think I could bear to lose you,” he says, “but I just don’t know what to do. I’m beginning to realize that literature isn’t the slightest help when it comes to dealing with life. I never knew, Selina, that I could feel what I feel now, and...”

He wants to say that he needs time, but he knows that love is commitment, love does not need time, love ignores every barrier... Of all the passions it is the most powerful passion...

She waits.

“...and...I don’t know where it’s leading.”

“It’s all right, I know you can’t just abandon your family. I don’t know where it’s leading either. It just hurts to be picking up scraps of you. And perhaps she might not even let me have the scraps.”

He was wrong. Though she has not lived as long, she knows as much. How could he have thought for one moment that he knew more? She matches him in all but learning, and learning is no key to living.

“It’ll have to take its course, won’t it?” she says, and he can only nod. But she is not crying now.

Rachel is due home on Sunday afternoon, and Joseph is to pick her up at the station. Mr Marchant left his car at Heathrow, and will bring Michael.

Selina removes all traces of her presence (*as if I had died*) before they leave. Joseph will drop her off near The Briars, though at her own suggestion she will duck down (*as if I were a criminal*) when they drive out of the gate (*as if it were a game*).

At the weekly seminar for postgraduates, they have discussed game theory as applied to literature. They have tested Roger Caillois’ categories of contest (*agon*), chance (*alea*), simulation (*mimicry*) and vertigo (*ilinx*), have discussed Bernard Suits’ definition of a game as “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles”, and have concluded that not only is literature itself a game played between author and reader, but that also its characters play against each other, and – rather shockingly - real characters in the real world (if there is such a thing) follow similar patterns.

It was Robert Destefano who came up with the suggestion that “life is a game”, because ultimately, he claimed, most of our obstacles are voluntary, and much of our existence is dominated by chance, competition, and – in our social behaviour – simulation. He wasn’t so sure about vertigo, until someone pointed out that most of the major questions are unanswerable, and vertigo equals disorientation.

It was Selina, however, who argued that disease, starvation, poverty, death were tangibly real and could not be regarded as matters of play even if they might result from chance, competition etc. There had to be a borderline between games and reality, even if it was not always readily identifiable. Then the quiet, bespectacled Roger Snelling acted the fox in the henhouse by pointing out that for millions of people, games had become a reality, since their livelihoods depended on them and in some cases on the results. Therefore, he concluded, the attempt was no longer voluntary and the obstacles no longer unnecessary.

As Selina bends low in the back seat of Joseph Lehman’s car, she calls out to Joseph that this must be simulation (the driver is pretending to be alone), and she is in danger of getting vertigo. They both laugh, but their laughter too is a game.

Selina knows that she must not cry again. Her knowledge is intuitive, and there is no strategy in her laughter – only the desire to avoid pain. His pain and hers. Things have to take their course, and the only influence that she can have on their course is to be there for Joseph. If she cries (in his presence), he will have to be there for her, and that cannot be. Unconsciously therefore she is playing being there for him.

Joseph is relieved to laugh. He is also puzzled, because Selina has shown no sadness this morning. She has worked busily and cheerfully to wipe away her presence. He senses that it is a game, he is not sure that it is a game, but he plays. His uncertainty gives the lie to his position of seniority, and is testimony to the fact that theory is no match for practice.

As they drive away from Joseph’s street, he tells her that she can come up now, and she appears in his rear view mirror.

“Back to reality!” she cries.

Joseph kisses Rachel on the cheek and carries her suitcase to the car, cheerfully asking about her stay, about Mum and Dad, about the weather in Huddersfield. She answers laconically. And when eventually she plays the game by asking about his own week, she does so as if the question has been dragged out of her.

“You must be tired,” he says.

“Yes.”

Only later will he find out just how tired she is.

The Lehmanns once had a cleaner named Doris, who talked far more than she cleaned. Joseph would escape to his study or to the university on Doris’s cleaning day, and Rachel – always a good listener – would steel herself for the latest list of scandals and disasters. It had been a day of celebration when Doris had announced that she was moving down to Cornwall to be closer to her son and grandchildren. Since the Doris nightmare, Rachel has done all the housework herself. She takes no pleasure in it, but no pleasure is preferable to another Doris.

Today the kitchen is extraordinarily clean and tidy. There are no dirty dishes in the sink, the floor has been scrubbed, and crockery and utensils have been neatly put away or stacked. Upstairs there are clean sheets and pillowcases on Joseph and Rachel’s adjoining single beds. This could never have been and is not the work of Joseph.

Rachel is tired. The game has to end.

“Can I get you a cup of tea?” he calls out from downstairs as she washes her face in the clean bathroom (and dries it on a clean towel).

They sit together at the dining-room table, and as he begins to ask her again about Mum and Dad, she cuts him off:

“Joseph, we have to talk.”

The lines on her face are deep now, and her eyes are darker than he has ever seen them. At this moment, he feels that he has been stabbed.

“I’m not a fool. I know what’s going on. I want to know who the girl is, and what you’re planning to do.”

She has said these words over and over again in her head, so that now she is almost like an actress in performance, but she too feels the stabbing. She has come on stage to start the play, and the play cannot be stopped.

For a moment, he thinks of denying it, but he is not a fool either. For a long time he gazes into his cup. Eventually he looks up, and her eyes are burning. This is a Rachel he has never seen before, but this Rachel has never existed before.

“She’s a postgraduate,” he says at last, and then to his amazement his voice breaks.

“Boys don’t cry!” That is his father’s voice from a different age, and it would quickly dry the tears and stiffen the lips. A forty-five-year-old university professor doesn’t cry either. But he too has never existed before.

“It’s something that just happened,” he says, “and I don’t understand it myself. I didn’t want to hurt you...”

“She’s spent the week here?”

“Yes.”

“And what do you intend to do?”

“I don’t know. To be honest, Rachel, I’m a very confused man...”

“And what do you think I am?”

“I’ve got no defence...”

“Of course you’ve got no defence. You knew what you were doing.”

Another silence, as jarring as Michael’s silences. Joseph finds it unbearable.

“How long have you known?”

It doesn't matter how long she has known. What matters is to break the silence.

“Since the faculty meeting that never was. Did you think I wouldn't notice?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“What sort of question is that? Do you expect me to take your decisions?”

But his question has already struck her even before this opening scene, and her answer is contingent upon his answers. She thinks she would like him to break down, to cry out that he has been a fool, to beg her forgiveness, to end the affair...But that would not be Joseph any more. Joseph has always been the protector, the rock. Already his momentary weakness has shocked her, and his regained composure has alienated her. So what does she want? For him to go?

“I didn't mean that,” he says.

“Then what did you mean?”

He doesn't know what he meant. Perhaps she's right – he wants her to decide. Anything, just to recover a balance.

“Something's happened to me which I don't understand,” he says. “I think I was hoping it would become clear to me without my hurting you, but now...now I don't know what to do.”

“If you don't know what to do, then obviously you love her and you want to be with her. I don't want you staying with me out of sympathy.”

“It's not sympathy, Rachel. I do love you.”

“Do you? Have you told her that you love me?”

She has become formidable. The gentle, unassuming Rachel is beating him down. With every question, she is changing the man sitting opposite her. She is breaking down the mighty intellect, the educator, the head of the family, the role model for daughter and son, the guardian, the shepherd, the man of honour, of principle, of judgment.

“Is she a good fuck?”

He has never heard her use that word. That word, though, is the right word. Of all words, that word is the word that most powerfully invokes and most strongly reflects the act and the damnation of the act that first gave rise to the word.

“Yes, but that’s not what this is about.”

“Then marry her.”

She is being unreasonable, but she is safe in her unreasonableness because what can he say? That he doesn’t know Selina well enough? That relationships must be allowed to develop? Can such things be said to a faithful wife?

Joseph is suddenly angry. He has no weapons to fight with, and she is enjoying his helplessness. She is suffering too, but she is torturing him for the sake of it. He wants to end this interrogation.

He closes his eyes.

“Look, I’ve got myself into a mess, and I need time to sort things out. I’ve got no right to ask anything of you, but I’m begging you not to push me.”

“Are you asking me to move out?”

“What?”

“Are you asking me to move out? Or do you expect me to stay here with you when you’re home and to smile sweetly when you’re with her?”

At this moment the doorbell rings.

If there’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow, there’s surely a divine (or devilish) plan behind the ring of a doorbell. No matter who is there, the result can only be a change of some kind, and Joseph needs a change – of any kind. He leaps to his feet.

Mr Marchant is standing on the doorstep, with Tony and Michael. Joseph is socially bound to invite the Marchants in, which he does with alacrity. Coats are removed, to be hung in the hall, and Rachel comes out to greet her son and the visitors. Then they all go into the living-room. Drinks are offered, but declined as Mr Marchant and Tony won't stay long.

"How was Paris, then?" asks Rachel.

"Great!" says Michael. (*I had my first fuck.*)

"Great!" says Tony.

"I think the lads enjoyed themselves," says Mr Marchant.

(*So did you, fucking your Nicole every night.*)

"It was really kind of you to take Michael with you. Hope he behaved himself."

"Impeccably."

(*He knows shit all about how we behaved. And he cares shit all.*)

"How was the weather?"

How was the weather, how was the hotel, how was the food, did Michael and Tony speak any French, did they go to restaurants/theatres/museums/concerts? Didn't they at least see the Mona Lisa?

"A week's not long enough," says Mr Marchant. "It'll be a fortnight next time, eh, boys?"

Jocular, well bonded, good old Dad/Mr Marchant knows how to handle the kids. He enjoyed their company – always a positive sign. A teacher who doesn't like children can only be a bad teacher. Joanna died when Tony was ten, and Mr Marchant is to be admired for having brought the boy up by himself. His own admiration is second to none, but he has made sacrifices, and he has earned his holiday in Paris.

They won't stay for supper, though the invitation (from Joseph) is much appreciated.

The goodbyes are effusive, as are the thanks. Even Michael's thanks are genuine. It may have been the most enjoyable week of his life.

But the week is over. The front door closes. The Lehmanns walk through the hall and back into the living-room. Rachel tells Michael to unpack his case and put his dirty washing in the basket. He leaves the room, and Joseph and Rachel are alone again.

There are no rules. Each player must decide on a strategy, and then see how the other player reacts. They do not even toss to decide who begins, for beginning is also a strategy. There are problems in most games, however, when players become too intellectually involved, because then they may lose spontaneity, which is a key to good timing. Joseph has lost spontaneity.

“Can we keep this from Michael?” he asks.

“Why?”

“At least till we’ve discussed it.”

“We have discussed it.”

“We haven’t settled anything.”

“How can we settle anything? You’ve got yourself a mistress, you don’t know what you want, and frankly, Joseph, I don’t know what I want either. But I’m not going to pretend any more – not to you and not to Michael.”

There is the sudden opening of a curtain in Joseph’s mind. What is revealed is neither Rachel nor Selina. It is not even Joseph himself. Standing in the spotlight is Michael. In his own confusion, he feels Michael’s confusion, and is overcome with an emotion made up of pity, guilt, sympathy, and perhaps even love. He has not been a good father, and only when he is about to lose his status, his authority, has he acquired an insight that might have made him a good father.

“Will you let me tell him then?”

“If you want to.”

Or is this simulation in the form of self-deception? Is he inflicting a punishment on himself as expiation? He doesn’t know, because he has lost spontaneity.

Michael is in his room, kneeling on the floor beside his suitcase, and adding more bits and pieces to the chaos.

“I’ve got something to tell you,” says Joseph, looking for somewhere to sit. He clears a space for himself on the bed.

“I don’t think I’ve been a very good father. Maybe I tried to mimic my own father. You don’t remember him, but...”

No, this is not what he meant to say. What’s the use of going back to his own childhood? The boy doesn’t want to know.

Michael is riveted, however. What is the “something” that he is to be told? This is the most basic of narrative devices, but it never fails.

“...he was pretty hard. I’ve probably been too hard, though I only wanted the best for you.”

The boy is looking at him as if he were talking a foreign language. And so he is. The words fail to come because the thoughts are so unfamiliar.

He is not the boy. He is Michael.

“I’ve done something terrible.”

The pause is highly dramatic, but not at all calculated. Joseph simply does not know how to go on. Michael gazes with fascination at this man whom he has never seen before. In a flash he creates scenario after scenario – murder, theft, rape - none of which even remotely fit in with the man he thought he knew.

“I’m having an affair with a student.”

There is a moment of frozen stillness, and then Michael laughs. Joseph is shocked, and then angry.

“What’s there to laugh about?”

“I thought you’d killed somebody!”

This is vertigo. Is Michael right?

“You don’t understand,” says Joseph. “It’s affecting all our lives...”

Madness! He is angry with the boy for not being angry.

“Does Mum know?”

“Of course she knows. We were discussing it when you arrived, and I said I’d tell you.”

“Thanks.”

It is as if he were now dismissing Joseph. Thanks. That’s it. Let’s get on with more important things. Like unpacking.

“I’ve let you and your mother down.”

