

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The Stars' Tennis Balls

Stephen Fry

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## *About the Book*

For Ned, 1980 seems a blissful year. Handsome, charming, popular and talented, his life is progressing smoothly, effortlessly, happily. And when he meets the lovely Portia Fendeman his personal jigsaw appears complete. But timing is everything in life, and his life is about to change for ever.

### *About the Author*

Stephen Fry was born in the twentieth century and will die in the twenty-first. In the course of writing seven books he has drunk four hundred and twelve thousand cups of coffee, smoked one and a half million cigarettes and worn out nineteen pairs of trousers. He has no birth sign.

*Also by Stephen Fry*

FICTION

The Liar  
The Hippopotamus  
Making History

NON-FICTION

Paperweight  
Moab Is My Washpot  
Rescuing the Spectacled Bear

*with Hugh Laurie*

A Bit of Fry and Laurie  
A Bit More Fry and Laurie  
Three Bits of Fry and Laurie

# **THE STARS' TENNIS BALLS**

Stephen Fry



arrow books

*To M' Colleague*

We are merely the stars' tennis balls, struck  
and banded

Which way please them

John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, Act V Scene 3



# 1

It all began some time in the last century, in an age when lovers wrote letters to each other sealed up in envelopes. Sometimes they used coloured inks to show their love, or they perfumed their writing-paper with scent.

41 Plough Lane,  
Hampstead,  
London NW3

Monday, June 2nd 1980

Darling Ned -

I'm sorry about the smell. I hope you've opened this somewhere private, all on your own. You'll get teased to distraction otherwise. It's called *Rive Gauche*, so I'm feeling like Simone de Beauvoir and I hope you're feeling like Jean-Paul Sartre. Actually I hope you aren't because I think he was pretty horrid to her. I'm writing this upstairs after a row with Pete and Hillary. Ha, ha, ha! Pete and Hillary, Pete and Hillary, Pete and Hillary. You hate it when I call them that, don't you? I love you so much. If you saw my diary you'd *die*. I wrote a whole two pages this morning. I drew up a list of everything that's wonderful and glorious about you and one day when we're together for ever I might let you look at it and you'll die again.

I wrote that you're old-fashioned.

One: the first time we met you stood up when I entered the room, which was sweet, but it was the Hard

Rock Café and I was coming out of the kitchen to take your order.

Two: every time I refer to my mum and dad as Peter and Hillary, you go pink and tighten your lips.

Three: when you first talked to Pete and – all right, I'll let you off – when you first talked to Mum and Dad, you let them go on and on about private education and private health and how terrible it was and how evil the government is and *you never said a word*. About your dad being a Tory MP, I mean. You talked beautifully about the weather and incomprehensibly about cricket. But you never let on.

That's what the row today was about, in fact. Your dad was on *Weekend World* at lunchtime, you proolly saw him. (I love you, by the way. God, I love you so much.)

'Where do they find them?' barked Pete, stabbing a finger at the television. 'Where *do* they find them?'

'Find who?' I said coldly, gearing up for a fight.

'*Whom*,' said Hillary.

'These tweed-jacketed throwbacks,' said Pete. 'Look at the old fart. What right has he got to talk about the miners? He wouldn't recognise a lump of coal if it fell into his bowl of Brown Windsor soup.'

'You remember the boy I brought home last week?' I said, with what I'm pretty sure any observer would call icy calm.

'Job security he says!' Peter yelled at the screen. 'When have *you* ever had to worry about job security, Mr Eton, Oxford and the Guards?' Then he turned to me. 'Hm? What boy? When?'

He *always* does that when you ask him a question – says something else first, completely off the subject, and *then* answers your question with one (or more) of his own. Drives me *mad*. (So do you, darling Neddy. But mad with deepest love.) If you were to say to my father, 'Pete, what year was the battle of Hastings?' he'd say,

'They're cutting back on unemployment benefit. In real terms it's gone down by five per cent in just two years. Five per cent. Bastards. Hastings? Why do you want to know? Why Hastings? Hastings was nothing but a clash between warlords and robber barons. The only battle worth knowing about is the battle between . . .' and he'd be off. He *knows* it drives me mad. I think it prolly drives Hillary mad too. Anyway, I persevered.

'The boy I brought home,' I said. 'His name was Ned. You remember him perfectly well. It was his half term. He came into the Hard Rock two weeks ago.'

