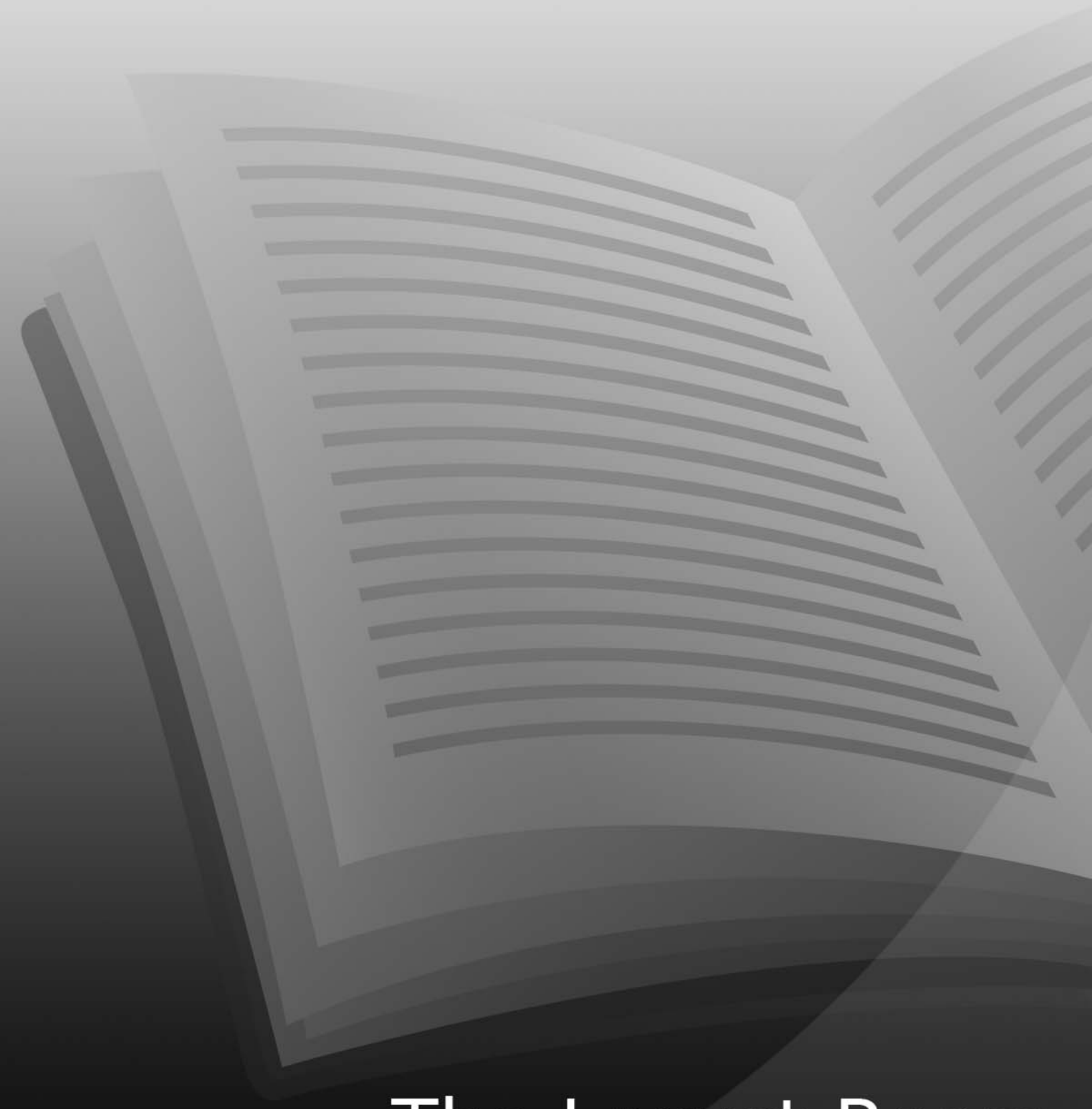
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



The Locust Room

John Burnside

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About the Author

John Burnside has published two previous novels, *The Dumb House* and *The Mercy Boys* – which was joint winner of the 1999 Encore Award – a book of stories, *Burning Elvis*, and seven books of poetry. His most recent collection, *The Asylum Dance*, won the 2000 Whitbread Poetry Award and was shortlisted for the Forward and the T. S. Eliot Prize. He lives in Fife with his wife and son.

