

John Niven

Bestselling author of *Kill Your Friends*



'Gripping, sexy,
violent and
outrageous'
Mirror

THE AMATEURS

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Extract of *Kill Your Friends*

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About the Book

GARY is a sweet and decent man. Only two things would improve his life - having children with his gorgeous wife Pauline, and a lower golf handicap. Both are unlikely.

PAULINE is wondering how she ended up living in an ugly little house, driving a second-hand car and making a living dressing up as Tinkerbell. She's planning to leave Gary for a self-made carpet millionaire.

FINDLAY, the Carpet King of Scotland, wants to trade in his obese wife for a younger model. But if he goes for a divorce she'll take him to the cleaners. If only there was some way she could be made to disappear . . .

LEE, Gary's luckless brother, has botched one too many drug deals. Local crime overlord Ranta Campbell gives him one more job - one last chance to get it right. Lee's done some bad things - but murder?

When Gary gets smashed on the head by a golf ball and miraculously develops an absolutely perfect swing, everyone finds their fates rest on the final day of the Open Championship . . .

About the Author

John Niven was born in Irvine, Ayrshire. He read English Literature at Glasgow University and spent the next ten years working in the UK music industry. He has written for the *Sunday Times*, *The Times*, *Scotland on Sunday*, *Esquire* and many other publications. He is the author of six novels including *Kill Your Friends* and *Straight White Male*. He lives in Buckinghamshire.

ALSO BY JOHN NIVEN

Music from Big Pink

Kill Your Friends

The Second Coming

Cold Hands

Straight White Male

The Sunshine Cruise Company

For my father, John Jeffrey Niven, and my son,
Robin John Niven. Golfers who never met.

The Amateurs

John Niven

 WINDMILL BOOKS

Here, in Scotland, golf was not an accessory to life, drawing upon one's marginal energy; it was life, played out of the centre of one's being.

John Updike, 'Farrell's Caddie'

He rallied, my tears being in unsurpassably bad taste, and said, 'Look here, it's only a game.'

Trying to speak softly so the children wouldn't hear, I said, 'Fuck you!'

Frederick Exley, A Fan's Notes

PART ONE

They dream in courtship, but in wedlock wake.

Alexander Pope

IT WAS THE most humiliating start to a birthday Gary Irvine could remember.

There had been more painful - his twelfth, when his parents had been unable to afford the skateboard he'd wanted. His dad had fashioned him one by gluing a piece of rubber tread to one side of a short plank and fixing the wheels from an old pair of roller skates to the other. Lacking any steering capabilities he'd barrelled down Castleglen Bridge and straight into the bus shelter, losing his front teeth in the process.

There had been more outrageous - his eighteenth, when he had been woken by his mum's shrieking after she found him unconscious in the downstairs hall, the cold trail of vomit marking his wobbly progress from the front door, the cock and balls inked on his forehead starkly proclaiming that he was now of legal drinking age.

And there had been more confrontational - last year for instance, when Pauline had accused him of being selfish because he'd suggested derailing her plans to go shopping in Glasgow so that he could play golf.

But this was definitely the most humiliating. It happened like this . . .

Pauline had to be up early, to get to a school over near Cumnock where she had a show to put on for some Year One kids. Even though it was *his* birthday he got up before her, as he always did, and made her breakfast.

At 6.30 he slipped from the warm pocket of the bed, the golf dream he was having (ball flying straight and true under a clear sky) evaporating around him as he yawned and scratched his way downstairs. It was the second week

of April and the spring dawn was already under way on the west coast of Scotland, squares of weak sunlight forming on the walls.

Opening the kitchen door he saw Ben's lifeless form slumped in the corner - his snout buried deep inside a training shoe, like he was wearing an oxygen mask - and for a second Gary entertained the usual delicious thought: the monster had finally died in the night. But when he leaned in to investigate he saw that the dog's flank was rhythmically rising and falling as his ancient, tattered lungs emptied and refilled, his back legs trembling and twitching as Ben pursued his own dreams into the dawn. (Terrible Ben-dreams - rivers of human blood. Turds the size of cities.)

