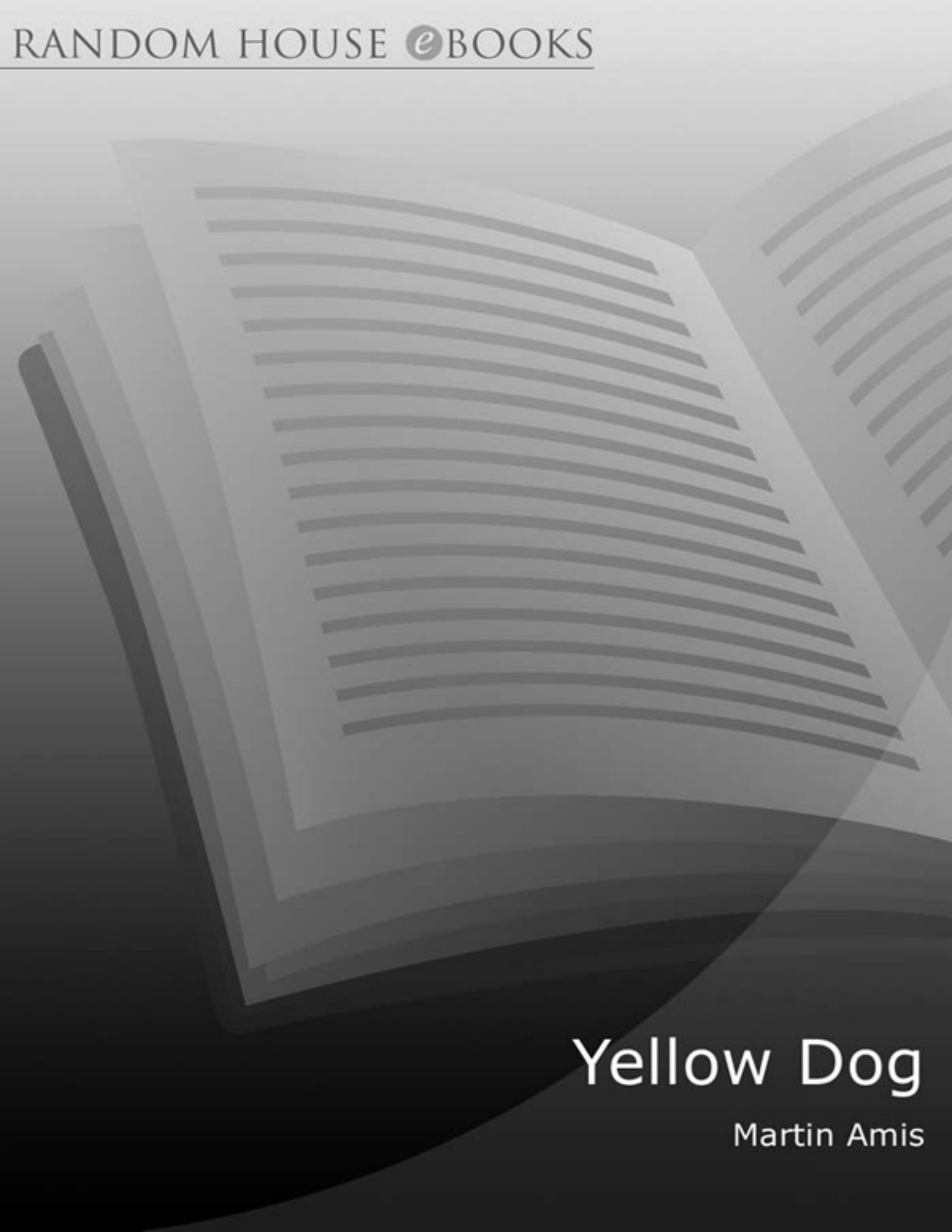
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



Yellow Dog

Martin Amis

CONTENTS

ABOUT THE BOOK

When ‘dream husband’ Xan Meo is vengefully assaulted in the garden of a London pub, he suffers head-injury, and personality-change. Like a spiritual convert, the familial paragon becomes an anti-husband, an anti-father. He submits to an alien moral system – one among many to be found in these pages.