ALSO BY JOHN BURNSIDE

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Poetry

The Hoop
Common Knowledge
Feast Days
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Swimming in the Flood
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for Lucas

The Locust Room

John Burnside

As for future unions, too soon to think about it.
Let there be clean and pure division first, perfected
singleness. That is the only way to final, living
unison: through sheer, finished singleness.

D. H. Lawrence

Prune
when the knife is sharp,
taking care that the scar be neat.
To share the surgeon’s belief in healing,
you must trust what has been taken from you
is a blessing.

Allison Funk

Being a gentleman is the number one priority,
the chief question integral to our national life.

Edward Fox

CAMBRIDGE, 1975

HE WAS SITTING in a chair, opposite the bed. The girl he had chosen was still asleep, totally unaware of his presence in her neat bedsit room. By the light from the window, he could tell that she was dreaming; he had seen enough sleeping women to recognise the look of the dreamer on her face, and the faint blue tremors of attention that flickered beneath her eyelids. He had been in her room for some time, excited by the thought of what was to come, but comfortable and easy in himself, in no way anxious or troubled, in no way afraid. He had come in through the window and closed it carefully behind him. He was good at this; it was what he knew best, this ability to *be*, to move silently around a house or a room, to go where he chose and leave no mark. It was a source of continuing pleasure that he possessed this particular ability to slip in through the smallest gap and, once inside, to become transparent, a negligible presence, so absorbed in the act of watching, in paying attention and being aware of every flicker and murmur of the house, that he himself became almost invisible. It was a skill he had been born with. When he was approaching a new place, he always knew the best way in, as if he belonged to that borderline of cool air at the window, to the half-life of greenery and rain in the almost imperceptible gap between the frame and the sash. He belonged – he had belonged all his life – to the places that other people treated as dead space, to attics and stairwells and narrow rooms at the back of the house, to old larders and closets with their tiny windows or rusting iron grilles that the occupants had long since forgotten. No matter how

secure they thought it was, every building, every home, had a gap where he could slip in and wait, for hours if need be, as still and silent as a hunting cat. On trains, he would sit by a door and press the palm of his hand to the space where the cold entered; out walking, or cycling back across the fen, he was happiest when a sudden gust of wind found him, brushing his face, or filling his eyes with momentary tears. It felt more real, more like life, to be in this world of borderlines and spaces, and he couldn't help thinking that it was nothing more than an accident that he had been born into the cluttered world of others. Long ago, he had realised that he should have been an animal – a polecat or a wolverine. In school, the one phrase in the Bible that had made sense to him was where it said that the spirit moved on the waters, like a breath of wind. It had pleased him, even then, to think that the spirit, which was something better than God, should be such an inhuman presence.

Afterwards, when he was remembering, he would sometimes wonder if this was the moment he enjoyed the most – not just for the anticipation, when it seemed that anything was possible, but also for the quiet of it, for how the tension he carried through the working day would settle and dissolve, till he felt so light and easy that he almost believed he could have flown out of the window and away over the sleeping town, over the roofs and chimneys and the lit shop fronts. At times like these, anything was possible. He would allow himself this moment to stop and look around, to take in the details of how each girl lived, with her books and her clothes around her, her posters on the wall above the bed, her photographs and knick-knacks on the table. He could have stayed there all night, he could have emptied the drawers and the handbags and taken anything he wanted, and they would never know who had been there. He was so good at this now, so skilled at his trade. He could cross a cluttered room in the dark and make

no sound. There were times when he was sure he could stop breathing if he had to.