Ben scented him and rolled over, not completely awake yet but already composing his features into a snarl of hateful greeting, the growl rising within him his instinctive response to any human presence bar Pauline's. As he stretched himself fully awake Ben's growl sharpened in pitch, quickly reaching the level of ultra-hate reserved solely for Gary - defiler of his mistress - before resolving into a series of short barks.

'Oh, *please* shut up, Ben.'

Ben stopped barking. Not, of course, through any impulse towards obedience, but simply to allow himself to concentrate fully on glaring at Gary; his lips pulled back, black and pink gums and caramel teeth exposed in a furious scowl. Gary and Ben eyeballed each other silently, each seeing what the other saw.

Gary saw a seventeen-year-old mongrel, the issue of the congress between a corgi and a Border collie; this unholy union the crucible in which Ben's unique 'personality' had been formed. Predominately black with white and tan patches, most notably on his face, which was half-white and half-black (the colours erroneously suggesting a yin and yang of the soul, a light side and a dark side. There was no yin; Ben's soul was all yang). Ben was short - like a regular

collie that had been cruelly sawn off at the knees. His eyes, once jet-black pools, were cracked and fissured with milky cataracts, and in those eyes Gary saw a Scotsman – thirty-three years old that very morning – with a thick, boyish thatch of reddish-brown hair and rust-coloured patches in his stubble. (A ‘hawf’ or ‘semi’ ginger they’d called him at school.) Gary’s eyes were blue and clear, the eyes of a man who ran three miles most mornings and who rarely drank spirits. His complexion was youthful, although lately he’d been finding, in the hollows beside his nostrils, in the pouches beneath his eyes, the odd open pore that contained deep reserves of waxy pus: a posthumous inheritance from his dad, a two-handicap golfer in his prime and thirteen years dead this summer.

Man and beast remained locked in the stare a moment longer – old adversaries acknowledging that fresh hostilities were about to commence – before Gary opened the back door and, with some difficulty, hustled the dog into the garden. Ben, of course, didn’t even make it as far as the grass, gleefully urinating on the patio three feet from the door, his panting face wreathed in steaming urine.

Now the ritual of Pauline’s porridge.

Pauline’s porridge was the product of much ingenuity and toil. It was made with milk and nuked in the microwave for exactly three and a half minutes. This specific timing produced exactly the right consistency of gruel and had been arrived at after much research and development early in their marriage, after Pauline had rejected many a bowl of too-loose or too-solid porridge.

Gary stood in the warming kitchen in boxer shorts and ancient Stone Roses T-shirt, listening to the hum of the microwave and the rumble of the kettle. Had he been standing in this exact spot a year ago he would have been in the garden. The extended kitchen/dining room – Pauline’s project – had only recently been completed, long over-schedule and much over-budget.

They had moved into the small development five years ago. ('Spam Valley' his brother Lee had called it, a piece of indigenous abuse meaning that the fools who bought such houses had to live on tinned meat in order to make the mortgage payments.) The house was brand new. Their arguments were the first its walls had contained, their lovemaking the first its oatmeal carpets had borne. (And when had *that* last happened?)

The microwave pinged brightly. He removed the blistering bowl and added chopped banana, blueberries and slices of strawberry. As the fruit sank into the grey quicksand he added a drizzle of maple syrup. (Just a drizzle, mind. Pauline wanted the echo of sweetness. She did not - emphatically *not* - want to get fat. Much of her reading, her ferocious scanning of *Babe!*, or *Hot!*, or the women's section of the *Daily Standard* - 'Scotland's brightest family paper!' - was devoted to the subject of avoiding fatness.)

While he prepared the porridge Pauline's tea was brewing. Again the methodology here was chillingly specific. The tea bag had to be left in the cup for a minimum of three minutes and a maximum of five. The bag then had to be lifted cleanly out of the mug. It was not to be squashed against the side as this could result in a 'bruising' of the tea.

