

VINTAGE AMIS

MONEY



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ABOUT THE BOOK

This is the story of John Self, consumer extraordinaire. Rolling around New York and London, he makes deals, spends wildly and does reckless movie-world business, all the while grabbing everything he can to sate his massive appetites: alcohol, tobacco, pills, pornography, a mountain of junk food and more. Ceaselessly inventive and thrillingly savage, this is a tale of life lived without restraint; of money, the terrible things it can do and the disasters it can precipitate.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

ALSO BY MARTIN AMIS

Fiction

The Rachel Papers

Dead Babies

Success

Other People

Einstein's Monsters

London Fields

Time's Arrow

The Information

Night Train

Heavy Water

Yellow Dog

House of Meetings

The Pregnant Widow

Lionel Asbo

Non-fiction

Invasion of the Space Invaders

The Moronic Inferno

Visiting Mrs Nabokov

Experience

The War Against Cliché

Koba the Dread

The Second Plane

The Zone of Interest

To Antonia

Martin Amis

MONEY

A Suicide Note

VINTAGE BOOKS

London

This is a suicide note. By the time you lay it aside (and you should always read these things slowly, on the lookout for clues or giveaways), John Self will no longer exist. Or at any rate that's the idea. You never can tell, though, with suicide notes, can you? In the planetary aggregate of all life, there are many more suicide notes than there are suicides. They're like poems in that respect, suicide notes: nearly everyone tries their hand at them some time, with or without the talent. We all write them in our heads. Usually the note is the thing. You complete it, and then resume your time travel. It is the note and not the life that is cancelled out. Or the other way round. Or death. You never can tell, though, can you, with suicide notes.

To whom is the note addressed? To Martina, to Fielding, to Vera, to Alec, to Selina, to Barry - to John Self? No. It is meant for you out there, the dear, the gentle.

M.A.

London, September 1981



As my cab pulled off FDR Drive, somewhere in the early Hundreds, a low-slung Tomahawk full of black guys came sharking out of lane and sloped in fast right across our bows. We banked, and hit a deep welt or grapple-ridge in the road: to the sound of a rifle-shot the cab roof ducked down and smacked me on the core of my head. I really didn't need that, I tell you, with my head and face and back and heart hurting a lot all the time anyway, and still drunk and crazed and ghosted from the plane.

'Oh man,' I said.

'Yeah,' said the cabbie from behind the shattered plastic of his screen. 'Fuckin A.'

My cabbie was fortyish, lean, balding. Such hair as remained scurried long and damp down his neck and shoulders. To the passenger, that's all city cabbies are - mad necks, mad rugs. This mad neck was explosively pocked and mottled, with a flicker of adolescent virulence in the crimson underhang of the ears. He lounged there in his corner, the long hands limp on the wheel.

'Only need about a hundred guys, a hundred guys like me,' he said, throwing his voice back, 'take out all the niggers and PRs in this fuckin town.'

I listened, on my seat there. Owing to this fresh disease I have called tinnitus, my ears have started hearing things recently, things that aren't strictly auditory. Jet take-offs, breaking glass, ice scratched from the tray. It happens mostly in the morning out at other times too. It happened to me in the plane, for instance or at least I think it did.

‘What?’ I shouted. ‘A hundred guys? That’s not many guys.’

‘We could do it. With the right gunge, we could do it.’

‘Gunge?’

‘Gunge, yeah. Fifty-sixes. Automatics.’

I sat back and rubbed my head. I’d spent *two hours* in Immigration, God damn it. I have this anti-talent for queues. You know the deal. Ho ho ho, I think, as I successfully shoulder and trample my way to the end of the shortest line. But the shortest line is the shortest line for an interesting reason. The people ahead of me are all Venusians, pterodactyls, men and women from an alternative timestream. They all have to be vivisected and bodybagged by the unsmiling 300-pounder in his lit glass box. ‘Business or pleasure?’ this guy eventually asked me. ‘I hope business only,’ I said, and meant it. With business I’m usually okay. It’s pleasure that gets me into all this expensive trouble . . . Then a half hour in customs, and another half before I firmed up this cab – yeah, and the usual maniac fizzing and crackling at its wheel. I’ve driven in New York. Five blocks, and you’re reduced to tears of barbaric nausea. So what happens to these throwbacks they hire to do it all day for money? You try it. I said,

‘Why would you want to go and do a thing like that?’

‘Uh?’

‘Kill all the niggers and PRs?’

‘They think, you know, you drive a yellow cab,’ he said, and raised one limp splayed hand from the wheel, ‘you must be some kind of a scumbag.’