And this was it. This was the key to everything a man did, the secret at the heart of it all. Silence. Stealth. That quality hunting animals possess, of moving silently in the night, aware of everything – aware, even before it happened, of the sudden rush of wings, or the quick magnetic glide of skin and bone through water or undergrowth. It had always been like this; even before, when he'd only gone to steal, he had lingered over his work, stopping to touch their things, to handle their hairbrushes and discarded underwear, their books, their bottles of perfume, their love letters. He had earned the right to everything he found in those rooms, and it had been the most logical thing in the world to move on from their jewellery and skirts and make-up to the bodies themselves, each one different, yet all of them his by right. Naturally, they were afraid – and he came to see, as he learned to enjoy it more, to relax into it, that he even had a right to their fear. There had been a night, less than a year before, when it had come to him that the fear only arose because they could never see the whole picture; they could never see this act from his point of view. It was impossible for them to understand the change in him. Occasionally, he lamented the fact that he would never be able to explain himself. He felt an odd regret, close to grief, when he realised that nobody would ever understand, not the journalists and policemen who wrote and spoke about him in the newspapers, or the people he overheard on his rounds, discussing his work with a quiet, shocked pleasure, taking their angel's share of his power, imagining, dreaming, pretending they despised what secretly enthralled them. What they didn't understand, as they said all the usual things, running through what was expected of them with an absurd, apparently practised ease, was that he wasn't a man any more: he was something else. As he rose from his chair and stole silently across the room towards the sleeping

girl, he was a character they would have recognised on film, or in a book, but would never acknowledge in real life: a vivid creature, part man, part animal, but also something more, something indescribable. For hours at first, and then for whole nights at a time, he was a fragment of hideous beauty and power; an elemental presence; a natural force. For a long time now, he had understood that he was immune to their world – that, unless he allowed himself to be caught, they would never find him out.

ACTS OF CONTRITION

AT AROUND FIVE or five thirty, Paul would stop at the bakery and buy hot rolls or a loaf of warm bread that he would slip inside his jacket to keep it warm on the walk or the cycle ride home. It was a routine into which he had gradually fallen, one of those everyday rituals that meant something, for no particular reason, and for a good half-hour before he stopped making photographs he would look forward to walking into the warmth of the shop and allowing the smell of it to connect him, at some level, with a whole other world that was only half-imagined. Though he didn't know quite what it was, there was something remembered there too, some link or kinship in the spirit with heat and mugged windows and strip lights. He had felt it working nights at the Post Office over Christmas vacations, when he should have gone home, but didn't leave until Boxing Day, when the worst of his mother's traditional Scottish Christmas was over, and it was there in his memories of childhood, in the grey, early morning cool of his paper round, or the long drives with his father, out on the weekend, when they escaped from the suspended animation of the house, on their contrived fishing trips. This daily ritual had something to do with the gap between the warmth of the bakery and the cold blue of the sky, with the slow shift from dark to light and with the sense of distance that came in the early morning, when most of the city was still asleep. At the baker's shop, you could walk right in to where the bread was made, the loaves coming out of the ovens on those wide metal trays, and set to cool on the side, the new bread and confectionery racked up along the walls, a richness that left

him feeling quietly happy when he left and stepped back out into the waiting cold.

He rarely slept, but it didn't bother him now as it had done, when he thought everyone had the same needs, the same basic requirements for rest and food and contact. People found it difficult to believe that he could survive on so little, but even as a child he had been an insomniac and, though it had troubled his mother, sleeplessness had been more of a pleasure to him than a burden. At night, while his parents slept – he imagined them settled deep in their separate beds, warm and thoughtless as wintered cattle, his father snoring quietly in his closed room, his mother mute and still, just visible through a door which always stood slightly ajar – at night, while they slept, he would get up and walk the house, going from room to room, listening to the silence around them, surrounded by the stillness of the gardens and the lit streets, and the exit road that reached away through the woods and the fields to the mystery of the distance. He was never tired after these sleepless nights; in the morning, after he had gone back to bed and slept maybe two or three hours, if that, he would rise as easily as anyone, and do whatever was required of him, getting ready, eating breakfast, putting his things together for school. Sometimes those sleepless nights turned into private feasts, when he raided the fridge for milk and cheese, or took down the tin of home-made cake from the tall cupboard, and cut himself a slice; sometimes he would sit by a window and flick through one of his father's books. It had never bothered him, sleeping so little – though it worried his parents, especially his mother, who seemed to blame him for his condition. Once or twice, she had risen in the night and found him sitting by a window, eating cake, or reading, and she had wanted to know what was wrong. He knew there was a simple explanation, he felt sure there was something he could say that would get her to leave him alone, but he could never work out what it was.

‘I can’t sleep,’ he would say, hoping that this was enough and knowing that it was not.