Gary Irvine performed these tasks with the assiduity, the attention to detail, of a man in a long-term relationship who very much hoped he would soon be having sex.

Before he took the tray up he went out into the garden to fetch Ben. From the kitchen door to the back of the garden was no more than fifty yards. A half sand wedge from where he stood. (But probably better to pitch-and-run it with the seven-iron. Percentage shot.) There was no point in calling Ben, for the dog's deafness was now almost total. (Or, Gary suspected, selective: the rustle of a biscuit wrapper, or a styro-foam tray of meat squeaking on the kitchen counter, could bring the fiend running from half a mile away. But if Ben were engaged in an activity he enjoyed - eating,

sleeping, probing the delicate rainbow of scents in another dog's quivering anus - you could scream his name from three feet and he heard nothing.) The grass was cold under his bare feet as he looked around at the two neighbouring gardens, both of which had brightly coloured children's toys scattered around them; tractors and trikes and big water pistols - more like bazookas these days - in orange and yellow and pink plastic. There were no toys in their garden.

This year she'd promised.

He came up behind the dog and discovered - as the beast turned to greet him and black chunks of the succulent turd he was munching on fell from the corners of his mouth - that Ben had indeed been engaged in an activity he enjoyed.

'Oh Jesus!' Gary said, gagging. 'Oh you . . . you *animal!*'

He hurried back towards the house, Ben barking angrily after him, saying to him in broad Scottish dog: '*Hey, whit's your problem, bawbag? Do ye no fancy a wee bit o' breakfast jobby? Naw? Well, get tae fuck then!*'

Pauline was already at her dressing table, wrapped in a beige towel, busy with the straightening tongs and the hairbrush. She had already showered and her milk-chocolate hair was slicked back, giving her a sleek, otter-ish look. He set the tray down next to her and leaned in to kiss her cheek, smelling apple and vanilla and tea tree and blackberry and gingseng and lime and whatever other scents were in the oils, unguents, conditioners and gels Pauline spent a small fortune on. ('*By Christ,*' his mother had said once when balefully inspecting the rows of tubs, tubes and jars in their bathroom, '*is that lassie wanting tae open a bloody chemist's?*') As he gazed down at his wife's heavy breasts, tightly contained by the towel, Gary was conscious of the return of the erection that had woken him in the night.

‘Happy birthday,’ Pauline cooed, pecking him back and handing him a purple envelope. His full name was written on it in her girlish hand (the little balloon over the second ‘i’ in his surname) and Gary dimly recalled the thrill that had run through him when he first saw her handwriting – on a valentine card, fifteen years ago. (The thrill he’d experienced the first time he saw her too – coming out of school assembly arm in arm with two of her friends. Pauline Shaw. The May Day Queen. Just fourteen years old and already the cause of much creative self-abuse among Gary’s fellow fifth-formers.)

‘Aw, thanks, doll. What time you got to be at the school?’ he said, making it sound casual, jumping back into bed, jamming a slice of toast into his mouth and working a thumb into the seal of the envelope.

‘Half eight. *Please* be careful with that toast. I don’t want butter all over those sheets.’ The new sheets, from that designer place in Glasgow she liked.

‘Sorry.’ He set the toast down on top of the dog-eared copy of Dr Ted Alabaster’s *Putting: the Secret Game* that lived on his bedside cabinet and checked the time: 7.02. Thirty/forty-minute drive to Cumnock, she’d already showered . . . plenty of time.

He took the card out: a photograph, black and white, 1950s Gary guessed, of a couple kissing on an iron bridge in some European city. The kind of card Pauline normally chose – classy, a wee bit arty. Inside was a handwritten message (‘Happy 33rd! All my love Pauline xxx’) and his present – one hundred pounds of gift vouchers for Oklahoma Dan’s Discount Golf World, the new golf superstore up by the bypass.