We are introduced to the inverted worlds of the ‘yellow’ journalist, Clint Smoker; the high priest of hardmen, Joseph Andrews; the porno tycoon, Cora Susan; and Royce Traynor, the corpse in the hold of the stricken airliner, apparently determined, even in death, to bring down the plane that carries his spouse. Meanwhile, we explore the entanglements of Henry England: his incapacitated wife, Pamela; his Chinese mistress, He Zizhen; his fifteen-year-old daughter, Victoria, the victim of a filmed ‘intrusion’ which rivets the world – because she is the future Queen of England, and her father, Henry IX, is its King.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

ALSO BY MARTIN AMIS

Fiction

The Rachel Papers
Dead Babies
Success
Other People
Money
Einstein's Monsters
London Fields
Time's Arrow
The Information
Night Train
Heavy Water
Yellow Dog
House of Meetings
The Pregnant Widow
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Non-fiction

Invasion of the Space Invaders
The Moronic Inferno
Visiting Mrs Nabokov
Experience
The War Against Cliché
Koba the Dread
The Second Plane
The Zone of Interest

To Isabel

Martin Amis

Yellow Dog

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

1. Renaissance Man

But I go to Hollywood but I go to hospital, but you are first but you are last, but he is tall but she is small, but you stay up but you go down, but we are rich but we are poor, but they find peace but they find . . .

Xan Meo went to Hollywood. And, minutes later, with urgent speed, and accompanied by choric howls of electrified distress, Xan Meo went to hospital. Male violence did it.

'I'm off out, me,' he told his American wife Russia.

'Ooh,' she said, pronouncing it like the French for *where*.

'Won't be long. I'll bath them. And I'll read to them too. Then I'll make dinner. Then I'll load the dishwasher. Then I'll give you a long backrub. Okay?'

'Can *I* come?' said Russia.

'I sort of wanted to be alone.'

'You mean you sort of wanted to be alone with your girlfriend.'

Xan knew that this was not a serious accusation. But he adopted an ill-used expression (a thickening of the forehead), and said, not for the first time, and truthfully so far as he knew, 'I've got no secrets from you, kid.'

‘. . . Mm,’ she said, and offered him her cheek.

‘Don’t you know the date?’

‘Oh. Of course.’

The couple stood embracing in a high-ceilinged hallway. Now the husband with a movement of the arm caused his keys to sound in their pocket. His half-conscious intention was to signal an impatience to be out. Xan would not publicly agree, but women naturally like to prolong routine departures. It is the obverse of their fondness for keeping people waiting. Men shouldn’t mind this. Being kept waiting is a moderate reparation for their five million years in power . . . Now Xan sighed softly as the stairs above him softly creaked. A complex figure was descending, normal up to the waist, but two-headed and four-armed: Meo’s baby daughter, Sophie, cleaving to the side of her Brazilian nanny, Imaculada. Behind them, at a distance both dreamy and self-sufficient, loomed the four-year-old: Billie.

Russia took the baby and said, ‘Would you like a lovely yoghurt for your tea?’

‘No!’ said the baby.

‘Would you like a bath with all your floaty toys?’

‘No!’ said the baby, and yawned: the first lower teeth like twin grains of rice.

‘Billie. Do the monkeys for Daddy.’

‘There were too many monkeys jumping on the bed. One fell down and broke his head. They took him to the doctor and the doctor said: *No more monkeys jumping on the BED*.’

Xan Meo gave his elder daughter due praise.

‘Daddy’ll read to you when he comes back,’ said Russia.

‘I was reading to her earlier,’ he said. He had the front door open now. ‘She made me read the same book five times.’

‘Which book?’

‘Which book? Christ. The one about those stupid chickens who think the sky is falling. Cocky Locky. Goosey Lucy. And they all copped it from the fox, didn’t they, Billie.’

‘Like the frogs,’ said the girl, alluding to some other tale. ‘The whole family died. The mummy. The daddy. The nanny. And all the trildren.’

‘I’m off out.’ He kissed Sophie’s head (a faint circus smell); she responded by skidding a wet thumb across her cheek and into her mouth. And then he crouched to kiss Billie.

‘It’s Daddy’s anniversary,’ Russia explained. ‘Where are you going,’ she asked him finally, ‘for your lost weekend?’

‘That bar-type place on the canal. What’s its name. Hollywood.’

‘Goodbye, Daddy,’ Billie called.