'The Sloane Ranger in the cricket jumper, what about him?'

'He is *not* a Sloane Ranger!'

'Looked like one to me. Didn't he look like a Sloane Ranger to you, Hills?'

'He was certainly very polite,' Hillary said.

'Exactly.' Pete returned to the bloody TV where there was a shot of your dad trying to address a group of Yorkshire miners, which I have to admit *was* quite funny. 'Look at that! First time the old fascist has ever been north of Watford in his life, I guarantee you. Except when he's passing through on his way to Scotland to murder grouse. Unbelievable. *Unbelievable.*'

'Never mind Watford, when did you last go north of *Hampstead?*' I said. Well, shouted. Which was fair I think, because he was driving me mad and he can be *such* a hypocrite sometimes.

Hillary went all don't-you-talk-to-your-father-like-that-ish and then got back to her article. She's doing a new column now, for *Spare Rib*, and gets ratty very easily.

'You seem to have forgotten that I took my doctorate at Sheffield University,' Pete said, as if that qualified him for the Northerner of the Decade Award.

'Never mind that,' I went on. 'The point is Ned just happens to be that man's son.' And I pointed at the

screen with a very exultant finger. Unfortunately the man on camera just at that moment was the presenter.

Pete turned to me with a look of awe. 'That boy is Brian Walden's son?' he said hoarsely. 'You're going out with Brian Walden's *son*?'

It seems that Brian Walden, the presenter, used to be a Labour MP. For one moment Pete had this picture of me stepping out with socialist royalty. I could see his brain rapidly trying to calculate the chances of his worming his way into Brian Walden's confidence (father-in-law to father-in-law) wangling a seat in the next election and progressing triumphantly from the dull grind of the Inner London Education Authority to the thrill and glamour of the House of Commons and national fame. Peter Fendeman, maverick firebrand and hero of the workers, I watched the whole fantasy pass through his greedy eyes. Disgusting.

'Not him!' I said. '*Him!*' Your father had appeared back on screen again, now striding towards the door of Number Ten with papers tucked under his arm.

I love you, Ned. I love you more than the tides love the moon. More than Mickey loves Minnie and Pooh loves honey. I love your big dark eyes and your sweet round bum. I love your mess of hair and your very red lips. They *are* very red in fact, I bet you didn't know that. Very few people have lips that really are red in the way that poets write about red. Yours are the reddest red, a redder red than ever I read of, and I want them all over me *right now* – but oh, no matter how red your lips, how round your bum, how big your eyes, it's *you* that I love. When I saw you standing there at Table Sixteen, smiling at me, it was as if you were entirely without a body at all. I had come out of the kitchen in a foul mood and there shining in front of me I saw this soul. This Ned. This you. A naked soul smiling at me like the sun

and I knew I would die if I didn't spend the rest of my life with it.

But still, how I wished this afternoon that your father were a union leader, a teacher in a comprehensive school, the editor of the *Morning Star*, Brian Walden himself – anything but Charles Maddstone, war hero, retired Brigadier of the Guards, ex colonial administrator. Most of all, how I wish he was anything but a cabinet minister in a Conservative government.

That's not right though, is it? You wouldn't be you then, would you?

When Pete and Hillary both *got it*, they stared from me to the screen and back again. Hillary even looked at the chair you sat in the day you came round. Glared at the thing as if she wanted it disinfected and burned.

'Oh, Portia!' she said in what they used to call 'tragic accents'.

Pete, of course, after going as red as Lenin, swallowed his rage and his baffled pride and began to Talk to me. Solemnly. He Understood my adolescent revolt against everything I had been brought up to cherish and believe. No, more than that, he Respected it. 'Do you know, in a kind of way, I'm proud of you, Porsh? Proud of that fighting spirit. You're pushing against authority and isn't that what I've always taught you to do?'

'*What?*' I screeched. (I have to be honest. There's no other word. It was definitely a screech.)

He spread his hands and raised his shoulders with an infernal smugness that will haunt me till the day I die. 'Okay. You've dated the upper-class twit of the year and that's got your dad's attention. You've got Pete listening. Let's talk, yeah?'

I *mean* . . .

I arose calmly, left the room and went upstairs for a think.

Well that's what I *should* have done but I didn't.