The boy shrugs, and Joseph takes the shrug for insolence, or indifference, or dismissal.

“For Christ’s sake, say something!”

The boy is shocked into looking at him.

“What do you want me to say? I don’t know what to say! At least you’re human.”

Joseph would like to ask him what he means by that, but he can’t bring himself to continue the conversation. He stands up and leaves the room.

Rachel is making up the bed in the guest room, which is in effect a little apartment built over the garage.

“You want me to move in here?” asks Joseph.

“No. I’m sleeping here tonight.”

“There’s no need for you to move. I’ll...”

“Do you think I want to sleep in that bed?”

Joseph has to get out. Away from Rachel and Michael, away from the house. Away from himself.

He goes downstairs, puts on his coat, picks up the key to his car, and leaves the house, closing the front door very quietly behind him. To have slammed the door would have been too melodramatic.

Rachel goes into Michael’s room, and sits on his bed in exactly the same place as Joseph. She has not heard the front door close.

“Did he tell you?” she asks.

“About his affair? Yes.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. What was I supposed to say?”

“I don’t know.”

“Tony’s Dad spent the week with a French bird named Nicole who’s half his age.”

“Tony’s Dad’s a widower.”

“It doesn’t make any difference. The teachers are the same at school – even the married ones.”

“You think it’s normal?”

“It’s not unusual.”

“It is for me.”

Her voice quivers, and Michael is immediately concerned. He sits beside her on the bed, and puts his arm round her shoulders. He has never done this before.

“It won’t last, Mum,” he says.

“Maybe not. But that’s not the point.”

Her voice doesn’t quiver. It’s as if Michael’s gesture has given her strength. And she is able to talk to him in a way that Joseph never could – directly and spontaneously.

“What is the point, then?” he asks.

“Whether I really care any more.”

“Oh!”

Michael is truly surprised. He is more shocked by this revelation than by his father’s confession, because what Rachel has said means the breakdown of a world. Things fall apart.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. At the moment I don’t even want to see him.”

“Is it really serious then – I mean, is he going to live with her?”

She shakes her head. Michael removes his arm from her shoulder, but stays beside her. He feels confused. Vertigo. His father has always cast a shadow, but his mother has been unwaveringly there for him, never changing, as dependable as light summoned by a switch. What unbalances things is not the thought of his father leaving, but the possibility that his mother is not his mother any more.

“Are you going to divorce him?”

She turns her head and looks at him. Then she half smiles.

“Do you think I should?”

“I don’t know. I was just asking.”

“Do you hate him?”

“No. No, I don’t hate him. I just wish he’d loosen up.”

“He obviously has loosened up.”

“No, I mean with us.”

“Perhaps it’s my fault. Perhaps I haven’t given him what he’s needed.”

Michael, however, has learned a thing or two about men – things which his mother may not know, because she has always been middle-aged, married, and a mother.

“Look,” he says, “the thing is...Dad’s at an awkward age.”

And this time Rachel laughs.

The man at an awkward age drives to the university, and from force of habit parks his car in his reserved lot at the Senate House. It is now 8 o’ clock on a Sunday evening, and there are no other cars. He walks to the English Department, unlocks the front door, and climbs the stairs to the first floor. He unlocks another door, and walks through Mrs Tanner’s office into his own. Once inside, he closes the door behind him, and sits at his desk. He feels calmer, and safer.

In order to know ourselves, we would need to live ten thousand different lives. One life gives us merely a fraction of our identity.

Joseph Lehmann, The Thinking Read

And yet not long ago, Joseph had thought he knew himself. Now the image has splintered, and because he has lost himself, Rachel has also become unknown and unknowable. Break one piece, and all patterns change. What will Barbara become when she is told? Even Mrs Tanner will change. Everyone will know in the end, and so every pattern will change.

There are decisions to be taken. Where is he to sleep tonight?

Professor Lehmann longs for a knock on the door, and for Selina to enter, but Selina doesn’t know he’s here, and she doesn’t have a key to enter the Department. Should he go to her?

Jane Wisheart is Selina's closest friend. It is a friendship of opposites, for Jane is tall and thin, with close-cropped black hair and glasses that emphasise her air of earnestness. They were neighbours in a first-year hall of residence, and shared a flat afterwards until they graduated.

Now Selina is sitting in Jane's room. She has told Jane everything except the identity of her lover.

"You're only going to get hurt," says Jane. "They never leave their families. How do you know it's not just an affair for him? Men of that age feel they have something to prove."

"I know he loves me."

"He may think he loves you, but sooner or later he's going to have to make a choice. How old are his children?"

"His son's sixteen, and I think his daughter's about twenty."

"Not that it matters. Except that it would be more difficult for him if they were younger. Are they at home?"

"Only the boy."

"What does he say about them?"

"He worships his daughter. He doesn't understand his son."

"And his wife?"

The last question sets Selina a puzzle, because she cannot recall what Joseph has said about his wife. They must have talked about her, and yet nothing remains except Rachel's age.

"She's 43."

"Is that all you know?"

"I've seen photos of her."

"That's not what I mean."

"No, he hasn't really told me anything."

"Or maybe you just didn't want to know anything."

Jane doesn't have a boyfriend. Jane is not in love. Jane is devoted to her books, to her Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Jane sees Gretchen in Selina.

“Anyway I thought you and Simon were happy.”

“So did I, but now Simon seems like a boy. I can't describe it – it's just a different level, Jane. Everything else fades away when I'm with him.”

Jane goes to her bookcase and pulls out a thin volume bound in black. She leafs through the pages until she finds what she is looking for. It is a poem, not by Goethe, but handwritten in pencil. She reads it out:

“Love's candle has a gentle flame,
 And sheds a gentle light.
 Love's fire is wild and passionate,
 And twenty times more bright.

Against its rage the candle's flame
 May vanish from our sight,
 But fires soon die, while candles burn
 Throughout the darkest night.”

The poem is by someone called Mary Challenor, and she is dead.

Jane puts the slim volume back in her bookcase.

“Mary Challenor was my mother,” she says. “I never knew my father. Wisheart is my stepfather's name. He's been kind to me, but I would have liked to know who my father was.”

It takes a moment before Selina makes the connection.

Meanwhile, two men are passing each other in the entrance-hall to The Briars. One is a middle-aged man who is leaving the building, having knocked in vain on a second-floor door. The other is young, and has just arrived. They nod to each other and go their separate ways.

Michael is hungry, and he and Rachel sit together at the table, though she does not want to eat.

“Where do you think he’s gone?” asks Michael.

“To her, I expect. Telling her all his troubles.”

She had not heard Joseph leave, and had expected to find him downstairs when she went to cook Michael some supper. She had no wish to see him or talk to him, but she looked in all the rooms and then the hall, and she saw that his coat had gone. She opened the front door, and the Ford estate had gone too.

The vanishing, unannounced, creates a multitude of uncertainties: motive, state of mind, whereabouts, time limit. It also makes a possible ending into a reality, whereas until now it has existed only as an idea. Rachel is shaken, and is glad to sit at the table with Michael.

He too has been shaken by the vanishing, but for different reasons. Coming home from Paris fresh from his exploration of Jacqueline, he felt he had solved some of life’s mysteries, and had stepped into manhood. But alone with his mother now, and conscious of her isolation which only he can remedy, he no longer feels adult. What might initially have created a degree of excitement has now engendered insecurity. His question was not one of curiosity but of genuine anxiety. For him too, the possible ending has become real, and he is not ready for it.

“What do you think we should do?” he asks.

“There’s nothing we can do. He’ll come home if he wants to.”

“Well maybe he won’t. Maybe he knows you don’t want to see him any more. He might stay away because of that – I mean, till you say something.”

“Maybe.”

“Will you say something?”

“What can I say? He’ll need his things anyway, so he’ll have to come home some time.”

“Well what will you say if he does?”

“What do you think I should say?”

In the last few hours Rachel has developed a talent for turning defence into attack. Michael finds his position dislocated. The son must now think for the mother, but how can he know what is right?

“Maybe you should just tell him not to be such an idiot.”

The half-smile comes to Rachel’s lips again, and she stands up to remove Michael’s dirty plate. Normally, he would be told to remove it himself, but these are exceptional times, and in any case Rachel wants things to do.

“You had enough?” she asks.

“Yes. Thanks.”

He follows her through to the kitchen.

“Maybe Babs should come home. I mean...she knows how to talk to him.”

“I know how to talk to him.”

“Well yes, but...you know what I mean.”

“She’ll certainly have to know, but she can’t tell him or me what we should be feeling. Can she?”

No, she can’t. Nor can she tell Michael. Nor, when the time comes, will she be able to tell herself. Every new impression changes the wax.

Joseph does not know where to go. When he had dropped Selina in the early afternoon, she had made no mention of going out. Like his own vanishing, her absence raises questions and uncertainties, but he has already taken a risk in going to the residence, and he cannot just sit in the entrance hall and wait for her to come back.

The Briars is only five minutes away from the Department. He could wait in his office and then try again some time before ten o’ clock (when the front door of the residence will be locked). But the later it gets, the more self-conscious he will feel about going in, and in any case he can’t stay with her.

He goes for a walk, pulling his hat down over his eyes. It's a cold, dry February night, and he puts his coat collar up, though not solely to ward off the chill. There are a few people about, but he hopes there will only be one that he knows.

He does not meet anyone he knows. He returns to The Briars, and from a distance sees a group of students standing outside the entrance, but Selina is not one of them. He heads back to the Senate House and gets into his car. Then he drives round to The Briars, and parks in a dark space down the road, from where he can see who comes and goes. The little group of students has already dispersed, and he watches the empty entrance.

*Does any here know me? This is not Lear:
Does Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discernings
Are lethargied. Ha! Waking? 'Tis not so.
Who is it that can tell me who I am?*

Perhaps it is madness, but he has to know where she is, and so he waits, telling himself every minute to stay just a little longer.

At ten o'clock, the front door closes. It is the deadline that he has set himself, but he drives down Surrey Hill towards the town-centre, scanning the pavements as he goes. There are still plenty of young people about (the town-centre is well endowed with pubs), but there is no Selina making her way home. On an impulse, he heads for Priory Road.

Frank Grundy lives on the top floor of a large Victorian house in Priory Road. When his wife and daughter left him, and he had given up hope of their ever returning, he converted the two lower floors into apartments. He and Joseph have been colleagues for over ten years, since Joseph took the chair for Modern English Literature, but colleagueship has never ripened into friendship. Frank is therefore quite startled when his doorbell is rung from down below, and Joseph's voice comes through the intercom.

The buzzer opens the front door, and Joseph makes his way up the stairs to find Frank beaming at him from the top landing. It is the first time that Joseph has ever seen him without a bow tie.

“This is a very unexpected pleasure. Come in, Joseph. Take your coat off. Would you like a drink? You look pretty frozen. Something hot, or something strong?”

Joseph declines. He feels awkward.

“Well, sit yourself down and tell me your troubles.”

Frank is ten years older than Joseph, and was King of the Department long before Joseph arrived. He is an institution of the institution, even without his bow tie. Joseph feels like an undergraduate facing his personal tutor.

“Come on, old boy. I am capable of listening, you know.”

It is an endearing trait of Frank’s that he can laugh at himself. It makes him approachable.

“I lied to you the other day,” says Joseph. “I am having an affair with Selina.”

“And now Rachel’s found out.”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“It’s half past ten on a Sunday night, Joseph. Why else would you be ringing at my door?”

“She’s known all along. It was you who gave the game away in the first place. You rang to talk to me when we were both supposed to be at a faculty meeting.”

“Sorry – but it’s your tangled web.”

“Absolutely. I suppose she was just waiting to see what would happen. She went up to see her parents for a week, and Michael was in Paris. They both got back today, and she simply confronted me with it. She knocked me sideways and all other ways.”

“Did she kick you out?”

“No. I just left. I couldn’t stay there – my head would have exploded.”

Frank fills and lights his pipe. It seems perfectly natural for him to do so, and there is no need for the accompanying silence to be broken. Only when the first clouds have swirled into the air does he dip into Joseph’s problem.

“Everyone gets hurt – there’s no way round that. But if you walk out, it may be difficult to go back.”

“I don’t know if I want to go back.”

“Well of course you’re welcome to stay here – as long as you like – but that’s not a solution.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that, but thanks all the same.”

“What were you thinking of?”

“I just came to talk, really.”

“You realize that she’s probably wondering where you are, and assuming that you’re with Selina in some hotel bedroom.”

“I went to The Briars, but she wasn’t there.”

“Well I have to say, Joseph, that there are other considerations too. If you were a young bachelor, you might get away with it, but a middle-aged professor shagging a student – even if she is a postgraduate – it’s not what the doctor would order here, even a doctor of philosophy. Though I must say she’s a stunning-looking girl. Whatever happens, it’s got to be discreet. I’ve squashed one rumour, but...well, you understand. And now I’ve got a suggestion. Let me ring Rachel and say that you’re here, and ask her whether you should stay the night with me or go home.”