I sighed and leaned forward. ‘You know something?’ I asked him. ‘You really *are* a scumbag. I thought it was just a swearword until you came along. You’re the first real one I’ve met.’

We pulled over. Rising in his seat he turned towards me gradually. His face was much nastier, tastier, altogether more useful than I had banked on it being – barnacled and

girlish with bright eyes and prissy lips, as if there were another face, the real face, beneath his mask of skin.

‘Okay. Get out the car. I said out the fuckin car!’

‘Yeah yeah,’ I said, and shoved my suitcase along the seat.

‘Twenty-two dollars,’ he said. ‘There, the *clock*.’

‘I’m not giving you anything, scumbag.’

With no shift in the angle of his gaze he reached beneath the dashboard and tugged the special catch. All four door locks clunked shut with an oily chockful sound.

‘Listen to me, you fat fuck,’ he began. ‘This is Ninety-Ninth and Second. The money. Give me the money.’ He said he would drive me uptown twenty blocks and kick me out on the street, right there. He said that by the time the niggers were done, there’d be nothing left of me but a hank of hair and teeth.

I had some notes in my back pocket, from my last trip. I passed a twenty through the smeared screen. He sprang the locks and out I climbed. There was nothing more to say.

So now I stand here with my case, in smiting light and island rain. Behind me massed water looms, and the industrial corsetry of FDR Drive . . . It must be pushing eight o’clock by now but the weepy breath of the day still shields its glow, a guttering glow, very wretched – rained on, leaked on. Across the dirty street three black kids sprawl in the doorway of a dead liquor store. I’m big, though, yes I’m a big mother, and they look too depressed to come and check me out. I take a defiant pull from my pint of duty-free. It’s past midnight, my time. God I hate this movie. And it’s only just beginning.

I looked for cabs, and no cabs came. I was on First, not Second, and First is uptown. All the cabs would be turned the other way, getting the hell out on Second and Lex. In

New York for a half a minute and already I pace the line, the long walk down Ninety-Ninth Street.

You know, I wouldn't have done this a month ago. I wouldn't have done it then. Then I was avoiding. Now I'm just waiting. Things happen to me. They do. They just have to go ahead and happen. You watch – you wait . . . Inflation, they say, is cleaning up this city. Dough is rolling up its sleeves and mucking the place out. But things still happen here. You step off the plane, look around, take a deep breath – and come to in your underpants, somewhere south of SoHo, or on a midtown traction table with a silver tray and a tasselled tab on your chest and a guy in white saying Good morning, sir. How are you today. That'll be fifteen thousand dollars . . . Things still happen here and something is waiting to happen to me. I can tell. Recently my life feels like a bloodcurdling joke. Recently my life has taken on *form*. Something is waiting. I am waiting. Soon, it will stop waiting – any day now. Awful things can happen any time. This is the awful thing.

Fear walks tall on this planet. Fear walks big and fat and fine. Fear has really got the whammy on all of us down here. Oh it's true, man. Sister, don't kid yourself . . . One of these days I'm going to walk right up to fear. I'm going to walk right up. Someone's got to do it. I'm going to walk right up and say, *Okay, hard-on. No more of this. You've pushed us around for long enough. Here is someone who would not take it. It's over. Outside.* Bullies, I'm told, are all cowards deep down. Fear is a bully, but something tells me that fear is no funkier. Fear, I suspect, is really incredibly brave. Fear will lead me straight through the door, will prop me up in the alley among the crates and the empties, and show me who's the boss . . . I might lose a tooth or two, I suppose, or he could even break my arm – or fuck up my eye! Fear might get carried away, like I've seen them do, pure damage, with nothing mattering. Maybe I'd need a crew, or a tool, or an equalizer. Now I come to think about it, maybe

I'd better let fear be. When it comes to fighting, I'm brave – or reckless or indifferent or just unjust. But fear really scares me. He's too good at fighting, and I'm too frightened anyway.

I walked west for a block, then turned south. On Ninety-Sixth Street I hijacked a cab at the lights – I just yanked open the door and swung my case on to the seat. The cabbie turned: and our eyes met horribly. 'The Ashbery,' I told him, for the second time. 'On Forty-Fifth.' He took me there. I gave the guy the two bucks I owed him, plus a couple more. The money changed hands very eloquently.

'Thank you, friend,' he said.

'You're welcome,' I said. 'Thank *you*.'

I'm sitting on the bed in my hotel room. The room is fine, fine. Absolutely no complaints. It's terrific value.

