RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

First Novel

Nicholas Royle

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About the Book

Either *First Novel* is a darkly funny examination of the relative attractions of creative writing courses and suburban dogging sites, or it’s a twisted campus novel and possible murder mystery that’s not afraid to blend fact with fiction in its exploration of the nature of identity.

Paul Kinder, a novelist with one forgotten book to his name, teaches creative writing in a university in the north-west of England. Either he’s researching his second, breakthrough novel, or he’s killing time having sex in cars.

Either eternal life exists, or it doesn’t. Either you’ll laugh, or you’ll cry. Either you’ll get it, or you won’t.

About the Author

Nicholas Royle is the author of seven novels, including *The Director's Cut* and *Antwerp*, as well as two novellas and a short story collection, *Mortality*. Born in Manchester in 1963, he runs Nightjar Press, reviews fiction for the *Independent*, and is a senior lecturer in creative writing at Manchester Metropolitan University.

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First Novel

A Mystery

Nicholas Royle

JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

1

Very Low-flying Aircraft

‘The greatest hazard of all, losing oneself, can occur very quietly in the world, almost as if it were nothing at all.’

Kierkegaard

I AM SITTING, alone, in my shared office at the university. On the walls are flyers for readings and a large poster advertising a local literature festival. The bookcase behind me is filled with books – books that I have brought in from home and others that I have acquired from the second-hand bookstalls across the road and the Paramount Book Centre in Shude Hill. In addition to these are bound volumes of literary magazines – *Antaeus*, *Transatlantic Review* – and books that I have claimed out of unwanted stock from the university library. My eye runs along a shelf two-thirds of the way down the bookcase. *Nineteen Seventy-Four* by David Peace, *Robinson* by Christopher Petit, *Berg* by Ann Quin, Gwendoline Riley’s *Cold Water*. I skip along. *Friction* by Joe Stretch; *Dreams of Green Base*, Terry Wilson. First novels.

I take down a book from the shelf above: James Lasdun’s *The Horned Man*. I hold it to my nose and flick through the pages using the soft pad of my thumb. It has a woody smell. Trampled grass, funfairs. A hint of caramel? I put it back on the shelf.

I turn back to the desk. On it are a PC, switched off, and a pile of books. Between them, right in the middle lying flat on the desk, is a Kindle. My colleagues and I in the writing

school have each been given a Kindle. I look at it. The screen is blank. My finger hovers above it, as if reluctant to touch it. The screen is cool, slippery. I press a random selection of buttons on the keyboard. Nothing happens. I have not plugged the device into a power source and charged it. I pick it up. Its weight is difficult to judge. The back is more tactile. It has a sort of rubberised feel to it. If I were to drag my fingernail across it, it would leave a mark.

I drag my fingernail across it. It leaves a mark.

I put the Kindle back down and study it. It looks impenetrable. There are no screws, or feet, no catch, just a seam that runs around the edge on the back of the Kindle. It's too narrow to get a fingernail into.

To the right of my desk is a unit comprising three drawers. I open the top one and take out a small box made of transparent plastic containing six precision screwdrivers. I place the case on the desk and open it. I take out the smallest of the four flathead screwdrivers and insert its head into the seam on the back of the Kindle. There's a little bit of give. I push the screwdriver outwards at the edge and manage to release one of a series of little plastic clips that hold the rear piece in place. Once one is free, it is easier to release the others. After a few moments I manage to pop off the back piece, which I put to one side. I place the device down on the desktop and take a good look at it. A large flat battery takes up a third of the space. Most of the rest is occupied by the motherboard, which is comprised of a green background and numerous tiny parts. There are four little protective shields with a finish like stainless steel. Using one of the bigger screwdrivers I undo two screws that hold the battery in place. I remove the battery, which has writing in English on one side and Chinese characters on the other. Revealed beneath where the battery had been is a portion of the back of the e-ink screen.

I lift the Kindle up off the desk and hold it to my nose. It doesn't smell of anything.

