



VINTAGE

# MÉNAGE

EWAN MORRISON

# Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Ewan Morrison

Title Page

Epigraph

Introduction

1. *PlayBoy*, 1992
2. *Negative Leap*, 1993
3. *Name Game 3*, 2004
4. *Leg Show*, 1993
5. *Trust*, 1993
6. *Watch Over Me*, 1997
7. *Walking Blind*, 1993–2004
8. *Trust 3*, 2001
9. *Untitled*, 2009

Acknowledgements

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## About the Book

It's the '90s and Dot, Saul and Owen are living together on the fringes of the Hoxton art scene - shoplifting, dole-scrounging, swapping drugs, clothes and beds. Fifteen years later they are drawn back into each other's lives but can they happily relive the past or will they rekindle the passions that nearly destroyed them?

## About the Author

Ewan Morrison is the author of the novels *Swung* and *Distance* and a collection of stories, *The Last Book You Read*.

Also by Ewan Morrison

*The Last Book You Read*

*Swung*

*Distance*

*Close Your Eyes*

EWAN MORRISON

# Ménage

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London



## *Ménage*

Pronunciation: Ma'nazh

Function: Noun

Etymology: French, from Old French – *mesnage*, dwelling; from Vulgar Latin – *mansionaticum*

A domestic establishment; Household;  
also Housekeeping

See *Ménage à trois*



I just point my camera at people then they do things they wouldn't normally do, I suppose. Even when I film myself, it stops being me. I don't really think of myself as an artist anyway. I'm probably at least three people in one body. I mean, sometimes I'm a guy and other times two guys or three girls or . . . I don't know, I just don't buy into this big artistic genius thing. It's sick. Who wants to be stuck on that pedestal? I'd die of loneliness.

Dorothy Shears, 1999

Dorothy Shears

**nine works**

*Video installations, 1992-2009*

# introduction



**Trust.** 1993. Video installation. 32 mins. Variable dimensions. Private collection.

THE NINE WORKS here form an intrinsic part of the iconography of what came to be known as the Young British Artist (YBA) scene, a period that started in 1992 and endured for almost fifteen years. Many of the artists from this 'movement' are now represented in major international art collections, with their works commanding impressive sums. As the movement has received institutional acceptance, however, it has inevitably fallen into decline.<sup>[fn1](#)</sup> Dorothy Shears is one of the few key artists to have survived the collapse of the YBA brand and to have consolidated her status.

The typical image of the YBA was that of grungy cockney post-punks living in squats, making thrown-together streetwise art in rebellion against Thatcherism and Consumerism.<sup>[fn2](#)</sup> Shears does not fit that prescriptive schema, being from a different class background, but her work shares many common features with her peers. Being made with 'cheap throwaway materials', in her case domestic home video, it crosses over into the realms of installation and performance art, and was originally made for exhibition in backstreet Dockland and East End warehouses.<sup>[fn3](#)</sup> Graduating from Goldsmiths College within a few years of Hirst at the time of what was to become Britpop,<sup>[fn4](#)</sup> the hype machine was quick to pull her into its orbit.

Some claim that Shears's initial success was a product of 'Van Gogh syndrome',<sup>[fn5](#)</sup> with much tabloid hype being made out of the speculated history of her mental health. But unlike several of her peers, Shears has carefully protected her past from the public eye.<sup>[fn6](#)</sup> Against the ironic zeitgeist of her time, Shears created intimate, personal works that were in many ways a record of her own artistic 'becoming' in a secret coded visual language. As such, her

work survives beyond explanation and plagiarist reproduction in the many forms that have attempted to exploit it across the years.[fn7](#)

The following discussion of the nine works sets out not to analyse or explain, but to pay respect to the enigma of the works and the woman herself. As she has, throughout the years, invited viewers to lay aside judgement and trust her, so I too beg you to close your eyes, and enter the darkness with her.

Owen Morgan, 2009

THE LANDLINE IS ringing. It should not be, not outside working hours, not ever without warning. He has taken great care over the years to keep his number from everyone, apart from the editor and the picture desk, going ex-directory so that the artists whose work it is his work to destroy cannot trace him.

It is still ringing.

Friends are few and all know that acts of spontaneity will be ignored. It could only be his mother or ex-wife. But his mother seemed well enough when he called for his quarterly check-in and the ex no longer calls. It could be a fuck-buddy, but they always ring his mobile as is his rule.