The pain in my face has split in two but hurts about the same. There's a definite swelling in my jaw now, on my upper west side. It's a fucking abscess or something, maybe a nerve deal or a gum gimmick. Oh Christ, I suppose I'll have to get it fixed. The mouth-doctor I choose is in for a jolt. These croc teeth of mine, these English teeth – they're about as good, I reckon, as those of the average American corpse. It will cost me, what's more. You have to splash out big for everything like that over here, as you know, as I've said. You have to tell yourself beforehand that the sky's the limit. All the people in the street, these extras and bit-part players, they all cost long money to keep on the road. There are taxi-meters, money-clocks, on the ambulances in this city: that's the sort of place I'm dealing with. I can feel another pain starting business in the slopes of my eyes. Hello there, and welcome.

I'm drinking tax-exempt whisky from a toothmug, and listening to see if I'm still hearing things. The mornings are

the worst. This morning was the worst yet. I heard computer fugues, Japanese jam sessions, didgeridoos. What is my head up to? I wish I had some idea what it's got in mind for me. I want to telephone Selina right now and give her a piece of it, a piece of my mind. It's one in the morning over there. But it's one in the morning over here too, in my head anyway. And Selina would be more than a match for me, with my head in the shape it's in . . . Now I've got another evening to deal with. I don't want another evening to deal with. I've already had one, in England and on the plane. I don't need another evening. Alec Llewellyn owes me money. Selina Street owes me money. Barry Self owes me money. Outside I see night has happened quickly. Dah – steady now. The lights don't seem at all fixed or stable, up there in the banked sky.

Refreshed by a brief blackout, I got to my feet and went next door. The mirror looked on, quite unimpressed, as I completed a series of rethinks in the hired glare of the windowless bathroom. I cleaned my teeth, combed my rug, clipped my nails, bathed my eyes, gargled, showered, shaved, changed – and still looked like shit. Jesus, I'm so fat these days. I tell you, I appal myself in the tub and on the can. I sit slumped on the ox-collar seat like a clutch of plumbing, the winded boiler of a thrashed old tramp. How did it happen? It can't just be all the booze and the quick food I put away. No, I must have been pencilled in for this a long time ago. My dad isn't fat. My mother wasn't either. What's the deal? Can money fix it? I need my whole body drilled down and repaired, replaced. I need my body capped is what I need. I'm going to do it, too, the minute I hit the money.

Selina, my Selina, that Selina Street . . . Today somebody told me one of her terrible secrets. I don't want to talk about it yet. I'll tell you later. I want to go out and drink some more and get a lot tireder first.

The sprung doors parted and I staggered out into the lobby's teak and flicker. Uniformed men stood by impassively like sentries in their trench. I slapped my key on the desk and nodded gravely. I was loaded enough to be unable to tell whether they could tell I was loaded. Would they mind? I was certainly too loaded to care. I moved to the door with boxy, schlep-shouldered strides.

'Mr Self?'

'The same,' I said. 'Yeah?'

'Oh, sir. There was a call for you this afternoon. Caduta Massi? . . . Is that *the* Caduta Massi?'

'The same. She - any message or anything?'

'No, sir. No message.'

'Well okay. Thanks.'

'Mm-hm.'

So I walked south down bending Broadway. What's all this *mm-hm* shit? I strode through meat-eating genies of subway breath. I heard the ragged hoot of sirens, the whistles of two-wheelers and skateboarders, pogoists, gocarters, windsurfers. I saw the barrelling cars and cabs, shoved on by the power of their horns. I felt all the contention, the democracy, all the italics, in the air. These are people determined to be themselves, whatever, little shame attaching. Urged out from the line of shufflers and idlers, watchers, pavement men, a big blond screamer flailed at the kerb, denouncing all traffic. His hair was that special mad yellow, like an omelette, a rug omelette. As he shadowboxed he loosely babbled of fraud and betrayal, redundancy, eviction. 'It's my money and I want it!' he said. 'I want my money and I want it now!' The city is full of these guys, these guys and dolls who bawl and holler and weep about bad luck all the hours there are. I read in a magazine somewhere that they're chronics from the municipal madhouses. They got let out when money went wrong ten

years ago . . . Now there's a good joke, a global one, cracked by money. An Arab hikes his zipper in the sheep-pen, gazes contentedly across the stall and says, 'Hey, Basim. Let's hike oil.' Ten years later a big whiteman windmills his arms on Broadway, for all to see.

I hit a topless bar on Forty-Fourth. Ever check out one of these joints? I always expected some kind of Mob frat-house policed by half-clad chambermaids. It isn't like that. They just have a few chicks in knickers dancing on a ramp behind the bar: you sit and drink while they strut their stuff. I kept the whiskies coming, at \$3.50 a pop, and sluiced the liquor round my upper west side. I also pressed the cold glass against my writhing cheek. This helps, or seems to. It soothes.