I start removing tiny black screws from the motherboard. When I think I have removed all of them, I try to prise the motherboard free, but it won't come and when I inspect more closely I see another little screw hidden towards the bottom. Once I have taken that out and disconnected the little red speaker cable, I pop out the L-shaped motherboard, which bristles with minuscule parts. Using the screwdriver, I lever off the stainless steel protective shields to find a number of computer chips whose various functions I would only be able to guess at. Putting the motherboard down next to the rear casing piece, I turn my attention to the last set of tiny screws that hold in place a final board made up of two interlocking sections, one shiny, the other matt. Beneath this I find the back of the screen. I can neither see nor figure out how the e-ink interfaces with the inside of the screen.

I place all the separate pieces next to each other on my desk, the screws and widgets that had held it all together sorted into piles according to size and type. I pick up the screwdriver and replace it in the transparent plastic box.

Either I would be able to put the Kindle back together, or I would not.

Pushing back my swivel chair I get up and walk around to the front of the desk. I pick up the waste-paper bin and return to my side of the desk. I hold the bin under the edge of the desk and use my other hand to sweep all the various parts and pieces of the Kindle into it. I take the bin and put it back where I got it from, then I come back around to my side of the desk and sit down.

My hand reaches out and takes a book from the top of the pile on the right-hand side of my desk. Jane Solomon's *Hotel 167*. It is a Picador, a paperback original, dating from 1993, when Picador still gave all of their books a clean white spine with plain black lettering. I open the book and feel the slightly rough fabric-like texture of the yellowed pages

under my fingertips. I lift the book to my nose and breathe in.

I turn up the volume as the front wheels make contact with the tarmac and the rear of the car leaves the driveway. The road is lit at regular intervals, neighbours' houses standing in darkness. Speed bumps force me to stay in low gear until I reach the main road where I signal to go right. A bus drives past the stop on the other side of the road, empty but for a single passenger on the top deck. His silhouetted head narrows as he turns to look at the car nosing out of the side road.

I follow the bus, making no attempt to overtake. At the lights it goes straight on while I turn sharply to the left, sensing the pull of the car towards the front offside. The road surface is made up of flat blocks of orange broken up with lines of reflective white. The street lights are topped with misty coronas like dandelion clocks. The next set of lights changes to red as I approach and I knock the gearstick into neutral, allowing the car to coast. Another car sits at the adjacent stop line waiting to go, the driver's face ghostly in the glow of the dash. The traffic lights change in his favour and he moves forward.

I go on through one more set of lights and turn left into Burton Road. The restaurants and bars that earn this district its reputation are all closed. I slow down as I approach Somerfield, indicate left and pull into the car park behind the shuttered supermarket.

There's one car parked behind the store itself, another two at the other end by the recycling bins. I roll down towards them and back up into a space a few yards short, switching off the engine. The CD, *Full on Night* by Rachel's, stops as I do so.

I peer into the darkness – the car park is unlit – and turn the key halfway in the ignition, then pull down the stalk to activate my right indicator. Its rhythmic clicking is the only

sound to be heard apart from the hum of traffic on the Parkway, even at this hour. After a couple of minutes I start the engine and a dissonant guitar riff accompanies my rolling the car back out on to Burton Road, then turning right into Nell Lane and heading for the Parkway.

Traffic on the motorway is light. I take the exit for Cheadle Royal and the patient piano work of Rachel Grimes ticks off the lighting poles on the wide loop around the back of the former Barnes Hospital and nearby disused Cheadle Bleach Works. The frantically bowed viola towards the end of ‘Full on Night’ is a suitable accompaniment to the scratching of the treetops at the purply-orange sky.

I take the third exit off the roundabout at Cheadle Royal, skirting the miniature lake and heading deeper into the business park behind the sports and leisure centre. Behind an anonymous building of blond brick and green smoked glass I reverse into a parking space and sit and wait. The car park is divided by a line of low shrubs, beyond which two cars wait in darkness. In an hour or so, the bright lights of the day’s first flights will appear in the sky 1,500 feet above the Stockport Pyramid. Shortly after, they will rumble over Cheadle Royal, travelling at a speed of 150 knots just 700 feet above the roof of the car. For now, though, all is quiet.

I turn the interior light on and let it burn for less than half a minute before switching it off again.

Nothing happens. No lights are lit in the other parked vehicles. No one approaches the car on foot.

Either I stay a bit longer or I leave.

