



A Novel

JONATHAN LEE

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Acknowledgements

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About the Book

'Did she jump? Did she fall? Will she wake?'

On an ordinary Friday afternoon in the office, talented young lawyer Joy Stephens plummets forty feet onto a marble floor.

In the shadow of this baffling event, the lives of those closest to her begin to collide and change in unexpected ways. There is Dennis, her disgraced husband, who finds consolation in books; her colleague Peter, whose refuge is a mix of hedonism and hard work; Barbara, Joy's prickly PA, who'd be content if only she could get away to New York; and Samir, Joy's hygiene-obsessed personal trainer, who escapes into exercise routines and other, stranger rituals. In a sparkling glass office in London's Square Mile - a place bursting with flirtations, water cooler confrontations and dangerous amounts of abject boredom - each of them is forced to question what they've witnessed, and to face past moments that have defined Joy's life, as well as their own.

About the Author

Jonathan Lee was born in 1981 and lives in London. His first novel, *Who is Mr Satoshi?*, was nominated for the Desmond Elliot Prize 2011 and shortlisted for an MJA Open Book Award 2011. The BBC's *Culture Show* recently featured him as being one of Britain's 'best new novelists'.

Also by Jonathan Lee

Who is Mr Satoshi?

Jonathan Lee

JOY



WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

For Amy

'Happiness is the light on the water. The water is cold and
dark and deep.'

William Maxwell

Act One

DREAM LOGIC

... Do bats eat cats? ...

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

1 a.m.

WHY IS THE door ajar? The front door should not be ajar. 1 a.m. in Angel, fatigue buzzing in Joy's brain like a trapped fly, and the door is ajar. At a certain stage in your life every single thing gets complex.

She checks her BlackBerry. Nothing new. Not since she checked it in the taxi seconds ago. No email or voicemail or text message from Dennis to explain why the door isn't closed. As the black cab that delivered her here purrs out of earshot she runs a fingertip along the teeth of her house key, the house key which is now surplus to requirements, and feels sharp little judgements scissor through her thoughts: irresponsible - unsafe - did this once before - left it open when he went to bed - went to bed with late-night toast - Egyptian cotton and he snacks on toast! A tingling, achey sense of irritation takes over, a state which is exacerbated by the very next thing she notices: a pavement-laid present from Zorro, her neighbours' manifestly incontinent cocker spaniel, a halo of mocking moonlight round its rim.

Lately Joy's been making an effort to suppress expletives but she feels a few floating up her throat now, heat rising to her ears and eyes and lifting a hint of perfume from her skin. 'You're too hard on people,' her father used to say, and she's been working on that, being less hard on others and herself, has resolved to pass her last day alive in a wraithlike serene state wearing her most implausible heels

and treating strangers to generous wide smiles, but now the door has been left ajar, one hour into this final Friday it is noticeably ajar (*wide open*, almost - yawning, *gaping*), and the Atkinsons are unacquainted with the term 'pooper scooper', and the air outside her home is a doggy fog of faecal stink, a stink made cheaply sweet by floral tones from her own perfume, and a deep frown is forming on her forehead which even the wispy silken fringe above and always-shining eyes below cannot make unserious.

She swallows down a *shit* and a *prick*, settles for muttering *tit* under her breath. Calling your husband a tit, watching the word become a tiny vanishing cloud in the January air - it's surprisingly soothing, actually. Already feeling a bit better, standing here. Less woozy. Less of the week's frustrations, its toast crumbs, clinging to her skin. After a period in the office like the one just gone - an absurdly stretched series of meetings flecked with stress and caffeine; sixteen hours of painstaking discussions about food law and what you're allowed to inject into chicken breasts; of not-so-furtive glances at her own breasts by men sporting splayed B cups under clammy jaundiced shirts - it feels like a fitting and blessedly succinct coda to her Thursday: *Tit*.

An animal is passing between parked cars, reddish in the sombre glow of street lamps. Above these street lamps Victorian rooftops wear aerials and a hook of moon hangs in darkness. She keeps her head tilted upward, acknowledging the fact she'll never see the moon again, determined to appreciate its abstract elegance, then hears the soft spinning of wheels - a bike light illuminating the fox's face - and reaches out for the doorknob, tired of lingering in the street, the leather of her handbag flirting with her skirt as she enters the deeper gloom of her home. Her objective for the coming hours? To avoid over-thinking, to execute her plan with methodical calm, a quality her employer, naively deaf to the inevitable acronym,

recognises as a Tier 2 Soft Skill called Conscientious Office Conduct ('You need more COC,' say Joy's colleagues, 'the partners love COC'), but somehow it is not -

Cre-aack.