‘You can get yourself something nice for your golf, can’t you? I wouldn’t have a clue.’

‘Aye, great, that’s brilliant. C’mere –’ He reached out towards her as she crossed the room. Pauline kissed him primly on the forehead, but, before he could pull the towel

off, she twirled away out of reach, across the landing towards the bathroom.

Calm. Keep calm. Don't paw.

He slipped his T-shirt off, lifted the duvet with one hand and the elastic waistband of his boxer shorts with the other. Fuck sake - look at the state of that. A cat couldnae scratch it. Suddenly he sneezed, the starburst of the sneeze falling tingling and sparkling over the length of his near-naked body.

Take your mind off it for a minute.

He grabbed the remote control and thumbed through the channels until the screen turned a familiar comforting green and he heard the swish and clank of metal driver hitting ball: the Golf Network, a preview of the Masters, which started the following week. The camera roved over the lush green fairways and rich forestry of Augusta National in Georgia (arguably the most photogenic golf course in the world) with stirring, dramatic music playing and an American voice saying '*where the greatest players in the world will be teeing it up to compete in the first major championship of the year*'. Now a quick compilation clip of some of the greats - Brett Spafford, Torsten Lathe, James Honeydew III, Drew Keel - before the commentator's voice shifted down a gear dramatically and he said, '*including, looking for his tenth major title,*' and then the screen was filled with the image of a man.

A man? *The Man*. The Big Man. The Don.

'The world number one . . . Calvin Linklater.'

Calvin Fucking Linklater.

A shot of Linklater slashing an iron from thick rough at St Andrews the previous summer, on his way to winning his second consecutive Open. Gary had been in the crowd, managing at one point to get close enough to the ropes to shout 'Go on yerself, big man!' as Linklater passed. Gary felt the familiar ripple of awe he always felt when he watched

his hero at work. For Linklater was not just a man to Gary. He was a god.

They were the same age.

They had both taken up the sport when they were five years old, taught by their fathers.

They both played Spaxon balls.

They were both golfers. (Indeed, Gary had even been named after a golfer – the great South African pro Gary Player. His father had been much taken with Player's compelling victory in the 1974 Open at Royal Lytham & St Anne's, where the black-clad dynamo had led the tournament from the first day.)

Actually, to say that Linklater and Gary were both golfers was a little misleading. Like saying that Jimi Hendrix and a busker cranking out the three chords of 'All Along the Watchtower' on an out-of-tune acoustic guitar were both musicians. Linklater was a *golfing machine*. The youngest major winner in history. Arguably the greatest putter in the history of the sport. Owner of the smoothest, most faultless swing since Ben Hogan; a swing that had brought him over fifty million dollars in career earnings (and many times that in ancillary income) and nine major titles.

Gary's handicap was eighteen. He was capable of routinely whiffing two-foot putts and he could always, always, be counted on to choke in a crunch situation. (If he had ten pence for every time he had uttered the words 'Sorry, partner' he would be richer than Linklater.) Gary's swing was so terrible that many golfers at the club refused to watch it in case they became contaminated by its uncountable faults. It had, as they say, more moving parts than *Terms of Endearment* and it had brought him a pen and a single golf ball in career earnings (both token prizes given to any junior member who had finished the Junior Medal in a terrible rainstorm twenty years ago) and more heartbreak than any man should have to endure. Linklater was one of the very few whom the Golf Gods chose at birth to bestow

incredible talent upon. Gary was one of the very many whom the Golf Gods devoted their immortality to tormenting.

As he lay in bed listening to the punditry - who was on form, who wasn't, who was struggling around the greens and so forth - Gary became aware that he had been stealthily massaging his cock and that his erection was now of torturous proportions. Suddenly a thrill of panic shot through him - what if she . . . ?

No. No way, man. It was his *birthday!* She wouldn't . . .