I twist the key in the ignition and turn the wheel to drive down the other avenue on the far side of the island on the way out of the car park. The two cars, expensive saloons parked three spaces apart, appear empty, but the shallow angle of the windscreens makes it impossible to be sure.

I negotiate the roundabouts and head south on the Wilmslow Road, turning right at the lights in the direction of Heald Green. A man in high-visibility clothing waits at a bus

stop. A delivery van sits outside a convenience store, its rear doors folded back. I turn left into Styal Road and right into Ringway Road. The Moss Nook restaurant approaches on the right. I can either turn into the little car park or keep going. I allow the car park and restaurant to retreat in the wing mirror. Moments later, again on the right, there is a sudden break in the line of small, modest houses. On the other side of the road a bank of yellow-white approach lights marks the beginning of runway 24. I take the next road on the right and shortly afterwards another right turn into the Ringway Trading Estate. A light shines brightly on to the apron outside a depot on the left. I turn to the right and then go left in front of Air Freight Services. In the car park at the end, I turn around and back up to the chain-link fence.

I switch off the CD but keep the engine running and the lights on. Further down on the other side is a parked car. A dark shape is lodged in the driver's seat.

I reach down to kill the engine and extinguish the headlamps, then raise my hand to switch on the interior light and turn towards the passenger seat.

I say something as they come towards me. I can't remember what I say but they take exception to it. I ask them for money and they start to taunt me. One of them, maybe she feels bad for me, I don't know, sticks her hand in her pocket and pulls out a fiver. As I go to take it, she pulls it away, so I snatch it and the others start pushing me and pulling me, trying to get the fiver back, but I'm not going to let go of it. I bury it deep in a pocket and back away from these idiots. I feel a push and suddenly I'm falling, falling, falling.

Thursday morning. I am running a workshop at the university. Just over half of the two dozen students who should be present have actually turned up. My eyes flick

from face to face as I see who is there and try to work out who is not and whether they are persistent absentees who need to be sent a formal letter. Grace is there. I wonder if she has remembered what she wanted to ask me.

‘I’d like you to write a short scene,’ I say. ‘No more than a page. Pick something memorable that has happened to you in the past week involving at least two people and write about it from a point of view other than your own. It can be that of someone else present, but it doesn’t have to be. Be as imaginative as you like.’

‘What if,’ asks a boy called Iain with fixed braces and a glossy black fringe, ‘nothing memorable has happened to us in the past week?’

There is a ripple of laughter.

‘Then write about the most interesting dream you have had in the past week, and the rule remains the same. Switch the POV.’

Another student starts to ask a question, but I cut him off. ‘If nothing memorable has happened to you and you can’t remember any of your dreams or they weren’t interesting, just make something up. And change the POV from yours to that of someone – or something – else. You’ve got fifteen minutes. And please,’ I add, ‘don’t write your name on it.’

Amid much sucking of pens and scratching of heads, the students slowly settle into their own thinking space. At the end of fifteen minutes I ask them to finish the sentence they’re writing and I walk around and collect up the sheets. I shuffle them and redistribute them. If anyone ends up with their own piece back again, they don’t say so. I ask Iain to read out the piece he has in front of him. It’s about a confrontation in a nightclub in town. It’s not particularly interesting, but there’s nothing actually wrong with it. I ask Grace to read out what she has been dealt. She reads a piece about an argument with a ticket inspector on a train that turns into a river running between high, snow-capped

mountains guarded by two-headed lions. Someone has taken me at my word.

I ask a boy whose name I can't remember if he will read out what he's got. He reads out an account of an attack on a tramp, from the tramp's point of view.

I realise I am going to have to check out the path down to the dismantled railway line, after all, and have a look for Overcoat Man.

Late afternoon. Wednesday. I am standing in my study at the top of the house looking out at the back gardens of my neighbours and the rear elevations of the houses in the next street. Behind me, my study, with its square hip or pyramid roof, the vaulted ceiling rising in four converging triangular planes to a single point. Built-in bookshelves cover two walls, floor to ceiling. Fiction, film, biography – each has a different section. Short-story anthologies, literary journals in magazine files. Books are ordered alphabetically, little magazines chronologically. Perched on the four-drawer filing cabinet looking down at my desk is a head-and-shoulders mannequin, female; standing in the corner close to the anthologies and magazines, a full-size tailor's dummy. Curled up asleep on the armchair in the opposite corner, my black cat, Cleo. Above her, hanging on a nail on the wall, a stuffed fox's head.