It is as if he has unravelled a knot. The immediate decision lies with Rachel, and Joseph can just sit quietly while Frank takes the next step for him. That’s what personal tutors are for.

Rachel and Michael are half-watching a film when the phone rings. They are both startled, and Rachel is afraid. It is now 11 o’clock, and no-one would ring at such an hour except in an emergency. She immediately suspects that something has happened to Joseph.

“That’s probably Dad,” says Michael, with rather less imagination, and offers to take the call.

“Hello, is that Michael?”

“Yes.”

“It’s Frank Grundy here. Is your mother there?”

“Yes. Hold on.”

“Who is it?” asks Rachel.

“Mr Grundy.”

She takes the phone in a trembling hand.

“Frank?”

“Hello, Rachel. Sorry to ring you so late, but Joseph’s here. He’s told me what’s happened, and I’m really sorry. I’m ringing, though, to ask what you want him to do. I mean, do you want him to spend the night here, or should he come home, or what?”

Rachel is relieved twice over: that there hasn’t been an accident, and that Joseph is not with the girl. On the other hand, she is angry that she cares, and angry that he has made her care.

“It’s up to him, Frank,” she says firmly. “He can come if he wants to.”

She hears Frank relaying the message.

“Do you want to talk to him, Rachel?”

“No. No, I don’t want to talk to him. Just ask him if he’s coming and if he’s got his key.”

Again Frank passes on the message. There is a pause before Frank says yes twice over.

“I hope you can sort it out, Rachel. Don’t hesitate if there’s any way I can help.”

Rachel puts the phone down and tells Michael that Joseph is coming home, but that she’s going to bed in the guest room. Michael has school in the morning, and so he should go to bed too.

“I’ll stay up a bit.”

This morning Michael was in Paris, but now the city is a long way away, and the drive home is a memory. Even Jacqueline has faded into the background. He needs to stay awake in order to see his father, and find out what his father has become. It is not concern any more, because Joseph's yes means restoration. Now it is curiosity. And one small part of his curiosity is directed towards himself, because he has grown into an adult again. He may even be more adult than his father.

It is past ten o'clock when Selina leaves Jane's room, and walks towards her own, which is at the very end of the corridor. She is surprised to see someone sitting on the floor with his back against her door. For a second her heart leaps, because she thinks it is Joseph, but it is not Joseph. It is a good-looking, rugged young man who gets to his feet as soon as he sees her.

"Simon!"

"Hello, Selina."

"You shouldn't have come."

Given: Simon Betts: aged 26, architect, rugby player.

Given: Selina Grant, aged 22, postgraduate.

Determinate: a well matched couple.

"I had to, after that letter."

They stand uncertainly in the corridor.

"Well, you'd better come in," says Selina, and unlocks the door.

She has a bed-sit, with a window overlooking the garden, though of course this cannot be seen now in the winter darkness. There is a single bed, a desk and chair, an armchair, and a small bathroom. On the other side of the corridor is a communal kitchen, as cooking is forbidden in the rooms.

"Shall I get you something?" she asks, but he shakes his head.

He takes his coat off, and she puts it on the bed. Then she sits at the desk, and he sits in the armchair.

“I know I’ve hurt you,” she says, “and I didn’t mean to. It’s just something that’s happened.”

“You can’t simply undo two years with a letter. I think you owe me a bit more than that.”

“I know it was cruel, but there isn’t a kind way to tell someone that...that you’re in love with someone else.”

“Who is he?”

“It’s someone I’ve met here.”

“Obviously.”

“I really love him, Simon, and I didn’t want to deceive you. I thought I was being honest.”

“So when I wanted to come down for the week-end, presumably you were with him.”

“Yes.”

“You told me you had too much work.”

She lowers her eyes.

“How long have you known him?”

“I’ve known him for a long time, but it’s only recently that I realized I was in love with him.”

“You’ve slept with him.”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to live with him?”

Again she looks away.

“Well, are you?”

“I don’t know, Simon. You and I hadn’t decided to live together, had we?”

“I thought we were waiting till you’d finished your PhD.”

“I’m just saying that you can love someone without living together.”

Simon looks directly at her, with two furrows between his eyes. For a moment she can almost visualise him as an old man, since the lines are already etched faintly into his face. The mop of brown hair will turn grey like his father's, and the heavy chin will begin to sag. (*But I will grow old too.*)

“Is he married?”

He can see at once that he has struck home.

“Christ, Selina!”

“Simon, it doesn't make any difference. I love him, and I don't love you. Please try to understand. I can't help it.”

He puts his hand over his eyes, and suddenly she feels sorry for him. If she can't help her own feelings, no more can he. All her friends at home envy her. She is the person he loves, and he has driven six hours to see her. He's right, she owes him more than a letter.

“I'm so sorry, Simon.”

Eventually he uncovers his eyes again.

“I wanted to marry you. I love you, it's as simple as that. And if this man is married...How old is he anyway?”

“Simon, please don't.”

“Is he a student?”

“No, he's a professor.”

“Selina, you're going to get hurt – everyone's going to get hurt. And I don't want that to happen to you.”

“You should meet Jane.”

“Who's Jane?”

“She's just been lecturing me as well. And you may be right. But I can't walk away. I just can't, Simon.”

He has registered the finality, and they both sit in silence for a while.

“Where are you going to sleep?” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

“You can have the chair. I’ve got spare blankets.”

“I won’t say no, then. It’s too late to drive back to London. I’ll ring the office first thing.”

“Do you want a drink, or something to eat?”

“You haven’t got a beer, have you?”

“There’s probably some in the kitchen. Don’t come out. I don’t want anyone to see you.”

She brings him his beer, the spare blankets and a towel, and while he drinks, she goes into the bathroom to undress. Last night, she had slept naked in Joseph’s bed. Tonight she puts on pyjamas.

By the time Simon has draped himself in the blankets, and Selina has switched off the light, a distant church clock is chiming the end of a long, sad Sunday.

The Sunday has not yet ended for Joseph. When he lets himself in and enters the living-room, he finds Michael sprawled in the armchair, fast asleep in front of the television, which is showing a horror movie. There is no sign of Rachel.

Joseph switches off the television, and paradoxically the sudden absence of sound wakes Michael up. He sees his father, feels a momentary uncertainty, and then remembers the situation.

“You came home then,” he says, and the irony is paternal.

Joseph pretends not to notice it.

“You should be in bed,” he says. “You’ve got school in the morning.”

“I’m all right. You’re the one who looks tired.”

Joseph knows that the boy is pushing him.

“Mum’s in the guest room. She doesn’t want to sleep with you.”

Joseph nods.

“She’s very upset.”

Joseph sits down and looks directly at Michael, and Michael withstands the look.

“These things happen, Michael, and you might understand more when you’re older.”

“I’m not a child.”

“No.”

“And I’m not a virgin. I’ve had sex, just like you.”

“Having sex is not the same as loving someone.”

“Well Mum thought you loved her, so tell me what I haven’t understood.”

“It’s possible to love more than one person.”

“So?”

“It makes human relations very complicated.”

“I think I know that.”

“I’m not justifying myself, and I’m not proud of myself, and I’m having to face up to certain aspects of myself that I didn’t know about. Getting to know yourself is a never-ending process, as you’ll find out in due course.”

“I am finding out. I’m going through an identity crisis, remember? Like all sixteen-year-olds.”

Joseph nods. It is not only himself that he is getting to know. There are depths in this boy that he had not imagined - that he had not taken the trouble to imagine. He has always tried to impose thoughts, and has not been receptive. And yet he has always prided

himself on his openness to the ideas of his students. He has relished the independent thinking of his star pupils, but has never opened himself up to the mind of his own son.

“You’re right. It was a stupid thing to say. Maybe life’s a permanent identity crisis.”

“I told Mum you were at an awkward age.”

Just like Rachel, Joseph laughs, and is surprised to hear himself laugh. It’s also a relief for both of them, and Michael is as pleased as Joseph. The man is loosening up after all.

“You said something, Michael, earlier today which has stuck in my mind. You said that at least I was human. What did you mean? Have I seemed inhuman to you?”

“Well, you just never seem to have any doubts. You always know what’s right for everyone. You’re always telling, and never asking.”

Joseph nods. The boy is turning into a man, and the man is Joseph’s equal.

“But you don’t know all the answers, do you?” says the boy.

“No.”

“Well that’s what I meant.”

The judge has been judged. And he admires the justice of the judgment.

“At the risk of sounding maudlin, I have to say, Michael, that I’ve never felt as unsure of myself as I do now, but one thing I am sure of is that I’m proud you’re my son.”

It does sound maudlin, and Michael is embarrassed though also pleased. Joseph gets up and puts a hand on his shoulder, but the boy remains still. He has challenged

and won, but that does not break down all the barriers, or make them buddies, or rescue lost causes. He is not even sure that this new father is a better father.

For a moment, Joseph feels strings being pulled inside him to make him cry out: "It's over, and I shall never see Selina again." But that would be drama, not life. Even as he changes the resting of the hand into a gentle, affectionate pat, he is thinking that tomorrow is Monday, and he will see Selina again. That is what he really wants.

It is three o' clock in the morning when something wakes Selina. A sudden coldness. The covers are off. Then there is a heavy weight on the bed and a pressure against her.

"No!" she cries, and reaches for the light cord.

Simon is half in and half out of the bed, and violently she pushes him away. He is completely naked, his penis sticking out like a lance. She sits up as he tries to get into the bed again, and they grapple for a moment before he pulls the light cord and they are in darkness again.

"Don't, Simon, don't!"

He has grasped her wrist and forces himself against her, pressing her downwards and trapping her other arm with the weight of his body. With his free hand he pulls her pyjama trousers down beyond her knees. She cries out, but he is far too strong for her. Half on top of her, he crooks his knee between her legs and with one movement pushes her pyjama trousers off with his foot. Then he rolls her over onto her side, with her face against the wall, prizes her legs apart with his own, and enters her from behind. She whimpers and groans as he pumps ever more brutally inside her until there is a savage burst and he gasps with the final effort. It is the first sound he has made.

Then they lie there. Selina is crying, her face still pressed to the wall, her body rigid even though he has relaxed his grip and is lying limply against her. There is wetness trickling from her crotch into the bedclothes, but she can't move to wipe it away. Gradually his breathing slows down again, and he gently strokes her thigh.

"You're mine, Selina," he says very quietly. "You know we belong together."

But she is still crying.

"You raped me."

"I love you. And you love me. This other business is just infatuation or something. We've always loved each other."

"You raped me."

"We should have got married before. It's my fault."

She suddenly pulls the light cord, sits up, and looks down at him. She is deathly white, and her face is awash with tears.

"You raped me!"

"I love you, Selina."

"You raped me."

"Don't keep saying that! I didn't rape you. You don't rape someone you love."

Now he sits up next to her, perched on the narrow bed, naked and suddenly cold. He reaches over to try and grasp the bedclothes, but they are on her side, wedged between her legs and the wall. She still has her pyjama jacket on, and pulls it tighter round herself. He tugs at the bedclothes again, but she doesn't free them. Nor does she take her eyes off him.

"Why are you looking at me like that? We're lovers, aren't we? Selina?"

But they are not lovers. On the unnaturally white face, and in the unnaturally wide green eyes is an expression of pain and shock that tells him more clearly than any words precisely how she feels and what he has done.

“Oh my God!”

He gets off the bed, and begins hurriedly to put on his clothes. She does not move. She is sitting up, holding herself in a kind of protective embrace, but looking straight ahead now and not at him.

“Oh my God!” he says again and again.

When he is dressed, he stands beside the bed, looking at her.

“Selina, I didn’t mean to...”

She stares ahead.

“You raped me.”

“Selina...”

“Go away. I never want to speak to you or see you again.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Go away, Simon. It’s over. Go away.”

He puts on his coat.

“I can’t leave you like this.”

Now she turns her gaze full on him.

“There’s nothing you can do for me, Simon, and I hate you more every minute you stay.”

He leaves the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

It is Monday morning. Joseph hears Rachel knock on Michael's door and then go downstairs. He is hesitant to see her, but there has to be contact sooner or later. He has a wash, gets dressed, and goes down.

Rachel is in the kitchen, cooking breakfast for herself and Michael. She does not look up when he enters the kitchen.

"It's raining," he says. "Do you want me to take Michael?"

"I'll take him."

"I don't mind dropping him..."

"I'll take him."

She still hasn't looked at him, and her voice is flat, expressionless.

"Please, Rachel, give me time to sort this thing out."

Now she does look at him.

"Joseph, you can do what you like."

Her eyes are as expressionless as her voice. She walks past him and goes into the dining-room, calling out to Michael that breakfast is ready.

Joseph never eats a cooked breakfast. He makes some toast and coffee, and enters the dining-room at the same moment as Michael. The boy's shirt is hanging out of his trousers, and his tie is crooked, but Joseph forces himself not to comment.

"Morning, Michael," he says.

The boy grunts, then goes to his mother, bends down and kisses her on the cheek. He has never greeted her like this before, and Rachel looks up in surprise, but the boy says nothing.