In fact I absolutely yelled at him. 'Fuck you, Pete! I hate you! You're pathetic! And you know what else? You're a *snob*. You're a hideous, contemptible snob!' Then I stamped out of the room, slammed the door and ran upstairs for a cry. The President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had finished his sport with Portia.

Poo. And more poo.

Anyway, at least they know now. Have you told your parents? I suppose they'll hit the roof as well. Their beloved son ensnared by the daughter of Jewish left-wing intellectuals. If you can call a part-time history lecturer at North East London Polytechnic an intellectual, which in my book you can't.

It wouldn't be love without opposition, would it? I mean, if Juliet's dad had fallen on Romeo's neck and said, 'I'm not losing a daughter, I'm gaining a son,' and Romeo's mum had beamed 'Welcome to the Montague family, Juliet my precious,' it would be a pretty short play.

Anyway, a couple of hours after this 'distressing scene', Pete knocked on my door with a cup of tea. Precision, Portia, precision – he knocked on my door with his knuckles, but you know what I mean. I thought he was going to give me grief, but in fact – well no in fact he *did* give me grief. That is exactly and literally what he gave me. He had just had a phone call from America. Apparently Pete's brother, my Uncle Leo, had a heart attack in New York last night and was dead by the time an ambulance arrived. Too grim. Uncle Leo's wife Rose died of ovarian cancer in January and now he's gone too. He was forty-eight. Forty-eight and dead from a heart attack. So my poor cousin Gordon is coming over to England to stay with us. He was the one who had to call the ambulance and everything. Imagine seeing your own father die in front of you. He's the only child too. He must be in a terrible state, poor thing. I hope he'll like it

with us. I think he was brought up quite orthodox so what he'll make of family life here, I can't imagine. Our idea of kosher is a bacon bagel. I've never met him. I've always pictured him as having a black beard, which is insane of course, since he's about our age. Seventeen going on eighteen, that kind of thing.

The result of the day is that peace has broken out in the Fendeman home and next week I shall have a brother to talk to. I'll be able to talk about you.

Which, O Neddy mine, is *more than you ever do*. 'Won a match. Played pretty well I think. Revising hard. Thinking about you a great deal.' I quote the interesting bits.

I know you're busy with exams, but then so am I. Don't worry. *Any* letter that comes from you gives me a fever. I look at the writing and imagine your hand moving over the paper which is enough to make me wriggle like a love-sick eel. I picture your hair flopping down as you write, which is enough to make me writhe and froth like a . . . like a . . . er, I'll come back to you on that one. I think of your legs under the table and a million trillion cells sparkle and fizz inside me. The way you cross a 't' makes me breathless. I hold the back of my envelope to my lips and think of you licking it and my head swims. I'm a dotty dippy dozy dreadful delirious romantic and I love you to heaven.

But I wish wish *wish* you weren't going back to your school next term. Leave and be free like the rest of us. You don't have to go to Oxford, do you? I wouldn't go to *any* university that made me stay on through the winter term after I'd already done all my A levels and all my friends had left, just to sit some special entrance paper. How pompous can you get? Why can't they behave like a normal university? Come with me to Bristol. We'll have a much better time.

I shan't bully you about it though. You must do whatever you want to do.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

I've just had a thought. Suppose your History of Art teacher hadn't taken your class on a trip to the Royal Academy that Saturday? Suppose he had taken you to the Tate or the National Gallery instead? You wouldn't have been in Piccadilly and you wouldn't have gone to the Hard Rock Café for lunch and I wouldn't be the luckiest, happiest, most dementedly in-love girl in the world.

The world is very . . . um . . . (consults the Thomas Hardy textbook that she's supposed to be studying) . . . the world is very contingent.

So there.

I'm kissing the air around me.

Love and love and love and love and love

Your Portia X

Only one X, because a quintillion wouldn't be anything like enough.

7th June 1980

My darling Portia

Thank you for a wonderful letter. After your (completely justified) criticism of my terrible style of letter-writing, this is going to be completely tricky. It just seems to gush out of you like a geezer (spelling?) and I'm not too hot at that kind of thing. Also your handwriting is completely perfect (like everything else about you of course) and mine is completely illegible. I thought of responding to your little extra (which was fantastic, by the way) by spraying this envelope with eau de cologne or aftershave, but I haven't got any. I don't suppose the linseed oil I use for my cricket bat would entice you? Thought not.