His mother would stand watching him a moment, in her slippers and dressing gown, with that sceptical, careworn look on her face. She would wait a long time – maybe a minute or more – before she spoke, always quiet, but always with a note of suppressed annoyance, always on the verge of an accusation.

‘You can’t sit up all night, you know. You have to sleep.’

‘I’m all right,’ he would answer, trying to keep his voice flat and calm, though he knew it was useless. ‘Honest I am.’

If it had been his father, he would have been allowed to stay where he was. His dad might be strict, and he always spoke his mind when it mattered, but there was no point – as he frequently said, when called upon to intervene in these subdued confrontations between his wife and son – there was no point whatsoever in trying to force the issue. It had been stalemate: Paul never could explain what it was that made him want not to miss a moment of the night, while his mother could never overcome the basic fact of nature that, no matter what she did, she could not force her son to sleep like a normal human being.

Then, some time during his teens, he had discovered photography. To begin with, he had used an old Voigtlander he’d found in a junk shop; he had heard somewhere that the Emperor of Japan refused to have his portrait taken with any other camera than a Voigtlander, because the lenses were so good. He liked the Germanic authenticity of the name as much as anything, and the weight of it in his hand; at the time, it had been the best he could afford with the money he had saved from his paper round and various odd jobs. Later, however, he had started with the Minolta. It wasn’t that he had needed, or even wanted a modern camera – he would have had something older, something with glass plates and a long exposure time – but his father, who always encouraged any interest Paul might develop for

craftsmanlike or skilled tasks, had bought him the X300 and a good-quality camera bag one afternoon on the way home from work. From then on – especially after he had gone away to college – Paul had taken the business of photography seriously, not as a hobby, but as a lifelong discipline. From the first, he had seen no point at all in taking the usual pictures, whether that meant the kind of snapshots his mother expected, or the craftsmanlike, camera-club work that was exhibited from time to time in the town hall or the library. What he wanted, though he had still not come anywhere close to achieving it, was a photography of the night, of the gaps between the hidden and the revealed, that would more closely resemble natural history than anything that might be called ‘art’.

So it was that, halfway through his first year of college, this early morning excursion had become an important, even vital, ritual. Occasionally, he would stay out all night, but his customary routine was to take his camera bag and a notebook and go out into the streets for a couple of hours in the early morning, before it got light. Sometimes he took the bicycle; more often, he walked. It was essential to this nightly routine that he keep moving – though not too quickly – in order to cultivate that sense of things one has when on the move. It was the single most important thing he had learned about looking: just as most people are more conscious of being seen than of seeing, so there are those who only see fully when in motion, picking out essential details with a sidelong look, or learning how to be attuned to those shifts in colour and form that only occur at the edge of vision. Sometimes he would stay out for hours, cycling from one place to another in search of the perfect contrast, the perfect expression of the night’s logic. What he wanted was a photograph, not of the darkness itself – which he knew was impossible – but of the colours that darkness revealed: the gardenia of a lit street sign; the egg-yolk gold of a Belisha beacon; the shell-pink of street lamps, still burning

in the milk-and-ash grey of the dawn. And though he had always loved darkness, though it was true that, even without his camera, he would probably have gone out into the night at some point, just for the smell and the taste of it, there was no doubt that the act of photography itself, the process of choosing and focusing and singling out colour and detail and form, added something he could only think of as metaphysical. Ever since he was a child, on long drives with his father, going out to make a special delivery, or on the way to their fishing spot, early on Saturday mornings when it was still half dark, he had guessed that there was something there, some state, resembling absence, that might be achieved in the half-light, achieved or chanced upon, perhaps, by simply staring out and catching a glimpse, here and there, of lit windows through the woods, or passing through those small towns on the road home, after a day's fishing or walking, narrow villages with the one shop still open, the houses hooded and still, a few children here and there, standing under street lamps, or walking back with milk and bread and bottles of cherry cola. Now, when he took night pictures, he felt he was setting in motion a process that might end with that absence, a form of invisibility that would consist of nothing but attention, nothing but being itself.

When it was too bright to continue, when the sky cleared and there was a softness in the air, he would put the camera away, carefully packing the body and the lenses into their separate compartments, and he would start for home, stopping at the bakery on the way. It was the best part of his day; he was happiest in those first couple of hours, from the last of the darkness to the first of the light: in the faint, ice-blue intimation of a spring dawn, or the lime-coloured wash of a summer's morning over fields and meadows, a light with no trace of white in it, no glare, no ordinary brightness.