Still it rings. It must be to do with the image. It is everywhere: on the tube, fly-posted twenty feet across, in the pages of the *Guardian*, the *Telegraph*. No escaping it. This advert for this exhibition with this photo of a man's face in obscene sensual agony. They have been ringing and emailing – the gallery and the agent – asking him to return their calls and emails, to consider writing the text for the catalogue for the international touring show by Dorothy Shears. What they don't know is how that image has almost forced him into hiding this past month. Of how that obscene sensual face in that artwork from 1993 is his own.

It keeps on ringing so something must be wrong.

He has his rules; if he picks it up he knows the night will be ruined. Tonight was going to be the one, which so rarely occurs, when, having found time away from the work he's paid to write at a certain number of pence per word, he would commune with self and attempt to write his diary or a poem or a critique of this or that advert or image or any other damn thing that's invaded his privacy and reminded him that there's no escape from images.

The usual ritual had been gone through. The second gin and tonic and the bottle in the freezer ready for the top-ups if inspiration hit. Radiohead on repeat. The secondary plan, if words failed, was to check in on CANDYGIRL. She might be in her bath, or bed, or at her PC and he would instant message her. She is the only person he allows to chat to him at night. She knows him as Nocture9 and he pays eighty-nine US dollars per month for the privilege of watching her 24/7 on her four webcams. He would put on the used pink frilly girlie panties he bought from her which she mailed FedEx and touch himself as he watched her touch her tight firm eighteen-year-old body in her student flat in Los Angeles. These were the limits of his deviances now. There are mental techniques for their control.

But it will not stop ringing. He does not have an answer-phone because it only encourages them. He could turn the ringer off but still the little red light would keep flashing on and off, and in the reaching, he might, after the G&Ts, upset the handset from its cradle and then the caller would hear him pick up and know he'd deliberately hung up and so it would start again. Pull it from the wall then. But he is unsteady on his feet as he reaches for the plug socket and already enraged over so many things. And the fucking world will not go away no matter how strict you make the rules, so he picks it up and shouts: 'Who the hell is this?'

A male voice saying 'Owen. Owen Morgan. Hey, it's me.'

'I'm going to hang up. I have no idea how you got my -'

'Chill, man, it's me . . .' (cough) ' . . . Saul.'

(Silence.)

'Freaking you out, eh? Sorry, been a while. So how you doing?'

'Sorry . . . Saul . . . how did you . . .?'

'Hey, buddy, yeah, they're doing Dot's show on telly later, just wanted to let you know. You going to review her show?'

'I don't think so.'

'You ever see her around . . . galleries and that?'

'No . . . Saul, so what are you . . .?'

'*Late Review* tonight. Just thought I'd let you know.'

'Well . . . thanks.'

'Piece in the *Independent*, couldn't believe it, one of the old videos, how did that happen eh? Picture of you. Saw it on the tube.'

'Look . . . could you give me your number? I'm kind of in the middle of something right now.'

'Sure, yeah.' (Laughter.) 'The fucking Lieder, eh! Who'd have thought, huh? Hey, you going to review her show?'

'No, I try to avoid -'

'I was there, snuck in, her opening . . . man, you should see her now, beautiful. Didn't say hello. Still mad as a brush, her, not . . . she's got a kid too, you know.'

'Yes, I read that.'

'Looks like her mum. Dot - a mum - Jesus! You know with the medication and all that. Wassit called - birth defects - those pills she used to -'

'Saul, it's great . . . you sound well, but it's late and I'm sorry but I've got work tomorrow.'

'Course, course, career man, yup, OK, sorry for calling . . . just wanted to . . . well, to say sorry if I put you down, I was always putting you down. You proved me wrong though, eh? What did I know? Good on you, partner. The *Guardian*, eh?'

'Well, freelance actually.'

'Who'd have thought . . . and Dot, she's quite the artist, eh?'

'Look, if you could give me your number I can call back when I have -'

'You still in Hoxton?'

'Well . . . no, a bit . . . further out.'

'Big place, is it? Amazing the changes, eh? Hope you didn't over-mortgage on a big yuppie place. Amazing what's happening out there, eh? It's all going to hell, man.'



The end of capitalism again, eh? We're all going down.'  
(Laughter.)