I'm so sorry you had a row with your family. Would it help at all if you were to tell Peter (there, I said it!) that I am completely poor? We never go abroad for holidays, it's all my father can do to send me here and I know that it doesn't sound very left wing or anything but he spends all the rest on travelling between London and his constituency and trying to stop our house from falling down. If I had any brothers or sisters, I'd probably (by the way, where on *earth* did you get 'prolly' from?) have to wear their hand-me-downs, as it is, I wear *his*. I'm the only boy in the school who goes around in cavalry twills and old hacking jackets on days when we don't have to wear uniform. I even wear his old boater, which is almost orange with age, and the edge of the brim is chipped. When my mum was alive she genuinely used to darn socks for me, like some Victorian. So my father may be a fascist (which I honestly don't think he is) but he's a completely poor one. Also, I told him that I met a girl in London and he was very pleased. He didn't hit the roof at all when I said you had a Saturday job from school working as a waitress at a hamburger restaurant. In fact he said it sounded like you had some initiative. And as for the Jewish thing - he was very interested and wondered if your family were refugees from Hitler. He had something to do with the War Crimes in Nuremburg (berg?) and . . . oh, anyway I'm not trying to say my father is better than yours - I thought your parents were really nice actually - it's just that you don't have to worry about him disapproving or anything. He can't wait to meet you, and I can't wait for you to meet him. Most people assume he's my grandfather, because he's older than most parents, if you know what I mean. He is a very *good* man I think, but I know I'm completely biased. Anyway, he's all I have. My mother died when I was born. Didn't I tell you before? My fault really. I was her first one and she was nearly fifty.

What terrible news about your uncle in America. I'm so sorry. I hope Gordon turns out to be a nice bloke. It'll be great for you to have a brother at last. All *my* cousins are completely scary.

I just cannot wait for term to end. Thank God the last exam is over. I've been revising so hard that my head is bleeding, but I still don't think I've done as well as I need to.

Boring school gossip, Number One: I've been made Head Boy.

Ta-ra!

We call it 'Captain of School' actually. Just for next term but I'll be too busy revising for Oxford entrance for it to mean much. (More on that subject in a bit.) Anyway, by the time you get to my age all the glamour goes out of authority. It just becomes hard work and endless meetings with the headmaster and school monitors - we call prefects Monitors here, don't ask me why.

Number Two: the Sailing Club is going to the west coast of Scotland this August. The master in charge has invited me along. For two weeks: the very same two weeks you and your family are going to Italy, so it's the same two weeks we would have been away from each other anyway. For the rest of the time I'll be staying in my father's flat in Victoria and you'll be there with me as much as possible I hope! Are you going to get a job at the Hard Rock again?

Anyway. Oxford. I can't bear either that I've got to come back here in September while you'll be as free as a bird. For two pins I'd forget the whole thing and apply to Bristol and be with you. It's not that I'm really so stuck on Oxford, it's just that I know it would break my father's heart if I didn't go. His great-great-grandfather was at St Mark's and every Maddstone since. There's even a quad named after us. You might think that would

make it easier for me to get in, but actually it doesn't work like that any more. I'll actually have to do better in my entrance exam than virtually anyone, just to prove that I've got in on merit not on family name and connections. It would mean so much to him. I hope that doesn't sound chronically pathetic. I'm his only son and I just know how much he'd love coming to visit me and walking round the colleges and pointing out his old haunts and so on.

I wish you could come and visit me *here*. Suppose next term I smuggle you in as a new boy? All you've got to do is squeak and look pretty, and you're very good at that. No, not pretty – you're beautiful of course. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen or ever will see. (You are very good at squeaking though.)

I *love* your letters. I still can't believe all this is true. Has it really happened to us? Other boys here have girlfriends too but I'm certain it's not the same for them. They show their letters around and make a great show of drooling publicly over them. That must be a sign that it's really no more than a joke to them. And it isn't a joke for us, is it?

