

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Victoria Line, Central Line

Maeve Binchy

CONTENTS

Cover
About the Book
About the Author
Also by Maeve Binchy
Title Page
Dedication

Victoria Line

Tottenham Hale
Seven Sisters
Finsbury Park
Highbury & Islington
King's Cross
Euston
Warren Street
Oxford Circus
Green Park
Victoria
Pimlico
Vauxhall
Stockwell
Brixton

Central Line

Shepherd's Bush
Holland Park
Notting Hill Gate
Queensway
Lancaster Gate
Marble Arch

Bond Street
Oxford Circus
Tottenham Court Road
Holborn
Chancery Lane

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About the Book

At Notting Hill, a mysterious secretary harbours a secret on her journey to work; at Highbury and Islington, a young man has a sudden change of heart; while at Holborn, a disastrous reunion is about to take place...

From Green Park to Brixton, Shepherd's Bush to Chancery Lane, the nameless faces travelling on the Tube each have their own tales to tell. In this vintage collection of stories, Maeve Binchy brings this cross-section of London society vividly to life with her unforgettable humour and compassion.

About the Author

Maeve Binchy was born in Dublin, and went to school at the Holy Child Convent in Killiney. She took a history degree at UCD and taught in various girls' schools, writing travel articles in the long summer holidays. In 1969 she joined the *Irish Times* and for many years she was based in London writing humorous columns from all over the world. She is the author of five collections of short stories as well as twelve novels including *Circle of Friends*, *The Copper Beech*, *Tara Road*, *Evening Class* and *The Glass Lake*. Maeve Binchy died in July 2012 and is survived by her husband, the writer Gordon Snell.

Also by Maeve Binchy

Fiction

Light a Penny Candle

Echoes

The Lilac Bus

Dublin 4

Firefly Summer

Circle of Friends

The Copper Beech

The Glass Lake

Evening Class

Tara Road

Scarlet Feather

Silver Wedding

Quentins

Nights of Rain and Stars

Non-fiction

Aches & Pains

*Maeve
Binchy*

VICTORIA LINE,
CENTRAL LINE



arrow books

*To Gordon
with all my love*

VICTORIA LINE

TOTTENHAM HALE

AMY WATCHED SIX taxis avoid her and go deliberately towards other people. Then she began to realise she was suffering from advanced paranoia and that she had better cut her losses and take the tube home. She was already so late and angry, that the lurching crowded journey couldn't make her much worse. And there was the danger that if she stood much longer on the side of the street being ignored by rush hour taxi drivers she might lose her small remaining ration of sanity. And she needed to hold on to what she had for tonight.

Tonight Ed's sister and her husband were coming to dinner. Tonight, for the first time, she would meet the Big Mama figure in Ed's American family, the one they all bowed to, the one Ed had practically written to for permission to marry Amy. At the time Amy had thought it funny; she had even suggested that her dental reports and photostats of her GCE certificates be sent to New York. But three years later, after a period of watching Ed write his monthly letter to his big sister Bella, she found it less funny. She was never shown these letters and in pique she had opened one before posting it. It was an infantile report on how their life had been progressing since last month: childish details about the floor covering they had bought for the kitchen, aspirations that Ed's salary would be reviewed and upped. Praise for a new dress that Amy had bought, minutiae about a picnic they had had with another couple. It had made Amy uneasy, because it had made Ed seem retarded. It was the kind of letter that a mother might

expect from a small son who had gone off to summer camp, not something that a sister in far away America should need or want.

Ed had been euphoric about the visit. It had been planned for over three months. Bella and her husband Blair were coming to London for three days as part of a European tour. They would arrive in the morning; they did not want to be met, they preferred to recover from their jet lag alone in the privacy of a good hotel with a comfortable bedroom and bathroom. Fully refreshed, at seven p.m. they would come and see their beloved Ed and welcome their new sister Amy to the family. Next day there would be a tour to Windsor and an evening at the theatre, with a dinner for the four of them; and on the Saturday morning, Amy might kindly take her new sister Bella shopping, and point out the best places, introduce her to the heads of departments in the better stores. They would have a super girly lunch, and then Bella and Blair would fly out of their lives to Paris.

Normally, on any ordinary Thursday, Amy came home from Harley Street, where she worked as a doctor's receptionist, took off her shoes, put on her slippers, unpacked her shopping, organised a meal, lit the fire and then Ed would arrive home. Their evenings had begun to have a regular pattern. Ed came home tense and tired. Little by little, in front of the fire, he would unwind; little by little he relaxed his grip on the file of papers he had brought back from the office. He would have a sherry, his face would lose its lines; and then he would agree really that there was no point in trying to do too much work in the evening.

