VINTAGE

LONDON FIELDS

MARTIN AMIS

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About the Book

There is a murderer, there is a murderee, and there is a foil.

Everyone is always out there searching for someone and something, usually for a lover, usually for love. And this is a love story.

But the murderee – Nicola Six – is searching for something and someone else: her murderer. She knows the time, she knows the place, she knows the motive, she knows the means. She just doesn’t know the man.

London Fields is a brilliant, funny and multi-layered novel. It is a book in which the narrator, Samson Young, enters the Black Cross, a thoroughly undesirable public house, and finds the main players of his drama assembled, just waiting to begin. It’s a gift of a story from real life ... all Samson has to do is write it as it happens.

About the Author

Martin Amis is the author of two collections of stories, six works of non-fiction, and fourteen novels.

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to my father

LONDON FIELDS

Martin Amis

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Chapter 1: The Murderer

KEITH TALENT WAS a bad guy. Keith Talent was a very bad guy. You might even say that he was the worst guy. But not *the* worst, not the very worst ever. There *were* worse guys. Where? There in the hot light of CostCheck for example, with car keys, beige singlet, and a six-pack of Peculiar Brews, the scuffle at the door, the foul threat and the elbow in the black neck of the wailing lady, then the car with its rust and its waiting blonde, and off to do the next thing, whatever, whatever necessary. The mouths on these worst guys – the eyes on them. Within those eyes a tiny unsmiling universe. No. Keith wasn't *that* bad. He had saving graces. He didn't hate people for ready-made reasons. He was at least *multiracial* in outlook – thoughtlessly, helplessly so. Intimate encounters with strange-hued women had sweetened him somewhat. His saving graces all had names. What with the Fetnabs and Fatimas he had known, the Nketchis and Iqbalas, the Michikos and Boguslawas, the Ramsarwatees and Rajashwaris – Keith was, in this sense, a man of the world. These were the chinks in his coal-black armour: God bless them all.

Although he liked nearly everything else about himself, Keith hated his redeeming features. In his view they constituted his only major shortcoming – his one tragic flaw. When the moment arrived, in the office by the loading bay at the plant off the M4 near Bristol, with his great face crammed into the prickling nylon, and the proud woman shaking her trembling head at him, and Chick Purchase and Dean Pleat both screaming *Do it. Do it* (he still remembered

their meshed mouths writhing), Keith had definitely failed to realize his full potential. He had proved incapable of clubbing the Asian woman to her knees, and of going on clubbing until the man in the uniform opened the safe. Why had he failed? Why, Keith, why? In truth he had felt far from well: half the night up some lane in a car full of the feet-heat of burping criminals; no breakfast, no bowel movement; and now, to top it all off, everywhere he looked he saw green grass, fresh trees, rolling hills. Chick Purchase, furthermore, had already crippled the second guard, and Dean Pleat soon vaulted back over the counter and self-righteously laid into the woman with his rifle butt. So Keith's qualms had changed nothing – except his career prospects in armed robbery. (It's tough at the top, and it's tough at the bottom, too; Keith's name was muck thereafter.) If he could have done it, he would have done it, joyfully. He just didn't have . . . he just didn't have the talent.

After that Keith turned his back on armed robbery once and for all. He took up racketeering. In London, broadly speaking, racketeering meant fighting about drugs; in the part of West London that Keith called home, racketeering meant fighting about drugs with black people – and black people are better at fighting than white people, because, among other reasons, they *all* do it (there aren't any civilians). Racketeering works through escalation, and escalation dominance: success goes to the men who can manage the exponential jump, to the men who can regularly *astonish* with their violence. It took Keith several crunchy beatings, and the first signs of a liking for hospital food, before he concluded that he wasn't cut out for racketeering. During one of his convalescences, when he spent a lot of time in the street cafés of Golborne Road, Keith grew preoccupied by a certain enigma. The enigma was this. How come you often saw black guys with white girls (always blondes, always, presumably for maximum contrast-gain), and never saw white guys with black girls? Did the black

guys beat up the white guys who went out with black girls? No, or not much; you had to be discreet, though, and in his experience lasting relationships were seldom formed. Then how was it done? It came to him in a flash of inspiration. The black guys beat up the black *girls* who went out with white guys! Of course. So much simpler. He pondered the wisdom of this and drew a lesson from it, a lesson which, in his heart, he had long understood. If you're going to be violent, stick to women. Stick to the weak. Keith gave up racketeering. He turned over a new leaf. Having renounced violent crime, Keith prospered, and rose steadily towards the very crest of his new profession: non-violent crime.