Though he had cleaned it himself only a couple of days before, the kitchen had managed to transform itself, as if by magic, into the usual mess. The sink was stacked high with plates and coffee cups, some of which stood proud of the rancid grey pool of dishwater, recongealed grease, bacon rinds and bloated scraps of pitta bread that had gathered there over several days of deliberate neglect. The draining board, the floor, even the low window behind the sink, were splashed with tomato sauce, gravy and egg-fried rice; every available surface was littered with beer cans, half-eaten chop suey in foil containers, blotted newspapers, spills of sweet-and-sour sauce, dirty glasses and cups, grease-crusted plates and various other, less explicable traces of the decayed and the inedible. In the middle of the table, a pair of rugby boots had been deposited, their cleats packed with mud and grass, as if to perform the office of some bizarre ornament, between a near-empty vodka bottle and a jar of pickled onions from which the lid had obviously been missing for some time. On the chair, set at some distance from the table, yet implicated nevertheless in the general chaos, a pair of maroon socks, scabbed and clouded with pewter-coloured mud, lay neatly folded beside a box of Tide. Blotting from his mind the image of Clive, his sixteen-stone, rugby-player housemate, standing over the sink, carefully hand-washing and rinsing his kit, Paul dashed to the cupboard, removed a jar of strawberry jam and the sliver of Lurpak butter which sat, still unmolested, on his personal shelf, and retired to his own room, where he kept a clean knife, a spoon and a glass for just such occasions. He hated eating in a dirty kitchen. He couldn’t understand how Clive could let things degenerate to this level. Because keeping things in order seemed so natural, so very straightforward a thing to him, he usually suspected that this mess was deliberate.

He took his time over breakfast: a glass of milk, some fresh bread and butter, a spoonful of jam, a banana – the

simplicity, the ritual of it, had become one of his deepest pleasures. Yet the thought of the chaos downstairs nagged at him and soon he was back in the kitchen, cleaning up. In spite of the elaborate mess that Clive had contrived, it took less than an hour to restore some semblance of order to the place. It was something he had learned in his first year: if you shared a house with other men, you had to decide on your policy right away, then stick to it. You could take on the unacknowledged, even despised role of housekeeper, or you could let things continue to slide and fester, till the house was, in Paul's terms at least, close to uninhabitable. It had surprised him how people like Clive, or his previous housemates, Tom and Adam, could live in such porcine squalor, and for a while he had tried to call their bluff, to see if one of them would snap, and do something – anything – to help. They never did. They lived by the simple rule that there was always someone else who would clean things up, as there presumably had been at home, before they came to college. Not that Clive ever actually intended to leave this midden for someone else to deal with: the presence, here and there amongst the debris, of washing-up liquid containers, rancid dishcloths and a single, sad-looking Brillo pad, floating in a battered and blackened saucepan, testified to his pathetic goodwill. Besides which, the mere presence of someone of Clive's bulk, in a space so small as their shared kitchen, struck Paul as absurd, even ugly. Whenever Clive was indoors, Paul preferred for him to remain at rest, preferably seated, with something to occupy his hands.

On this occasion, however, Clive was not the sole begetter of the chaos with which Paul had to contend. At some point, presumably when the house was otherwise empty, the new tenant, Steve, had descended from his room, made soup from a packet, and left what he had been unable to eat in an uncovered plastic bowl, in the middle shelf of the otherwise empty fridge. There was no doubting that this blood-red

liquid with spaghetti rings and rehydrated onion floating on its surface belonged to Steve; Clive would never have eaten anything from a packet. He was strictly a tins-and-takeaway man: if you had to add water, or break eggs, he was sunk. Steve's empty Knorr wrapper still lay, like a vital clue, on the floor under the kitchen table – and it was enough, as insignificant as it was in the overall scheme of things, to get Paul wondering about the new man. Steve had moved in just six weeks before and, after the first couple of days, he had kept himself apart, preferring to stay locked up in his room, and only emerging to leave the rent, in a plain brown envelope, on the kitchen table, where Paul would find it. Pretty soon, Paul never knew when Steve was in the house: the little man would sit upstairs for hours, even days at a time, or he would come and go, silent and invisible, sneaking in and out of the house while Paul and Clive were out, or otherwise occupied. The only conclusive evidence of his presence would be the rent, the occasional bowl of unfinished food in the fridge and, every now and then, a vast mess of sweet papers, abnormal quantities of Quality Street wrappers, empty Black Magic and Jaffa Cake boxes, crammed into the swing-bin till it was full to overflowing.