'Where are you exactly, Saul?'

'Me, getting by . . . living in Dalston, been here a few years now.'

'Really?'

(Silence.)

'Hey, Owen, fuck, eh? Member that time we watched Bergman what was it? No, no, the one with the . . . no, maybe Tarkovsky, anyway . . . I kissed her, her hand, I mean and . . . it was . . .'

(Laughter.)

'OK, Saul.'

' . . . thought it was hers! It was your fucking hand!'  
(Laughter.)

(Silence.)

'OK, fine, look . . . what can I do for you, Saul?'

'No need to -'

'How did you get this number anyway?'

'You know, I know my place, man, happier than ever, no need to get all -'

'Saul.'

'Never been happier - Jesus Christ, I'm talking to Owen fucking Morgan - you grow that beard yet?'

'Saul!'

'Hey, 'member when she pinched that chicken?!'

'What do you *want*, Saul?'

(Silence.)

'I love you, man.'

'OK.'

'No, I mean it. Just had to say it.'

(Silence.)

'Always have done.'

'OK, thanks for calling. We'll speak soon. Got to go.'

'Love you, partner.'

'OK. Bye.'

He hung up. Seconds then, just staring at the phone. The past coming back to haunt you was an old bullshit lie from movies and therapy. The voice from the past with its apocalyptic overtones. 'We're all going down.'

He resisted the sudden desire to call the ex-wife in Paris. Fuck it all. He needed to fuck. He scrolled through the fuck-buddies on his mobile: Alexis, Angie, Annabel, Beth, Carolyn, Camilla – but then an old Saulism came to him: 'Endless consumer choice masks the fact that there's no choice at all.'

He felt guilt now over his tone with Saul, for having got rid of him so abruptly, for not even having had the politeness to ask how he was, if he made a living, or was in a relationship, had kids even, or ever finished that artwork or written that book. Guilt, for having withheld his address, for having harboured the fear that Saul was lurking, waiting. Looking for a place to crash. Stalker.

He turned on the TV and there was *Late Review*. Dot wasn't there, just the usual three critics in round-table discussion about whether this show was the epitaph for YBA. The post-feminist was saying the early works marked the end of Marxist feminism and the birth of gender fucking. The tabloid nu-lad was saying: 'It's a rip-off, you can find better video stuff on YouTube.' The black Oxbridge academic said he found her work typical of work from the Aids-panic era. The usual round of tediously well-balanced argument but all he could focus on was that image on the back wall behind the critics from that night when Dot and Saul had tied him up and took turns kissing and slapping him. This image now called art. Now called *Trust*.

Images flooded him. He was searching for loose change and shoplifting to eat – waking to find Dot running her cunt-wet fingers over his lips as he slept beside Saul – dancing to Saul's suicidal music – the needle and the blood – the green tube of her intravenous drip – kissing her torn knuckles as she drifted in and out of consciousness –

praying for her to wake and, in time, come to forgive, if she lived.

Stop it. End it again. The images wouldn't go till it was done. OK, he told himself. He would go and see Dot's retrospective, get it done in ten minutes, have it over with, put the past back where it belonged - on the cold dead white of a commercial gallery wall.

\*

Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here - that should have been the sign above our door. It was the Thursday, the week after Black Wednesday 1992, the year of Dot. The stock market had crashed; Communism was dead; Whitney Houston was just about to start a three-month run at number one; and Saul and I were under threat of eviction for our failure to find a co-tenant and our five months' worth of rent arrears. For two years I had endured Saul's self-imposed poverty while he sat and quoted his aphorisms at me ('To confront death every day is the only way to really live!'). I could no longer endure the squalor, but made one last attempt to save myself from the street by putting adverts up in all the local shops. The wording had been his.

### FLATMATE SOUGHT

To share basement flat, Whitmore Road, Hoxton, w/two aesthetes (male). Rent - cheap, conditions - rudimentary. No limits on sex, race or age. Strictly no hoodlums. Only lovers of Wagner need apply. Call 071 338 9865. Ask for Owen.

My brain was so starved of nutrients that I no longer even knew how I'd got trapped there. It was supposed to be a stopover, the lowest rent in London and probably illegal for occupancy. One of the council houses Thatcher couldn't

sell off. The two floors above were totally derelict and our 'basement' seemed dug from the foundations. My window had iron bars on it and a view of the four lanes of Shoreditch overpass. The whole place was dank, dark, fungus-ridden and could have come down at any time, the security door was busted and some moron, or maybe many, used the communal hallway as a toilet.