Keith worked as a *cheat.* There he stands on the street corner, with three or four colleagues, with three or four fellow *cheats*; they laugh and cough (they're always coughing) and flap their arms for warmth; they look like terrible birds . . . On good days he rose early and put in long hours, going out into the world, into society, with the intention of cheating it. Keith cheated people with his limousine service at airports and train stations; he cheated people with his fake scents and colognes at the pavement stalls of Oxford Street and Bishopsgate (his two main lines were Scandal and Outrage); he cheated people with non-pornographic pornography in the back rooms of shortlease stores; and he cheated people on the street everywhere with the upturned cardboard box or milk crate and the three warped playing cards: Find the Lady! Here, often, and occasionally elsewhere, the boundaries between violent crime and its non-violent little brother were hard to descry. Keith earned three times as much as the Prime Minister and never had any money, losing heavily every day at Mecca, the turf accountants on the Portobello Road. He never won. Sometimes he would ponder this, on alternate Thursday lunchtimes, in sheepskin overcoat, his head bent over the racing page, as he queued for his unemployment benefit, and then drove to the turf accountants on the Portobello

Road. So Keith's life might have elapsed over the years. He never had what it took to be a murderer, not on his own. He needed his murderee. The foreigners, the checked and dog-toothed Americans, the leering lens-faced Japanese, standing stiff over the cardboard box or the milk crate – they never found the lady. But *Keith* did. Keith found her.

Of course, he already had a lady, little Kath, who had recently presented him with a child. By and large Keith had welcomed the pregnancy: it was, he liked to joke, quite a handy new way of putting his wife in hospital. He had decided that the baby, when it came, would be called Keith – Keith Jr. Kath, remarkably, had other ideas. Yet Keith was inflexible, wavering only once, when he briefly entertained the idea of calling the baby Clive, after his dog, a large, elderly and unpredictable Alsatian. He changed his mind once more; Keith it was to be, then . . . Swaddled in blue, the baby came home, with mother. Keith personally helped them from the ambulance. As Kath started on the dishes, Keith sat by the stolen fire and frowned at the new arrival. There was something wrong with the baby, something seriously wrong. The trouble with the baby was that it was a girl. Keith looked deep into himself, and rallied. 'Keithette,' Kath heard him murmur, as her knees settled on the cold lino. 'Keithene. Keitha. Keithinia.'

'No, Keith,' she said.

'Keithnab,' said Keith, with an air of slow discovery. 'Nkeithi.'

'No, Keith.'

'. . . Why's it so fucking yellow?'

After a few days, whenever Kath cautiously addressed the baby as 'Kim', Keith no longer swore at his wife or slammed her up against the wall with any conviction. 'Kim', after all, was the name of one of Keith's heroes, one of Keith's gods. And Keith was cheating hard that week, cheating on everyone, it seemed, and especially his wife. So Kim Talent it was – Kim Talent, little Kim.

The man had ambition. It was his dream to go all the way; he wasn't just messing. Keith had no intention, or no desire, to be a *cheat* for the rest of his life. Even he found the work demoralizing. And mere cheating would never get him the things he wanted, the goods and services he wanted, not while a series of decisive wins at the turf accountants continued to elude him. He sensed that Keith Talent had been put here for something a little bit special. To be fair, it must be said that murder was not in his mind, not yet, except perhaps in some ghostly *potentia* that precedes all thought and action . . . Character is destiny. Keith had often been told, by various magistrates, girlfriends and probation officers, that he had a 'poor character', and he had always fondly owned up to the fact. But did that mean he had a poor destiny? . . . Waking early, perhaps, as Kath clumsily dragged herself from the bed to attend to little Kim, or wedged in one of the traffic jams that routinely enchained his day, Keith would mentally pursue an alternative vision, one of wealth, fame and a kind of spangled superlegitimacy – the chrome spokes of a possible future in World Darts.