"It's raining," says Joseph, "so your mother'll take you to school."

"Thanks, Mum," says the boy.

The rest is silence. Breakfast at the Lehmanns' has never been animated, but this silence is one of mood, not of routine. It is a time for tongues to be locked away from thoughts.

The lines on Rachel's face are deep, especially round her mouth, and when she and Michael have finished their breakfast, she clears his dishes and hers, but not Joseph's. The lines and the movements are firm, decisive. She has established her strategy.

"I'll be gone by the time you get back," says Joseph. "Don't forget your key."

She does not respond.

"Rachel?"

"I heard."

Rachel does not ask if or when Joseph will be coming home, and when she and the boy are ready, they leave without saying goodbye. Joseph can do what he likes. He understands her decision, but he had not expected to be a stranger to Michael this morning. It takes him a while to work it out, and then the explanation is obvious. Neither boy nor man can serve two masters. Besides, may one be pardon'd and retain th' offence?

Joseph has no official duties on Monday mornings. He usually devotes these to correspondence and administrative matters, but this Monday he has an unofficial appointment. Selina is to bring some papers to his office at 11 o'clock, and she should ask Mrs Tanner if the professor has a moment to go through them with her.

Joseph gets to the office at half past nine. Bun-haired, earnest Mrs Tanner is already at her desk.

"Morning, Mrs Tanner."

"Morning, Professor."

A friendly exchange about the weather, the weekend, their respective states of health, and then Joseph escapes into his office. She has been his secretary for ten years. Frank calls his secretary Irene, and she calls him Frank.

Joseph's office can only be reached through Mrs Tanner's, and his telephone is linked to hers, so that she acts as a filter for all comers and callers. This was his own choice, because he has always resented distractions. Now, though, her guardianship is a nuisance. Selina cannot call him or visit him without Mrs Tanner knowing.

There are letters and e-mails to be answered, and a third-year student has left an essay. Everything is laid out on the desk, in order of urgency. There is also a half-written article that Joseph is working on for a literary journal. He doesn't like computers, and writes everything first by hand, so that Mrs Tanner then has to type it out. In earlier times it was Rachel who typed out his work. His handwriting is sloping but neat. He is a methodical man.

At eleven method will give way to madness. The wet, grey February day will turn into bright Spring at eleven. At eleven, he will break out of the chrysalis.

Selina does not come at eleven. He has deliberately left his office door slightly ajar in order to hear her knock and speak to Mrs Tanner, but although there has been a steady stream of callers, eleven o' clock comes and goes without her. Could he have failed to hear her? Has Mrs Tanner sent her away?

At a quarter past eleven he can hold back no longer. He pushes his door open.

"Selina Grant hasn't left some papers for me, has she, Mrs Tanner?"

"No, Professor."

"Oh! Right! Unlike her – she's usually reliable."

He retreats into the office again, once more leaving the door on its latch. He has scarcely sat down at his desk when he hears someone knock on the outside door. A female voice asks if Professor Lehmann is in – but it is not Selina's voice. Mrs Tanner inquires what it's about.

"I've got some rather important papers for him," says the voice. "He's expecting them."

“Ah, yes...I’ll just see if he’s free.”

Mrs Tanner knocks, then pokes her head round the door.

“It’s a student with some papers, Professor. I thought they might be the ones you were waiting for.”

“Yes, tell her to come in, Mrs Tanner.”

The girl who enters the office is tall and thin and very serious. Mrs Tanner discreetly closes the door.

“Professor Lehmann?”

“Yes. Hello, come in.”

“I’m Jane Wisheart. You don’t know me – I’m a friend of Selina’s.”

“Oh!”

“We need to talk.”

She is speaking quietly, earnestly. Something terrible has happened. Joseph ushers her to one of the two armchairs by the window.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know how to tell you this.”

She sits for a moment, staring at him.

“Is she all right?”

“No. Last night her boyfriend came to see her.”

“Boyfriend?”

“Simon.”

Doesn’t Jane know that Selina and Joseph are lovers? He waits, transfixed, for her to go on.

“She’d written to break it off. But he wouldn’t accept it, so he came to her room. They talked, and it got very late, so she let him stay the night. He was supposed to sleep in the armchair. Anyway, during the night he...he raped her.”

“Oh my God! Is she all right?”

“Do you expect her to be all right?”

“I’m sorry. Stupid question. I meant...”

“She’s very upset. She didn’t want me to tell you, but she knew you’d be waiting for her.”

“I must go to her.”

“I don’t think you should.”

“Why not?”

“I think you should leave her alone.”

The girl seems angry - almost as if Joseph is the rapist and not Simon. Joseph in turn resents her proprietary tone, but he speaks gently:

“She sent you, didn’t she? I have to see her.”

Then suddenly the girl’s face softens, and Joseph feels guilty at his momentary resentment. Jane is Selina’s friend, and she is upset, too. He reaches across to put his hand on her arm. She looks up at him, nods, and takes off her glasses to wipe her eyes. Her face is less severe without the glasses – almost pretty.

“This is a terrible ordeal for you as well,” he says. “I can’t tell you how grateful I am to you.”

He has not understood. She puts on her glasses again, and frowns at him.

“You’re going to ruin her life,” she says. “What you’re doing to her is worse than rape.”

He is taken aback, but he doesn’t show it.

“That’s a very harsh judgment.”

“Is it? Are you going to leave your family?”

Now the resentment rises again.

“With respect, this is not something I have to discuss with you.”

“No. Nor with Selina.”

“Yes. With Selina.”

“So have you?”

“What?”

“Discussed it with her?”

He doesn't answer.

“You're old enough to be her father. She trusted you.”

“Selina's a grown woman.”

“Selina's a young girl with dreams.”

This tall, thin, serious girl is giving him a tutorial.

“Look, you're her friend,” says Joseph, “and I understand your concern, but this is something that she and I have to work out between us. Now I want to see her. I presume she's in her room.”

He gets up, and Jane gets up too.

“I didn't mean to be rude,” she says. “But Selina's a good person. She doesn't deserve to be hurt.”

“She's the last person in the world that I would want to hurt.”

“Is she? What about your wife and children?”

He cannot answer.

Selina has put fresh sheets on the bed, and has bundled the soiled ones in a corner. She has bathed and dressed, but has not left the room, because she doesn't want to meet anyone.

Jane knocks on the door, and when Selina unlocks it, Joseph goes to her and puts his arms round her. She begins to cry.

"Shall I get you a coffee?" asks Jane.

Joseph shakes his head, and Jane leaves them. After a few moments, Selina stops crying.

"I didn't want you to see me like this. Jane told you what happened?"

"Yes."

They sit down – Joseph at the desk, Selina in the armchair.

"Joseph, I need to know if you love me."

"Yes, I love you."

He should hold her again, but they are too far apart.

"He was so brutal."

"Are you in pain?"

"I'm sore. He really hurt me. I didn't think such a thing could happen."

"Perhaps you should go to the police."

"No. I've thought about it. But no-one would believe me. I invited him to stay. He was my boyfriend. Besides, he might get you involved. There's nothing to be gained by going to the police. I keep telling myself that it was just an incident. Maybe that's all it was, but I feel so ashamed."

He tries to find words of comfort, but all the time he is thinking of what Jane had said. This is a young girl. Sitting hunched in the armchair, with her hands round her knees, she could be a child.

"Jane's a good friend to you," he says.

"Yes."

"What's she studying?"

"German. She's doing a PhD on Goethe's 'Faust'."

*“Da steh ich nun, ich armer Tor,
Und bin so klug als wie zuvor.”*

“I didn’t know you spoke German.”

“My father was German. Hence the name.”

“And what was it you said?”

“It was Faust. He’s studied philosophy, law, theology, and every other subject under the sun, and there he stands, poor fool, as clever – which means as ignorant – as he was before. Like the rest of us.”

A different subject of conversation. A distraction. Is this a time to tell her that Rachel knows everything?

“What was it like last night, when your wife came home?”

“It was difficult.”

“Did she want you to make love to her?”

“No.”

“Did something happen?”

Is she reading his mind?

“Why do you ask?”

“I have magic powers. Your wife knows, doesn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“So what happened?”

Joseph tells her.

“I even came to your room,” he says, “but you weren’t there.”

“What time?”

“About eight.”

“I was with Jane. Simon must have arrived about eight as well.”

“My God! There was a young chap arriving just as I was leaving – I thought he was a student. A big man, with a mop of brown hair?”

“That was Simon.”

“If I’d known...”

“It would have been quite funny really, if you’d both arrived at the same time. Except that he’d probably have killed you. He’s very strong....Your wife must hate me.”

“It’s me she hates.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Why do you say that?”

“If she hated you, she’d have told you to leave. I wish she had.”

They are not talking about the rape, or about Simon, or about Rachel. Nor are they talking about what they are really talking about. He has felt the strings being pulled just as they were before: “It’s over, and I shall never see Rachel again.” But he knows that he will go home tonight, and Selina knows that too. It is what lies beyond that is indeterminate and beyond the grasp of thought or tongue.

“Listen,” says Joseph, “I’ve got a couple of tutorials this afternoon. Then I’ll come and see you. Will you be all right?”

“Yes, I’m all right.”

“Shall I bring you something to eat?”

“No. I don’t think you should come. People would start talking.”

He has not told her that he went to Frank’s last night.

“I’ll come to your office tomorrow. When are you free?”

“Come after five – Mrs Tanner goes then. Supposing you’re not well enough?”

“I’m not ill. I’ll send Jane, though, if there’s a problem. Don’t look so worried.”

“I don’t like leaving you.”

“Jane’ll keep me company.”

“Does she live here?”

“Third door on the left. Perhaps you can tell her.”

They embrace, then they kiss, and then he goes, leaving her standing in the middle of the room. She is beautiful and fragile, and something inside him is hurting.

Selina is afraid. Nothing is safe any more. She is sure that Joseph loves her, but perhaps he also loves his wife. That was the subject they did not talk about. And Simon? Did he go back to London, or is he waiting to burst into her room?

Joseph knocks on Jane’s door to deliver the message.

“I don’t like leaving her,” he says. “She shouldn’t be alone.”

“No, she shouldn’t,” says Jane, more in accusation than in agreement. “I’ll look after her.”

“Thank you.”

He hurries away. She makes him feel uncomfortable.

.....*There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been.*

Like Selina, T.S.Eliot has magic powers, though the second-year student quoting these lines in her essay can have no idea how apt they are for the professor’s present and immediate future. Until this moment, it has been an effort for him to listen, but he is shocked into alertness by these words, and will soon recall them like a fulfilled prophecy.

The tutorial ends at five. He would still like to go to Selina, but she does not want him to. The redoubtable Jane is to look after her.

“Goodnight, Professor.”

Mrs Tanner takes her leave.

“Goodnight, Mrs Tanner.”

- *Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky...*

He does not want to go home. Selina knows that Mrs Tanner leaves at five. Perhaps she will come. He must stay – at least for a while. There are letters to write and papers to mark.

As before, he leaves his own door ajar in order to hear the knocking. But she does not come. No-one comes.

When the world was itself, he would always tell Rachel his timetable, and she would have his supper waiting for him. When he goes home tonight, there will be a cold buffet of indifferent words and glances. She and the boy will follow the routine, and he can do what he likes. That is to be the pattern.

He is wrong, and knowledge falsifies in the face of the new and shocking.

At half past six he leaves the office and goes home. When he opens the front door and enters the hall, he sees a red coat on the coat stand, and hears voices from the dining-room.

“Hello!” he calls out.

At once the voices stop. He takes off his coat and goes into the dining-room. Sitting at the table are Rachel, Michael, and a dark-haired, bright-eyed girl whose smile has illuminated his life ten thousand times.

“Barbara!”

She is not smiling now.

“Hello, Dad.”

“What are you doing here?”

The question elicits a silence of disbelief. In his pleasure at seeing her, he has failed to establish connections.

“I sent her an e-mail last night,” says Michael, not without a hint of triumph.

“Oh!”

“We’re a family, aren’t we?” says Michael. “Or aren’t we?”

The ambiguity of the repetition is not lost on anyone, least of all Joseph.

“You came down by train?”

The irrelevance of the question is not lost on anyone, least of all Joseph.

“Yes.”

“There’s food in the oven if you want it,” says Rachel.

“Thank you.”

He goes to the kitchen, grateful for the chance to recover his balance.

- *Why has Barbara come? The boy sent for her last night, so it wasn't Rachel's doing. Assuming she knows what's happened, what can she do about it? Maybe she doesn't know what she can do. The boy told her, and so she came. We're a family. Are we?*

He rejoins them at the table. No-one has said another word.

“You know what’s going on, then,” he says.

Barbara bursts into tears.

Barbara is sunshine, Barbara is spring, Barbara brings laughter to the world, not tears. When she left for Cambridge, it was the first move she had made away from home. Joseph and Rachel had driven her there, and helped her to carry her belongings to her cosy little bed-sit in the College. She had been excited, and Joseph had hidden his anxieties and pretended to be as light-hearted as she was. New life, new opportunities, little girl growing up. Barbara is Joseph’s joy.