I returned from sticking up the adverts late in the afternoon and still he had not risen. I stared despairingly into the spare room, knowing we would never rent it in such a state. It was stacked high with three months' worth of bluebottle infested bin bags and had the sickly sweet malodour of a mortuary. I was damned if it was going to be my turn to clean them out, as I had done the task over fifteen times previously, without him lifting a finger.

Damn him, that very day he would have to take responsibility for our situation or I would leave, I told myself, knowing full well there was no way to beat him in the standoffs. He could have eaten from a maggot-infested plate before admitting it was his turn to do the dishes. Hygiene! He often ejaculated with disgust - what has a more filthy history than cleansing? Think of the Nazis and the Serbs!

As I waited for him to wake I prepared my ultimatum speech. Saul rarely woke before 2 p.m. as he generally kept me up till dawn with his drunken plans for 'the most transgressive artwork of our time'. Every day it was the same: he cursed me for waking him, with his smoker's sotto voce, then for letting him sleep so late again, shouting, 'Another day wasted. It's pointless! I'm going back to bed, we'll start again tomorrow.' But tomorrow, I knew, it would be the same. It struck me then that this was what old people did, curling up in bed waiting for death, and saw clearly how it could happen to us both. When Kerouac was our age he'd been driving Route 66. Why were we wasting our halcyon days like this? For what? For art? What the hell

was halcyon anyway? There were galleries starting up around us, but Saul was convinced they were all beneath him. That he'd never even made a start on his great artwork he blamed on the fact that there were no functioning light bulbs in the flat and so we were in almost perpetual darkness.

The kitchen had no windows and the light bulb in there had been the first to blow months back and had never been replaced. As I stood in the doorway, I could sense a squirming in the sink beyond. I had to eat something before confronting him, to get my strength up, but all I could make out among the stacks of encrusted plates was a halved orange skin, scooped out and refilled entirely with cigarette butts, like some sick surrealist artwork.

Vomit rose and I swallowed it, took another Rennie and considered how malnutrition was affecting our judgement. Starvation produces ecstatic visions, he often said, and I knew for a fact that the majority of what passed his lips most days was regurgitated phlegm. For three months we had eaten nothing but pasta with no sauce, not even butter, as he had grown weary of stealing it from Spud-u-Like. The occasional can of beans (stolen) or banana (same). Everything else was spent on his necessary Don Quixote (sherry). He considered my concern over nutrition 'reactionary' and advised I reread the Marquis de Sade, although what sexual mutilation had to do with nutrition I had yet to work out. My gut was aching from, perhaps, liver failure. I sneezed constantly from the spores and had to take Rennie and paracetamol to kill the side effects of the antihistamines. After paying for all the drugs, buying food was out of the question.

When finally I plucked up the indignation to knock on his door, he opened it and struck a dandyish pose, as if he had been waiting all along.

— Yes? What can I do for you?

His appearance never failed to throw me: eyeliner, stubble poking through layers of foundation stretched into cracks around his mouth, high-street girl's T-shirt, far too tight, which read 'BABE', army boots, bare legs and his kimono. That damned kimono. The way his dick would peek out from it occasionally, as if checking whether the coast was clear. The whole issue about sex was very confusing and I had lived those two years without it because every time I tried to pick up a girl he showed great disdain, muttering things like 'Don't forget - all they want is to steal your talent, and you have precious little of it to spare'. Naked bodies disgusted him, and as for sex, he said, 'All that grunting and sweating, it's like doing push-ups till you're sick.' No, I was convinced he was as asexual as he was amoral and our relationship was platonic (although I did once dream I let him sodomise me in exchange for him taking out the bin bags).

He waited in his doorway for me to challenge him, his stereo blaring - *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* - as if claiming Nietzsche was on his side in the pending argument. His breath was already heavy with sickly sweet breakfast sherry.

I was afraid of confronting the eviction issue too directly, so said, — We need to have a big talk, and I can't if you insist on hitting the bottle before breakfast.

He silently drew on the last strand of fag end, staring at the ground before venting his riposte.