A casual darter or arrowman all his life, right back to the bald board on the kitchen door, Keith had recently got serious. He'd always thrown for his pub, of course, and followed the sport: you could almost hear angels singing when, on those special nights (three or four times a week), Keith laid out the cigarettes on the arm of the couch and prepared to watch darts on television. But now he had designs on the other side of the screen. To his own elaborately concealed astonishment, Keith found himself in the Last Sixteen of the Sparrow Masters, an annual interpub competition which he had nonchalantly entered some months ago, on the advice of various friends and admirers. At the end of that road there basked the contingency of a televised final, a £5,000 cheque, and a play-off, also televised, with his hero and darting model, the world

number one, Kim Twemlow. After that, well, after that, the rest was television.

And television was all about everything he did not have and was full of all the people he did not know and could never be. Television was the great shopfront, lightly electrified, up against which Keith crushed his nose. And now among the squirming motes, the impossible prizes, he saw a doorway, or an arrow, or a beckoning hand (with a dart in it), and everything said – Darts. Pro-Darts. World Darts. He's down there in his garage, putting in the hours, his eyes still stinging from the ineffable, the heartbreaking beauty of a brand-new dartboard, stolen that very day.

Magnificent anachronism. The lights and mores of the modern criminal Keith held in disdain. He had no time for the gym, the fancy restaurant, the buxom bestseller, the foreign holiday. He had never taken any exercise (unless you counted burgling, running away, and getting beaten up); he had never knowingly drunk a glass of wine (or only when he was well past caring); he had never read a book (we here exclude *Darts: Master the Discipline*); and he had never been out of London. Except once. When he went to America . . .

He journeyed there with a friend, also a young *cheat*, also a dartsman, also called Keith: Keith Double. The plane was overbooked and the two Keiths were seated twenty rows apart. They stilled their terror with murderous drinking, courtesy of stewardess and duty-free bag, and by shouting out, every ten seconds or so, 'Cheers, Keith!' We can imagine the amusement of their fellow passengers, who logged over a thousand of these shouts during the seven-hour flight. After disembarking at New York, Keith Talent was admitted to the public hospital in Long Island City. Three days later, when he began to stagger out to the stairwell for his smokes, he encountered Keith Double. 'Cheers, Keith!' The mandatory health insurance turned out to cover alcohol

poisoning, so everyone was happy, and became even happier when the two Keiths recovered in time to make their return flight. Keith Double was in advertising now, and had frequently returned to America. Keith hadn't; he was still cheating on the streets of London.

And the world, and history, could not be reordered in a way that would make sense to him. Some distance up the beach in Plymouth, Massachusetts, there once lay a large boulder, reputedly the first chunk of America to be touched by the Pilgrims' feet. Identified in the eighteenth century, this opening sample of US real estate had to be moved closer to the shore, in order to satisfy expectations of how history ought to happen. To satisfy Keith, to get anywhere with Keith, you'd need to fix the entire planet – great sceneshiftings, colossal rearrangements at the back of his mind. And then the tabloid face would have to crease and pucker.

Keith didn't look like a murderer. He looked like a murderer's dog. (No disrespect to Keith's dog Clive, who had signed on well before the fact, and whom Keith didn't in the least resemble anyway.) Keith looked like a murderer's dog, eager familiar of ripper or bodysnatcher or gravestalker. His eyes held a strange radiance – for a moment it reminded you of health, health hidden or sleeping or otherwise mysteriously absent. Though frequently bloodshot, the eyes seemed to pierce. In fact the light sprang off them. And it wasn't at all pleasant or encouraging, this one-way splendour. His eyes were television. The face itself was leonine, puffy with hungers, and as dry as soft fur. Keith's crowning glory, his hair, was thick and full-bodied; but it always had the look of being recently washed, imperfectly rinsed, and then, still slick with cheap shampoo, slowdried in a huddled pub – the thermals of the booze, the sallowing fagsmoke. Those eyes, and their urban severity . . . Like the desolating gaiety of a fundless paediatric hospital (Welcome to the Peter Pan Ward), or like a criminal's cream Rolls-

Royce, parked at dusk between a tube station and a flower stall, the eyes of Keith Talent shone with tremendous accommodations made to money. And murder? The eyes – was there enough blood in them for *that*? Not now, not yet. He had the talent, somewhere, but he would need the murderee to bring it out. Soon, he would find the lady.