Leaving the house, he turned briefly to assess it – a customary means of assessing himself, assessing where he was positioned, where he was *placed*. It wasn’t his style (we shall come to his style), but he might have put it this way:

If fine materials are what you like, then have a feel of that fleece there, on the extravagandy deep armchair (take as long as you like: don’t stint yourself). In fact, if you have an interest in real estate or fine living generally, you could do worse than take a tour of the whole house. If, alternatively, German technology is your thing, then get you to my garage, just around the side there. *And so on. But it wasn’t the money*. If you harbour an admiration for extreme womanly beauty, then feast your eyes on my wife – the mouth, the eyes, the aerodynamic cheekbones (and the light of high intelligence: he was very proud of her intelligence). Or, if your soul melts to the vivid ardour of

unusually cute, healthy and well-behaved children, you would envy us our . . . *And so on. And he might have continued*: But then I am the dream husband: a fifty-fifty parent, a tender and punctual lover, a fine provider, an amusing companion, a versatile and unsqueamish handyman, a subtle and accurate cook, and a gifted masseur who, moreover (and despite opportunities best described as 'ample'), never fools around . . . The truth was that he knew what it was like, being a bad husband, a nightmare husband; he had tried it the first time; and it was murder.

Xan Meo walked down St George's Avenue and came to the main road (this was London, near the Zoo). In so doing he passed the garden flat, opposite, which he now seldom used. Were there any secrets there? he wondered. An old letter, maybe; an old photograph; vestiges of vanished women . . . Xan paused. If he turned right he would be heading for pram-torn Primrose Hill – itself pramlike, stately, Vicwardian, arching itself upwards in a posture of mild indignation. That route would have got him to Hollywood the long way round. If he turned left he would get there sooner and could stay there later. So he had a choice between the garden and the city. He chose the city. He turned left, and headed for Camden Town.

It was late afternoon, and late October. On this day, four years earlier, his decree nisi had been made absolute, and he had also given up smoking and drinking (and dope and coke. American pimps, he had recently learnt, called coke *girl*; and heroin *boy*). It had become Meo's habit to celebrate this date with two cocktails and four cigarettes and half an hour of writhing reminiscence. He was happy now – a delicate state: you could feel the tingle of its stress-equations. And he was steadily recuperating from his first marriage. But he knew he would never be over his divorce.

The rink of Britannia Junction: Parkway and Camden Lock and Camden High Street, the dozen black frames of the traffic lights, the slum of cars. Certain sights had to be got out of the way: that heap – no, that stack – of dogshit; that avalanche of vomit; that drunk on the pavement with a face like a baboon's rear; that old chancer who had clearly been incredibly beaten up in the last five or six hours – and, just as incredibly, the eyes that lurked among those knucklestamps and bootprints harboured no grievance, sought no redress . . .

Xan Meo looked at the women, or more particularly the girls, the young girls. Typically she wore nine-inch bricks and wigwam flares; her midriff revealed a band of offwhite underpants and a navel traumatised by *bijouterie*; she had her car-keys in one cheek and her door-keys in the other, a plough in her nose and an anchor in her chin; and her earwax was all over her hair, as if via some inner conduit. But aside from that – what? The secret purpose of fashion, on the street, the harlequinade, fashion in its anarcho-bohemian form, is to thwart the lust of your elders. Well, it's worked, thought Meo. I don't dig you. He thought too of the menpleasers of twenty-five years ago, their stockings, garterbelts, cleavages, perfumes. Girls were now breaking with all that. (And maybe it went further, and they were signalling the retirement of physical beauty in the interests of the egalitarian.) Meo would not say that he disapproved of what he saw, though he found it alien. And when he saw two teenagers vigorously kissing – an unimaginable mesh of lip-rings and tongue-studs – he felt himself assent to it. See the young kissing and run it by your heart; if your heart rejects it, retreats from it, then that's age, that's time – fucking with you.