There were three girls working the ramp, spaced out along its mirrored length. The girl dancing topless for my benefit, and for that of the gingery, hermaphroditic figure seated two stools to my right, was short and shy and puppyishly built. Well, let's take a look here. Her skin showed pale in the light, waning sorely to the eye, as if she were given to rashes, allergies. She had large woeful breasts, puckered at the heart, and an eave of loose flesh climbed over the high rim of her pants, which were navy-blue and fluff-flossed, like gym-briefs. Yes, the upper grips of her breasts bore soft crenellations, even whiter than the rest of her. Stretchmarks at twenty, at nineteen: something wrong there, the form showing fatigue, showing error, at a very early stage. She knew all this, my girl. Her normal tomboy face tried to wear the standard sneer of enraptured self-sufficiency and yet was full of disquiet – disquiet of the body, not the other shame. If you want my considered opinion, this chick had no kind of future in the gogo business. She was my girl, though, for the next half hour anyhow. Her two rivals further down the ramp looked a lot more my style, but my face throbbed knowingly each time I turned their way. And I had my girl to consider, her own feelings in the matter. I'm with you, kid,

don't worry. You'll do me fine. She smiled in my direction every now and then. The smile was so helpless and uncertain. Yes the smile was so ashamed.

'You want another scotch?' said the matron behind the bar – the old dame with her waxed hair and scrapey voice. The body-stocking or tutu she wore was an unfriendly dull brown or caramel colour. It spoke of spinal supports, hernias.

'Yeah,' I said, and started smoking another cigarette. Unless I specifically inform you otherwise, I'm always smoking another cigarette.

I nursed my cheek for a while with the glass. I muttered and swore. By the time I looked up again my girl was gone. In her stead there writhed a six-foot Mex with wraparound mouth, hot greasy breasts, and a furrow of black hair on her belly which crept like a trail of gunpowder into the sharp white holster of her pants. Now this is a bit more fucking like it, I thought. In my experience you can tell pretty well all you need to know about a woman by the amount of time, thought and money she puts into her pants. Take Selina. And these pants spelt true sack knowhow. She danced like a wet dream, vicious and inane. Her tooth-crammed smile went everywhere and nowhere. The face, the body, the movement, all quite secure in their performance, their art, their pornography.

'You want to buy Dawn a drink?'

I levelled my head. The old dame behind the bar gestured perfunctorily towards the stool beside me, where Dawn indeed perched – Dawn, my girl, now swaddled in a woolly dressing-gown.

'Well what's Dawn drinking?' I asked.

'Champagne!' A squat glass of what looked like glucose on the rocks was smacked down in front of me. 'Six dollars!'

'Six *dollars* . . .' I flattened another twenty on the damp wood.

'Sorry,' said Dawn with a wince. She used the long Boroughs vowel, the out-of-towner vowel. 'I don't like to do

this part. It's not nice to a girl.'

'Don't worry.'

'What's your name?'

'John,' I said.

'What do you do, John?'

Oh I see – a conversation. This is some deal. There's a wriggling naked miracle five feet from my nose, but I pay good money to talk with Dawn here in her dressing-gown.

'I'm in pornography,' I said. 'Right up to here.'

'That's interesting.'

'You want another scotch?' The old boot, this headmistress in her therapeutic singlet, loomed over us with my change.

'Why not,' I said.

'You want to buy Dawn another drink?'

'Christ. Yeah, okay – do it.'

'... Are you English, John?' asked my girl, with deep understanding, as if this would answer a lot of questions.

'Tell you the truth, Dawn, I'm half American and half asleep. I just climbed off the plane, you know?'

'Me too. I mean the bus. Yesterday. I just climbed off the bus.'

'Where from, Dawn?'

'New Jersey.'

'No kidding? Where in New Jersey? You know, I grew up –'

'You want another scotch?'

I felt my shoulders give. I turned slowly. I said, 'How much does it cost to keep you away from me for ten minutes? Tell me something,' I asked her. But I said a good deal more. She stood her ground, this old dame. She was experienced. I gave her all my face, and it's a face that can usually face them down, wide and grey, full of adolescent archaeology and cheap food and junk money, the face of a fat snake, bearing all the signs of its sins. For several seconds she just gave me her face too, full on, a stark presentation of the

eyes, which were harder than mine, oh much harder. With her small fists on the bar she leaned towards me and said:

'Leroy!'

Instantly the music gulped out. Various speckled profiles turned my way. Hands on hips, older in the silence, her breasts standing easy now, the dark dancer stared down at me with weathered contempt.

'I'm looking for things.' This was Dawn. 'I'm really interested in pornography.'

'No you're not,' I said. And pornography isn't interested either. 'It's okay, Leroy! Relax, Leroy. Pal, there's no problem. I'm going. Here's money. Dawn, just you take care now.'