After a month of this, Clive had had enough. One morning, when Paul returned from one of his night photography sessions, he was confronted in the kitchen by the big rugby player, who was very obviously hung over and dissatisfied in the general way that Paul had come to think of as Clive's trademark. It was something he had noticed about the men he knew, not just from college, but pretty well everywhere he went: there was a disgruntled quality, an air of dissatisfaction about nothing in particular, which they seemed to think went along with being male. The few men he knew who seemed more or less accepting of their lot – his father, his friend Richard – were the exceptions rather than the rule. Not that they were happy so much as curious and alert, as if the question, for them, wasn't so much

whether or not they were content with their lives, as whether or not the world was still interesting enough.

‘What do we know about Steve anyway?’ Clive had demanded. ‘I mean – what does he do?’

‘I don’t know,’ Paul replied, trying to make light of the whole thing. ‘I got the impression he was a student.’

‘He doesn’t look like a student,’ Clive said.

Though he was tempted to enquire what a student looked like, Paul could see the point. Steve was an odd-looking little guy: yellow-skinned, prematurely balding, thin as a rake, he looked more like an undertaker’s assistant, or a gravedigger. At times, in fact, Paul was tempted to think of him as a phantom, a revenant from the graveyard at the end of the street, come to haunt them. Still, it was none of his business, or Clive’s, what the guy did, as long as he paid his rent – which he did, religiously, every Friday. This was more than could be said for Clive, as it happened, who had been late more than once with his share of the money.

‘I don’t see why you let him have the room,’ Clive continued. ‘The truth is, he gives me the creeps.’

Now it was Paul’s turn to be annoyed. ‘I let him have it,’ he said, trying to hide his irritation, ‘because nobody else wanted it. And because we needed the money. Unless, of course, you want to split the rent two ways instead of three.’

Clive was standing at the sink, concocting one of his exotic hangover cures, a process which involved honey, milk and some kind of dried herb.

‘The lad doesn’t seem very bright,’ he said. ‘I’m sure there’s a brain installed as standard, but whether it’s switched on is another question. Besides which, there’s a smell.’ He flashed Paul a quick, interrogatory look. ‘There’s a definite, ratty kind of smell, coming from his room.’

Paul shook his head. He’d noticed a thin odour on the landing outside the new man’s room, reminiscent of animal pens, or damp straw, but it was nothing compared to some of the aromas Clive had created in the upstairs toilet, on his

more colourful Sunday mornings. Or the warm, slightly fenny scent of the pick-me-up that Clive had just set down on the table, in a chipped beer mug, with SKOL stencilled on the side.

‘Maybe he’s got a pet,’ Paul ventured.

‘What kind of a pet?’

‘I don’t know. Just a pet. A hamster or something. A lab rat. A spring-tailed Siberian gerbil.’

Paul ventured a quick glance at Clive’s face, which wore an expression of distaste, though whether this had to do with Steve’s unofficial roommate or the glass of curdled milk and fenugreek, or whatever it was, that he had just downed in one, it was impossible to say.

‘That has to be unhygienic,’ the big man said, setting the empty glass down on the table and wiping his mouth.

Paul held his tongue.

‘I’m surprised at you,’ Clive continued. ‘I thought you hated germs.’

Paul sighed. ‘I don’t know if Steve has a pet,’ he said. ‘And I don’t much care. It’s not our business really, is it?’