As he joined the long queue at the service store, for cigarettes, Meo recalled his penultimate infidelity (the ultimate infidelity, of course, had been with Russia). In a

hotel room in Manchester he methodically undressed a twenty-year-old continuity girl. ‘Let me help you out of those nasty hot clothes,’ he said. Which was a line of his. But the line felt accurate: the damp-dog sloppy joe, the woollen tights, the rubber boots. He was seated on the armchair when she finally straightened up in front of him. There was her body, with its familar circles and half-circles, its divine symmetries, but it included something he had never seen before. He was face to face with a pubic buzzcut. Also: ‘What’s that doing there?’ he asked. And she answered: ‘It helps me have an orgasm’ . . . Well, it didn’t help *him* have an orgasm. Something else was hard where everything was meant to be soft: he seemed to be pestling himself – against a steel ingot. Plus a nice telltale welt (with her name and phone number on it) to take home to a wife who was, in any case, and with good reason, psychopathically jealous (as was he). The continuity girl, then, had not been a continuity girl. Discontinuity, radical discontinuity, was what she had signalled. How clear did it need to be? *No more monkeys jumping on the bed*. He had been sleeping with Russia for four and a half years. Passion survived, but he knew it would dwindle; and he was prepared for that. Xan Meo was on his way to realising that, after a while, marriage is a sibling relationship – marked by occasional, and rather regrettable, episodes of incest.

Dusk was now falling; but the firmament was majestically bright; and the contrails of the more distant aeroplanes were like incandescent spermatozoa, sent out to fertilise the universe . . . On the street Meo stopped looking at the girls, and the girls, naturally, went on not looking at him. He had reached the age (he was forty-seven) where young women looked through you, beyond you, they looked through your ghost: a trite misfortune, perhaps, but definitely a point in your leavetaking, your journey to

ghostdom. You whisper goodbye, goodbye – *God* be with you (because I won't be. I can't protect you). And yet this was not quite fully Meo's case, for he was a conspicuous man, and knew it, and liked it, on the whole. He owned a lot of physical space, tall, broad, full; his dark brown hair was no longer thick and wavy but it still covered a fair part of his head (the unguent that lent it extra mass and fixity was called Urban Therapeutic); and his eyes had rather more twinkle in them than you necessarily want to see. His face held a glow to it – a talented glow, certainly, but what kind of talent? At its weakest, its most ingratiating, Meo's face was that of a man who might step up to a microphone and give you a competently leering rendition of 'Pop Goes the Weasel'. His air seemed likely: plausible for the purpose at hand.

And, more than this, he was famous, and therefore in himself there was something specious and inflationary, something bigged-up. He was, however, *quietly* famous, as so many are now: many are famous (and even Meo could remember a time when hardly anybody was famous). Fame had so democratised itself that obscurity was felt as a deprivation or even a punishment. And people who weren't famous behaved famous. Indeed, in certain mental atmospheres it was possible to believe that the island he lived on contained sixty million superstars . . . Meo was, in fact, an actor, an actor who had gained sudden repute by warily diversifying into another field. And the world has a name for these people who can do more than one thing at the same time, these heroic multitaskers: it calls them Renaissance Men. The quiet glow of quiet fame, then, further illumined Xan Meo. Every five minutes someone would smile his way – because they thought they knew him. He returned such smiles.

The stroll to Hollywood continued – and we will stay with Meo's stroll, because it will be his last for some time.

He stuck his head round the door of the High Street bookshop and complacently ascertained that his paperback (a debut collection of short stories entitled *Lucozade*) was still on the table marked Our Staff Recommends. Then, turning right up Delancey Street, he passed the café where Renaissance Man played rhythm guitar every second Wednesday with four old hippies who called themselves the Original Hard Edge. He cut left down Mornington Terrace – rather poorer, very much quieter: he could hear his own footfalls despite the thrashing trees he walked beneath and the submerged clangour of the rolling-stock deep down over the wall to his right. The weather was of the type that was still politely described as blustery. A ragged and bestial turbulence, in fact, a rodeo of wind – the earth trying to throw its riders. And in the street: garden furniture, twirling dustbins, bicycles and (increasingly) car doors thrown open into the path of the boost. Xan was too old for fashion, for cuts and styles; but his trousers, now, were alternately flared and drainpiped by the wind.

Up ahead he picked out a figure that reminded him, or reminded his body, of his first wife – his first wife as she was ten years ago. Pearl would not have had a cigarette in her mouth and a tabloid in her armpit, and nor would her clothes have been quite so brief, so taut, so woman-crammed; but the aggressive or at least sharply defiant stance, the arms disaffectedly folded, the lift of the chin that said that all excuses had now been considered and dismissed . . . She stood, waiting, in the shadow of a dun-coloured mediumrise. Behind her a male infant lingered, wiggling a stick among the exposed innards of a black plastic bag. As Meo turned to cross over the railtracks he heard her say,

‘*Harrison! Move* your *fucking* arse!’