I slid to my feet and found no balance. The stool wobbled roundly on its base, like a coin. I waved to the watching women – get your staring done with – and made my diagonal for the door.

Everything was on offer outside. Boylesk, assisted showers, live sex, a we-never-close porno emporium bristling in its static. They even had the real thing out there, in prostitute form. But I wasn't buying, not tonight. I walked back to the hotel *without incident*. Nothing happened. It never does, but it will. The revolving door shoved me into the lobby, and the desk clerk bobbed about in his stockade.

'Hi there,' he said. 'While you were out tonight, sir, Mr Lorne Guyland called.'

Daintily he offered me my key.

'Would that be the real Lorne Guyland, sir?'

'Oh, I wouldn't go that far,' I said, or maybe I just thought it. The elevator sucked me skyward. My face was still hurting a lot all the time. In my room I picked up the bottle and sank back on the bed. While I waited for the noises to come I thought about travel through air and time, and about

Selina . . . Yes, I can fill you in on that now. Perhaps I'll even feel a little better, when I've told you, when it's out.

Earlier today – today? Christ, it feels like childhood – Alec Llewellyn drove me to Heathrow Airport at the wheel of my powerful Fiasco. He's borrowing the car while I'm away, that liar. I was smudged with drink and Serafim, for the plane. I'm scared of flying. I'm scared of landing, too. We didn't talk much. He owes me money . . . We joined the long queue for standby. Something in me hoped that the flight would be full. It wasn't. The ticking computer gimmicked my seat. 'But you'd better hurry,' said the girl. Alec jogged at my side to passport control. He tousled my rug and shooed me through.

'Hey, John,' he called from the other side of the fence. 'Hey, addict!' Beside him an old man stood waving at no one that I could see.

'What?'

'Come here.'

He beckoned. I came panting up to him.

'What?'

'Selina. She's fucking someone else – a lot, all the time.'

'Oh you *liar*.' And I think I even took a weary swipe at his face. Alec is always doing things like this.

'I thought you ought to know,' he said offendedly. He smiled. 'Round from the back, one leg up, her on top. Every which way.'

'Oh yeah? Who? You liar. Why are you – who, who, who?'

But he wouldn't tell me. He just said that it had been going on for a long time, and that it was someone I knew pretty well.

'*You*,' I said, and turned, and ran . . .

There. I don't feel better. I don't feel better at all. I'm rolling over now, to try and get some sleep. London is waking up. So is Selina. The distant fizz or whistle or hiss in the back of my head is starting again, modulating slowly, searching for its scale.

Oh man sometimes I wake up feel like a cat runover.

Are you familiar with the stoical aspects of hard drinking, of heavy drinking? Oh it's heavy. Oh it's hard. It isn't easy. Jesus, I never meant me any harm. All I wanted was a good time.

The disease I host called tinnitus – more reliable and above all cheaper than any alarm call – woke me promptly at nine. Tinnitus woke me on a note of high exasperation, as if it had been trying to wake me for hours. I let my sapless tongue creak up to check out the swelling on my upper west side. About the same, yet tenderer. My throat informed me that I had a snout hangover on, too. The first cigarette would light a trail of gunpowder to the holster, the arsenal inside my chest. I patted my pockets and lit it anyway.

Ten minutes later I came out of that can on all fours, a pale and very penitent crocodile, really sorry about all that stagnant gook and offal I went and quaffed last night. I'd just rolled on my back and was loosening my tie and unbuttoning my shirt when the telephone rang.

'John? Lorne Guyland.'

'Lorne!' I said. Christ, what a croak it was. 'How are you?'

'Good,' he said. 'I'm good, John. How are you?'

'I'm fine, fine.'

'That's good, John. John?'

'Lorne?'

'There are things that worry me, John.'

'Tell me about them, Lorne.'

'I don't happen to be an old man, John.'

'I know that, Lorne.'

'I'm in great shape. Never better.'

'I'm glad, Lorne.'

'That's why I don't like it that you say I'm an old man, John.'

'But I don't say that, Lorne.'

‘Well okay. You *imply* it, John, and that’s, it’s, that’s about the same thing. In my book. You also *imply* that I’m not very sexually active and can’t satisfy my women. That’s just not true, John.’

‘I’m sure it’s not true, Lorne.’

‘Then why imply it? John, I think we should meet and talk about these things. I hate to talk on the telephone.’

‘Absolutely. When?’

‘I’m a very busy man, John.’

‘I respect that, Lorne.’

‘You can’t expect me to just drop everything, just to, just to meet with you, John.’

‘Of course not, Lorne.’