The sound - what is it? - makes her pause.

There is silence as the moment gathers itself in and then, again, *cre-aack*. Somewhere between a creak and a crack and it - wait - was that different?

Yes.

Different.

Punctuating the *cre-aacks* she hears a noise that carries more air, a ... *woo-wooh*? Almost like the backing vocals on that Stones track, the one Peter likes, 'Sympathy for the Whatsit' - *woo-wooh* - 'Devil'. Odd. Frightening. Only she and Dennis use this front door; the bedsit above their split-level property has its own entrance. She hears nothing from up there, never does hear a thing. This weird mix of two sounds is coming from *her* kitchen, *her* lounge.

Cre-aack.

Woo-wooh.

Probably nothing ... unless ... probably nothing ...

She slips off her shoes and begins to move, in slow motion, down the hall. The air, even with the front door open, is syrupy with central heating. Flushed, afraid, she acquires a highly inflamed sense of everything ahead of her: the dust-green rug, the shadowy walls, the balled fuzz under the radiator. It makes no sense to be scared. *Cre-aack*. So what if a psychopathic burglar jumps out and takes her life? He'd be saving her the trouble of taking it herself. *Woo-wooh*. But if he hurt her, only hurt her ...

Hesitates. Thinks about turning back. Wake the Atkinsons up? Return with Zorro?

Then, in the midst of this hesitation, a surge of self-hate: come *on*; the approaching hours are about courage; the Atkinsons are *Latin teachers*; Zorro's only frightening feature is his bum.

One step, two steps, three. Beyond the kitchen doorway now so the sounds are coming, must be coming, from the lounge. She pauses again. Focuses. Calls out Dennis's name. It arrives as a thin rasp, a match flare in vast darkness. She considers unplugging the lamp. Make it a weapon. Where is her tennis racket? Her tennis racket is normally under the table which holds the lamp that in the absence of the tennis racket may be the best weapon she almost has to hand.

Cre-aack.

If she survives this encounter with the intruder, but nonetheless finds he has stolen her tennis racket, then she will miss her lunchtime tennis game.

Woo-wooh.

Which would be far from ideal, since it was due to be the final tennis game she would ever play, and with finality comes ceremony, and although Joy is on the whole an authentic and unpretentious person the trappings of tradition - the precedents, preambles, kind regards and chauffeured cars that constitute a career in law - have made ceremony a part of who she is. And she is Joy, still Joy, despite her doubts of late - the niggling sense that she's in the wrong skin, that even her feelings are borrowed or false.

With adrenalin blundering through her body she finds her attention snagging on the puzzlingly banal question of whether, if the burglar takes her racket (but not her life), she should cancel tennis with Christine, should instead do a final gym workout with her personal trainer at the office, but she had hoped to be in the company of a friend and she doesn't want in any way to disappoint a friend who has been as good to her as Chri—

—*A-AACK.*

Louder now, and the volume brings unexpected clarity, the two sounds less tangled than before, and Joy thinks, Joy concentrates on the present problem, and finds it funny,

really quite funny, that one sound should seem so breathily human and the other more like a piece of furniture sort of creaking and - could it be -

She feels, somewhere in her fear-fogged brain, the silent glide of a fresh idea.

WOO-WOOH.

The noises. The noises are. The noises are surely something to do with Dennis's new fitness thing.

She exhales. *Jesus*. All well. *Christ*. Ever since he took his sabbatical from the university, Dennis - safe, dependable Dennis - has been spraining muscles in front of fitness DVDs, sipping drinks that have the consistency of wet cement. Older men. They should come with a health warning. He was young enough when she married him, but no one explained that the gap would seem somehow to grow, that for men past forty every year is a dog year bringing flatulence, paranoia, regular naps and vigorous barking up the wrong tree.

CRE-AACK.