Yes, most regrettable, no doubt; but with his back safely turned Meo did not deny himself a wince of laughter. He

was a good modern person; was a liberal, a feminist (indeed a gynocrat: ‘Give the girls a go,’ he’d say. ‘I know it’s asking the earth. Still, *we’re* no good. Give the girls a go’). But he still found things funny. The woman, after all, had made her meaning plain; and it couldn’t be said that she had minced her words. No: Pearl would have put it differently . . . He could see the building now, with its variegated Christmas lights, its squirming barber’s pole. Sometimes a descending aeroplane can sound a warning note: one did so, up above – an organ-chord, signalling its own doom.

He stopped and thought: that feeling again. And he sniffed the essential wrongness of the air, with its fucked-up undertaste, as if all the sequiturs had been vacuumed out of it. A yellowworld of faith and fear, and paltry ingenuity. And all of us just flying blind. Then he stepped forward.

Xan Meo went to Hollywood.

‘Good evening.’

‘All right?’ said the barman, as if querying the mental health of someone who still said that: good evening.

‘Yeah mate,’ said Meo comfortably. ‘And yourself?’ This was the thing about him: he was big, he was calm, he was comfortable. ‘Where is everyone?’

‘Football. England. They’ll come steaming in here around eight.’

Meo, who would not be around for that, said, ‘You want to get those uh, plasma screens in. They can watch it in here.’

‘We don’t want em to watch it here. They can watch it in the Worm and Apple. Or the Turk’s Head. And trash *that* when they lose.’

The cocktail menu had been chalked up on a blackboard above a display of bottles and siphons arranged and set-dressed to resemble downtown Los Angeles. Out-of-scale mannequins of selected moviestars lurched through its streets.

'I'll have a . . .' There was a drink called a Blowjob. There was a drink called a Boobjob. He thought: it's like those companies called FCUK and TUNC. Meo shrugged. It was not his intention, now, to ponder the obscenification of everyday life. He said, 'I'll have a Shithead. No, a *Dick*head. No. *Two* Dickheads.'

Holding a glass in either hand Xan went out into the paved garden overlooking the canal where, in recent months, on a west-facing bench, usually with Russia at his side, he had consumed many a pensive Club Soda, many a philosophical Virgin Mary. And how much more solemn – how much more august and royal – his thoughts would be, pondering Pearl, alone with his cigarettes and his Dickheads . . . Meo's first glance at the motionless green channel rather too studiously confronted him with a dead duck, head down with its feet sticking up like the arms of a pair of spectacles. Dead in the water, abjectly dead: he imagined he could smell it, over and above the elderly medicine of the canal. Like Lucky Ducky or Drakey Lakey, after Foxy Loxy was done.

Xan seemed to be alone in his garden. But then a dapper young man emerged from a Hollywood side-exit, with a mobile phone held to his ear; he seemed briskly bound for the street until he stopped dead and then seemed to grope his way sidewise and steady himself against the canal fencing a few feet away. He acknowledged Xan's nod with a flicker of his brow and then said clearly, 'So everything we said, all the vows we exchanged, now mean nothing. Because of Garth. And we both know that's just an infatuation . . . You say you love me but I think we have

different conceptions of what love really means. To me, love is something sacred, almost ineffable. And now you're saying that all that, all that . . .' He moved off, and his voice was soon lost in the hum of the city. Yes, and that was part of it, the obscenification: loss of *pudeur*.

Like the dead duck, the worldline of Xan's first marriage, that attempted universe – dead also. His divorce had been so vicious that even the lawyers had panicked. It was as if the two of them had been trussed together with barbed wire, naked and face-to-face, and then thrown overboard. Your flailings down there, your kicking and clawing: there could be no morality. When Pearl had him arrested for the third time, and he stood at the door of his service flat listening to the charges, Xan knew that he had reached the end of a journey. He had reached the polar opposite of love – a condition far more intense than mere hatred. You want the loved one dead; you want her plane to come down, and never mind about the others on board – those four hundred saps and losers . . .