Clive had given up then and gone off to the gym, or the pool, muttering something about rodent infestation and bubonic plague. Yet Paul had to admit that, on some level, the other man had been right: Steve really *was* odd, and if Paul had had any choice in the matter, he would have given the room to someone else, if only to keep Clive happy. He had known, as soon as Steve had turned up, that the big man wouldn’t like him. Not that this made Steve so extraordinary. No one could have denied that Clive was generous in the range of his dislikes: he didn’t want women staying in the house, because you couldn’t relax when they were around, you always had to be on your best behaviour, you couldn’t swear, or fart when you wanted, you had to keep the toilet clean; he preferred it if they didn’t have music students, or anybody musical, in fact, because he’d had a bad time with some clarinettist in his first year; before

Steve, a thin, angelic-looking, somewhat vague art student, in a tie-dye shirt and white drainpipe jeans, with straggly dyed-blond hair and painted fingernails, had turned up, having seen Paul's ad in a shop window, calling himself Marc-with-a-c and enquiring if the room was still for rent. By this time, Paul had been desperate – they had gone three weeks without a third person to share, and Mrs Yazstremski had said that, if they didn't get somebody within the month, Paul would have to make up the rent out of his own pocket. It was hard to find anyone who wanted to share the house, especially mid-term, and Paul would certainly have let the room to Marc, if he could have done. But Clive had been at home, and had proceeded to behave as badly as only Clive could – it was his chosen field, after rugby and drinking; as he himself would often admit, with a cheery smile, he could have represented England at Olympic level in obnoxiousness. Marc's response had been exemplary: though he had obviously decided, within the first five minutes, not to take the room, he had persisted in showing a keen interest in the let for as long as he thought he could get away with it. His parting remark to Paul, with Clive safely out of earshot, had said it all.

'I'm sorry,' he had murmured, with a wave of his alarmingly white, purple-tipped hand, 'but I was hoping for something a little less bucolic.'

Marc had been lucky. Steve had come along on a wet Wednesday evening, when Clive had been at the gym, doing circuits with the rugby team, and he had taken the room immediately, saying it suited him down to the ground. Yet, looking back, Paul realised that he hadn't gleaned much information from Steve's conversation and, in idle moments, he had stopped to wonder, much as Clive was wondering, exactly what he knew about his new housemate. Obviously, Steve was a student: he had to be, since he kept such irregular hours. True, he always had the money to pay his rent, and never used any of Paul's stuff from the cupboards,

or the fridge, but that didn't mean he couldn't be a student, any more than the fact that Steve – as he had told Paul when he came to see about the room – did not drink. It seemed that the guy's only problem was that he was painfully shy. He may have been afraid of Clive, and perhaps with good reason, which partly explained why he kept to himself so much. In fact, the shyness, the fondness for sweets, the way he talked put Paul in mind of a displaced schoolboy; in spite of his sallow skin and balding pate, it was hard not to think of Steve as an overgrown child. It was obvious to Paul, though he would never have admitted it to Clive, that Steve had a pet of some kind locked in his upstairs room, probably a hamster, or a guinea pig. His only other interests, as far as Paul knew, related in some way to nostalgia: he had a collection of old records from the Forties and Fifties, mostly children's songs like 'Tubby the Tuba', and 'Sparky's Magic Piano', and he could occasionally be found in the front room, watching children's television. It was the only time he ever used the front room – though whether this was because he only liked children's programmes, or because it was the time when Clive was least likely to be around, Paul couldn't be certain. Steve avoided Clive like the plague, and would probably have preferred to be left to his own devices generally, but he seemed less intimidated by Paul, and would even occasionally stop to exchange awkward niceties over a cup of tea, or the handing over of rent. Only a few days before, Steve had engaged him in something close to real conversation, in this very kitchen, as Paul sat reading the *Evening News.* The headline had been that The Rapist had been sighted, on three separate occasions, the day before; Steve had been on the point of leaving when the story caught his eye.

'Has he done it again?' he had suddenly asked.

'No,' Paul had replied. 'It says here he was foiled trying to break into the New Hall hostel on Madingley Road.'

Steve had lingered a moment then, as if there was something he wanted to say, but for which he couldn't find the words.

'Do you ever wonder about it?' he asked, finally.

'About what?'

'You know. The rapist.' Steve looked awkward, yet it was obvious he wanted to carry on; Paul got the impression, just for a moment, that he didn't really know what to make of the situation, that he wanted to hear how someone else felt about it. 'What he does. To those girls.'

'No.' Paul had lied, without knowing, until he said the words, that he *was* lying, that he would have lied, no matter who had asked him this question. It was an enquiry he had never made of himself; yet now, when Steve put it to him, he realised he wondered about it all the time.