You mention that strange thing about Fate and how it was that our school group was at the Royal Academy and how, if we hadn't been, we probably wouldn't have gone into the Hard Rock Café. That is such a completely *weird* thought. But then, when you came up to our table there were I think seven of us and why was it you looked twice at me? Apart from the fact that I'm such a moron that I was standing up. I really hate to disillusion you on that, by the way, but it wasn't politeness that made me stand up. I saw you and I stood up. It was like a sort of instinct. This must sound completely crazy – it was as if I had known you for ever. What's more, if I think about it, I could swear that I *knew* you were going to come out of that swing door. I had been feeling funny all day. Feeling

*different* if you know what I mean, and by the time we got into the restaurant after sweating around the gallery for two hours and walking half a mile down Piccadilly I just knew something was going to happen to me. And when you started coming towards us (you patted the front of your apron and checked your ear for a pencil in the *funniest* way – I can remember every detail of it) I just leap to my feet. I nearly shouted out, ‘At last!’ and then you looked up into my eyes and we smiled at each other and that was it.

But you must have noticed the other boys there. Most of them surely taller and better looking than me? Ashley Barson-Garland was there, who’s twenty times funnier and twenty times brainier.

That reminds me . . . I did something *completely* awful this morning, in Biology. It’s a bit complicated to describe and I feel awful about it. It’s not something for you to worry about, but it was odd. I read Barson-Garland’s diary. Part of it. I’ve never done anything like that before and I just don’t know what came over me. I’ll tell you all about it when we meet.

When we meet.

When we meet.

When we meet.

I just CANNOT stop thinking about you. All kinds of wicked things start happening to me.

Before I was born my father was a District Commissioner in the Sudan. I remember him telling me once that young men arriving from Britain used to go about in ironed khaki shorts and sometimes, if they happened across one of the beautiful Nubian women who went around bare-topped, or often entirely bare, they would have to turn and face the wall or just sit down on the ground there and then, where they were, to

cover the fact, as my father puts it, 'that they had become a little excited downstairs.' Well, just imagining you reading this letter, just knowing that these words will soon be in your eyes, that gets *me* a little excited downstairs. A *lot* excited downstairs.

So when I say that I'm thinking of you and thinking *hard*, you'll know what I mean. Well, I've gone and made myself blush now. I adore you so much that I hardly know what to do with myself except laugh.

I love you to the power of everything, plus one.

Ned X

Ned never knew why he had done such a sly and terrible thing. Perhaps it was Fate, perhaps it was the Devil, in whom he believed sincerely.

He had slipped the book from Ashley Barson-Garland's bag, dropped it onto his knees and opened the first page before he was even aware of what he was doing. His right hand lay on the desk and pretended every now and then to slide backwards and forwards through Advanced Cell Biology.

Lowering his eyes to his lap, he began to read.

It was a diary. He did not know what else he had imagined it might be. It looked at least four years old. He believed that it was its age that had first attracted him to it when he had seen it peeping from the bag. He had seen Ashley carry this book with him everywhere and that had intrigued him.

None the less it was very strange that he should have done such a thing. Ned did not like to think of himself as the kind of person who was interested in other people's diaries.

It was difficult to read. Not the handwriting, which was very small, but clear and strong: Barson-Garland's style was – how should one put it? – *opaque*. Yes, that was an intellectual's word. The style was opaque.

With each line that Ned absorbed, the drowsy buzz of the classroom fell further and further away into the background, until he was entirely alone with the words and a vein that throbbed quick and guilty in his neck.

3rd May 1978  
Didsbury

Firstly, it has to be the *accent*. If you get that right, you're close to them. You're halfway there. Not just the accent, mind, the whole delivery. Note the way the voice comes out of the mouth, note too the mouth's limited aperture, the line of the lips, the angle of the head, the dipping of the head, the tilting of the head, the movement of the hands (hands, not arms, they are not Italians after all) and the direction of gaze.

Remember how there used to come a hot buzz of blood to your face on the bus every time you heard your name spoken by them? You believed for one heart-jump of a moment as they repeated and repeated your name that they were talking about you. You truly believed that inexplicably they must *know* you. They had recognised you as one of their own, displaced by some tragic turn of fate. The very first time on the bus, do you remember, they kept mentioning your name? Maybe you were going to be *friends*. How excited you were! They saw it in you. That *thing* you have. They spotted it. That indefinable quality of difference.

Then you twigged. It wasn't you they were talking about. They had no idea you existed. Theirs was another Ashley altogether. An *amusing* Ashley . . .