My desk is as tidy as that in my office at the university. Laptop, empty mug (on coaster), pile of scripts for marking, A4 wallet-style folder marked 'Writers' Rooms'. On the wall over the desk, a number of pictures of aeroplanes – some cut out of newspapers and magazines, others printed at home on photographic paper – pinned to a small corkboard. Against the fourth wall under the window is a long free-standing bookcase. On top of this at the left-hand end is a pile of books, first novels – *Fermentation* by Angelica Jacob, *Pharricide* by Vincent de Swarte, *Glass People* by Tom Darling. John Banville's *Nightspawn*, Philip N. Pullman's *The*

Haunted Storm. Among others. At the right-hand end, a pile of six identical trade paperbacks. Orange spine, black type.

To the left of the rear gardens that I can see from the window, the main road climbs gently towards a humpback bridge over the trackbed of a dismantled railway line. I can see Overcoat Man making his way slowly up the incline. Overcoat Man is one of numerous instantly recognisable characters that I see around the village, such as Laundry Bag Man, Umbrella Lady, Polling Station Man and Dog Man. Overcoat Man wears several overcoats one on top of the other. All of them are filthy, his trousers likewise. His shoes are coming apart, which perhaps accounts for his shuffling gait and extremely slow progress. His features mostly hidden behind unkempt grey hair and a long reddish beard, he is inscrutable. Often he can be heard muttering to himself and occasionally he will ask passers-by for money or utter an offensive remark.

As he reaches the point towards the top of the humpback bridge where a path leads down to the trackbed of the former railway line, he turns to confront an approaching crowd of rowdy young people. Maybe he asks them for money or growls unintelligibly at them, but something prompts them to gather around him. I am unable for a few moments to see clearly what is happening, but soon I realise that he is being jostled. He seems to try to edge away from the group down the path to the old railway line and either loses his footing or is pushed and falls over. He rolls once or twice and then I can no longer see him.

In what resembles the protective gesture of a threatened organism, the group of young people closes in. They form a huddle, from which one and then two members abruptly break out, leaving the group. Others depart and soon there’s only one person standing at the head of the path, peering down into the undergrowth. After a moment, this person also leaves.

During the incident, which is over in less than a minute, no one else has crossed the bridge. A dog trots by off its lead, its owner nowhere to be seen.

I continue to watch the road and the humpback bridge, but there is no sign of Overcoat Man emerging from the bushes that border the path.

I look at the backs of the houses in the next street. A light has come on in one of the flats. A man fills a kettle at a sink in a first-floor kitchen.

I continue to stand at the window as the sky above the houses turns a deeper blue and the lights in the windows glow more brightly and the gardens below fall into deeper and deeper shadow.

Tuesday morning, just after eleven o'clock. I am sitting in my office at the university. None of my three colleagues is in. This is deliberate. We choose our office hours so that they do not overlap. It is not good to be talking to a student about his or her creative writing while a colleague sits listening – trying not to perhaps, but listening all the same – just the other side of the room-divider. It is not good from the student's point of view, as writing can be a personal thing, and nor is it good from your own, since your colleagues might find it impossible not to judge your performance as a teacher.

On the desk in front of me is a PC, switched off. When I need a machine, I bring in my own. The PC is cumbersome, clunky, slow. I have moved the keyboard out of the way next to the printer, which is also redundant. These items of hardware occupy the left side of the desk. On the right-hand side are two books – Jane Solomon's *Hotel 167* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, both first novels, which I am intending to read in the next few days, the latter for the first time – and a small, neat pile of newspaper cuttings.

There is nothing else on the desk, no clutter.

The newspaper cuttings are all single pages from the review section of a national broadsheet. They are part of a series called Writers' Rooms in which a half-page photograph of an author's office, study or workroom is accompanied by a sidebar of copy written by the featured writer. I take the top one off the pile.