Barbara’s tears are new, and shocking.

No-one speaks. Only she can break the silence she has created.

“How could you do this, Daddy?”

How could he do it? By growing tired of the nothing new. By quarrelling with his son, by saying goodbye to his daughter, by taking his wife as an eternally given, by marking papers, writing letters, saying good morning and goodnight to Mrs Tanner, organizing seminars with Frank Grundy, squashing smart Destefanos year after year,

and thinking, thinking, thinking of words, structures, processes, breaking them down into black and white, while all around him the kaleidoscopic world is spinning away. How could he do it? By making a discovery.

Only he cannot say this to Barbara. He has barely said it to himself until this moment. Nor can he say to Barbara that his discovery has been darkened by the terrible events of last night. Who cares in this family about Selina's problems?

"I can't explain it," he says at last. "These things happen."

"I thought you had an explanation for everything," says Michael.

"No. I wish I did."

"What are you going to do?" asks Barbara.

"I haven't decided yet."

"You haven't decided!"

This is Rachel, eyes blazing, furrows deepening.

"Don't we have a say in this? Are we supposed to carry on as if everything was normal, not even knowing if you're coming home or not? Are we supposed to ask you if you've had a nice day, when you come back smelling of this girl? How can we talk to you normally? I can't even look at you, Joseph, without seeing a stranger and imagining another stranger."

"Do you want me to move out?"

"I want you to stop seeing this girl. I want you to face up to your responsibilities, to act your age, to..."

She breaks off, as if censoring the next item on her list.

"To what?"

"To be yourself."

And that is the thrust into the heart. All the study, research, analysis, philosophy – what shall it profit a man if he loseth himself?

"He doesn't know who he is," says Michael. "It's an identity crisis."

He has said this to Rachel, almost as if Joseph were not there, and in truth

Joseph himself feels as if he were not there. He is wrapped in some strange garment that isolates him from his surroundings. These people are separate from him, and any connection between him and them is coincidental.

Nevertheless, he hears his own voice respond:

“I’m not proud of myself. I’m having to face up to certain aspects of myself that...”

Now he too breaks off. He has said this before. Is there a machine malfunctioning inside him? Or is he now floating away? He forces himself to stay in the room, at the table, talking to his family.

“I’m causing everyone a lot of pain. But I need time.”

“Time for what, Joseph?”

“To find out what it is I’m looking for.”

“Aren’t we what you’re looking for?” asks Barbara. “I thought we mattered to you.”

“Yes, of course you matter to me. More than anything.”

“How can you say ‘more than anything’ when you’re thinking of leaving us?”

“I’m not thinking of leaving you!”

“So what are you thinking of?” asks Rachel. “Inviting the girl to come and stay?”

What Selina left open, Rachel is seeking to close, and now they are all looking at him. They are waiting for a decision. The strings are being pulled again, but the puppet will not dance. He will not.

“No!” he says vehemently, but they all misunderstand what he is negating.

“Then make up your mind,” says Rachel. “I don’t want to be half of a double life.”

“How can you treat Mum like this?” cries Barbara.

If he makes the effort, he can look at himself from around the table. He can see the daughter’s breaker of illusions, the son’s fallen pontiff, the wife’s betrayer of trust and destroyer of castles. He can feel the disenchantment, the contempt, the bitterness, and he can condemn himself threefold. He has no defence. But what has happened has happened, and Selina is as real to him as they are. How can they expect him to make a commitment now?

“If you leave Mum, I’ll never speak to you again,” says Barbara.

As if such a threat can magically wipe out one half of his double life. But he loves Barbara. He loves them all. Doesn’t he? The girl who has travelled all this way. The boy who sent an e-mail. Rachel, with her darkened hair, her furrows, her fierce protection of what is rightfully hers. He does love them. Surely he loves them. And they have gathered here because they love him, and do not want to lose him.

*When Paris did the golden apple give
To Venus, fairest of all goddesses,
He much offended Juno and Minerva.
Yet who would be the judge of such a contest,
Agnizing that for one immortal friend
He must perforce gain two immortal foes?
Then how the nymph Oenone wept to see
Her husband claim the promis’d prize from Venus
And steal the beauteous wife of Menelaus,
Taking her back to Troy and bloody war.*

“It won’t mean anything to you,” says Joseph, “and I don’t expect you to understand or sympathize, but last night the girl was raped by her former boyfriend. I can’t turn away.”

Michael gasps, while Rachel and Barbara look shocked. Joseph is surprised. Why should they care?

“Is she badly hurt?” asks Barbara.

“Not physically.”

“There was a girl raped in Cambridge last month, and the man stabbed her.”

“Is she on her own?” asks Rachel.

“No, she has a friend who’s looking after her.”

The pattern is new in every moment. Voices, eyes, furrows have softened. Joseph is back with his family, sitting at the table. They are not staring at him, they are not judging him, they are not demanding the all or the nothing. They are thinking about a girl who has been raped.

“Has the boyfriend been arrested?” asks Michael.

“No. Selina didn’t want to go to the police. She thought no-one would believe her.” (He had not intended to mention her name, but it scarcely seems to matter now.)

“If she did go, you’d be involved,” says Rachel.

“That was another reason.”

“She should go home,” says Barbara. “If that was me, I’d go home.”

“She’s unhappy at home. She hates her stepfather.”

Have they forgotten already that Selina is their enemy?

The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops

For the moment, they have stopped weeping. Such is the generosity of the human spirit.

Simon has not gone back to London. He has booked in at a hotel, has rung the office, has slept fitfully, and by afternoon is facing the full torment of his situation. He is appalled by what he has done and by what he has lost, but this cannot be the end. He has to see Selina again.

After Joseph’s departure, Jane stays with Selina. She cooks lunch for them both. Selina is calm, rational, but still unwilling to leave her room. When Jane goes to her own room to fetch something, however, Selina is afraid. And when the light begins to fade, her fear increases even though Jane is with her.

“I wonder,” she says, “if there’s a monster in all of us.”

“Not in you,” says Jane.

“What about you?”

“Yes, I think I could be a monster.”

The knock at the door comes almost as a fulfilment, and Selina stiffens with fear.

“Don’t answer it,” she whispers.

“It’s all right,” says Jane

She opens the door, and knows at once who the tall, brown-haired visitor is.

“Oh!” he says. “I thought...Is Selina there?”

“She doesn’t want to see you.”

“Go away, Simon!” cries Selina. “Go away!”

Jane tries to close the door, but he pushes it open and enters the room.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he says. “I only want to talk. Please! I only want to talk.”

“If you don’t go,” says Jane, “I’ll call the police.”

He raises his hands.

“Five minutes. I promise. Just five minutes. Please!”

Jane stands beside Selina, who sits tensely in the armchair. Simon remains by the door, which he closes behind him.

“What I did was terrible. I just had to see you. I never meant to harm you. I do love you, Selina, and...I’m asking you to forgive me.”

“All right, Simon. Just go. I don’t want to see you again.”

“It can’t end like this.”

He turns to Jane, as if she were a referee.

“We’ve been together for two years. She’s infatuated with some married man. If you’re her friend, then talk some sense into her!”

“It doesn’t depend on me who she falls in love with,” says Jane sharply. “But after what you did to her, I’d say she’s well rid of you.”

“I know. I know. But I’m not like that. I don’t know what happened. But perhaps if you love somebody...”

“If I loved somebody, I would want them to be happy. I wouldn’t rape them.”

Simon looks from Jane to Selina, and then back to Jane.

“Who are you anyway?”

“I’m a friend of Selina’s. You’ve had your five minutes.”

“I want to talk to Selina, not to you.”

“Stop it, Simon!” cries Selina.

“I’m not going to let her judge me! I’m asking you to forgive me, Selina, and not to shut me out. When this thing is over, you’ll realize that I’m the one who loves you. That’s all I’m saying. Don’t shut me out.”

“All right, Simon. I forgive you.”

“Can I write to you?”

“Are you mad?” cries Jane. “Just leave her alone!”

“Selina? Can I write to you?”

Selina closes her eyes and lowers her head until it almost touches her knees.

“No, Simon,” she whispers.

“What?”

“She said no!” snaps Jane. “Now get out!”

“Let me write to you. What harm can that do?”

“Write to me then! Write to me!”

“And you’ll read my letters. You won’t throw them away.”

“Simon, go away! Go away! Go away!”

Now she is screaming. Jane strides across the room and opens the door. Without taking his eyes off Selina, Simon allows himself to be pushed out, and Jane locks the door behind him.

“How could you ever fall for someone like that?” she says. “He’s not a monster. He’s a worm.”

But even as she says it, she thinks of Fafner, the giant turned dragon, that guards the Ring of the Nibelung: *Fafner, der wilde Wurm*. She understands all too well why Selina is shaking. She is trembling herself.

The body too is a monster, straining to break the chains of reason. Michael does not think of it in those terms, because his body is himself and he is not conscious of any division. He is, however, conscious of Jacqueline, and he sees reflections of her everywhere, as he confides to his friend Tony.

“It’s no problem,” says Tony. “Any fucking time you want.”

Michael wants.

“Good morning, Professor.”

“Good morning, Mrs Tanner. Sunny one for a change. Any problems?”

“No, but there was a young man in earlier. Rather a strange chap. Asked a lot of questions. I haven’t seen him before, and I’m sure he’s not one of ours. He said he knew Selina Grant, and wanted to know if you were her professor.”

“Oh! Tall chap with thick brown hair?”

“That’s right. I told him you had a surgery at ten, so he could come back then if he wanted to see you. I don’t know if he will, though. He seemed odd. I wondered if he was on drugs.”

“Thanks, Mrs Tanner.”

Joseph is tempted to ring for half a dozen security guards. If this man did not go home after raping Selina, what might he have done to her now? Joseph curses himself for not having gone back to The Briars last night or this morning. He hastily flicks through the university directory and telephones The Briars. A man’s voice answers, and Joseph asks to speak to Selina or Jane. He is told to wait, because the man will have to see if they’re in. Joseph waits. If the man says there’s no answer, he will go there himself and break the door down.

“Hello.”

“Yes, hello.”

“Sorry. They just said they wouldn’t come, and if your name’s Simon, you should bugger off. Got the message?”

“Thanks. I’m not Simon, but thanks a lot. You’ve been a great help.”

He puts the phone down with a sigh of relief: they're together, they're all right, and Simon is not with them. Now all he has to worry about is himself.

The first student arrives to ask advice about a problem with the Administration. As one goes out, another comes in, and each time Joseph expects to see the giant rugby player bearing down on him with gun or knife or beer bottle, but the hour has almost passed, and still there is no Simon.

A long-haired Scots girl enters.

"Are you the last, Fiona?" he asks hopefully.

"No, there's just one more," she says.

He does not dare to ask whether the one more is male or female.

Simon has let the others go before him. When Fiona leaves, she holds Mrs Tanner's door open for him, and Mrs Tanner looks up with a certain air of misgiving which approximates to one fiftieth of the professor's own misgivings.

"Just go through," she says.

Joseph has already seen him coming. Normally he sits with students in the armchairs over by the window, but now he sits in the chair behind his desk.

"Close the door, please," he says as Simon enters.

There is another safety barrier which Joseph inadvertently removes through a falsely determinate pattern. Simon still doesn't know for sure the identity of Selina's lover. He has guessed, because she had told him it was a professor, but there is still enough doubt to hold him back. Joseph, however, assumes that Simon already knows who and what he is.

"My name's Simon Betts."

It sounds like Macbeth greeting Young Siward with sword upraised.

“I know who you are,” says Joseph. “You’d better sit down. We have a lot to talk about.”

Simon does not sit. He leans on the desk and stares down at Joseph, with bloodshot eyes.

“You’ve ruined her, you bastard. I ought to kill you.”

With a sudden crash, Joseph brings the flat of his hand down on the desk, and leaps to his feet.

“Sit down or I’ll have you thrown out!” he says.

The noise and the movement are startling, and Simon instinctively steps back. Joseph has even startled himself, but he does not let his authority slip.

“Either we talk sensibly man to man, or I’ll have you arrested.”

There is a knock on the door, and Mrs Tanner opens it without waiting.

“Are you all right, Professor?”

“Everything’s fine, Mrs Tanner. Thanks.”

He blesses her, and vows never again to wish her away from the office.

Simon has sat down. He has been crash-tackled from two directions.

“I understand your feelings,” says Joseph, “but you’ve committed a terrible crime. Nothing can excuse what you’ve done.”

“I love Selina.”

“Is raping her what you call love?”

“And what do you call love, Professor? A middle-aged married man seducing a student? I’ve admitted what I did, and I’ve said I’m sorry, but what about you? What’s the world going to say about you?”

“Why have you come here? What do you expect to achieve by this?”

“If nothing else, to expose you.”