— Hitting? The bottle! As you may have noticed our penury has reduced us to drinking from boxes. And if anything is being hit it is me, by the poverty of your imagination!

I knew what was coming.

— Ungrateful peasant. My God, may He rest in peace, it was me that dragged you up . . .

— I know, I know - from the proletarian slime . . . but if we're going to be able to get a flatmate we need to clean

the place and if we're going to clean the place we need to buy light bulbs so we can at least see the extent of the horror.

— Buy? *Buy*? Did you not know they invented a light bulb that lasted for a lifetime but the capitalist bastards decided it would put them out of business? I will not subsidise planned obsolescence! Go forth and procure some by the usual methods!

I protested that I'd almost got caught red-handed last time. There were only so many times I could go to the pub's pisser and replace their live bulb with our dead one. I proposed candles.

— Candles are for hippies!

— Well, if we went to sleep at a regular hour we could wake before it starts getting dark and clean up using daylight; it's free by the way.

— I have my best ideas at night. The dark suits me.

I laid out the cost of light bulbs for him, seventy-five pence from Sadhi's, sixty-five from Woolies.

— Do you have sixty-five pence?

I did not and told him so.

— My God, may He rest in peace, but what happened to your dole cheque?

And so I went through our weekly costs. Don Quixote and Golden Virginia, photocopying and pasta shells. I suggested we roll back the carpet and look for spare change, if not our own then from the previous occupants.

— We did that last month. All is futile. I'm going back to bed.

He did just that and pulled the covers over his head. It must have been 4 p.m.

— For Christ's sake, I protested, are you seriously telling me we're going to be evicted just because you refuse to save up enough to buy a light bulb!

— Money money money, you're like a fucking song by Abba. Why don't you sell your soul and get some real work,

like you really want to, then we could afford all your horrible bourgeois necessities.

Stupidly, I ventured that he might also try to find work.

— Jobs, my dear, are for those such as you, who are scared of a moment alone with one's thoughts. Sustaining idleness is the most difficult vocation of all.

Oh, how he loved to tease me about my little scraps of freelance writing for the *Hoxton Advertiser* – a hack from the Borough of Hackney, he called me. I was not proud of what I had to do to earn a crust and did not know how it came to pass that I paid for everything and was poorer than before. To this day I still have no idea how Saul had managed to stay on the dole for seven years, only hints. Something to do with faking a psychology test and his 'affliction'. He was on invalidity benefit although he was able-bodied, or at least would have been if he for once tried to eat and didn't smoke so much. He said Thatcher invented all these new benefits to bring down the unemployment figures, and even though he decried the welfare state and railed against scroungers and hypocrites, he nonetheless every second week cashed his giro as an invalid. He was, as he said, 'gainfully unemployed'.

I digress. I should be telling you about how I met Dot, but it is important for you to picture the mire she was just about to wade into.

To resolve the crisis over flatmate and electric light, I, as a last attempt, proposed that we go to one of the gallery openings that night – there were many at that time. It was at Dazed and Confused and there would be wine to steal. Perhaps, I thought, if Saul got wasted enough he might help me clean up. Saul, shook his head – I could pinch sherry from Sadhi's much more easily, he exclaimed, so I added the prospect of real toilet paper. While he had often insisted that my complaint over using newspapers for the purposes of anal cleansing was reactionary, I knew that he harboured a secret nostalgia for quality loo roll ('Tabloids



are smoother on the anus,' he'd declared, 'being cheaply made on thin, inferior paper, while *The Times* and *Guardian* do lead to chafing and occasional bleeding. Such is the burden of intelligence.') That was it then: the promise of some pinched Kleenex and white wine had him motivated. As he got dressed I secretly searched my mind for a plan to leave him. I did not for a second really hope or believe that anyone would or could enter our lives and save us from ourselves, certainly not one such as Dot.

*Arseholes* was the name of the exhibition, and it was, quite unexpectedly, a series of eighteen high-gloss cibachromes, about a metre square, of human anuses in extreme, almost medical, close-up. (There was no way the *Hoxton Advertiser* would publish a review, which would leave me twenty quid short the next month.)

I set about locating and stealing the wine bottles while Saul got to work distracting the masses.

— Such a succinct sphincter, he pronounced as he gesticulated before a tight pink arsehole, — but my favourite is the one with hairy haemorrhoids, very Jackson Pollock!