Still, he could hear the blast of the hairdryer being usurped now by the drilling of her electric toothbrush - the morning symphony of Pauline's machines - and he thought, *Best not leave it too late.*

Pauline came back into the bedroom, humming to herself, turned to the chest of drawers in the corner, and dropped the towel. As they always did at such moments Gary's thoughts went something like - *How the fuck did I pull this off?*

Pauline was tall - a couple of inches taller than Gary - and dark-skinned for someone from the west coast of Scotland. (Italian grandmother on her mother's side.) Her nose flicked up at the end - forming a little button that Gary delighted in but which its owner regarded as an imperfection - and her hazel eyes were flecked with tiny mint-green shards. Moving down, the breasts - larger and heavier than her slender body would lead you to expect - were capped with glossy mahogany nipples. Down over the stomach - flat and fluted from hours at the gym, or in the spare bedroom with the cycling machine and the weights - and onto the long, tapering legs that were permanently slick from their monthly waxing. But it was Pauline's bum that stole the show. It jutted out so prominently it bordered on comic. '*Christ,*' Gary once overheard a guy in the Annick saying to his mate as Pauline sashayed by them on her way to the Ladies, '*ye could sit yer pint oan that.*' Gary possessed a

clean soul, a decent soul, and was not given to jealousy. So he felt no anger, only mild pride, when strangers ogled and commented on his wife's body.

He watched her shimmying into a pair of translucent champagne-coloured knickers. 'Are you still having lunch with your mum?' Pauline asked, her back to him.

'Yeah. We're going to the Pepper Pot.'

'Nice.'

'Errr, Pauline . . .' Gary said huskily.

'Mmmm?' she said without turning.

'Pauline?'

She turned round, topless, her thumbs snapping out of the band of her knickers, as Gary patted the space beside him on the bed, grinning shyly.

'Oh,' Pauline said.

Oh? Fucking oh?

'Look,' she said, fishing a bra out of the drawer, 'I haven't got time.'

'But . . . it's only half seven! It's not going to take you -'

Don't say 'it's my birthday', don't say 'it's my birthday'

. . .

'It won't take long,' he said instead.

'Great,' Pauline said flatly. Her green sparkly tights were on now and she was pulling up the green sparkly tutu.

'But -'

'Listen, tonight we'll -'

'But . . . it's my birthday!'

Pauline gave him the look - a disappointed headmistress staring down a hopeless miscreant after yet another transgression - and said, 'I knew you were going to say that,' as she pushed her feet into the green felt slippers. She was now dressed head to foot as Tinkerbell.

'Fine,' Gary said.

'Oh, don't sulk. Tonight. I promise.'

A scuttle of paws across wooden boards, a low growling, and Ben shouldered his way into the bedroom. 'Aww, hello,

boy! Hello!’ Pauline said, kneeling to greet him. ‘Come here! Come here!’ She buried her face in Ben’s neck, nuzzling him and shrieking delightedly as his tongue basted her face.

Gary loved his wife, he really did. However, right at this moment, lying there in bed, abandoned and bereft on his birthday, with an aching erection pressing into his belly and sick lust running uselessly through his veins, he was certainly enjoying watching her French-kiss a dog who had just eaten a huge pile of shite.

‘Christ, I’m late,’ Pauline said. ‘See you tonight. Have a good day.’ Then her feet on the stairs, Ben pounding after her, the front door closing, her feet on gravel, the car door slamming, and she was gone.

Gary leapt out of bed. He scampered naked through to the spare bedroom (*‘home gym’ ma fucking baws*) and opened the third drawer of the metal filing cabinet. Halfway down the stack of golf magazines he found the crackly copy of *Spunk Sluts*. Back into bed, on autopilot now, flip straight to page 32 – a blonde in riding gear reclining on a hay bale, her jodhpurs pulled down and her blouse ripped open, one hand tugging an enormous breast greedily towards her mouth – and heigh-ho let’s go.