But they'd survived; they lived, didn't they? Xan reckoned that he and Pearl came out pretty well even. And, fantastically, they came out richer than they went in. It was the boys, the two sons, who lost, and it was to them that Xan Meo now raised his glass. 'I'm sorry,' he said out loud. 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry.' As if in recompense for the waterbird upended in the green canal, a sparrow, a feathered creature of the middle air, hopped on to the bench beside him and, with eerie docility, began to ventilate itself, allowing its wings to thrum and purr, six inches away.

The wind had departed – fled elsewhere. In the west a garish, indeed a porno sunset had established itself. It resembled a titanic firefighting operation, with ethereal engines, cranes, ladders, the spray and foam of hose and standpipe, and the genies of the firemen about their massive work of hell-containment, hell-control.

‘Is that your “bird”?’ said a voice.

Meo acknowledged the passing of his solitude. He looked to his right: the sparrow was still agitating on the arm of the bench, testingly close to his second Dickhead. He looked up: his smiling questioner, a square-looking, almost cubic individual, stood about ten feet away in the weak dusk.

‘Yeah, well it’s all I can pull these days,’ he answered.

The man took a step forward, his thumbs erect on either side of his navel. Recognised, thought Meo. Made.

‘Are you *the*?’

Expecting that he would soon have a hand to shake, Xan got to his feet. The sparrow did not yet absent itself.

‘Yes. I’m *the*.’

‘Well I’m Mal.’

‘. . . Hello there,’ said Xan.

‘Why’d you do it, son?’

At this point it became clear that Mal, despite his air of humorous regret, was a violent man.

Far more surprisingly, it became clear that Xan was a violent man too. That is to say, he suffered from no great deficit of familiarity as the changed forcefield took hold. Violence, triumphally outlandish and unreal, is an ancient category-error – except to the violent. The error having been made, both men would know that from here on in it was endocrinological: a question of gland-management.

‘Why’d I do *what*?’ said Meo, and took a step forward. He hoped still to avert it; but he would not be going second.

‘Ooh.’

He pronounced it *où*, as Russia Meo had, so long ago. He went on, ‘I *heard* you was a bit tasty.’

‘Then you know what to expect,’ he said as levelly as he could (there was an acidic presence in his mouth). ‘If you have it with me.’

‘You went and *named* him! And I mean *that*, to me, that is totally, to *me* –’

‘Named who?’

Mal breathed in and bulged his eyes and loudly whispered, ‘You’ll remember this in pain, boy. *J-o-s-e-p-h A-n-d-r-e-w-s*.’

‘Joseph Andrews?’

‘Don’t say it. You don’t *say* it. You named him. You put him there – you placed him. In black and *white*.’

For the first time Meo thought that something *else* was wrong. The calculations going on inside him might be given as follows: my five inches equals his two stone, and zero real difference in the other thing (time lived). So: it would be close. And the guy seemed too blithe and hammy for close. He couldn’t be *that* good: look at his suit, his shoes, his hair.

‘You’ll remember this in pain, boy.’

But there is another actor on our stage. But I go to Hollywood but I go to hospital. A man (for it is he, it is he, it is always he), a sinner, shitter, eater, breather, coming up fast on him from behind. Mal is violent, and Xan is violent, but in this third player’s scowl and its nimbus you see an absence of everything that human beings have ever agreed about: all treaties, concordats, all understandings. He is palely and coarsely bald. His eyebrows and eyelashes seem to have been lasered or even blowtorched off his face. And the steam pouring from his mouth as if from a spraycan, on this not intemperate evening, reached out to arm’s length.

Xan heard no footsteps; what he heard was the swish, the shingly soft-shoe, of the hefted cosh. Then the sharp two-finger prod on his shoulder. It wasn’t meant to happen

like this. They expected him to turn, and he didn’t turn – he half-turned, then veered and ducked. So the blow intended merely to break his cheekbone or his jawbone was instead received by the cranium, that spacey bulge (in this instance still quite marriageably forested) where so many noble and delicate powers are so trustingly encased.