He soon had quite a circle round him. I located a hidden place beside the drinks table, with bottles well within reach. And so Saul stared ranting about Damien Hirst; how he'd first met him three years ago and told him: — Darling, you're flogging a dead horse with this art of yours. Why don't you just in fact exhibit one?

The sheep and the cows in formaldehyde that then followed Saul claimed as his own, to rapturous laughter from the circle.

— He has still to do a horse, though. I think he's afraid I might sue.

I grabbed two bottles while Saul went on. Pearls before swine, he muttered. Pearls before swine. As he threw back a glass of wine I heard him start his old favourite.

— Did I ever tell you about the Duchess, he ranted, — the mistress of Duchamp? She once walked down Fifth Avenue with a corset built from a birdcage, with a live bird inside it!

Bottles stuffed in bag, I snuck to the back and, before heading to the toilet, paused and stuck up an advert for the spare room. On looking up I noticed this girl was staring at me. Quite beautiful in a way, skinny-looking with long mousy hair, not dyed or cropped. Young, privileged, but not hip. Twenty-one was my guess. Flat sensible shoes, not retro heels or Doc Martens like the rest, and an Aran sweater. Something freakish but endearingly geekish about her, profoundly uncool, but still an elegance, the high cheekbones and large sky-blue eyes, a sign of good breeding, a trophy mother maybe. It was not my fault that Saul taught me to read class background from faces. He liked to joke that Dr Mengele was right. Eugenics would be on the pages of *Vogue* soon enough. I imagined her in time lapse, a hundred people buzzing around her in a soft blur of excitement about what's hot and what's not, and her standing so still, staring out at the arseholes.

From across the gallery, Saul nodded to me to proceed with phase two. So I ducked away and headed to the toilet. The process was tricky as I'd made the mistake of swapping light bulbs before attempting to steal the toilet roll and so had to work in the dark with my penknife to open the big white metal thing. (Did they do that to stop toilet rolls being stolen? Were there others like me?) It was a real treasure, though, a whole new roll, about a foot in diameter. It was hard to stuff it into the shoulder sack with the two bottles and the bulb in there already, but the thought of actually cleaning my arse on something other than Saul's stolen tabloids got me through the humiliating process. Then there were knocks at the door and posh voices laughing and I was crouching by the door, listening

like a cat, trying to will the bodies away, feeling rather like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*.

I was out and mumbling apologetically about the damned light bulb that had just blown, as a couple laughed past me and entered together. Coked up, obviously, going for a kinky shag. I searched through the bodies for Saul and the door.

The girl was still there at the noticeboard, in front of my advert, and I realised what a stupid mistake I'd made. How easy it would be for anyone to work out that the guy loitering by the noticeboard had been the toilet thief. My name and address there for all to read. I feared she was maybe the daughter of the gallery owner and was about to have me arrested. She smiled as if with a look of pity, or embarrassment. Anxiety gripped me.

I pushed through the thickening trendies to the exit. Outside and round the corner, I waited for Saul. As my breath calmed and I counted the minutes, I was suddenly crushed by the pettiness of what I had found so all-consuming just minutes before – the theft of a light bulb, toilet roll and two bottles of wine. As I had to pay for both our tickets on the late-night bus and as Saul would consume all the wine himself, I calculated that, even after such entrepreneurial exertions, I was left at a loss of something like forty-seven pence.

As I rested my head against the cold wall and closed my eyes, her smile came to me. And a phrase – 'Alone among the arseholes'. I thought that, as with most things of beauty, I would never see her again.

Five flatmate interviews were scheduled for the day after next, but still the stand-off on the bin bags had not been resolved. To make matters worse Saul had dressed in his most offensive attire to greet the potentials: that wedding dress he'd torn in half to make into a T-shirt – grey with grime – his red rhinestone cowboy boots and a huge beauty

spot over his stubble. — Try to have some common sense for once, I begged, to which he replied, — Sense is far too common for me! I decided it was best he stayed out of the proceedings and had dragged only the first of the stinking bags out of the door when they started arriving.

First there was a lovely, elderly Francis Bacon type, who found it 'all so bohemian' and was dying to meet my 'chum'. Who seemed oblivious to the stench and was just 'so thrilled' about sharing with 'two young aesthetes'.

Saul played the Osmonds and would not open his door.