Actually, he was so worked up that the pornography was a totally unnecessary addition. Approximately twenty seconds in and already his balls were tickling his lungs and trying for further north. His toes began curling as he felt the semen – and it felt like deep-core stuff, heavy sediment dredged up from the testicular floor – beginning to pump into the base of the shaft. Heigh-ho, let’s g—

Fuck! The new sheets!

He feverishly scanned the bed for something, anything, within arm’s reach that could be pressed into service, his hand now clamped around his twitching prick like it was an unstable nuclear device. Nothing. Not a tissue or a sock or a pair of underpants. He looked through the open bedroom

door and across the landing into the bathroom: the open, willing mouth of the toilet bowl.

Carefully inching out of the bed - if a butterfly beat its wings within three inches of the tip of his penis right now it would all be over - he crept towards the door. He began crossing the landing. To his right a short staircase led straight down to the small hall and the front door. As he came shuffling across - naked, bone-hard cock in hand - he heard the letter box clank and looked down.

There, looking up the stairs through the glass panel that ran down the side of the front door, was the postman. Gary stopped in his tracks as they made perfect eye contact.

Gary's fist jerked involuntarily.

A butterfly beat its wings.

Gary closed his eyes and shuddered as he felt the warm drops spattering onto his right foot.

Caught wanking by the postman? No, scratch that, caught *ejaculating* by the postman.

Definitely the most humiliating start to a birthday Gary Irvine could remember.

As Gary wiped and dabbed, the golf ball that would soon change his life beyond all recognition was on its way up the M42 in the back of an articulated goods lorry. The ball - a Spaxon V - was in a sleeve of three, packaged in a box of twelve, which was in a crate along with 199 other boxes of Spaxon Vs, which, along with various other bits of golf equipment, were being freighted from Oklahoma Dan's Discount Golf World warehouse in London to the branch in Glasgow.

PAULINE DROVE FAST through the streets of Ardgirvan, heading for the bypass that ran around the town centre and then south towards the larger town of Kilmarnock. She shifted down from fourth to third to overtake a dawdling pensioner and, as she experienced the minimal acceleration of the jeep's feeble engine - the increase in noise easily outweighing the increase in speed - she thought to herself, *Christ, I hate this car.*

Pauline was first-generation Ardgirvan. She was born here shortly after her parents moved to the town in the mid-seventies. (Unlike Gary, who could probably trace his roots right back to the first peasant who ever tilled this miserable soil, Pauline thought.)

Historians of Ardgirvan - a rare and unlikely breed - could slice the town's development into two distinct phases: pre and post New Town. The oldest streets and buildings dated back to the thirteenth century, when the town was a bustling port, serving Glasgow, thirty or so miles up the coast. Later, as Glasgow prospered under the Victorians - those canny old tobacco barons, sugar lords and spice dons - so did Ardgirvan.

Handsome sandstone villas went up along the main roads into town and shops thrived on the high street. A fine wrought-iron bridge spanned the River Ardgirvan in the town centre and tall, ornate street lamps threw orange-yellow pools of gaslight across the broad avenues and cobbled streets. Great shipments of coal and lumber from the local mines and sawmills were loaded at the harbour and sent up the water to help build the great ships on Clydeside.

The first half of the twentieth century was harder all round - as it was for pretty much everybody - but the place chugged along well enough. Plentiful council housing sprung up after the war - brown pebble-dash terraces with little squares of garden behind them for the veterans to grow carrots. Then, in 1966, it was decided that Ardgirvan was to become Scotland's last New Town: one of the poured-concrete paradises designed to help ease overpopulation in the big cities. Hundreds of acres of woodland vanished under the steel treads of diggers as roads were improved, roundabouts and bypasses were built, and fresh estates of council houses - these ones white as Polo mints - went up around what had been the outskirts of the town. Government money was used to build factory units to house the companies that - drawn by sweet rental deals and cheap local labour and about to be surfing the mid-seventies economic boom - would surely flock to the town. Glasgow was invited to send its poor huddled masses down the coast for a better life.