‘I lead a full life, John. Full and active. Superactive, John. Six o’clock I’m at the health club. When my programme’s done I hit the mat with my judo instructor. Afternoons I work out with the weights. When I’m at the house, it’s golf, tennis, water-skiing, scuba-diving, racket-ball and polo. You know, John, sometimes I just get out on that beach and run like a kid. The girls, these chicks I have at the house, when I run in late they scold me, John, like I was a little boy. Then I’m up half the night screwing. Take yesterday . . .’

It went on like this, I swear to God, for an hour and a half. After a while I fell silent. This had no effect on anything. So in the end I just sat through it, smoking cigarettes and having a really bad time.

When it was over, I took a pull of scotch, dabbed the tears away with a paper tissue, and rang down to room service. I asked for coffee. I mean, you have to take it easy on yourself sometimes.

‘Coffee how?’ came the suspicious reply.

I told him: with milk and sugar. ‘How big are the pots?’

‘Serve two,’ he said.

‘Four pots.’

‘You got it.’

I lay back on the cot with my frayed, fanlike address book. Using the complimentary pad and pencil, I started making a list of the places where I might expect to find the nomadic Selina. That Selina, she gets around. I wondered, out of interest, how much these calls were going to cost me.

I undressed and ran a tub. Then the impeccable black bellhop arrived with my tray. I came over, initialled the check and slipped the kid a buck. He was in good shape, this kid: he had a pleasant agitation in his step and in his smile. He frowned innocently and sniffed the air.

He could take one look at me – at the ashtray, the bottle, the four pots of coffee, my face, and my gut set like a stone on the white band of the towel – he could take one look at me and be pretty sure I ran on heavy fuel.

There is a dog tethered in the steep airwell beneath my room. A talented barker, he barks booming well. I listened to him a lot while I sat there being talked to by Lorne. His half-hourly barking jags reverberate in monstrous warning up the length of the canyon walls. He needs that nether fury. He has big responsibilities – he sounds as though he guards the gates of hell. His lungs are fathomless, his hellhound rage is huge. He needs those lungs – what for? To keep them in, to keep them out.

I'd better give you the lowdown on Selina – and quick. That hot bitch, what am I letting her do to me?

Like many girls (I reckon), and especially those of the small, supple, swervy, bendy, bed-smart variety, Selina lives her life in hardened fear of assault, molestation and rape. The world has ravished her often enough in the past, and she thinks the world wants to ravish her again. Lying between the sheets, or propped at my side during long and anxious journeys in the Fiasco, or seated across the table in the deep lees of high-tab dinners, Selina has frequently

refreshed me with tales of insult and violation from her childhood and teenage years – a musk-breathing, toffee-offering sicko on the common, the toolshed interrogations of sweat-soaked parkies, some lumbering retard in the alley or the lane, right up to the narcissist photographers and priapic prop-boys who used to cruise her at work, and now the scowling punks, soccer trogs and bus-stop boogies malevolently lining the streets and more or less constantly pinching her ass or flicking her tits and generally making no bones about the things they need to do . . . It must be tiring knowledge, the realization that half the members of the planet, one on one, can do what the hell they like with you.

And it must be extra tough on a girl like Selina, whose appearance, after many hours at the mirror, is a fifty-fifty compromise between the primly juvenile and the grossly provocative. Her tastes are strictly High Street too, with frank promise of brothelly knowhow and top-dollar underwear. I've followed Selina down the strip, when we're shopping, say, and she strolls on ahead, wearing sawn-off jeans and a wash-withered T-shirt, or a frilly frock measuring the brink of her russety thighs, or a transparent coating of gossamer, like a condom, or an abbreviated *school uniform* . . . The men wince and watch, wince and watch. They buckle and half turn away. They shut their eyes and clutch their nuts. And sometimes, when they see me cruise up behind my little friend and slip an arm around her trim and muscular waist, they look at me as if to say – Do something about it, will you? Don't let her go about the place looking like that. Come on, it's your responsibility.

I have talked to Selina about the way she looks. I have brought to her notice the intimate connections between rape and her summer wardrobe. She laughs about it. She seems flushed, pleased. I keep on having to fight for her honour in pubs and at parties. She gets groped or goosed or propositioned – and there I am once again, wearily raising my scarred dukes. I tell her it's because she goes around

the place looking like a nude magazine. She finds this funny too. I don't understand. I sometimes think that Selina would stand stock still in front of an advancing juggernaut, so long as the driver never once took his eyes off her tits.