Joy has formed the mental picture now: he will be doing some kind of ridiculous late-night breathy I-don't-look-forty-five *woo-wooh*-ing midlife-crisis tricep dip with his heels digging into the costly carpet and his weight leaning back on the *cre-acking* Jacobsen sofa and she can live with this scenario, she can tolerate it, for it is a scenario that does not involve her going to the trouble of unplugging the lamp and murdering a burglar hours before Hanger's attempt to present her with partnership, ask her to sign the papers, try to take from her a capital contribution, tie up her finances, make the business of dying as tricky as the business of living has, with relentless quiet persuasive force, proved itself to be. She wants to go as planned, in the afternoon, on the anniversary of the day her life most fully fell apart - with the least fuss possible, with hardly any fuss at all.

In the tempered darkness of the hallway a memory starts to flicker. Sees herself, and her nephew, in a tent. A tent pitched in the middle of the dining room in her previous home, hastily assembled on the carpet in the hope it would make the child's bottom lip wobble less. He was missing his parents, wasn't he; camping with friends in the South of France. As both babysitter and tent-pitcher she found she had a lot to learn. Designed to be a free-standing structure, it nonetheless needed improvised guy lines to remain in place - lengths of string tied to bookcases and table legs which went periodically slack as, excited by the torch beam Joy rolled around the sloped walls, the child unsettled the fibreglass frame. 'Auntie Joy can I perform the torch?' he said ... those words or words like them ... a curious precision to his question. His role as a tiny god controlling light and dark made him giggle for a while but soon, growing bored, he asked for more cereal ...

Motionless amid the continuing *cre-aacks* and *woo-woohs*, exchanging stares with a pair of discarded glasses on a console table, her own fear has segued into boredom. Nothing more dreadful than discomfort awaits her, the aggravation of debating unlocked doors and early-hours exercise. The cycle of fault-finding and grumbling is loathsome yet habitual, somewhere safe she can snuggle into. It's the same with Dennis's exercises, she supposes. He is doing them before bed because they whittle the day down to a manageable scale and shape. And there are worse habits, if she's honest. Take the guys at work, guys who'll probably sneer when she's gone (Couldn't cope! Too much pressure!). Guys like Peter, who likes to end each day gazing in that mirror by the burly Coke machine, his self-regard so intense you can almost *hear* it sometimes, a waveband fizz, a twiddle of excited static. At least Dennis doesn't do mirror-love, is merely trying - in a vaguely manly fashion - to keep fit.

As verdicts go, 'tit' was perhaps a little harsh.

Except that. This is strange. As she leans her head forward and relaxes her posture, to squint past the glasses and the table edge, into the submarine light of the lounge, something new comes into view. A scrap of material on the carpet, its colour muffled by shadow. And is it - are those - *knickers?*

Peter

IF YOU WALK down the same corridor for a hundred months, hearing the sound of tapped keys and sipped tea, you know something about what it is to feel safe. Even a man of my vision and experience would be forgiven for seeing the office as a sanctuary, a place where the wider world was both abbreviated and improved. Beautiful women. Pleasant furnishings. A range of enjoyable biscuits. Yes: Hanger, Slyde & Stein was - until last Friday - a kind of paradise. And I'll tell you the really troubling thing: when it all goes wrong, when colleagues start to do horrific things to each other and themselves, their appearance remains the same. As people become monsters, they grow no horns or extra eyes. No. They stay perfumed in pencil skirts.

What's that?

Oh, I see. Skirts, suits, kilts - I was making no distinction. I met my wife here, and more to the point Joy, so it's not as if I have anything against the firm's female contingent. Have you heard anything about Joy, by the way? About her condition?

Naturally. Say no more. I'm no stranger to confidentiality. Although, to let you in on a trade secret, at Hanger's confidentiality is considered against the public interest. Law firms are networks of people who want to digest every tiny private detail. The appetite for

humiliation, for the finer points of a disgrace or discomfort, is particularly great. In 2008 a camera-phone clip was circulated of Nigel Beast dozing off at the Annual Partners' Dinner. His head bobbed over candlelit petits fours and in an instant his famously frenzied nasal hairs, full of the kinks and curls of gift ribbon, caught a naked flame. Like a firework, people said. Like a Catherine wheel. Your average bystander is pretty loose with their imagery, but you get the idea. Nigel Beast's charred button nose was the talk of the office for nearly a year. Committing an embarrassing act at Hanger's meant Doing A Beast right up until spring '09, when a woman in Real Estate was discovered naked, in the ladies' fourth-floor lavatories, allowing a gym-built reprographics assistant to snort coke off her clitoris. Nobody is amused by what happened to Joy, of course. That's not what I'm saying. But the incident is still public property. It is Beastgate, but with more blood; Clitgate, but with less blow. Good employees, like good citizens, are curious. They will talk it over. They will get their story straight.