*That's SAY funny, Ashley.*  
*Ashley, that's a RAIL hoot.*

Despite the initial bump of disappointment that had jolted you like an electric shock when you realised it wasn't you they were talking about, it still gave you a little glow of pride and connection. Made you walk with a bit of a swing for a day or so, didn't it? Maybe your name, the name you hated so much, the name that shamed you, that you had believed to be so *middle class*, maybe, if one of *them* shared it with you, maybe it was an all right name after all. Could it be that 'Ashley' was, in fact, upper middle class, or even – you never know – *aristocratic*?

Which one of them was Ashley, though? It was absurd, but you caught the name bandied so often that for a shining day or two you wondered whether they could *all* be Ashleys. Then you considered the possibility that Ashley might be a general name they used for 'friend', *their* counterpart of the ugly 'mate' that you heard every day in your concrete playground, just streets away from their stone quadrangle? But then you twigged again.

There was no Ashley. Ashley did not exist. There was only an *actually*.

That's so funny, actually. Actually, that's a real hoot.

Can you actually, can you actually, Ashley, have ever really believed that they might have been talking about *you*? Did you seriously think that their lazy glances might actually, Ashley, have so much as taken you in? Sometimes your face may have been in the way of the arc of their gaze, but could you have truly believed that your identity, or even your face, ever actually, Ashley, *registered*?

Yet they registered on you. Oh, how they registered. You looked at their skin and their hair and wondered how it could be so different from *our* skin and hair. From ordinary people's skin and hair. Was it a genetic gift? You noted the signature patch of flush on their cheeks, a hot scarlet, brighter by far than the dusty crimson bruise that stained the cheeks of the boys at *your* school. You noted too, on some, such pallor and translucence of complexion that you

wondered if it might be their diet. Or the diets of their mothers while they still swam in the womb.

What burned into your mind most deeply of all of course, was the Flag. The Flag of the Blest. *Their* Flag. The flop. The flopping fringe. The fringe that flopped. The Flop Fringe Flag. And how it made you ache. What a great hole grew inside you when you gazed upon the Flag. Like a Frenchman, far from home, catching a whiff of Gauloise. Like an Englishman lost in Asia to whose ears there suddenly floats the opening music of *The Archers*. Because always, deep down, you did feel that *their* flag was really *your* flag too. If it weren't for the terrible mistake. And the hole that grew in you, the great ache you felt was not envy, or covetousness. Actually, Ashley, it was *loss*, it was *exile*. You had been banished from your own, all on account of the Terrible Mistake.

And you only ever shared a bus with them, what, five times? Six at most. You watched them climbing aboard and swinging themselves to the back seat, sometimes a hand would push down on *your* headrest and the proximity of that hand to your head would send you dizzy and you would try to eat the air around you, so deep was your hunger for what they were. For what they had. Breaking rules, probably. Skipping into London out of school uniform. The beautiful, the ridiculous uniform of tailcoats and striped trousers discarded in favour of sweaters and cords. The Flag flying, free to flop without constriction from boaters and top hats.

On the last day, the day before the Move North, you retrieved a boater from under the seat, didn't you? He didn't realise at first that he had come onto the bus wearing it. They teased him and laughing he had skimmed it down towards the driver in mock self-disgust. You *nearly* opened your mouth to tell him it was lodged under the seat in front of you as he passed on his way out, but you kept silent. Ashamed of your North London vowels. You retrieved the boater and you kept it. A shallow straw hat with a ribbon of blue. And afterwards you wore it, didn't you? In your



bedroom. You're wearing it now. You are wearing it now, aren't you, you *cheap*, you *creepy*, you *sad* . . . And it *doesn't work*, does it? Your hair is too coarse to flop like a wild Tay salmon or a swatch of Savile Row suiting, your hair *bristles*, like a bog brush, like a suburban doormat. In fact, you aren't *wearing* J. H. G. Etheridge's boater (note the three initials . . . *class*), J. H. G. Etheridge's boater just happens to be On Your Head. Just as this diary is On The Table and this table is On The Floor. The floor isn't wearing the table, the table isn't wearing the diary. There's a gulf, a great gaping gulf of difference. And it is this gulf, this gulf that . . . that's why so often you jerk off into this straw hat, isn't it? Isn't it, you miserable lump of nothing?

\*

How did the Terrible Mistake happen? The terrible *series* of mistakes.