“Do you think that’ll win Selina back? She doesn’t love you! You can expose me, and there’ll be a minor scandal at the university, but affairs between staff and students are no big deal. I can ride it out. But rape’s another matter. You go to prison for rape. Is that what you want?”

“I’d never be convicted. I’m her boyfriend, and she invited me to stay the night. She won’t lie.”

“And you will?”

“I thought she wanted me.”

“Didn’t she tell you to stop it? Didn’t she?”

“Women say no sometimes when...”

“So she said no.”

“She won’t go to the police anyway.”

“No, you’re right, she won’t. She just wants to be left in peace, to sort out her own life. Whether that life is with me or not remains to be seen, but it’s no longer your affair. She doesn’t love you. Regardless of what she feels for me, it’s over for you.”

“I don’t accept that.”

“Then look at it this way. If things change again, why would she go back to you?”

“Because I love her.”

“And will she love you for raping her, for taking revenge on me, for hounding her till she’s in terror of you? Is that how you’ll get her to love you again? The man she once loved in you was gentle to her, kind and reliable. He didn’t terrorize her. Perhaps you could even write to her. Become the man that she knew, if that’s what you want – so that she knows you’re there for her.”

- And what’s he then that says I play the villain?

When this advice is free I give and honest,

Probal to thinking, and indeed the course

To win the girl again?

“She said I could write to her.”

“Don’t frighten her. Don’t make her hate you.”

Sweet reasoning, but Professor Lehmann is fighting for his safety here. Who knows what this lover might do?

“You’re planning to ditch her, aren’t you?”

“What?”

“Jesus! What sort of a man are you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Become the man she knew. Be there for her. To pick up your leavings?”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m just telling you to leave her alone and let her make her own decisions. Go back to London.”

Simon stands up, and again comes to the desk. This time he will not be caught by surprise, but nor will Joseph. He does not flinch, and his eyes never leave Simon’s.

“It makes me sick to think of her with an old man like you. You tell me to go back to London. Why don’t you go back to your wife?”

Joseph doesn’t answer, and Simon has no more to say. There is a moment of deadlock, and then with one hand Simon sweeps all the books and papers off Joseph’s desk onto the floor.

“If you hurt her,” he hisses, “that’s what I’ll do to you.”

He turns on his heel, and strides out of the office. Mrs Tanner watches him come and watches him go. He has left Joseph’s door open, and she hurries in to see if the professor is all right.

“Oh good heavens!” she cries, and at once begins to pick up the books and papers. “What’s the matter with him?”

Joseph gets out of his chair to help her.

“He’s a sick young man.”

Mrs Tanner notices that he is trembling.

The fascination of the kaleidoscope lies in its ever-changing combinations. With a single movement, one pattern gives way to another which will be equally beautiful and equally harmonious. This is a rare quality, for in most of life's processes, the dissolving of a beautiful pattern will result in disorder and pain. Restoration is impossible, and the sense of loss is hardly ever compensated by the something new. Death is the extreme example, but a broken relationship is akin to a death.

Joseph Lehmann, The Thinking Read

Tony Marchant's father is going to be out all evening. Tony has invited Michael and two girls from their class to come home with him after school, and they have all said yes. Alison and Vicky are both sixteen, like the boys. They have told their parents that they have a play rehearsal and will be late home. They are always together, laugh a lot, are slightly shy, and have no idea what the boys are planning.

When Joseph rang The Briars, Jane and Selina were in Jane's room, where they had spent the night. They had carried Selina's mattress and bedclothes down the corridor, because she was afraid to stay in her room. She thinks that Simon might do something desperate, and the phone call, which they assume was from him, seems to confirm her suspicions. Going home is not an option, as there would be no comfort for her there, and so she and Jane resolve that if Simon continues to be a threat, they will go to the police. First, though, they will talk it over with Joseph at five.

After the phone call, they decide to go to the kitchen for some breakfast. Jane opens her door very slowly, half expecting Simon to force his way in. When he does not, she peers round the door to see if he is waiting at the end of the corridor. Selina stands behind her.

"All clear!" says Jane, and they both laugh, though it is not a laugh of enjoyment.

They are making coffee and toast in the kitchen when there is the sound of approaching footsteps and female voices. This poses no threat, but it turns into a surprise when two women knock on Selina's door. They have their backs to the kitchen. They are both dark-haired, one wearing a fawn-coloured coat, and the other in red. Jane wonders if they are Jehovah's Witnesses.

"Are you looking for someone?" she calls out.

They both turn, and Selina at once recognizes the older of the pair. She has occasionally seen Mrs Lehmann in the Department.

"We were looking for Selina Grant," says Rachel.

Selina comes to the door of the kitchen.

"I'm Selina," she says quietly. "You're Joseph's wife, aren't you?"

"Yes. This is Barbara, our daughter."

The confrontation sets off a burst of new patterns, impressions and emotions.

Selina finds Rachel severe and is immediately afraid of her. In the given situation, she could hardly feel anything else. Barbara has a sweet and open look. Under different circumstances Selina imagines they could be friends.

Rachel is immediately struck by Selina's beauty, but also by how pale she is. The girl is frightened, which is scarcely surprising after her ordeal. Rachel is not aware that she herself is frowning.

Barbara notices the beauty and the pallor, but also senses a vulnerability that immediately softens her own hostility.

Jane is put out by the intrusion, perhaps because her role has now become unclear.

It had been Barbara's idea to come, although she had no clear concept of what might be gained. Rachel was against it initially, but finally gave way to the argument that there was nothing to lose. *Know thine enemy*. She had rung Frank Grundy, and had asked him where Selina lived. He too had his doubts about a meeting but agreed that it could hardly make matters worse than they were. He knew nothing, of course, about the rape, and Rachel did not tell him.

"Is there anywhere private where we can talk?" asks Rachel.

Selina looks to Jane.

"This is probably the best place," says Jane. "If anyone comes, we'll chase them away. I'm Jane, by the way."

There is a table with four chairs in the kitchen. Rachel, Barbara and Selina sit down.

"We were just making coffee," says Jane. "Can I get you a cup?"

Rachel refuses, but Barbara accepts. Her acceptance is a small gesture of reaching out.

"Joseph told us what happened," says Rachel. "With your boyfriend, I mean."

"It must have been terrifying," says Barbara.

Selina nods. She is looking down at the table.

"He came back yesterday," says Jane.

"God, how awful!" says Barbara.

"I was there," says Jane. "We managed to get rid of him, but he's still around. He rang this morning."

"It might have been Joseph," says Selina very quietly.

"Has Joseph been to see you?" asks Rachel.

Selina shakes her head, still not looking up.

“We told him not to,” says Jane. “We’re going to his office at five. Do you take milk and sugar?”

The coffee is ready, and Jane also brings toast and marmalade to the table. She then sits in the fourth chair.

“Are you going to the police?” asks Rachel.

“We will do if he comes again,” says Jane. “But we want to talk about it first with your husband.”

Rachel finds herself getting irritated. It’s Selina she wants to talk to, not Jane. Selina sits with her eyes down, sipping her coffee.

“I don’t want to be rude, but I do need to talk to Selina.”

“Do you want me to leave?” Jane asks Selina.

“No!”

The response is an appeal, and Selina has looked directly at Jane.

“It’s all right, Mum,” says Barbara. “They’re friends.”

“I need answers from Selina, not Jane.”

“You are being rude,” says Jane. “I’m staying.”

Rachel is taken aback by her forthrightness, but Barbara is impressed. This awkward, studious-looking girl would be a staunch friend and a formidable enemy.

“Perhaps we shouldn’t have come,” says Rachel.

“I think we were right to come,” says Barbara, following Jane’s lead. “We’re all involved. We can at least talk things over.”

“Well,” says Rachel, “where do we begin?”

“I’ll begin,” says Selina quietly.

At last she is looking directly at Rachel, and the older woman is immediately transfixed. The green eyes are almost translucent, and the sunshine through the kitchen window

has lit up the unlined beauty of the face and the sheen of the blonde hair that frames it. The thought flashes through Rachel's mind that she cannot compete with this girl.

"I know what you must think of me," says Selina, "but I never set out to steal Joseph from you. It's something that just happened. But now it can't be undone – I can't want it to be undone. When I was a child, my mother used to say that God was a magician, and I was one of his magic tricks. That's what Joseph makes me feel – the way he casts spells over things so that they seem new, and the way he listens so that you become part of the discovery. I don't think I was ever fully awake until I met Joseph. I love him. I'm sorry to cause you so much pain, but I can't give him up."

It is now Rachel who looks away. It is hard to oppose the appeal of those green eyes, and the honesty of the soft voice.

"You can understand, then, why I can't give him up either," she says. "He's my husband and he's the father of my children. You can't expect me to walk away."

"No."

"Then what do you think is going to happen to us all?"

"I don't know. Joseph will have to decide."

There are little shifts now in Rachel's patterns. She has caught a glimpse of Joseph through Selina's eyes, and the vision has created uncertainty. Has she perhaps unconsciously neglected him? Quite apart from the girl's beauty, could it be that he has turned to her because she understands and treasures an intellect which Rachel has never found quite real? Of course he has discussed his ideas with her, but she has never treated them as anything other than a kind of game. The children, the house, meals, her charity work – these were reality.

"Does he talk about us?" asks Barbara.

"He adores you. He says you're the light of his life. It made me quite jealous when he said it. But he worries about Michael. He says he doesn't know how to handle Michael."

Rachel waits, but Selina does not go on.

"And me?" she asks.

“He won’t talk about you. He’s never said anything nasty about you, ever, but I can’t get him to say that he loves you or he doesn’t love you. It upsets him if I try, and so I don’t try any more. I’m sorry.”

“Of course he loves you, Mum,” says Barbara. “That’s why he gets upset. He loves you both.”

“Maybe he’s just used to me.”

The threat to Rachel’s future is becoming darker by the minute, and the anger of the last few weeks begins to give way to fear. This girl will not let Joseph go. Barbara and Michael will leave home. Then what?

“You could have any man you want...”

But she stops herself in mid-sentence. It would be absurd and degrading to ask for pity, and besides, what has pity to do with love?

Barbara has caught something of her mother’s thoughts, perhaps through her voice rather than her words.

“He won’t leave you,” she says.

“How do you know?”

“He loves you, and he loves us.”

“He loves Selina.”

They all struggle to resolve the unresolvable.

“What do you think, Jane?” asks Barbara.

“Selina knows what I think.”

“We don’t.”

“Someone always gets hurt. In this case, it’ll probably be Selina.”

“Why?”

“It takes a certain type of man to leave his family, and your Joseph isn’t that type.”

“You don’t like him, do you?” asks Rachel.

“I don’t like what he might do.”

Rachel stands up.

“I don’t think there’s anything more we can say, is there? But I am glad we came. I thought I would hate you, but I don’t. You’re a very beautiful girl, and you seem a nice person. I can see why he loves you. But I’m going to fight you. I’m not going to lose my husband or have you break up my family without a fight – you can understand that, can’t you?”

Selina nods.

“I’m sorry if I was rude to you, Jane. I’m under a strain too, though.”

Barbara has not yet risen. She leans towards Selina.

“We don’t wish you any harm. But we love him too.”

Selina looks at her for a moment, then half-smiles.

“I know. And he loves you. That’s what makes it so difficult.”

During the lunch hour at Queen’s College, Tony Marchant has a secret meeting with a sixth-former in the boys’ changing-rooms. The meeting is very brief. The sixth-former takes a packet from his locker and gives it to Tony in exchange for money. They leave separately.

Joseph has been shaken by his encounter with Simon, and he is still afraid for Selina. He resolves to buy her a mobile, though she would probably have switched it off if she’d had one. He decides to go to The Briars during his lunch break.

The girls, however, are not there. He knocks on both doors, calling out that it’s Joseph, but there is no response, and the doors are locked. He has a nightmare vision of two dead bodies,

but quickly dismisses it as lurid fantasy. Someone would have heard the noise of a life-and-death struggle, and the murderer would scarcely have paused to lock the door behind him.

The girls will come at five, and Joseph will have to be patient till then. Normally, he has lunch in the staff refectory at the Senate House, but it is always full of colleagues and he has no wish to see anyone he knows. Instead, he goes to a sandwich bar at the bottom of Surrey Hill, and takes his purchases back to the office.

Jane has persuaded Selina to go into town with her. They cannot coop themselves up in their rooms indefinitely, and in any case they will be far safer in town than in The Briars. They have lunch in a pizzeria.

Rachel and Barbara are also in town. They have done some shopping, and go for lunch to Enderby's – a restaurant with starched white tablecloths and black-jacketed waiters.

Simon Betts is driving back to London. He stops for lunch at a motorway service station.

On the way back to Tony's house after school, the quartet buy a Chinese takeaway, and it is already dark by the time they arrive. There is a lot of laughter as the girls lay the table. Tony finds some candles, and Michael opens a bottle of wine. They are doing things in style. They open the foil containers and pour the food out into different dishes, so that they can sample each other's choice. There is music from the CD player in the living-room.

"This is fun!" says Vicky.