'I try not to think about it,' he continued, carefully, though he could tell Steve didn't believe him. 'It doesn't do any good.'

Steve had studied him a moment. Paul felt uncomfortable.

'I can't help it,' he had said. 'I wonder about it all the time.'

He rose slowly, and started for the door, then turned and studied Paul for a moment, as if he were trying to decide whether he could be trusted. Paul had the familiar impression – an impression he had often had from other men, at just such moments – that this was the first time Steve had taken any real notice of him. Men did that all the time, though he knew very few women who were so casual, or so ready to take others for granted. For most of the men Paul knew at college, other people were like furniture, objects which existed, and took up space, and occasionally got in the way, or proved surprisingly useful.

'I've been stopped eight times so far,' he said, 'by the police, I mean. Apparently, I fit the description.'

He waited a moment, just long enough to give Paul time to speak, but Paul couldn't think of anything to say, and

Steve had left then, looking sad and – this seemed odd to Paul, but he couldn't think of a better word for it – strangely triumphant. It was as if Steve had been included in something – some ritual or sacrament – from which normal men like Paul or Clive, ordinary men who did not fit the description, had been excluded, and this had bestowed upon him a special, indefinable status that only a martyr, or an innocent, might share or understand.

Paul was almost finished in the kitchen when Clive appeared. As always, even when he had a hangover, he looked fresh and rosy-cheeked, like a freshly scrubbed pig farmer, or a schoolboy just out of the shower after a hard afternoon's rugby. Nothing ever showed on the surface. It was all buried, deep under the healthy, flushed skin. When he finally noticed the state of the kitchen, he grinned and shook his head softly, but he didn't say anything.

'A good night?' Paul enquired.

'Mm.' Clive filled the kettle, scooped two heaped spoonfuls of instant coffee into a mug, spilling a few grains on the freshly wiped draining board, and sat down. Even from where he was sitting, Paul was able to observe the spilt coffee grains gradually dissolve and spread over the stainless-steel surface, like the aftermath of some failed experiment in chromatography.

'Where did you go?'

'The usual.' Clive seemed to be searching for something. He often became disoriented in very neat surroundings. A minute or more passed before he found what he was looking for and the look of vague dismay passed from his face. The kettle began to sing gently, as he spread the *Evening News* upside down on the table so Paul could see.

'Bastard's been at it again,' Clive said.

'Oh.'

Paul studied the front page. Headed by an appeal to landlords – 'Police believe the rapist lives alone in a

bedsitter or flat', it said, without a trace of irony – the story was the familiar one, with an ugly twist.

NEW LEAD IN RAPIST HUNT

The Cambridge rapist may have patrolled the Chesterton area in make-up, a wig and dark glasses yesterday before pouncing at a house in Church Street where he raped and stabbed his seventh victim in his most macabre attack to date.

Soon after the weirdly dressed man was seen round about 12.10 to 12.25 p.m., a 21-year-old secretary was raped in the house and stabbed – and this time the attacker had the word 'Rapist' printed in white capital letters on the forehead of his black leather hood.

The dramatic development of the man in make-up was revealed last night after police officers had questioned dozens of people in the area of Pye Terrace, Church Street, Chesterton, where the rapist struck.

'UNNATURAL'

He was seen riding an old black bicycle which witnesses said rattled. And he was seen to cycle past the house on the terrace twice – once up the road and then down again. He may have been to other streets nearby.

He was described, police said, as young, probably in his twenties, wearing a tan-coloured anorak or windcheater. He was thought to be wearing a fair or light brown wig, dark glasses with steel rims and had what witnesses called 'an unnaturally tanned complexion'.

'When they catch that fucker,' Clive said, 'the police are going to give him a good kicking.'

'Probably.'

'*If* they ever catch him,' Clive continued, staring sadly at the paper. 'I mean, how hard can it be?'

'Well, they know it's a man in his twenties who lives in a bedsit,' Paul said. 'They're bound to get him soon.'

'Sometimes I wonder,' Clive answered, oblivious to the ironic note.

They'd had this conversation several times. It was probably the most boring of a number of boring conversations they were capable of having. Sport. College. Women. Pubs. The rapist.

Paul had been treated on various occasions to theories ranging from the vaguely credible to the ridiculous. The