How could *your* consciousness be the issue of *his* commonplace seed and *her* dull egg? Birth was the first terrible mistake. The transmigration of souls might explain such a mix-up on such a vast scale. In a previous incarnation you were one of them and now a trace memory lingers to torture you. You are a foundling perhaps, or the bastard by-blow of a ducal indiscretion, farmed off on these woeful people you are obliged to call your parents.

Firstly the name. Ashley. Ashley. ASHLEY. Write it and say it how you like, it just won't do. There's a beery, panatella reek of travelling salesmen in tinted glasses and sheepskin car coats. Ashley is a PE teacher: Ashley says 'Cheers, mate' and 'Wotcher, sunshine'. Ashley drives a Vauxhall. Ashley wears nylon shirts and cotton/polyester mix trousers that are sold as 'leisure slacks'. Ashley eats dinner at lunchtime and supper at dinnertime. Ashley says 'toilet'. Ashley hangs fairy lights around the double-glazed window frames at Christmas. Ashley's wife reads the *Daily Mail* and puts

ornaments on the television. Ashley dreams of tarmac driveways. Ashley will never do anything in the world. Ashley is cursed.

Mum and Dad gave you that name.

*Don't say Mum and Dad.*

Mama and Papa, with the emphasis on the final syllable. Mamah and Papah. Well, perhaps not. That might over-egg the pudding. (*Note: Always pudding, never 'dessert' or, heaven help us, 'sweet'. . .*) 'Mother' and 'Father' is better.

Mother and Father gave you that name. And the criminal part of it is that, as a name, it's only *just* off. Roy or Lee or Kevin or Dean or Wayne, they're the real thing. *Echt Lumpenproletariat*. Dennis and Desmond and Leonard and Norman and Colin and Neville and Eric are revolting, but they are honest. *Ashley*, though. It's a Howard or a Lindsay or a Leslie kind of a name. It's *nearly* there. It seems to be trying to be there. And that, surely, is the saddest thing of all.

Americans don't have this trouble do they? With names and the implications of names. The one Ashley, in fact, who might be said to have had a touch of class was American. Ashley in *Gone With the Wind*. So classy that they called him Eshley. In the film, Leslie Howard never even *tried* to give him an American accent. Leslie *and* Howard. Two disgusting names for the price of one. But then Leslie Howard wasn't English. He was Hungarian and to him no doubt, fresh off the boat, Leslie and Howard seemed posh.

The word 'posh' is right out. Unsayable.

But *seemed*. Seemed posh. There's the rub. What people *think* is smart is so far from what actually, Ashley, is. You might think silver fish knives would be pretty bloody pukka, but fish knives of any kind are an absolute no. You might as well put doilies round them and abandon all hope of social pretension.

But it isn't *about* social pretension. It's about the *ache*.

Look, some males grow up with a feeling that they're in the wrong body, don't they? A woman trapped inside a man.

Isn't it possible then that some people might grow up, as it were patricians imprisoned within plebeian bodies? Knowing, *just knowing* that they have been born into the wrong class?

But it isn't *about* class. It's about the *hunger*.

Oh but Ashley, you poor sap, can you actually believe that you're supposed to be of their world? Don't you know that it's a world you can only be born into?

But that's so *unfair*. If he wanted, a man can become American. He can become Jewish. He can, like Leslie Howard, make himself not just English but a symbol of all that England ever stood for. He can become a Londoner, a Muslim, a woman, a man or a Russian. But he can't become a . . . a . . . nearly said *gentleman* there, didn't you, but what is the word? An aristo, a nob, a public school toff . . . a *one of them*. You can't become one of them, even if you feel yourself to be one of them in the deepest pit of you, even if you know in your innermost knowing self that it is your right, your destiny, your need and your duty. *Even if you know that you could do it better*. And that's the truth. You would carry it off with so much more style. Carry off the ease that belies any sense of anything at all *having* to be carried off, if that isn't too baroque. Carry off that natural, effortless taking-it-all-for-granted air. But the opportunity has been denied you because of the terrible mistake of your birth.