In addition to rape, Selina is frightened of mice, spiders, dogs, toadstools, cancer, mastectomy, chipped mugs, ghost stories, visions, portents, fortune tellers, astrology columns, deep water, fires, floods, thrush, poverty, lightning, ectopic pregnancy, rust, hospitals, driving, swimming, flying and ageing. Like her fat pale lover, she never reads a book. She has no job any more: she has no money. She is either twenty-nine or thirty-one or just possibly thirty-three. She is leaving it all very late, and she knows it. She will have to make her move, and she will have to make it soon.

I don't believe Alec, necessarily, but I won't believe Selina, that's for sure. In my experience, the thing about girls is – you never know. No, you never do. Even if you actually catch them, red handed – bent triple upside down in mid-air over the headboard, say, and brushing their teeth with your best friend's dick – you never know. She'll deny it, indignantly. She'll believe it, too. She'll hold the dick there, like a mike, and tell you that it isn't so.

I have been faithful to Selina Street for over a year, God damn it. Yes I have. I keep trying not to be, but it never works out. I can't find anyone to be unfaithful to her with. They don't want what I have to offer. They want commitment and candour and sympathy and trust and all the other things I seem to be really short of. They are past the point where they'll go to bed with somebody just for the hell of it. Selina is past that point also, long past. She used to be a well-known goer, true, but now she has her future security to think about. She has money to think about. Ah, Selina, come on. Tell me it isn't so.

I worked up a major sweat over the console that morning – yeah, and a major tab, too. Deafened with caffeine, I was just a hot robot, a ticking grid of jet-lag, time-jump and hangover. The telephone happened to be an antique: a dialler. And my fingers were already so sore and chewed that each shirtbutton had felt like a drop of molten solder . . . Half way through the session I was dialling with my left pinkie. ‘Room number please,’ said the telephonist in her honeying drone, every time, every time. ‘Me again,’ I said and said. ‘Room 101. Me. It’s *me*.’

I tried my own number first and repeatedly thereafter. Selina has her keys. She is always in and out . . . I spoke to Mandy and Debby, Selina’s shadowy flatmates. I rang her old office. I rang her dancing class. I even rang her gynaecologist. No one knew where she was. On a parallel track I combed the airwaves for Alec Llewellyn. I talked to his wife. I talked to three of his girlfriends. I talked to his probation officer. No luck. Boy, these are pretty thoughts for me to entertain, three thousand miles from home.

The dog barked. My face felt small and clueless between its fat red ears. For a while I slumped back and stared hard at the phone. It held out for several seconds, then it rang. And so naturally I thought *it’s her* and made a hurried grab for my girl.

‘– Yes?’

‘John Self? It’s Caduta Massi.’

‘At last,’ I said. ‘Caduta, it’s an honour.’

‘John, it’s good to talk to you. But before we meet I want to sort some things out.’

‘Like what, Caduta?’

‘For instance, how many children do you think I should have?’

‘Well I thought just the one.’

‘No, John.’

‘More?’

‘Many more.’

I said, 'About how many?'

'I think I should have many children, John.'

'Well okay. Sure. Why not. What, say two or three more?'

'We'll see,' said Caduta Massi. 'I'm glad you're amenable to that, John. Thank you.'

'Forget it.'

'And another thing. I think I should have a mother, a white-haired lady in a black dress. But that's not so important.'

'You got it.'

'And another thing. Don't you think I should change my name?'

'What to, Caduta?'

'I don't know yet. But something a little more appropriate.'

'Whatever you say. Caduta – let's meet.'

After that I had them send me up a rack of cocktails and canapés. The same black bellhop walked skilfully into the room with the silver trays on his tense fingertips. I had nothing smaller, so I flicked him a five. He looked at the drinks and he looked at me.

'Have one,' I said, and picked up a glass.

He shook his head, resisting a smile, averting his mobile face.

'What's up?' I said coolly, and drank. 'Little early for you?'

'You party last night?' he asked. He couldn't straighten his face for more than a couple of seconds at a stretch.

'What's your name?'

'Felix.'

'No, Felix,' I said, 'I did it all by myself.'

'... You gonna party now?'

'Yeah. But all by myself again. Damn it. I got problems you wouldn't believe. I'm on a different clock to you, Felix. My time, it's way after lunch.'

He lifted his round chin and nodded his head tightly. 'I take one look at you, man,' he said, 'and I know you ain't *never* gonna stop.'