Then a young German student guy with bicycle clips on his chinos, who arrived just as a bag burst in my arms and I was covered in fungal noodles, and insisted I lower the rent for reasons of basic hygiene and common decency. And Saul played that terrifying album by Einstürzende Neubauten, with the chainsaws as musical instruments. In desperation I did all that I could. I climbed up to the fusebox, and flicked off the power. The sound of his stereo dying. That was it for him, that roused him. I threatened to move out if he did not help me with the flatmate situation.

— Go then, he said, — you'll find nothing much out there, believe me, it's a void.

The doorbell rang again and he turned, flicked the electricity back on and ran back to his room, his kimono flying behind him.

I took a deep breath and opened the door. It was her. She offered her hand and her name and laughed nervously

— Dorothy, but people call me Dotty. I guess I am rather, sometimes.

She was a final-year student at Goldsmiths, a painter. Her voice was very pukka-pukka, like royalty. She seemed ashamed of it, putting her hand over her mouth. Perfect American TV presenter teeth, a slight stutter, she did not finish her sentences.

I invited her in and no sooner did I indicate Saul's room, than 'Happiness in Slavery' started up from behind his door

- that track with the S&M noises. I led her swiftly away, then to the kitchen, apologised for the lack of light, then showed her my room - the only one not toxic - apologising that we hadn't had time to clean the spare one, but really, she could trust me, it would be fine and was about the same size as mine and really cheap.

She left with a smile and said we seemed very interesting, but I could tell she was glad to get away. As if in celebration of her departure Saul turned up the volume: the sounds of electric guitars and a man being whipped filled every room.

Why had I sacrificed my life to be his apologist and slave, I asked myself in the days that followed as I made plans to move out. It took me back to that very first time I met Saul and the question of why I moved in. I'd been in my third year, studying for a BA in political theory and journalism at the London School of Economics. I was twenty-one, and much angered by the decline of the Left. It was just after the Wapping dispute, Rupert Murdoch and the great cull of permanent staff at the newspapers. I swore I would never walk past a picket line even though I needed work to pay back my student loan. I was a member of the Socialist Workers Party and stood every weekend, outside Camden tube station, beside the alkies and bums, trying to sell papers with headlines like TORY SCUM; DESTROY THE CAPITALIST MACHINE. But the more I studied Trotskyism the more my thesis on working-class solidarity bore no relation to the world around me.

I'd been going through a messy break-up with my then girlfriend, Debs, who was angered both by my sexual inadequacies and my revolutionary beliefs - the latter she saw as a pathetic excuse for the former. It had been on a day when I had been struggling with my thesis and had failed to sell a single paper after six hours shouting, 'This week's *Socialist Worker*,' a day when Debs had given me an ultimatum to move out. Facing homelessness, I came across

an ad in a shop window. The rent was cheap and I was pushing well into my overdraft.

I heard his music before I saw him at the door. Some kind of terrifying art-student experiment. But it was his face that really scared me: he was wearing foundation and looked like the Joker in *Batman*. He nodded at me, reluctantly, then let me enter. I found his rudeness perplexing, as all previous potential flatmates had given me the tour like they were estate agents. I walked to the back room and 'squalid' would have been a compliment. I entered his dark cavern of a room with questions about rent. He gave me a figure, ridiculous, then, as I was about to leave, he cut it in half. Two hundred . . . and then he added thirty more. He asked me to sit, and as I set down my stack of unsold papers, he laughed. I asked what he found so funny. He read the front page aloud: — 'Support the Wapping workers.'

— Waking the masses from their slumbers, are we?

I took offence and explained that Marxism was an analysis of –

— Yes, yes, yes . . . he interrupted, – cultural hegemony, historical necessity and all that jazz.

I was shocked that he knew the lingo.

— I'm sure equality seems lovely to you, but let me tell you, people will always find a way to fuck each other over. You see, there's no such thing as Left and Right, there are simply those who shaft and those who get shafted!

I picked up my papers and headed for the door.

He called after me: — In time you may come to see the simple beauty of this.

With no money for the tube I headed to the intersection at Shoreditch in a fury. A minicab screamed to a halt before me; I passed a sex shop, beneath the shadow of the high-rises where drug dealers loitered – the shafters and the shafted, and how dare anyone say this was anything but ugliness and hell. The sky was bearing down on me,