I must admit, I was a little intrigued to meet you. You see all these American programmes - do you have a chaise longue, at least, in your normal office? - but you don't expect your firm to bolster its occupational health function like this. In the spirit of enquiry, I thought I'd be the first to come and say hello. Ease you in with someone senior and sane. I'm afraid Friday has left some employees, and of course Dennis, two snacks short of the full picnic.

Dennis.

No one's told you about Dennis?

They may have! They *may have*. You really are taking this privacy stuff seriously, aren't you?

For the avoidance of doubt, he's Joy's husband. The sort of boarding-school toff who belongs in Parliament, though in fact he's housed in another fossilised institution: academia. He was here when the incident happened, and -

wink twice if I'm right - the firm has made your services available to him as well as us? They called him in yesterday to impart that news, and afterwards, stirring coffee in the kitchen pod, he cornered me with one of his monologue moans about the CCTV footage doing the rounds. I tried to explain to him that it's only natural people will be curious. Did she jump? Did she fall? Will she wake? I told him, these are all valid questions.

You're not sure they're valid, or you're not sure they should be asked?

But of course. Everything in life depends on your perspective. Even the most niche activities - using vegetables to sodomise a loved one, for example - depend on your perspective. But does unremitting relativism advance the argument? Does it get us any closer to understanding why the curt courgette, the prim parsnip, might be considered arousing?

Well, no, he didn't take my comment well. There was this tense little pause in which I fancied I could hear Damon Turner from Finance burping. Damon has a way of adopting a wide-set posture when he feels one coming, making it a kind of performance. But I ignored the quality of both the foreground pause and the background belch and continued in my attempts to explain to Dennis how a big law firm operates. This is one of my abilities, you see: effective expression under pressure. I sit in the Disputes team, but my specialism is on the insolvency side. Do you know any insolvency lawyers, at all?

No. I thought not. But, if you did, you'd know that we tend to live on the brink. I get involved just as companies are going under. Board members are panicking about the present, shredding the past and shielding their behinds from future claims. My job is to drill down into pressure, risk and the reservoirs of lies in which true testimony lurks. There's an addictive creativity to deceit - if you doctor one

detail you'll alter the adjoining - so the reservoirs can be pretty deep, and interconnected.

When I got back to my room after the awkward exchange with Dennis, the lovely Jess, my trainee, was absent. That left me free to unzip Peter the Great and hang him under the desk. He likes to get some air, plus it helps me relax. One thing about sharing your office with a hottie: you can't always completely relax. When I'm on my own, and a little excitable, it's fun to see how many elastic bands I can hang off the big man. Personal best? One hundred and twenty-nine. The thick type from the third-floor cupboard, naturally. The other somewhat amusing thing is to hang bull clips from your ear lobes, but you can only really do that after five, when the secretarial bay has emptied.

Tiny Tony O turned up at my door. There's no public-school irony in his name. He's an official midget. In addition he is possibly gay and definitely Asian - an HR wet dream. He delivered one of his little interrogations, but I won't trouble you with it. I can see you're the type that's easily shocked and, anyway, that's not what we're here to talk about, is it?

Whatever I would *find helpful*? My word, you do have a strange turn of phrase. I think I'm going to call you Doctor Odd. Does that strike you as a satisfactory nickname? Doctor Odd?

Well I doubt Doctor Who was either, but the name still stuck. Here's roughly how it went. You'll have to excuse me, voices aren't my strongest suit.

Oi oi, Tony said, did I miss her? Shitty shitty bang bang, must have missed her. Was looking for the Jessmeister and all I get is you. Doing some work for me on the nuclear project, the one where the plant got security guards from the care home. Things are getting uggggg-ly. Keen for the Fox after work? I heard Sutcliffe's had the heave-ho. You didn't hear that from me. He hasn't heard yet. Who knew

they'd sack more Seniors even with the good Joy Stephens in a coma? Man I miss those teeth around the place. Nothing better in life than a set of perfect teeth. You know they're getting some junior barristers in on secondment? Last thing we need is those wankstains in their wigs and shawls. I really need a holiday but I can't see how it's going to work with this nuclear thing exploding. My stomach, man, swear to God the canteen food's getting worse, the sausages, those sausages, tried to tell me it's firm policy to serve them medium rare! You've probably heard about Kennedy. You must have heard. Which reminds me, he reckons he's next in line. Personally I can't see Mental Brian letting him go while the tobacco thing's still smoking. God, Kennedy's a bell end. Un-be-lievable. I've got to admit, Peter, that tie works well with the shirt. If I don't get some time off soon *I'm* going to throw myself from some place tall. The fact is Jessmeister's a flirt and you're a married man. Have you heard anything about me, you know, my future?