Well, the Glasgow people came all right. But the mid-seventies economic boom was more reluctant to show its face. In fact, it decided to skip the party altogether. Instead of reverberating with the bustling sound of small companies growing bigger, the huge prefabricated units were soon echoing to the tinkle of glass, the crinkle of the glue bag and the snake-hiss of the aerosol can as the vandals delighted in their new-found playgrounds. What did come along at the end of the seventies, when Pauline was taking her first steps, was something entirely different. Gary - two years older than Pauline - could dimly remember his mum saying that it might be a 'nice wee change' to have a lady prime minister.

She didn't think that for very long.

Gary's mum's potted history of the town went something like this: Ardgirvan was an idyllic coastal community filled with happy Hobbits who knew and trusted each other, a

place where you left your doors and windows open when you went away on holiday (presumably, Pauline thought, so that your neighbours could pop in and water your flowering money trees) and where there was no poverty or violence. After a hard week digging coal or sawing timber the men would drink two pints of beer on a Friday night before going home to dutiful wives and happy children, children who ran laughing through sunlit woodland glades and whose rare bouts of apple-scrumping were the only crimes in this unfallen Eden.

Then the Glasgow people came.

And they brought knives and guns and drug-dealing and gangs and prostitution and devil dogs and Aids and gambling and ram-raiding and graffiti and mugging and Indian restaurants and video nasties and greenhouse gases and power cuts and the three-day week and unemployment and paedophilia.

How could the Hobbits survive these savages?

Although it stemmed from very different reasons, Pauline's dislike of Ardgirvan New Town was the only thing she had in common with her mother-in-law. (Gary, of course, loved living here, in this golf-studded stretch of Ayrshire that ran from Largs in the north to Ayr in the south.) Pauline – impatient at the lights now – had been the May Day Queen. Her family's house had been festooned with ribbons and streamers. There had been stories about her in the local paper. On the big day itself she had travelled at the head of the great procession in a horse-drawn carriage, waving at the throngs who turned out to cheer her royal progress and take her photograph. As the flashbulbs crackled against the spring sky, for one glorious afternoon, the fourteen-year-old Pauline had felt like she was at the centre of the universe, exactly where she was meant to be, her future glittering ahead of her like a diamond path lit by fireworks.

This was not the way she had been feeling lately.

Lately, as she thumbed through the pages of *Babe!* or *Hot!*, seeing these women – women no more attractive than she was, no brighter, no more driven – wearing dresses that cost more than her car (her stupid bloody car), with their own perfumes and fitness videos, their four-figure handbags, their first-class flights and their silicone cleavages, Pauline had begun to feel an odd sensation, not exactly jealously or avarice, but something closer to *terror*.

How were these things going to happen for her now? Here? In Ardgirvan?

As she turned onto the dual carriageway a removal lorry shuddered past her. Removal lorries caused Pauline to feel vaguely uneasy. The first time she'd seen one she'd been ten years old. It had pulled up in front of their house and the men had started taking things out to it. But they weren't moving anywhere. Pauline remembered her mum crying and trying to stop the men. It had all been something to do with her dad's business. It was years later before Pauline heard the full story. Before she heard the word 'bankrupt'.

She couldn't really remember Gary from school. He was just one of the older boys whose nervy gaze flittered over her as she walked along the corridor. She'd really noticed him for the first time a year or so later, in Annabel's, the disco in town. He'd already left the school and was working at Henderson's. He wasn't drinking. He was *driving*. It was the first time that a boy had given her a lift home *in his own car*. She'd blinked and now here she was – thirty-one, with no marketable skills and married to a man who was unlikely to be making six figures any time soon. She had been the May Day Queen and she was going to end up living in an ugly little house, driving second-hand cars and maybe going on holiday twice a year.