Or she would find him.

Chick Purchase. *Chick.* It's hugely unsuitable for such a celebrated bruiser and satyromaniac. A diminutive of Charles. In America it's Chuck. In England, apparently, it's *Chick.* Some name. Some country . . . Of course, I write these words in the awed hush that follows my completion of the first chapter. I don't dare go through it yet. I wonder if I ever will.

For reasons not yet altogether clear, I seem to have adopted a jovial and lordly tone. It seems antique, corrupt: like Keith. Remember, though: Keith is modern, modern, modern. Anyway, I expect to get better at this. And soon I must face the murderee.

It would be nice to expatiate on how good it feels, after all these years, to sit down and actually start writing fiction. But let's not get any big ideas. This is actually happening.

How do I know, for instance, that Keith works as a *cheat*? Because he tried to cheat *me*, on the way in from Heathrow. I'd been standing under the sign saying TAXIS for about a half-hour when the royal-blue Cavalier made its second circuit and pulled up at the bay. Out he climbed.

'Taxi, sir?' he said, and picked up my bag, matter-of-factly, in the line of professional routine.

'That's not a taxi.'

Then he said, 'No danger. You won't get a cab here, pal. No way.'

I asked for a price and he gave me one: an outlandish sum.

‘Limo, innit,’ he explained.

‘That’s not a limo either. It’s just a car.’

‘We’ll go by what’s on the clock, yeah?’ he said; but I was already climbing into the back and was fast asleep before we pulled away.

I awoke some time later. We were approaching Slough, and the meter said £54.50.

‘Slough!’

His eyes were burning at me warily in the rearview mirror. ‘Wait a second, wait a second,’ I began. One thing about my illness or condition. I’ve never been braver. It empowers me – I can feel it. Like looking for the right words and finding them, finding the powers. ‘Listen. I know my way around. I’m not over here to see Harrods, and Buckingham Palace, and Stratford-on-Avon. I don’t say twenty quids and Trafaljar Square and Bar*net*. Slough? Come *on*. If this is a kidnap or a murder then we’ll discuss it. If not, take me to London for the amount we agreed.’

He pulled over unhurriedly. Oh, Christ, I thought: this really is a murder. He turned around and showed me a confiding sneer.

‘What it is is,’ he said, ‘what it is is – okay. I seen you was asleep. I thought: “He’s asleep. Looks as though he could use it. I know. I’ll pop in on me mum.” Disregard that,’ he said, jerking his head, in brutal dismissal, toward the clock, which was of curious design and possibly home manufacture and now said £63.80. ‘Don’t mind, do you, pal?’ He pointed to a line of pebbledash semis – we were, I now saw, in some kind of dormitory estate, green-patched, shopless. ‘She’s sick like. Won’t be five minutes. Okay?’

‘What’s that?’ I said. I referred to the sounds coming from the car stereo, solid thunks followed by shouted numbers against a savage background of taunts and screams.

‘Darts,’ he said, and switched it off. ‘I’d ask you in but – me old mum. Here. Read this.’

So I sat in the back of the Cavalier while my driver went to see his mum. Actually he was doing nothing of the kind. What he was doing (as he would later proudly confide) was wheelbarrowing a lightly clad Analiese Furnish around the living-room while her current protector, who worked nights, slept with his legendary soundness in the room above.

I held in my hands a four-page brochure, pressed on me by the murderer (though of course he wasn’t a murderer yet. He had a way to go). On the back was a colour photograph of the Queen and a crudely superimposed perfume bottle: ‘“Outrage” – by Ambrosio.’

On the front was a black-and-white photograph of my driver, smiling unreliably. ‘KEITH TALENT’, it said:

*Chauffeur and courier services
*Own limousine
*Casino consultant
*Luxury goods and Celebrity purchases
*Darts lessons given
*London operative for Ambrosio of Milan, Perfumes and Furs

There followed some more information about the perfumes, ‘Scandal’, ‘Outrage’, and minor lines called Mirage, Disguise, Duplicity and Sting, and beneath, in double quotes, accompanied by an address and telephone number, with misplaced apostrophes: Keith’s the Name, Scent’s the Game. The two middle pages of the brochure were blank. I folded it into my middle pocket, quite idly; but it has since proved invaluable to me.