I stayed silent.

Anyway, Tony said, how's it hanging?

An ironic question, Doctor Odd, if you consider what I had going on under the table.

Not bad, I said. Busy?

Intensively so, he said. By which he meant *I hope to avoid the next round of redundancies*.

Me too, I said. Bent over on Project Poultry, completely shafted. By which I meant *My discomfort is palpably sexual, my superiors want and desire me, I have a job for life*.

Then things got really tricky. He asked how my wife, Christine, is coping. She and Joy are close friends, you see. We all started here together. The three of us were one happy family, until Friday. Happy in the dysfunctional way familiar to most families. And the thing that really irritated me with the questioning which followed was the implication

that ... Anyway, that's the sort of thing Tiny Tony said. An impressionist sketch, if you will. Luckily he got bored of quizzing me and took himself over to the secretarial bay, to watch Olivia Sullivan filling the colour Laserjet with paper. Everywhere you go there are girls leaning, bending, kneeling, crouching. If they let you out of this makeshift therapy room you should have a wander round. In every cubicle and stairwell, every kitchen pod and corner office, you'll see magnificent nipple-shadows through tight white shirts. As I said, it's a kind of paradise, until it's not.

Well, what I mean is this. Ever since what happened last Friday, it's become clear that a lot of people around here have something to hide. Particularly that Asian chap from the gym, and Barbara, and even Dennis - people who *may have* been asked if they'd like to partake in these ... what would you call them?

Chats! Ha! I like you more and more, I really do, your humour is positively postmodern.

My point is that the three of them, if you watch the CCTV closely, are the first to move towards Joy's body. It has only been about two seconds since we heard her bones crack on the marble, but already they're weaving through the crowd to get close. And on the shaky black-and-white footage their heads are already down, as if they are not just afraid but ashamed.

Me? I was moving too, I suppose, champagne glass in hand. I was feeling very strange. I hadn't seen it coming. This was the day she was to make partner at Hanger, Slyde & Stein. Strong-willed, successful and modestly wealthy, arguably the most talented and attractive woman in the Disputes team. On a stone floor, no signs of life.

In the days since it happened I've heard people say that, even before the fall, there was a blankness in Joy's face. They say the thud was like a bass drum in their brains. They say her features looked vague and undefined. And

they say she seemed like a broken chair, lying there: designer furniture for a cleaner to clear.

They make this stuff up, of course. But the more they put the experience into words, the more elaborate the shared memory becomes. This is a problem with Londoners, don't you think? We talk so much shit just to get along! We can't bear for our fears to recur in isolation, so we get together, we discuss. We endlessly analyse that unspoken something in her eyes as she addressed the crowd, the unfocused pain or purpose in the pupils - the fear of a wasted existence, or the thought of what to have for tea. Unceasing interpretation. Murmured consensus. Sonorous stories. No offence, but I find that kind of care-and-share psychological masturbation incredibly tedious. And that's coming from a man who is really rather fond of -

Do I think it was a suicide attempt? Personally, you mean?

I know for a fact she was working past midnight the night before. She had, in truth, been doing those hours for several weeks. She was overworked, but then we all are. So her personal life must have played a part. Sometimes when you come home from a day's hard slog it's a little thing at home - the sleeping pills are finished, the milk is off - that sends you lurching into some dark corner of yourself. It's a point I've thought about, naturally. The question of what happened when Joy finally got home in the early hours of that Friday. Something the police and press will do, I suppose. Try and reconstruct that last day from the beginning, right through to the 5 p.m. fall.

Is that clock right?

Really?

I've got to attend a Senior Associate Forum on how to bring more women into the partnership. Ones who aren't comatose, presumably. It's part of a diversity initiative.

No, I said *diversity*. The firm's new word for Shit We're All Men.

You're like my trainee, Doctor Odd. A non-stop note-taker. Except you appear to prefer loose-leaf. Personally, I'd worry about the pages getting muddled. I'm terribly keen on structure, you see.

Where do you stand on elastic bands?

1.10 a.m.