It is the turn of Scottish novelist Andrew O'Hagan. In the foreground is a comfortable-looking armchair, a newspaper draped over one arm. The position of the armchair traps an open door against the wall. Hanging on the door, on the side of the door that would be outside the room if the door were closed, is a blackboard. Both these details suggest the door is, in fact, never closed. Maybe any other members of the O'Hagan household are on instructions not to enter, since a comment – 'The laptop is there for work but it's not online because I hate the idea of some boring email popping up while I'm trying to fix a paragraph' – suggests he does not like to be interrupted. On the blackboard is a chalked reminder: 'Tuesday: Burns essays.'

I picture O'Hagan bent over a pile of manuscripts in a back garden somewhere in north London, striking a match.

There is a knock on the door – my door, the office door, not O'Hagan's. I get up and walk around the desk, slip between two of the room-dividers and cross the office to open the door, which cannot be opened from the outside unless you know the code.

'Hello,' I say to the student who is standing there.

Her name is Grace, I think. I see a lot of students, hear a lot of names.

'Hiya.' Her voice is slightly uncertain and her eyes look everywhere but at mine. With her dyed black hair and pale skin, she has the androgynous look of an emo kid or a goth. 'It's Grace. I'm in your First Novels class.'

'I know,' I say. 'I remember. Come in.'

We sit with my desk between us, and she still doesn't look at me, until I briefly turn away and then I am peripherally

aware of her gaze momentarily settling on me.

‘What did you want to see me about, Grace?’ I ask.

‘The . . . er . . . First Novels class.’

‘Yes?’

‘I’m having trouble finding copies of some of the books on the list.’

‘Maybe you weren’t at the introductory session,’ I say. ‘I explained then that a number of these titles are out of print but that in most cases second-hand copies are easily available from online booksellers or second-hand bookshops, where they still exist.’

‘Right,’ she says, looking at the two books on my desk. ‘I managed to find this actually,’ she adds, pointing to *The Bell Jar*. ‘But it looks different.’

‘This is an old copy,’ I tell her. ‘Second-hand. But *The Bell Jar* is in print. The Jane Solomon is not in print, but you can pick up copies online very cheaply.’

She nods, looking at the floor.

‘Was there anything else?’

‘I can’t remember,’ she says. ‘I mean, yes, there was, but I can’t remember what it was.’

‘Email me when you remember.’

‘My Internet connection is down. Can I call you?’

‘OK.’ I look at my Spartan desk. ‘I don’t have anything to write my number on.’

She rummages in her pockets and comes up empty-handed. From her bag she produces a dog-eared five-pound note and a pen. I dictate the number and she writes it on the banknote.

I see her to the door. The cutting I had been looking at is still sitting in the middle of my desk. I pick it up again.

O’Hagan’s desk is old, square, solid, four drawers either side, two in the middle. He claims it came from a Victorian lawyers’ office in Doughty Street, next door to Dickens’ house, and it may well have done but it looks identical to that of Antonia Fraser, previously featured in the same slot.

Behind the desk is a bookcase with glazed doors full of volumes the uniformity of which suggests they are copies of O'Hagan's own titles. Between the armchair and the desk is a small three-shelf bookcase of the type that tips books at an angle, but the spines are too far away to be legible. Closer to the camera, an urn sits on the floor next to the armchair. Three books sit on top of it in a neat little pile, clearly the books O'Hagan was last looking at as he sat relaxing, but they cannot quite be made out. All I can say with any certainty is that none is a trade paperback with an orange spine and black lettering.

After the workshop I head straight for home. I stand at the window of my study and look down across the back gardens of the houses in the next street towards the humpback bridge over the dismantled railway line. I think about the incident involving Overcoat Man and the crowd of young people. Is there any doubt in my mind that the piece read out in the workshop was a description of that actual event? Could it not have been an account of a similar incident, perhaps even an imagined one? Was it not simply a generic event easily called to mind or one that could have happened anywhere in the city in the last week? The local papers are full of accounts of happy-slapping incidents.

In the cupboard under the kitchen sink I find a box of lightweight rubber gloves that I bought off an unemployed teenager from Middlesbrough who came to the door with a bag of dusters, microfibre cloths, clothes brushes, tea towels and other poor-quality household items. You can close the door on them, but then how do you know they will not target your house when you are out? The simplest and safest way to make them go away is to buy something off them.