\*

The Move North, that was another nail in the coffin. Another element of the Terrible Mistake. Your dad died and Mum got a job teaching at a deaf school in Manchester. Dad had been an officer. In the RAF, it grieves you to admit, not in a smart army regiment. He never flew, so there was no romance to

him. But at least he had been an officer. Be honest now, he was compelled to enter the service as a humble Aircraftsman. He wasn't ever officer class. He had to work his way up through the ranks and Lord that burns you up, doesn't it? Then he died of complications from diabetes, a rather bourgeois, not to say proletarian disease, and you, your mum and your sister Carina moved north. (Carina! Carina, for God's sake! What kind of name is *that*? All very well to say that the Duke of Norfolk has a daughter called Carina. There's a world of difference between saying, 'Have you met the Lady Carina Fitzalan-Howard?' and 'This is Carina Garland.') You moved away from Old Harrow and the proximity of them, their tailcoats, top hats, blazers and boaters. You were twelve years old. Slowly you have become infected by a northern accent. Not obvious, just a trace, but to your sensitive, highly attuned ears as glaring as a cleft palate. You began to pronounce 'One' and 'None' to rhyme with 'Shone' and 'Gone' instead of 'Shun' and 'Gun', you gently sounded the 'g's in 'Ringing' and 'Singing'. At school you even rhyme 'Mud' with 'Good' and 'Grass' with 'Lass'. Fair enough, you would be beaten up as a southern poof otherwise, but you have trailed some of that linguistic mud into the house with you. Not that your mum noticed.

And then this afternoon happened.

She brought some of her deaf kids home for tea this afternoon. After they had gone you said that good God, they even *signed* in a Mancunian accent. You thought it a good joke. Mum bridled and called you a snob. That was the first time the word was ever said openly. It hung in the air like a fart in a teashop. I pretended not to hear, but we knew that something deep was up because we both blushed and swallowed. I made a fuss of doing up my shoelaces, she became fascinated by the teapot lid.

And I came up and started to write this and . . . ah. I've gone into the first person. I have said 'I'.

Never mind, all this will be past history soon. Watch out, I am about to join them. I am on my way in. And there's nothing they can do to stop me. I'm smarter than they are and braver and better too. I am prepared for every paper and they will not be able to refuse me.

But I must be prepared for the wider scholarship. The scholarship that counts. The scholarship of life, if I may be so sententious. I shall add my mother's maiden name of Barson. Why not? *They* have been doing it for years. I shall be Barson-Garland. It has a ring, I think. Damn it, I could triple-barrel myself. Barson-Barson-Garland, how would that be? A *little* too much, I think. But Barson-Garland I like. It palliates the Ashley, makes it almost tolerable.

But firstly, there must come the accent. When I arrive, the accent will be in place and they will never know. I have my exercises all written out:

*Don't say good, say gid.*  
*Don't say post, say paste*  
*Don't say real, say rail*  
*Don't say go, say gay*  
*Don't say -*

The outer door to the biology room banged and Ned looked up to see the top of Ashley's head in the window of the inner door. He slammed the diary shut, pushed it hurriedly back into the bag and hunched himself quickly over his Advanced Cell Biology, both fists pressed hard against his cheeks, hair flopping down like a thick silk curtain.

He was in this attitude of intense study when Barson-Garland resumed his place next to him. Ned looked up and smiled. He hoped that the pressure from his fists would explain any heightened flush.

'What was all that about?' he whispered.

'Nothing of great interest,' said Barson-Garland. 'The headmaster wants me to make the Speech Day Oration.'

‘Bloody hell, Ash! That’s completely brilliant.’

‘It’s nothing . . . nothing.’

Barson-Garland had rhymed the first ‘nothing’ with ‘frothing’ and then quickly corrected himself. Ned tried hard to look as if he hadn’t noticed. Half an hour ago he *wouldn’t* have noticed. His hand moved to Ashley’s shoulder in a sudden surge of warmth and friendship.

‘Bloody proud of you, Ash. Always knew you were a genius.’

Dr Sewell’s high croak intruded. ‘If you have absorbed all that information and have nothing better to do than gossip, Maddstone, then no doubt you will be able to come forward to the blackboard and label this chloroplast for me.’

‘Righto, sir.’ Ned sighed cheerfully and sent Barson-Garland a rueful smile over his shoulder as he went up.

Barson-Garland was not smiling. He was staring at a dried, pressed four-leaf clover on Ned Maddstone’s stool. The same four-leafed clover that had lain undisturbed between the pages of his private journal for three years.