The food is plentiful, as are the stories and the jokes and the exchange of gossip about school and family life. Tony gets Michael to talk about his father's affair, and he does so in detail, omitting only one item from the tale. All the while, Tony is plying the girls with wine, though he and Michael merely sip from their own glasses. This is fun. The laughter becomes louder, and Vicky keeps leaning over and touching Tony's hand or arm. Michael's right leg is resting against Alison's left leg, and she makes no attempt to move.

"Who wants ice cream?"

"Me!"

“Me!”

“Then get it yourself!”

Peals of laughter. The girls bring in the ice cream and dessert bowls, and as they are dishing it out, Tony pours wine over it.

“Great! It tastes great!”

Given: four teenagers sitting round a table eating a meal by candlelight.

Determinate: innocence.

“Put another CD on, Tony. Something soft.”

Given: the girls have drunk far more than the boys.

“I’ve got something special to finish off with.”

“Oooh, what is it?”

“Tell us.”

“You’ll see.”

Given: a packet taken from a changing-room locker.

The girls are drunk, but still aware enough to be unsure about smoking the contents of the packet.

“Come on, Vicky. It’s great. Look!”

Tony sets an example.

“See? Nothing happens. You just feel good.”

He passes his joint to her.

Michael passes his to Alison.

There is the silent suspense of experimentation. Vicky pulls a face.

“Go on! You get used to it.”

Tony laughs loudly, leaning very close to Vicky.

“See? It won’t hurt you!”

Alison has taken a few puffs, and shrugs her shoulders.

“It’s harmless,” says Michael.

“Harmless. Just leaves you legless!” says Tony, and they all laugh.

The boys make the girls smoke all the way through to the end, helping only once or twice, laughing, joking... This is fun.

Then with a wink at Michael, Tony helps Vicky to her feet. She is giggling and clinging to his arm.

“You all right, Vicky?”

“Yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeah...”

They leave the room, and Michael hears them clunking slowly and unsteadily up the stairs.

“Let’s go into the living-room,” he says to Alison.

“Great!” says Alison, but she cannot stand up, and laughs happily at her own weakness.

Michael helps her. They go into the living-room, and he guides her to the sofa. There is enough light from the hall and from the dining-room candles for him to see what he is doing.

“Nice music!” says Alison, and Michael kisses her full on the lips. Then slowly he begins to undress her.

At five o' clock, Selina and Jane come to Joseph's office. They sit in the two armchairs by the window, and Joseph brings another chair across. He sits between them. Mrs Tanner says goodnight to the professor between two students. She does not see a middle-aged man between two young women, or a lover between mistress and chaperone. The pieces are given, the pattern is not.

The girls tell their story first, and Joseph is irritated by the fact that his wife and daughter have acted behind his back. Jane shakes her head. Does he think Rachel's conduct is worse than his adultery?

"Why are women always expected to be more open than men?" she asks.

He tells them about Simon's visit, with its parallels - wife tackles mistress, ex-lover tackles new lover.

They must decide what to do about Simon if he comes again. Joseph thinks he's persuaded Simon to go back to London, and asks whether he has always been so irrational.

"No," says Selina. "But a certain professor told us in relation to Shakespeare's tragedies that extreme situations bring about extreme forms of behaviour."

"I must remember that," says the professor.

He hits on the idea of ringing Simon in London, to check whether he is there, but all he gets is a message on an answering machine.

"What would you have said if he'd answered?" asks Selina.

"Sorry, wrong number," says Joseph.

"We could try his mobile," suggests Jane.

"He could answer that from the corridor," says Selina, and even Jane manages a smile.

They will try the London number again later. In the meantime, Joseph will take them out to dinner.

"Thanks, but I've got work to do," says Jane.

So have they all, but the last forty-eight hours have taken work off the timetable. Joseph and Selina need to spend a quiet, calming evening together, and he will take her to the restaurant of her choice. She chooses Vincenzo's.

Michael has unbuttoned the front of Alison's dress, and slips it down over her shoulders, freeing her arms and her breasts. Jacqueline's were full and round, with huge nipples, but Alison's are small, firm, still budding. He holds them, with the nipples between his fingers, and gently squeezes them.

"Oooh!" says Alison, and giggles.

Next he undoes the belt round her waist. She is wearing tights.

"Can you stand up for a second?" asks Michael.

"Ah ah," says Alison, shaking her head.

"Put your arms round my neck."

"Mmmm."

She does so.

"Hold on."

He manages to lift her, at the same time pulling down her dress, tights and pants.

She collapses again onto the sofa, and he removes her shoes. She is completely naked, and is lying at an angle between the back and arm of the settee, her legs dangling. She is a small girl, slim, with a tiny waist – not like Jacqueline. Her eyes are closed, as if she is waiting for him.

Already Michael's penis is straining against his trousers. Swiftly he takes them off, lifts Alison's legs onto the settee, and pulls her along the seat until she is lying flat. Then he parts her legs, and lies on top of her. She does not resist, but he has difficulty getting into her. She begins to groan. He pushes hard, something gives way, and then he is inside her. He tries to slow himself down (*doucement, doucement*) but the chemicals have taken over and all too soon he feels the juices spurting away from him. All the time she is groaning loudly. He stays

on her, the top of his head pushing against the arm of the settee, and his body presses her down until his penis softens and slips out of her vagina. Still he stays on her, turning his head to one side so that he can breathe more easily.

The groaning beneath him has not ceased, and he can feel her body still rising and falling. Something is not right. He eases himself off her just before there is a loud, gurgling rush and a stream of vomit pours out of her mouth onto the settee and the floor.

“Jesus Christ!”

He leaps back, and there is a second jet.

“Jesus, Alison!”

She is still on her back. She retches again, but this time the sound is stifled – a kind of rattle in the throat.

“You all right, Alison?”

The stench reaches his nostrils, and he holds his hand over his nose.

“Jesus! Alison, you OK?”

There is no answer save for the rattling sound. Michael pulls on his trousers, and rushes out of the room to the staircase.

“Tony! Tony!”

He is half whispering, half shouting. There is no reply, so he races up the stairs and knocks on Tony’s door.

“Fuck off!”

“It’s Alison. She’s sick!”

“What the fuck do you expect me to do about it?”

Michael goes downstairs again and switches on the living-room light. Alison is still lying on her back.

“Alison, you OK?”

She does not move. He takes a step nearer, his hand over his nose.

“Alison?”

He has never seen anyone so white and still.

“You OK?”

Carefully avoiding the pool of vomit, he stands over her and shakes her. There is no movement, no sound. The naked body is limp.

“Oh God! Alison, wake up! Alison!”

A trickle of vomit oozes from her mouth as her head flops to one side.

“Oh Jesus, Jesus! Oh God! Jesus!”

Rachel cannot get her parents’ story out of her mind. The silver-haired old man who was tempted; the wife who said nothing. *Let the old fool think he’d got away with it.* Would that have been a better way? For how long? And supposing the affair blossomed? Blossoms? Has she stopped it from blossoming? With all the confrontations, has she changed anything?

She does not tell Barbara about grandpa, but she does ask whether she should have kept quiet.

“No,” says Barbara, “you shouldn’t have to live with lies.”

There is a section in *The Thinking Read* which is devoted exclusively to the necessity for lies. Sometimes they are called fictions. The author argues, for instance, that nothing in our lives can ever be permanent, and yet if we did not delude ourselves into an assumption of permanence, we and our world would sink into paralysis. He calls this an existential lie, which can be distinguished from philosophical, social, political, religious, psychological etc.

lies, though every one of these underpins our ability to keep functioning. In this context, however, the author does not discuss the necessity for truth.

The boys have got dressed and have put Alison's clothes on her. There was blood on her thighs and on the settee. Tony has wiped it off and has turned the stained cushion over. He then makes Michael accompany him upstairs to dress Vicky, who is asleep. She moans and giggles, but does not wake up.

Michael never stops sobbing, but Tony remains tight-lipped and focused. They are not to say anything about drugs, or about sex. Nor should they mention Vicky.

"The less people know, the better," says Tony.

Only now does he ring for an ambulance.

The story will be that Alison got drunk, they left her on the settee to sleep it off, and when they came in again, this was how they found her.

When the paramedics arrive – a man and a woman – Tony takes them straight into the living-room. The smell is nauseating. They go to the settee, and the man feels Alison's wrist, even though there is no need to do so.

"She's dead," he says.

He asks what happened, and they all go out into the hall, where Tony tells his story.

"Is there anyone else in the house?" asks the woman.

"No."

"Where are your parents?"

Tony explains. With his father out for the evening, he'd simply invited his friends over to keep him company. It sounds plausible enough, and Michael confirms the story, but the woman is frowning.

"Get the police," she says.

The man rings for the police, while the woman asks for Alison's address. Neither of the boys knows it, and so they look in her coat and in her schoolbag. The address is on the inside of the bag.

"You say your mother's dead?" asks the woman.

"Yes."

"Does anyone else live here apart from you and your father?"

"No."

"So whose is this coat?"

Vicky's coat is hanging next to Alison's.

"My Dad's got a girlfriend. She leaves a lot of stuff here."

Michael's face is ashen.

"You all right, son?" asks the ambulance man.

Michael rushes into the downstairs lavatory and is violently sick. The woman goes to stand behind him, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"I'll be all right," says Michael, though he is trembling violently.

He flushes the vomit away, washes out his mouth, and wipes his face.

"When the police come," says the woman very quietly, "you must tell them the truth. No matter how bad it is. Right?"

He looks at her, very frightened, and she nods to him, then they go back into the hall just as the police arrive – again a man and a woman.

The ambulance man stays in the hall with the two boys while the others go into the living-room.

"What's going on?" asks Tony. "Why did you send for the police?"

"It's just routine," says the man. "We'll soon be out of here."

But the ambulance woman has noticed something odd. There is a pool of vomit on the floor and all over Alison's face and neck. But there is nothing on her dress.

Joseph rings London from Vincenzo's. Simon answers the phone. Joseph apologizes for getting a wrong number, and returns to Selina with the news. A cloud scuds away, and the sun shines forth, complete with dimple.

Rachel knows that Joseph will be seeing Selina at five, and is unlikely to be home till late. But where is Michael?

"I think he hates coming home," says Rachel.

Barbara shrugs.

"He's sixteen."

Barbara intends to go back to Cambridge tomorrow. There is nothing more she can do here.

Mr Marchant plays bridge every Tuesday with friends. They take the game seriously, because bridge is a serious game. There's much pleasure and much satisfaction to be derived from outthinking your opponents, and this evening Mr Marchant is deriving a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction. He has no qualms about leaving Tony on his own. They are both used to it. .

Mr and Mrs Swann are surprised that a play rehearsal should have been arranged at such short notice, and is going on so late. They must have a word with the drama teacher some time. Mr Swann wonders if he shouldn't drive to the school to pick Alison up, but she'll

probably be home any minute, and he could miss her in the dark. She'll be with Vicky anyway, and they're both sensible girls.

It's nothing new. Ask any policeman, doctor, lawyer, reporter. The nothing new is the world's end.

The sharp-eyed ambulance woman has alerted the police to the extra coat, and they find Vicky in bed upstairs. When they wake her, she babbles incoherently. Alison's body is transported to the mortuary, another police team is dispatched to the Swanns' house, Vicky is driven home, and the two boys are taken to the police station. Joseph Lehmann is not at home when the police ring, and so it is Rachel and Barbara who go to the police station, where Michael gives his version of events. Mr Marchant is summoned from his bridge party, and is present when Tony tells his story.

The statements are part truth and part fiction. The distinction will become apparent when Vicky sobers up and when the police get the results of the post mortem. Until then, the boys are guilty only of having fun.

It has been a long and difficult day for Joseph and for Selina, but with Simon's departure, she feels safe again. They talk about Beckett and about the conference in Constance, which is only six weeks away. Joseph has written to his friend Hermann Stolz to tell him the title of his paper: BEGINNING AT THE END – Patterns of Reversal in Beckett's Plays . He discusses his ideas with Selina, and they argue about the role of the boy in *Godot*. Is he or is he not a negative figure? The conversation is animated, the minds are alert, the subject-matter complex and important. It was irrelevant a few hours ago, and it will be irrelevant again in the ebbing and flowing.

It is half past ten when Joseph drops Selina at The Briars. They are both tired. He does not want to go home, or to hear Rachel's views on Selina, or to be locked into tensions, even though they are his own fault, not Rachel's or Barbara's or Michael's. Guilt is no comfort.

Nor is the sight of the family sitting round the table. The faces that look up at him are grim, tear-stained, resentful, accusing. He is taken aback. They knew that he would be with Selina – he had told them so last night, hadn't he?

“You'd better sit down, Joseph.”

“What's wrong? You knew...”

“Something's happened. Sit down.”

He sits down, and Rachel tells him the patchwork story of truth and lies: a dinner, two girls hopelessly drunk, one girl vomits, and dies. They've just come back from the police station.