With sloping gait and two casual corrections of the belt, Keith came down the garden path.

There was £143.10 on the blatting clock when the car pulled up and I awoke again. Slowly I climbed from the car's slept-in, trailer smell, as if from a second aircraft, and unbent myself in front of the house – and the house massive, like an ancient terminal.

'The States? Love the place,' Keith was saying. 'New York? Love it. Madison Square. Park Central. Love the place.' He paused with a flinch as he lifted my bag from the trunk. 'It's a church . . .' he said wonderingly.

'It used to be a rectory or vicarage or something.' I pointed to an engraved panel high up in the masonry. Anno Domini. 1876.

'1876!' he said. 'So some *vicar* had all this.'

It was clear from his face that Keith was now pondering the tragic decline in the demand for vicars. Well, people still wanted the goods, the stuff for which vicars of various kinds were the middlemen. But they didn't want *vicars*.

Making no small display of the courtesy, Keith carried my bag in through the fenced front garden and stood there while I got my keys from the lady downstairs. Now, the speed of light doesn't come up very often in everyday life: only when lightning strikes. The speed of sound is more familiar: that man in the distance with a hammer. Anyway, a Mach-2 event is a sudden event, and that's what Keith and I were suddenly cowering from: the massed frequencies of three jetplanes ripping past over the rooftops. 'Jesus,' said Keith. And I said it too. 'What's all *that* about?' I asked. Keith shrugged, with equanimity, with mild hauteur. 'Cloaked in secrecy innit. All veiled in secrecy as such.'

We entered through a second front door and climbed a broad flight of stairs. I think we were about equally impressed by the opulence and elaboration of the apartment. This is some joint, I have to admit. After a few weeks here even the great Presley would have started to pine for the elegance and simplicity of Graceland. Keith cast his bright glance around the place with a looter's cruel yet

professional eye. For the second time that morning I nonchalantly reviewed the possibility that I was about to be murdered. Keith would be out of here ten minutes later, my flightbag over his shoulder, lumpy with appurtenances. Instead he asked me who owned the place and what he did.

I told him. Keith looked sceptical. This just wasn't right. 'Mostly for theatre and television,' I said. Now all was clear. 'TV?' he said coolly. For some reason I added, 'I'm in TV too.'

Keith nodded, much enlightened. Somewhat chastened also; and I have to say it touched me, this chastened look. Of course (he was thinking), TV people all know each other and fly to and from the great cities and borrow each other's flats. Common sense. Yes, behind all the surface activity of Keith's eyes there formed the vision of a heavenly elite, cross-hatching the troposphere like satellite TV – above it, above it all.

'Yeah well I'm due to appear on TV myself. Hopefully. In a month or two. Darts.'

'Darts?'

'Darts.'

And then it began. He stayed for three and a half hours. People are amazing, aren't they? They'll tell you everything if you give them time. And I have always been a good listener. I have always been a talented listener. I really do want to hear it – I don't know why. Of course at that stage I was perfectly disinterested; I had no idea what was happening, what was forming right in front of me. Within fifteen minutes I was being told, in shocking detail, about Analiese – and Iqbala, and Trish, and Debbee. Laconic but unabashed mentions of wife and daughter. And then all that stuff about violent crime and Chick Purchase. And New York. True, I gave him a fair amount to drink: beer, or lager, plentifully heaped like bombs on their racks in Mark Asprey's refrigerator. In the end he charged me £25 for the ride (special TV rate, perhaps) and gave me a ballpoint pen shaped like a dart, with which I now write these words. He

also told me that he could be found, every lunchtime and every evening, in a pub called the Black Cross on the Portobello Road.

I would find him there, right enough. And so would the lady.

When Keith left I sacked out immediately. Not that I had much say in the matter. Twenty-two hours later I opened my eyes again and was greeted by an unwelcome and distressing sight. Myself, on the ceiling mirror. There's a mirror on the headboard too, and one on the facing wall. It's a chamber of mirrors in there, a hell of mirrors . . . I looked – I looked not well. I seemed to be pleading, pleading with me, myself. Dr Slizard says I have about three months more of this to get through, and then everything will change.