So Pauline set up Kiddiewinks – 'North Ayrshire's Premier Children's Entertainment Service', as her Yellow Pages ad proudly proclaimed. She had been at a friend's party for their five-year-old and happened to find out what they were

paying the idiot who came along and made balloon animals and told stories to the kids. It sounded like a lot. Pauline's original vision had been to establish the company and then take a purely managerial role as the cash poured in. Sadly this hadn't quite happened yet - children's entertainers were thin on the ground and paying them was severely cutting into Pauline's profit margin. So, for now, it was just her and her seventeen-year-old assistant, Derek, and long hours and lots of driving.

Pauline's mobile trilled. She pulled it from her handbag and read the text message. Slowing down and pulling into the left-hand lane, she began thumbing a reply. One, two, four, six words, the longest ('later') not more than five letters. Not more than thirty characters then in the sentence that would have sliced her husband's heart into bloody pieces. She hit 'Send', tossed the phone onto the passenger seat and crunched the accelerator all the way down to the floor. Nothing much happened.

GARY WALKED ACROSS the factory floor on his way to the office. A huge, loud space – many thousands of square feet filled with the sound of machinery; the rumble of the overhead tracks as they whirred large parts from one place to another, the heavy clank of metal on concrete, the hammering of rivet guns. You could comfortably hit a five-wood the length of the place. Plenty of height – the corrugated-iron roof in darkness over a hundred feet above him, pale sunlight coming through the filthy plastic skylights. The smells of the factory too – oil, spray paint and the smoky aroma of hot metal. He kept within the yellow lines and returned the ‘Mornings’ that came his way from the canteen area, an island of Formica tables and orange plastic chairs lit softly by the red, white and orange lights of the vending machines that guarded it. He knew some of the boys down here well, he’d gone to school with many of them, indeed – if it hadn’t been for his three Highers (History, Geography and Maths) – he might well have been one of them.

Henderson’s Forklift Trucks was one of the very few companies that *had* come to Ardgirvan in the 1970s. It had weathered the recession of the early 1980s, the redundancies caused later by technological advances (the jerkily moving robot-welders Gary was passing now, their steel limbs oblivious to the blue sparks), and the market erosion caused by cheaper foreign competition. They had offered Gary a job in administration a few days after his seventeenth birthday.

He returned an increasing number of ‘Mornings’ and two ‘Happy birthdays!’ (Big Sue from Accounts, wee Marion from Export) as he passed through the grey warren of cubicles

towards his desk. There had been a moment, a long time ago, a year or two after he'd been here, when he'd thought about quitting. About going to college, or the uni, to study . . . something. But Pauline hadn't been keen. Three or four years as a penniless student? What was the point of that exactly?

With a sigh he sat down and began rearranging the piles on his desk: pink, yellow and green forms, bills of lading, customs documentation, invoices to be assigned purchase order numbers, the huge amount of paperwork that was created whenever a forklift truck rolled out of the factory below and was freighted somewhere in the world. He nudged his mouse and his screen lit up - his screen saver was a photograph of the famous eighteenth at St Andrews, the Swilcan Bridge a jut of grey stone in a sea of green grass. The clock in the corner of the screen told him it was 9.13, but before he got to work on the PO numbers he looked out of the window.

The office overlooked the scarred brick wall of an old warehousing building, unused since the late 1980s. At the far corner of the wall, low down, faded but still clearly visible, someone had used silver spray paint to daub a five-foot-high matchstick man. Or rather, matchstick woman, for the figure had two gigantic, misshapen breasts jutting from its frame. The nipples - clearly an afterthought, or possibly rushed by the approach of a nightwatchman - were just quick dashes. A demented tangle of hair covered the pubic region. Next to her, crudely sprayed in the same silver paint and still perfectly legible despite several attempts to remove it, was the legend:

TEGS BEGS AND HAIRY FECS

Sixteen years and it was still a rare day that it did not make Gary Irvine smile: the fact that someone among the youth of Ardgirvan, their veins fizzing with Merrydown or Buckfast,