He crashed, he crunched to his knees, in obliterating defeat: his womanblood, his childblood, taken by his enemy. The physics of it sent his Dickhead twisting up and away. He heard the wet crack, the wet crack of his knees followed by the wet crack of the sliced glass. The world stopped turning, and started turning again – but the other way. Only now after a heartbeat did the sparrow rear up with the whirling of its wings: the little paparazzo of the sparrow.

The sky is falling!

Then the words ‘*Get* down’ and a second, fervent blow.

The sky is falling, and I’m off to tell the . . .

Seemingly rigid now, like the statue of a fallen tyrant, he crashed sideways into the damp paving, and lay still.

2. Hal Nine

The King was not in his counting-house, counting out his money. He was in a drawing-room in the Place des Vosges, absorbing some very bad news. The equerry on the armchair opposite was called Brendan Urquhart-Gordon. Between them, lying on the low glass table, was a photograph, face-down, and a pair of tweezers. And the room was like a photograph: for several minutes now neither man had moved or spoken.

A vibration was needed to animate the scene, and it came: the ping of a tuning-fork, as one of the thousand

facets in the icy chandelier minutely rearranged itself within that ton of glass.

Henry IX said, ‘What a dreadful world we’re living in, Bugger. I mean, it’s such a ghastly, dreadful . . . world.’

‘It is indeed, sir. May I suggest a brandy, sir.’

The King nodded. Urquhart-Gordon wielded the handbell. More vibrations: scandalously shrill. The servant, Love, appeared in the distant doorway. Urquhart-Gordon had nothing against Love, but he found it awkward using his name. Who would want a servant called Love?

‘Two large Remy *reserve*, if you would, Love,’ he called.

The Defender of the Faith – he actually headed the Church of England (Episcopalian) and the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) – went on: ‘You know, Bugger, this shakes my personal belief. Doesn’t it shake yours?’

‘My personal belief was ever but a slender reed, sir.’

An unlikely expression, perhaps, coming from a man shaped like a cummerbund. Bald, dark, rosy, with Jewish brains (some said) from the mother’s side.

‘Shakes it to the core. These people really are the *limit*. No. Worse. I suppose it’s all part of some ghastly “ring”?’

‘That is possible, sir.’

‘Why did . . . How could it be so arranged that such creatures play a part in God’s *plen*?’

Love reentered and, as he approached, perhaps a dozen clocks, one after the other, began to chime the hour. An instinctively practical man, Urquhart-Gordon reflected that more work would have to be done on the modernisation of the King’s short ‘a’. In times of crisis, especially, it sounded almost prewar. Brendan’s rosy cheeks were for a moment all the rosier as he recalled Henry’s visit, as Prince of Wales, to the trade-union rest-house in Newbiggin-by-the-Sea, and the Prince at the piano singing ‘My Old Man’s a

Dustman': 'My old men's a dustman, He wears a dustman's het, He wears cor-blimey trousers, And he lives in a council flet!' The Fourth Estate had not been slow to point out that the truth was otherwise: Henry's old man was Richard IV, and he lived in Buckingham Palace.

Feebly averting his face from the humours of the brandy balloons, Love continued towards them, and still had a fair way to go. It was five past six by the time he left the room.

'Forgive me, Bugger. My mind's a blenk. Delivered . . . ?'

'The photograph was hand-delivered to my rooms in St James's. In a plain white envelope.' This envelope Urquhart-Gordon now produced from his case. He handed the transparent zipper-wallet to Henry IX, who gave it a more than averagely puzzled squint. MR BRENDAN URQUHART-GORDON ESQUIRE, and, in the top right-hand corner, Private and Confidential. 'No accompanying note. Calligraphy and the redundant "Esquire" suggest an uncouth or foreign hand, or an attempt to have us believe as much. Protection will conceivably tell us more.'

Urquhart-Gordon studied the King's frown. Henry IX normally wore his thick fair hair swiped sideways across his brow. But now in the royal disarray his quiff had collapsed into a baffled fringe, making his eyes look even more beleaguered and inflamed. Henry IX frowned on at him, and in response to this Urquhart-Gordon shrugged and said,

'We await further communication.'

'Blickmail?'

'Well. I would say extortion. It seems reasonably clear that this is not the work of the media, in the usual sense. If it were, then we would be looking at that photograph in some German magazine.'

'Bugger!'

'I'm sorry, sir. Or on the Internet.'