I have been out and about a bit since then; yes, I have made several tremulous sorties. The first thing I noticed in the street (I almost stepped in it) struck me as quintessentially English: a soaked loaf of white bread, like the brains of an animal much stupider than any sheep. So far, though, it doesn't seem as bad as some people like to say. At least it's intelligible, more or less. Ten years I've been gone, and what's been happening? Ten years of Relative Decline.

If London's a pub and you want the whole story, then where do you go? You go to a London pub. And that single instant in the Black Cross set the whole story in motion. Keith's in the bag. Keith's cool. And I am now cultivating our third party, the foil, the foal, Guy Clinch, who, to my horror, seems to be a genuinely delightful human being. I find I have a vast talent for ingratiation. But none of this would ever have gotten started without the girl. It didn't have a hope in hell without the girl. Nicola Six was the miracle, the absolute donnée. She's *perfect* for me. And now she'll be taking things into her own hands.

The English, Lord love them, they talk about the weather. But so does everybody else on earth, these days. Right now, the weather is superatmospheric and therefore, in a sense, supermeteorological (can you really call it *weather*?). It will stay like this for the rest of the summer, they say. I approve, with one qualification. It’s picked the wrong year to happen in: the year of behaving strangely. I look out at it. The weather, if we can still call it that, is frequently very beautiful, but it seems to bring me close to hysteria, as indeed does everything now.

Chapter 2: The Murderee

THE BLACK CAB will move away, unrecallably and for ever, its driver paid, and handsomely tipped, by the murderee. She will walk down the dead-end street. The heavy car will be waiting; its lights will come on as it lumbers towards her. It will stop, and idle, as the passenger door swings open.

His face will be barred in darkness, but she will see shattered glass on the passenger seat and the car-tool ready on his lap.

'Get in.'

She will lean forward. '*You*,' she will say, in intense recognition: 'Always you.'

'Get *in*.'

And in she'll climb . . .

What is this destiny or condition (and perhaps, like the look of the word's ending, it tends towards the feminine: a feminine ending), what *is* it, what does it mean, to be a murderee?

In the case of Nicola Six, tall, dark, and thirty-four, it was bound up with a delusion, lifelong, and not in itself unmanageable. Right from the start, from the moment that her thoughts began to be consecutive, Nicola knew two strange things. The second strange thing was that she must never tell anyone about the first strange thing. The first strange thing was this: she always knew what was going to happen next. Not all the time (the gift was not obsessively consulted), and not every little detail; but she always knew what was going to happen next. Right from the start she

had a friend – Enola, Enola Gay. Enola wasn't real. Enola came from inside the head of Nicola Six. Nicola was an only child and knew she always would be.

You can imagine how things might work out. Nicola is seven years old, for instance, and her parents are taking her on a picnic, with another family: why, pretty Dominique will be there, a friend, perhaps, a living friend for the only child. But little Nicola, immersed in romantic thoughts and perfectly happy with Enola, doesn't want to come along (watch how she screams and grips!). She doesn't want to come along because she knows that the afternoon will end in disaster, in blood and iodine and tears. And so it proves. A hundred yards from the grown-ups (so impenetrably arrayed round the square sheet in the sunshine), Nicola stands on the crest of a slope with her new friend, pretty Dominique. And of course Nicola knows what is going to happen next: the girl will hesitate or stumble: reaching out to steady her, Nicola will accidentally propel her playmate downwards, down into the rocks and the briars. She will then have to run and shout, and drive in silence somewhere, and sit on the hospital bench swinging her feet and listlessly asking for ice-cream. And so it proves. On television at the age of four she saw the warnings, and the circles of concentric devastation, with London like a bull's-eye in the centre of the board. She knew that would happen, too. It was just a matter of time.