I leave the house. Didsbury is an affluent area of south Manchester, a village in the way that Highgate in north London is a village or Greenwich Village in New York. I walk

around to the humpback bridge. I take the path that leads down to the dismantled railway line, which is overgrown, a haven for goldfinches, foxes and occasional junkies and alcoholics. I peer into the tangled vegetation on either side of the little path that runs down the slope. Nothing. At the bottom, the main path – the trackbed of the dismantled railway line – leads south past Didsbury Park, past the Tesco where TV presenter Richard Madeley once walked out with two bottles of wine for which he had forgotten to pay, and eventually to Parrs Wood, an area of East Didsbury bordered by the River Mersey and the A34 and known for its eponymous high school and extensive entertainment complex. The other way, a dead end, leads north towards the humpback bridge, but is blocked off before reaching it. There's a thicket of trees and bushes and brambles, all of which will have to be cleared if they do ever extend the tram system out here. I pick my way through razor-sharp coils of raspberry and blackberry, taking care to minimise my trail. In the shadows at the heart of the thickest vegetation, lighter patches turn out to be sweet wrappers, fast-food cartons, a copy of the *South Manchester Reporter*. I am about to head back up to the road when I notice what looks like a discarded pile of light-coloured textiles towards the back of an extensive nettle bed by the fence that separates the path from the new block of flats on the south side of School Lane. I realise I can get around the back of the nettle bed by creeping along the narrow ridge between the fence and the nettles, using the chain-link fence for support. This means I do not disturb the nettles. I have to make a single footfall between the fence and the light-coloured material, which I can now see is the outermost of Overcoat Man's many coats.

He is lying on his front with his face turned away from me. He is unmoving and makes no sound. There is a strong smell rising from his body, but then there always was. I take the gloves from my pocket and put them on.

The pockets of his outermost overcoat – a filthy mac – are empty. He has two further coats and a suit jacket underneath, but all I find in the pockets of these are a dry-cleaner's ticket stub, a button, part of a page torn from a religious tract bearing a subhead in bold type, 'The Way Forward', and a playing card – the seven of diamonds. I have to move Overcoat Man's body – a deadweight – to get at his trouser pockets, which contain two scrunched-up paper napkins, a few coppers and a door key on a split ring with a cheap plastic fob and the words 'Side door' written on the label in a spidery hand.

I leave everything where I found it and am about to retrace my single step to the chain-link fence when I realise I didn't check to see if the suit jacket had a top pocket. I bend down again, joints creaking, and feel my way through the outer layers to the suit jacket – cut from once-fine wool-rich cloth, 'hand-tailored by Howard Lever', according to the label – and in the top pocket I find a crumpled five-pound note.

I uncrumple it and study it closely on both sides. Nothing has been written on it. No phone number, nothing.

I return the note to the jacket pocket and roll Overcoat Man's body back into its original position before retreating to the chain-link fence and extricating myself carefully from the scene.

I climb back up the path to School Lane. As I reach the pavement by the side of the Scout hut, Umbrella Lady is making her way slowly past. She wears dark glasses, pink ankle socks and carries a plastic carrier bag in one hand and a small grey umbrella in the other. I wait for her to pass and then I cross the road.

It is half past eleven in the morning. I am sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of green tea and my laptop, answering emails. There's one from AJ and Carol inviting me to a barbecue at their house. Either I will accept or I won't.

There’s an email from the editor of a food and drink website asking me if I want to do another restaurant review.

And there’s an email from the latest editor to turn down my proposed article about Vincent de Swarte’s *Pharricide*.

Pharricide, Vincent de Swarte’s first novel, is the story of a young man, Geoffroy Lefayen, who becomes the lighthouse keeper at Cordouan, a tiny island in the Atlantic close to the mouth of the Gironde. To mark his appointment, Geoffroy catches and stuffs a conger eel. For Geoffroy, taxidermy is an art form, as well as a way of conferring immortality. ‘If you stuff a living creature, death is not the end, whether it’s a conger eel, a lion, even you or me,’ writes Geoffroy.

De Swarte died in 2006 at the age of forty-one. Shortly after, I started writing to literary editors, but few are interested in articles about untranslated foreign-language novels that are not set to become the latest publishing sensation, fewer still if the book in question is about a psychopathic loner with an interest in taxidermy.