With a bedraggled gesture Henry IX reached for the thing on the table. His hand wavered.

‘Use the tweezers, sir, if you would. Turn it with the tweezers, sir.’

The King did so.

He had not seen his daughter naked for perhaps three or four years, and, over and above everything else, he was harrowed, he was bitterly moved, by how much woman was already in her, in his girlchild who still played with her dolls. This, together with the dreaminess, the harmlessness, of the face, caused her father to cover his eyes with his sleeve.

‘Oh Bugger.’

‘Oh Hotty.’

Urquhart-Gordon looked on. A fifteen-year-old girl in what was evidently a white bathtub, with her arms up on the side, her legs folded at an angle in six inches of water: Princess Victoria, in her costume of nudity, her catsuit of nudity, adumbrating womanhood. The conspicuous tan-lines – she seemed, furthermore, to be wearing a spectral bikini – suggested summer. Urquhart-Gordon had checked the scrolled itineraries: all the Princess ever did, apparently, was go on holiday. But she had been back at boarding-school for six weeks and it was now almost November. Why, he wondered, had they waited? There was something about the Princess’s expression that worried him, that additionally disquieted him: the elevation of the pupils . . . Brendan Urquhart-Gordon’s nickname, by the way, derived from his initials, Henry IX’s from his performance as Hotspur in a school production of *Henry IV, Part One*.

‘Do you think,’ the King said miserably, ‘that the Princess and a uh, girlfriend might have been messing about with a camera, and uh . . .’

‘No, sir. And I’m afraid it is highly unlikely that this is the extent of it.’

The King blinked at him. The King always made you spell it out.

‘There must be more photographs of the Princess. In other . . . poses.’

‘Bugger!’

‘Forgive me, sir. That was unfortunate. The point is: look at the Princess’s face, sir. That is the face of someone who *thinks she’s alone*. We must take comfort from the fact that the Princess was and is quite unaware of this really unprecedented intrusion. Quite innocent of it.’

‘Yes. Innocent of it. Innocent of it.’

‘Sir, do I have your permission to activate John Oughtred?’

‘You do. Not another soul, of course.’

Henry IX got to his feet, and so, therefore, did Urquhart-Gordon. They fell into step together, the one so sleek, the other so lean. When the great embrasure of the central window had at last been reached, the two men looked out through the lace, through its weft and warp. Floodlights, cranes, gantries, retractable ladders: the firefighters of the Fourth Estate. It was the eve of the second anniversary of the Queen’s accident. The King was expected to make a statement in the morning before flying back to England and then on to his wife’s bedside. For the Queen was not in the garden, eating bread and honey. She was attached to certain machines, in the Royal Inverness.

‘Well, sir. The family motto.’

The family motto, impressed upon Henry IX by his father, Richard IV, and his grandfather, John II, was unofficial. In Latin it might perhaps have been *Prosequare*. In English it ran as follows: Get On With It.

‘What have I got tomorrow? The Aids people or the cancer people?’

‘Neither, sir. The lepers.’

‘The *lepers*? . . . Oh yes of course.’

‘It could be postponed, sir. I don’t see how it was arranged in the first place, given the significance of the date.’ And he invitingly added, ‘With your permission, sir, I will be availing myself of the King’s Flight in – two hours.’

‘No, I’d better go ahead and do the lepers, now I’m here. Get on with it.’

Urquhart-Gordon knew the real purpose of Henry IX’s visit to Paris. He was obliged to conceal his astonishment that, despite the nature of the current *crise*, the King evidently meant to go ahead with it (and despite the atrocious timing, the atrocious risk). Now his eyebrows arched as he made a series of fascinated deductions.

‘And after the lepers – then what?’

‘You should be in the air by noon, sir. There’s the ceremony at Mansion House at two: your award from the Headway people.’

Again Henry IX blinked at him.

‘The National Head Injuries Association, sir. Then you go north,’ he said, and superfluously added, ‘to see the Queen.’

‘Yes, poor thing.’

‘Sir. I have Oughtred on hold and will liaise with him tonight at St James’s. We must avoid passivity in this matter.’ He shook his head and added, ‘We’ve got to find somewhere to begin.’

‘Oh Bugger.’

Urquhart-Gordon had an impulse to reach out and smooth Henry IX’s hair from his brow. But this would