When Nicola was good she was very very good. But when she was bad . . . About her parents she had no feelings one way or the other: this was her silent, inner secret. They both died, anyway, together, as she had always known they would. So why hate them? So why love them? After she got the call she drove reflexively to the airport. The car itself was like a tunnel of cold wind. An airline official showed her into the VIP Lounge: it contained a bar, and forty or fifty people in varying degrees of distress. She drank the brandy

pressed on her by the steward. ‘Free,’ he confirmed. A television was wheeled in. And then, incredibly (even Nicola was consternated), they showed live film of the scattered wreckage, and the bodybags lined up on fields of France. In the VIP Lounge there were scenes of protest and violent rejection. One old man kept distractedly offering money to a uniformed PR officer. Coldly Nicola drank more brandy, wondering how death could take people so unprepared. That night she had acrobatic sex with some unforgivable pilot. She was nineteen by this time, and had long left home. Potently, magically, uncontrollably attractive, Nicola was not yet beautiful. But already she was an ill wind, blowing no good.

Considered more generally – when you looked at the human wreckage she left in her slipstream, the nervous collapses, the shattered careers, the suicide bids, the blighted marriages (and rottener divorces) – Nicola’s knack of reading the future left her with one or two firm assurances: that no one would ever love her enough, and those that did were not worth being loved enough by. The typical Nicola romance would end, near the doorway of her attic flat, with the man of the moment sprinting down the passage, his trousers round his knees, a ripped jacket thrown over his ripped shirt, and hotly followed by Nicola herself (now in a nightdress, now in underwear, now naked beneath a half-furled towel), either to speed him on his way with a blood libel and a skilfully hurled ashtray, or else to win back his love, by apologies, by caresses, or by main force. In any event the man of the moment invariably kept going. Often she would fly right out into the street. On several occasions she had taken a brick to the waiting car. On several more she had lain down in front of it. All this changed nothing, of course. The car would always leave at the highest speed of which it was mechanically capable, though sometimes, admittedly, in reverse. Nicola’s men, and their escape velocities . . . Back in the flat, staunching

her wrists, perhaps, or pressing an ice-cube to her lip (or a lump of meat to her eye), Nicola would look at herself in the mirror, would look at what remained and think how strange – how strange, that she had been right all along. She knew it would end like this. And so it proved. The diary she kept was therefore just the chronicle of a death foretold . . .

One of those people who should never drink anything at all, Nicola drank a very great deal. But it depended. A couple of mornings a month, stiff with pride, deafened with aspirin (and reckless with Bloody Marys), Nicola would adumbrate serious reform: for example, only two colossal cocktails before dinner, a broad maximum of half a bottle of wine with her meal, and then just the one whisky or *digestif* before bedtime. She would frequently stick to the new regime right up to and certainly including the whisky or *digestif* before bedtime the following day. By then, bedtime looked a long way off. There was always a lot of shouting and fistfighting to do before bedtime. And what about *after* bedtime, or after the *first* bedtime, with several bouts of one thing or the other still to go? So she always failed. She could see herself failing (there she was, clearly failing), and so she failed. Did Nicola Six drink alone? Yes, she drank alone. You bet. And why did she drink alone? Because she was *alone*. And she was alone, now, at night, more than formerly. What could never be endured, it turned out, was the last swathe of time before sleep came, the path from larger day to huger night, a little death when the mind was still alive and fluttering. Thus the glass banged down on the round table; the supposedly odourless ashtray gave its last weak swirl; and then the babywalk, the smudged trend to the loathed bedding. That was how it had to end.

The other ending, the real death, the last thing that already existed in the future was now growing in size as she moved forward to confront or greet it. Where would she see the murderer, where would she find him – in the park, the library, in the sad café, or walking past her in the street half-

naked with a plank over his shoulder? The murder had a place, and a date, even a time: some minutes after midnight, on her thirty-fifth birthday. Nicola would click through the darkness of the dead-end street. Then the car, the grunt of its brakes, the door swinging open and the murderer (his face in shadow, the car-tool on his lap, one hand extended to seize her hair) saying, *Get in. Get* in . . . And in she climbed.

It was fixed. It was written. The murderer was not yet a murderer. But the murderee had always been a murderee.