Michael is staring down at the tablecloth. His face is white, and Joseph wants to comfort him, to somehow obliterate what is now given, but he can find no words. The others are looking at him. For a moment he experiences being Michael confronted with his father's “affair” – how does one respond to the unprecedented?

“Where was Tony's father?” he asks.

“Where was Michael's father?” asks Rachel sharply.

Silence would have been the better choice.

“Playing bridge somewhere,” says Michael without looking up.

“You don't seem drunk.”

“I'm not drunk.”

He is sober, and painfully conscious. But something is not right. For all his pity, Joseph cannot stop himself from filling in the gaps.

“How come the girls got drunk then?”

Michael shrugs.

“Was Tony drunk?”

“What's this got to do with anything?” asks Rachel wearily. “It's the girl who got drunk, and now she's dead. Don't start cross-examining Michael. He's been through enough for one day.”

“Tony wasn't drunk, was he?”

Michael looks up angrily.

“No he wasn't. What does that matter?”

The pattern is becoming clearer, and Joseph doesn't like what he sees. Nor does Michael. His father is to be feared.

"I'm going to bed!"

"Michael, have you told us the whole truth?"

"Yes. I'm tired. I want to go to bed."

"Joseph, leave him alone!"

"Do you think the police are going to leave him alone?"

"What do you mean?"

Michael goes, but stops in the doorway of the dining-room.

"You're always judging me! You never let me breathe! But it's all right for you to fuck your students! That's all right – because who's going to judge you?"

He goes, and no-one calls him back.

"You asked for that," says Rachel. "Couldn't you just give him a bit of support for once in your life?"

"You don't understand."

"Don't understand what? He's just had the biggest shock of his life – a girl's died right in front of his eyes, and all you can do is interrogate him. You even seem to blame him for not being drunk!"

"I wasn't blaming him..."

"Yes you were, Dad," says Barbara. "And you were practically accusing him of lying."

"Will you listen to me! For God's sake, try and put the pieces together."

"You're not going to lecture us on gestalt theory, are you?" asks Rachel, closing her eyes.

"I'm not lecturing, I'm trying to explain. Why do two boys invite two girls back to an empty house, get them drunk, and not get drunk themselves?"

The answer is far more obvious than the question.

"Michael says he left her asleep on the settee. So where did he go? Why was the other girl upstairs in the bedroom? You think Michael and Tony deliberately got the girls drunk, put them to bed in separate rooms, and then went out for a walk?"

Rachel and Barbara do not think that.

“And there’s something else. Too much alcohol wouldn’t kill a healthy young girl.”

“What are you saying, Joseph?”

“Just that. People don’t die because they’re drunk.”

There is a moment’s pause before Rachel understands the implications.

“Oh God!”

“What do you mean, Dad?”

“He means drugs.”

“You can’t be sure of that! You can’t be sure of any of it! You’re just speculating!”

“No, your father’s right. None of it adds up. Oh God, though, I hope you’re wrong!”

“I still don’t understand. What difference does it make?”

Joseph takes them through his construct step by step until the picture is complete. His reasoning is flawless.

“Michael would never have planned such a thing!” says Rachel.

“Maybe it was Tony’s idea, but Michael went along with it.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I shall have to talk to him.”

“He won’t talk to you, Joseph.”

“Either he talks to me, or he talks to the police. They’ll come for him, Rachel. It’s better that he should go to them first.”

“Can’t we leave him, just for tonight?”

“Tomorrow might be too late. He’s got to tell them the truth before they find it out for themselves.”

The truth shall make you free, says St John. But what if the truth is damnation?

- Oh God, don’t let them find out. Tony shouldn’t have lied about Vicky, that was stupid, but they still can’t find out. We covered Alison. Oh God, Alison! Oh God, I didn’t mean it. Why did she die? I don’t understand it! Oh God, I’ll go to prison. But we dressed

her. All they know is she was sick, that's all. What did she die of? They'll find that out, but I didn't kill her. You can't kill someone just by fucking them. Fucking isn't a crime, so what have I done wrong? It's only the pot that's a crime. Tony gave them the pot, not me. But it doesn't kill you! That woman knew we were lying. How did she know? It's not our fault Alison died. I don't understand it. What have I done wrong?

There is a knock at the door. Joseph enters, and closes the door behind him. Michael is sitting on the bed, his head in his hands. Joseph sits in the chair. He is surprised that Michael doesn't say anything. Strangely, it seems almost as if Michael wants him there.

“What's happened is terrible, Michael, but I'm begging you now, please tell me the truth. It's the only way I can help you.”

“You can't help me.”

“Let me try.”

“Nobody can help me.”

“Nobody can bring Alison back – you're going to have to live with that. But it might help you just to tell me what really happened.”

Michael raises his head. Is it possible that his father might give him some answers? Might really help him?

“How do you know I'm not telling the truth?”

“The same way as the police will know – only they'll come up with the hard evidence.”

“What evidence?”

“Michael, I only want to help you, not to trap you or judge you. I want to know the truth so that we can decide what's the best thing to do. The truth is going to come out. If you tell me now, we might be able to limit the damage.”

Still Michael hesitates to put the truth into words.

“All right, I'll tell you what I think happened, and you can correct me if I'm wrong. You and Tony invited the girls back because you planned to get them drunk and drugged so you could have sex with them. He took the other girl upstairs, and you had sex with Alison. But something went wrong – maybe the drugs killed her. Is that what happened?”

Michael nods.

“What drugs did you give them?”

“It was only pot. Pot doesn’t kill people!”

“We don’t know what killed her. They’ll find that out at the post mortem.”

“So what crime have I committed? Tony got hold of the pot.”

“You raped her.”

“But she didn’t try to stop me!”

“That was why you got her drunk, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“That’s rape, Michael.”

“Well, your girlfriend’s boyfriend raped her, but you said she’s not even going to the police.”

“She had good reasons for not going.”

“Well Alison’s not going! Oh God! I mean, there’s no-one to say that I raped her.”

“Michael, do you know what they do at a post mortem?”

“Yes. They cut the body open to find out what killed the person.”

“They examine everything. They’ll find the pot and the alcohol, and they’ll find your sperm.”

“I didn’t kill her! I didn’t, did I?”

This is not a question. It is an appeal, and Joseph feels a wave of pity surge through him. The boy is his son, and he is in pain, and nothing in the world can remove the cause of the pain. If ever Joseph needed the wisdom of a father, it is now, and he searches frantically for some angle that will bring the boy comfort.

“No, son, no, it was an accident. No-one will say that you killed her, so don’t even think that. But we have to tell the police everything before they find out for themselves.”

“I’m scared.”

“I’ll come with you. I’ll be there and I’ll help you.”

“Will I have to go to court?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“And Alison’s parents’ll be there.”

“You’ve got to take it one step at a time, Michael. It’s no use trying to look ahead.”

“And what about looking back?”

“You made a mistake. We all make mistakes.”

“Even you?”

“Especially me.”

Rachel opens the door.

“Mr Marchant’s on the phone. He wants to talk to you.”

Joseph stands up, and puts a hand on Michael’s shoulder.

“We’ll go together then.”

Michael gives the slightest of nods.

Mr Marchant, Professor Lehmann and their sons will meet at the police station at half past nine in the morning. There they will a round unvarnish’d tale deliver of their whole course of love; what drugs, what charms etc. were used on the dead Alison and the living Vicky. It will be a difficult morning for all of them, but as Joseph has told Michael, they must go through their punishment one step at a time.

The night is also difficult, but sleep is snatched at odd hours, unbeknown to the sleepers, and when morning comes at last, Rachel – still using the guest room – knocks on Michael’s door. There is no response. She opens the door, and is shocked to find that Michael is not there. Nor has his bed been slept in.

Rachel looks in the bathroom, and then begins to call Michael’s name, but there is no sign of him. Joseph and Barbara come out of their rooms.

“He’s not here!” cries Rachel.

He is nowhere in the house or garden, but his coat has gone from the hall. Has he run away, then?

“What’s he taken with him?” asks Joseph.

Michael has taken nothing. No cases are missing, and all his clothes are in the cupboards and drawers.

“Maybe he just went for a walk,” suggests Barbara.

“It would be the first time in his life,” says Joseph. “Has he got money?”

“Only his pocket money,” says Rachel.

“Look in your bag.”

There is no money missing from Rachel’s bag.

“Barbara’s right,” says Rachel. “He could have just gone for a walk. He’d have taken things with him if he was running away.”

They all wash and dress and fret and pace, but Michael does not return. Joseph rings Mr Marchant. Michael is not there. Tony does not know where he might have gone.

“What did you say to him last night, Joseph?”

“We talked about what had happened, and he agreed to go to the police this morning.”

“He must be scared out of his mind,” says Barbara.

“I said I’d go with him.”

“But he’s the one who has to face them.”

An integral part of the reading process is the relationship between foreground and background. During the flow of the text the reader is systematically manipulated into not only making connections but also into establishing priorities. In the so-called real world, however, there is neither flow nor system, but only an uneven and frequently uncoordinated switch from one level to another.

Joseph Lehmann, The Thinking Read

Rachel and Barbara will stay at home, while Joseph goes to the police. Barbara will not go back to Cambridge, and Rachel will ring Mrs Tanner to cancel all the professor’s engagements. She will not ring The Briars – that he must do himself.

And so the day begins. It is Wednesday, March 1st. On this day, the pupils of Queen’s College learn that Alison Swann is dead. They are told no details, but classmates of Vicky, Tony and Michael notice that all three are missing. Vicky, in great distress, and Tony

make their statements to the police. The media are briefed. Joseph Lehmann searches randomly for his son. After the statements from Tony and Vicky, the police begin their own search.

How does a boy vanish? He can hide, or travel. If he hides, he'll need shelter and food, which he will have to steal or beg for since he has no money. If he travels, he will have to hitch-hike or stow away. Where will he live when he arrives? How will he survive?

“Very often, sir, they come back of their own accord after a few days because it's so rough out there.”

For the police, it's nothing new. Each hour brings its collection of mysteries, heartbreaks, tragedies. The rain pours, the wind howls, and the sun rarely shines.

Michael does not come back after a few days.

The post mortem reveals that Alison Swann choked to death on her own vomit, had taken cannabis and large quantities of alcohol, had had sexual intercourse before her death, and had been a virgin prior to that. Her last moments have been pieced together in their correct pattern, and her parents will relive her death every day until their own. Her funeral is attended by many of her schoolmates, but not by Vicky, who is in a state of shock, and not by Tony, who is in police custody. A sixth-former at Queen's College is arrested, and in due course there will be other arrests as the chain of supply is uncovered. The media keenly pursue a tale of death and drugs at a well-known independent school, and the face of Michael Lehmann stares out of screens, posters and newspapers. Have you seen this boy?

Joseph and Rachel exist, side by side and comfortless. Barbara goes back to Cambridge, and rings every day for the no-news. Selina and Joseph meet and talk, but she is talking to Joseph's shadow. Until the boy is found, the rest of life will have no reality.

- What have I done? What's going to happen to me? Oh God, what shall I do? I killed you, Alison, I killed you. Everybody will know. Everybody will hate me. I shall go to hell and burn for eternity. I'm only sixteen. No, I won't go to the police. I won't go. I don't want to see anyone. I don't want to see Mum and Dad, or Barbara. I want to disappear. I have to disappear. Far away. Far away where no-one can find me. Where no-one can touch me.

They knew that the boy had taken no clothes or money with him. But when he stole out of the house at dead of night, he did take something. It is two weeks before they discover what he took.

As is often the case, the body is found by chance. There is a path alongside the river, and this ends where the land becomes marshy and is filled with reeds as tall as a man. A fisherman out on the river snags his line, rows closer to the bank, and notices a strange looking bundle amongst the reeds. He climbs out of his boat, and wades towards the bundle.

The body is badly decomposed, lying on its side, and in one hand is a small, empty bottle. The fisherman unhooks his mobile, and calls the police.

The Senate House: built in 1954 to house the university administration, finance, security and other non-academic departments, the Faculty Offices, and a staff common-room and refectory. Situated at the top of Surrey Hill, it is eighteen storeys high, and from the roof garden there is a splendid panorama of the whole town.

Nothing to be done. It's over. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. But there's no future. The boy will always be there, between all of us. Poor Rachel. Poor Barbara. I'm so sorry. Poor Selina. Was that happiness? I was alive. But perhaps it was a game. It's over. I'm so sorry. Michael! To hide among the reeds and die alone. What have I done to you all? There's no place now. You'll understand. There is no place.

Joseph takes the lift to the top floor, and climbs the stairs to the roof garden. In winter it's deserted. He climbs over the balustrade, looks down to ensure that there is no-one walking below, then closes his eyes and jumps.

As Selina and Jane come out of The Briars, there is a wailing of sirens, and they see a small crowd gathered outside the Senate House. They cross the road, and see Robert Destefano among the on-lookers.

“What’s happened?” asks Selina.

“Some poor sod jumped off the roof.”

“Oh God! Do they know who it is?”

“No. He’s smashed to bits.”