I hear the snap of the cat flap in the cellar, which will be Cleo coming in from the garden. She will stop at her food bowls before coming upstairs. I wait a moment, listening, and then I hear her running up the wooden steps from the cellar. I wonder if she has brought anything. Lately she has started bringing birds into the house. Dead birds. Birds I’ve never seen alive. Goldcrests. A blackcap. I don’t know where she finds them, where in the garden they are hiding.

Cleo enters the kitchen and jumps up on to the table, sitting on her haunches next to my laptop. She is not an affectionate cat, but she is at least sociable. She has not brought any birds this time.

I look again at the email from AJ and Carol. Either or.

AJ and Carol’s house is a short walk from mine.

On the way, I take a detour down the path at the side of the humpback bridge. At the bottom, I turn right on to the path of the dismantled railway and pick my way carefully

towards the nettle bed. I stop and peer through the overhanging foliage. I approach a little closer but I can already see that Overcoat Man's body is no longer there. A telltale patch of damaged nettles shows where he lay, but I can see no clear evidence of which route he might have used to drag himself out of the nettle bed – or by which route his body was removed.

I search the rest of the area, but there is no sign of him.

At AJ and Carol's I encounter Lewis. He has a shaved head, which he may think disguises his male-pattern baldness, and the few extra pounds he carries are noticeable despite the untucked stencilled shirt and baggy linen trousers. His moon-like face is given a certain definition by strategically trimmed facial hair. He's standing a little apart from everyone else eating a greasy chicken leg.

'Lewis,' he says, licking grease off his fingers before holding out his hand. He laughs: '*Kssh-huh-huh*.'

'Hello,' I say as I take Lewis' hand, which turns out to be dry but has a soft grip as if made of rubber.

'I'm helping AJ with the barbecue,' Lewis says. 'By eating it. *Kssh-huh-huh*.'

'Hey stranger,' says AJ as he notices me for the first time. 'Let me get you a drink.'

'You carry on, AJ,' I reply. 'I'll go and say hello to Carol.'

I see Carol some mornings, if neither of us is working, as she walks their children to school past my house.

'Paul, darling,' she greets me with mock affection, a hand on my shoulder and a kiss on each cheek. 'What can I get you to drink?'

'You're not on duty now,' I say, bending down to get myself a beer from the cooler.

Carol is a flight attendant, cabin crew. She has a wavy curtain of thick auburn hair that I'm more used to seeing tied back and she's wearing a white linen dress cut daringly low. Although my eyes don't leave hers, I am peripherally aware of the meringue-like swell of her breasts.

I sense she wants to introduce me to the Asian woman she had been talking to when I arrived.

‘Paul, this is AJ’s mother, Nina,’ she says. ‘Nina, this is Paul. He’s only recently moved to the area.’

‘How are you settling in?’ asks the older woman, who is wearing a bright turquoise sari.

I know what to say. ‘Your son and daughter-in-law have been very kind.’

As everyone sits down to eat, a shadow falls over the garden accompanied by a thunderous roar of an intensity that some of those present appear to find uncomfortable.

‘That was low,’ complains a thin, orange-skinned woman called Juliet, whose only contributions to the conversation so far have been sharp and vituperative. Her bad mood seems to stem from the fact that her husband, who is delayed due to the overrunning of a Sunday league football match, has still not turned up. She seems embarrassed, as if AJ and Carol might regard it as bad manners.

‘That wasn’t low,’ says Lewis with a distinct sneering tone to his voice. He has a chicken bone in one hand and a trickle of grease at the corner of his mouth. ‘That was, what, 1,500 feet? *Kssh-huh-huh*. Low-flying is classified as 250 feet.’

He looks around, as if expecting most of those present to agree with him.

‘It depends,’ I say, looking at Carol, who flicks her hair behind her ear before raising her wine glass to her lips. The tiny pink tip of her tongue emerges to meet it. I cross my legs and dust away an imaginary mark, like a batsman prodding his wicket.

‘Paul’s a writer,’ AJ says, reaching for his own glass. AJ is one of those people, increasingly few in number, who think that because you are a writer you know something about the world. ‘Like Elizabeth,’ he says, as a petite woman with long silver-blonde hair enters the garden from the house. ‘Paul, this is Elizabeth Baines. Elizabeth, this is Paul Kinder.’