Where would she find him, how would she dream him, when would she summon him? On the important morning she awoke wet with the usual nightmares. She went straight to her bath and lay there for a long time, round-eyed, with her hair pinned up. On important days she always felt herself to be the object of scrutiny, lewd and furious scrutiny. Her head now looked small or telescoped, set against the squirming refractions of the giantess beneath the water. She rose with dramatic suddenness from the bath and paused before reaching for the towel. Then she stood naked in the middle of the warm room. Her mouth was full, and unusually wide. Her mother had always said it was a whore's mouth. It seemed to have an extra half-inch at either wing, like the mouth of the clowngirl in pornography. But the cheeks of the pornographic clowngirl would be painted white, whiter than the teeth. Nicola's face was always dark, and her teeth had a shadowy lustre, slanting inwards, as if to balance the breadth of the lips, or just through the suction of the devouring soul. Her eyes changed colour readily, eagerly, in different lights, but their firm state was a vehement green. She had this idea about the death of love . . .

The funeral, the cremation she was due to attend that day was not a significant one. Nicola Six, who hardly knew or remembered the dead woman, had been obliged to put in a tedious half an hour on the telephone before she managed

to get herself asked along. The dead woman had briefly employed Nicola in her antique shop, years ago. For a month or two the murderee had sat smoking cigarettes in the zestless grotto off Fulham Broadway. Then she had stopped doing that. This was always the way with Nicola's more recent jobs, of which there had, for a while, been a fair number. She did the job, and then, after an escalating and finally overlapping series of late mornings, four-hour lunches, and early departures, she was considered to have *let everyone down* (she wasn't there ever), and stopped going in. Nicola always knew when this moment had come, and chose that day to stop going in. The fact that Nicola knew things would end that way lent great tension to each job she took, right from the first week, the first day, the first morning . . . In the more distant past she had worked as a publisher's reader, a cocktail waitress, a telephonist, a croupier, a tourist operative, a model, a librarian, a kissogram girl, an archivist, and an actress. An actress – she had gone quite far with that. In her early twenties she had done rep, Royal Shakespeare, panto, a few television plays. She still had a trunk full of outfits and some videotapes (poor little rich girl, spry newlywed, naked houri maddeningly glimpsed through fogsmoke and veils). Acting was therapeutic, though dramatic roles confused her further. She was happiest with comedy, farce, custard-pie. The steadiest time of her adult life had been the year in Brighton, taking the lead in *Jack and the Beanstalk.* Playing a man seemed to help. She did Jack in short blazer and black tights, and with her hair up. A million mothers wondered why their sons came home so green and feverish, and crept burdened to bed without their suppers. But then the acting bit of her lost its moorings and drifted out into real life.

With a towel round her belly she sat before the mirror, itself a theatrical memento, with its proscenium of brutal bulbs. Again she felt unfriendly eyes playing on her back.

She went at her face like an artist, funeral colours, black, beige, blood red. Rising, she turned to the bed and reviewed her burial clothes and their unqualified sable. Even her elaborate underwear was black; even the clips on her garter belt were black, black. She opened her wardrobe, releasing the full-length mirror, and stood sideways with a hand flat on her stomach, feeling everything that a woman would hope to feel at such a moment. As she sat on the bed and tipped herself for the first black stocking, mind-body memories took her back to earlier ablutions, self-inspections, intimate preparations. A weekend out of town with some new man of the moment. Sitting in the car on the Friday afternoon, after the heavy lunch, as they dragged through Swiss Cottage to the motorway, or through the curling systems of Clapham and Brixton and beyond (where London seems unwilling ever to relinquish the land, wants to squat on those fields right up to the rocks and the cliffs and the water), Nicola would feel a pressure in those best panties of hers, as it were the opposite of sex, like the stirring of a new hymen being pinkly formed. By the time they reached Totteridge or Tooting, Nicola was a virgin again. With what perplexity would she turn to the voluble disappointment, the babbling mistake, at her side with his hands on the wheel. After a glimpse of the trees in the dusk, a church, a dumbfounded sheep, Nicola would drink little at the hotel or the borrowed cottage and would sleep inviolate with her hands crossed over her heart like a saint. Sulky in slumber, the man of the moment would nevertheless awake to find that practically half his entire torso was inside Nicola’s mouth; and Saturday lunchtime was always a debauch on every front. She hardly ever made it to Sunday. The weekend would end that evening: a stunned and wordless return down the motorway, a single-passenger minicab drive of ghostly length and costliness, or Nicola Six standing alone on a sodden railway platform, erect and unblinking, with a suitcase full of shoes.