I didn't attempt anything else that day. I drank the drink and ate the grub. I had a shave. I had a handjob, closely structured round my last night with Selina. Or I tried. I couldn't remember much about it, and then all these guys came walking in on the act . . . So me and my sore tooth throbbed our way through a few hours of television – I sat flummoxed and muttering like a superannuated ghost, all shagged out from its hauntings, through sports, soaps, ads, news, the other world. Best was a variety show hosted by a veteran entertainer, someone who was pretty well over the hill when I was a kid. Amazing to think that these guys are still around, still alive, let alone still earning. They don't make them like that any more. No, come on, let's be accurate: only now, in 1981, do they make them like that. They couldn't before – they didn't have the technology. Jesus Christ, this old prong has been sutured and stitched together in a state-of-the-art cosmetics lab. The scalloped blaze of his bridgework matches the macabre brilliance of his flounced dicky. His highlit contacts burn a tigerish green. Check out the tan on the guy – it's like a paintjob. He looks terrific, positively rosy. His Latin rug sweats with vitamins. His falsy ears are sharp and succulent. When I make all the money I'm due to make and go off to California for that well-earned body transplant I've promised myself, I'll mention the name of old green eyes here, and tell the medics, as I go under, *There. That's how I want it. Give me one just like that* . . . But now this aged android starts bringing on a string of even older guys, also spruce and dazzlingly metallic, a chorus line of tuxed fucks called things like Mr Music and Entertainment Himself. Wait a minute. Now I *know* that one has been dead for decades. Come to think of it, the whole show has the suspended air and sickly texture of treated film, that funeral-parlour glow – numb, tranced and shiny, like a corpse. I switched channels and sat there rubbing my face. The screen now showed a crater-field of dead cars, the frazzled heaps pummelled to the sound of

tinnitus, a new necropolis of old American gods. I telephoned, and found no answer anywhere.

Time passed until it was time to go. I climbed into my big suit and brushed the hair back off my face. I took one more call that afternoon. It was a curious call, a strange call. I'll tell you about it later. Some whacko. No big deal.

Where is Selina Street? Where is she? She knows where I am. My number is up there on the kitchen wall. What is she doing? What is she doing for money? Punishment, that's what this is. Punishment is what I'm taking here.

I ask only one thing. I'm understanding. I'm mature. And it isn't much to ask. I want to get back to London, and track her down, and be alone with my Selina – or not even alone, damn it, merely close to her, close enough to smell her skin, to see the flecked webbing of her lemony eyes, the moulding of her artful lips. Just for a few precious seconds. Just long enough to put in one good, clean punch. That's all I ask.

So now I must go uptown to meet with Fielding Goodney at the Carraway Hotel – Fielding, my moneyman, my contact and my pal. He's the reason I'm here. I'm the reason he's here too. We're going to make lots of money together. Making lots of money – it's not that hard, you know. It's overestimated. Making lots of money is a breeze. You watch.

I came down the steps and into the street. Above, all was ocean brightness: against the flat blue sky the clouds had been sketched by an impressively swift and confident hand. What *talent*. I like the sky and often wonder where I'd be without it. I know: I'd be in England, where we don't have one. Through some physiological fluke – poison and body-chemistry doing a deal in their smoke-filled room – I felt fine, I felt good. Manhattan twanged in its spring ozone, girding

itself for the fires of July and the riot heat of August. Let's walk it, I thought, and started off across town.

On masculine Madison (tightly buttoned, like a snooker waistcoat) I took my left and headed north into the infinite trap of air. Cars and cabs swore loudly at each other, looking for trouble, ready to fight, to confront. And here are the streets and their outlandish personnel. Here are the street artists. At the corner of Fifty-Fourth, a big black guy writhed within the glass and steel of a telephone kiosk. He was having a terrible time in there, that much was clear. Often as I approached he slapped the hot outer metal of the booth with his meaty pale palm. He was shouting – what, I didn't know. I bet money was involved. Money is always involved. Maybe drugs or women too. In the cabled tunnels beneath the street and in the abstract airpaths of the sky, how much violence was crackling through New York? How would it level out? Poorly, probably. Every line that linked two lovers would be flexed and snarled between a hundred more whose only terms were obscenity and threat . . . I've hit women. Yes, I know, I know: it isn't cool. Funnily enough, it's hard to do, in a sense. Have *you* ever done it? Girls, ladies, have you ever copped one? It's hard. It's quite a step, particularly the first time. After that, though, it just gets easier and easier. After a while, hitting women is like rolling off a log. But I suppose I'd better stop. I suppose I'd better kick it, one of these days . . . As I passed by, the negro cracked the phone back into its frame and lurched out towards me. Then his head dropped and he slapped the metal once more, but feebly now. Time and temperature flashed above.

Fielding Goodney was already in attendance at the Dimmesdale Room when I strolled into the Carraway a little after six. Erect among the misangled high chairs, he stood with his back to me in the depths of this grotto of glass, two limp fingers raised in a gesture of warning or stipulation. I saw his talking face, bleached to steel by the frosted mirror. A low-browed barman listened responsibly to his orders.