'WELL THIS MUST look bad, Joy-Joy. Not that I, well, I do to a degree - yes - admittedly this must look bad.'

Dennis says this standing, hands on hips, head slanted to see her.

'I mean to say, I recognise this is, somewhat, a departure from the norm.'

He says this naked, except for the socks on his feet, and the condom growing slack on his penis.

'She turned up, by she I mean, ha, this very lady still crouching ... and we were just having an innocent drink to pass the time (it would have passed anyway, of course, goes without saying, gin and tonic and lime), but you'll excuse my imprecision in situations such as ... and you'll see I have somewhat accidentally -'

'Tripped dick first into her vagina?'

His Adam's apple bounces to accommodate a swallow. 'You have a way with - always did - words, but what I was going to say is that we -'

Bastard. Not listening to this bastard. Standing there explaining with his buttocks clenched. Pouchy-buttocked bastard with his girl in the living room. Nubile girl on all fours on the Jacobsen - the Jacobsen! - shiny hair dangling down like the leaves of some nice thing, tree, nice young sun-soaked birch tree, and her buttocks all firm, faultless, poised beneath the bastard's pelvis and that yuk Jesus black banana thing lodged inside her and him still trying to

explain as the condom yawns - harassed, wrinkled, ready for retirement.

'You are um,' he continues, 'staring at this lady's ... rear, Joy-Joy, sorry, sorry, shouldn't keep using our real ... Rude to stare, and all that, ha ha.'

Joy knows that all objects of desire look vile when the appetite's not right - oysters are gloopy hellish things when what you want is cake - but she's always considered dildos to be, from all angles, repulsive. The girl's litheness makes this one seem particularly sinister: a torture instrument, or the oversized valve on an inflatable doll. He's not into doll-sex yet, but interrupting an affair with plastic and air would be preferable to this distinctly human betrayal. She has never been a slave to the conventional rules of relationships, but witnessing this, the final phase of their dissolution, is making the furniture twitch and gleam to the cadence of her own pulse.

'Um, darling? Perhaps you could throw those knickers over and this girl can, perhaps, move from this position and cover her bottom?'

'I was comparing it to your bottom,' she says, adrenalin flowing into aggression. 'Looking fat, of late.'

'Fat?'

'Piggy,' she says.

'Right,' he says.

'A series of fleshy sacks.'

'Ha! Even with the workouts, you're saying.'

'Mini-buttocks and maxi-buttocks.'

'Hm.'

'Chinchilla-like.'

'Chinchilla, right, as in the -'

'Pet. Fleshy. Overgrown. Grey.'

'Yes. Yes I see. Comparing your husband to a crepuscular rodent, that's ... I'm *sorry*,' he says.

The apology, modest though it is, satiates some of her hunger for a brawl. Objects are beginning to lose their

liquid glint; settledness is returning to the room. Does she want to end five years of marriage with a fight? She's fond of him like you're fond of a well-worn dress - after the shimmer and tease have gone, it is fully yours, hem-stain and all, making up in familiarity what it lacks in fun - but now he goes and spoils even that, starts breaking the rules, makes her feel stupid, stupid for not linking the *cre-acking* and *woo-wooh*-ing to their secret Thursday-night habit, the ritual which while shameful is supposed to be (crucially) shared.

Still patiently poised on all fours, the dildoad guest breaks her silence. Her words come in the lulling voice of a pro who could do this in her sleep and occasionally probably does: 'Would you like to settle up now, guys, or is this part of the game?' In one smooth movement that stretches the skin across her ribs she unplugs the dildo to the tune of a disturbing slurp and takes a seat, knees together and feet apart, arms mirroring this coyness so the four thin limbs make a letter X.

'Darling,' Dennis says, ignoring the interruption, 'fancy a G and T, perhaps, as a peace offering, darling? We have chopped limes and ice over there.'

'On the Noguchi coffee table. Thank you for that. Thanks. You were supposed to cancel her, Dennis. Awful day, you know, hectic. I thought you were a burglar and then ... I thought it was your exercise routine.'

'Well, in a way -'

'Don't.'

'It *is* Thursday night, you know. This is our night, Joy-Joy.'

'And if one of us wants to cancel?'

There is a pause, his eyes catch the melting ice, and as if softened by this sight his voice returns quieter than before. 'That's the rule. I know that's the rule. And I did try to cancel, once I knew you had all that stuff going on with your case. But I didn't get round to it this afternoon, Joy-