With a glass of wine, he would say that the Labourer was worthy of his Hire, and he would expand about people being entitled to their leisure. And afterwards, he would carve away happily at the table he was making, or watch television, or do the crossword with Amy; and she realised

happily that she was essential to him, because only her kind of understanding could make him uncoil and regard his life as a happy, unworrying thing.

That was all before the threatened visit of Bella.

For three months now, he hadn't been able to relax. No matter how many blandishments and encouragements Amy put in his way, he seemed stressed and anxious. He was anxious on all fronts: Bella would think it strange that he hadn't moved out of sales into middle management before this; he must show Bella what the structure of the company was, he must prove to her that he had done as much home work and extra work as he could possibly do. Every night his briefcase bulged with sheets of incomprehensible figures. But this wasn't all. He couldn't even concentrate on the office work, he would jump up and spot some defect in the house.

'Heavens, Amy, that curtain rail is missing three hooks, can you fix it darling? Please.'

Sometimes he said: 'Before Bella comes', sometimes he didn't. He didn't even need to, really. Amy knew.

The phone mouthpiece was dirty, the bath-mat had got worn-looking, the window boxes needed repainting, the carving dish had one of its feet twisted the wrong way, the ice trays in the refrigerator were both cracked.

About a dozen times, Amy had reacted and explained that Bella was not coming on a mission of inspection; she hadn't flown the Atlantic to check the curtains, the telephone or the ice trays, she had come to see Ed. But his face just became more worried and he said that he would like things to be right.

So right was everything, that Amy was almost a nervous wreck. The house had been polished within an inch of its life. A magnificent casserole was waiting to be reheated, good wine had been chosen, the table had been set before she left the house that morning. If Bella were to go through the house with a fleet of police specially trained in house-

searches, nothing damaging could be revealed. No hidden mounds of rubbish or unsorted paraphernalia in any cupboard. If Bella decided to pull back the sitting-room carpet and examine the underlay she would not be able to find fault.

Magazines and newspapers praising the excellence of this part of North London had been laid around strategically, so that Bella's gaze could be diverted to them should she disapprove of the suburb where Ed and Amy lived. They had even alerted one set of neighbours of the possibility that they might take Bella and Blair over for a drink if they wanted to say 'Hi' to some local people.

Amy had asked for the afternoon off, and she had spent it at the beautician's. She had suggested it herself and Ed's kind, worried face had lit up.

'It's not that you don't look lovely already, Amy,' he had said, afraid to offend her. 'It's just that ... well, you know, I told Bella you were so groomed, and you know the photographs we send ... well, we always send ones that make us look good.'

Bella was no oil painting, Amy often thought in rage. She was downright plain; she was tall and rather severe. Her clothes in the pictures that Ed had shown her - photographs taken some years back - had been simple and neat with no concession to fashion. Why, then, had Ed spent nights deliberating over Amy's wardrobe and planning what she should wear? Bella was a teacher, and Blair had some unspecified job in the same school, administration Ed thought, but he didn't really give it any time. None of the family gave Blair any time, he was good to Bella as a consort. He was mute and supportive. That was all that was needed. Bella's four younger brothers owed her everything. They would never have gone through school if she hadn't urged them; they wouldn't have got good jobs, and married suitable women without her wise influence; they would be nothings, hopeless orphans, rudderless, had not Bella

persuaded the authorities to let her play Mama at the age of fifteen. Ed had only been five then, he couldn't even remember the mother and father who went into a lake in a drunken motor-accident.

Sometimes Amy wondered about the other sisters-in-law. Wasn't it odd that the sons had all gone so far afield from beloved Bella? There was a brother who had gone to California - that was about as far as you could get from New York State; and one was in Vancouver, and one in Mexico, and Ed was in London. Amy suspected that her three sisters-in-law and she would get along famously. She felt sure they were united in a common hatred of Bella and what she was doing to their men.

But no hint of this escaped in any of the family letters, all of which seemed to be full of Bella. When she had been in bed for three weeks with influenza, letters posted in San José, Vancouver and Mexico City had crashed on to the mat in Tottenham Hale giving the latest bulletins. The three brothers had written to Ed in terms of congratulation and encouragement once the visit of Bella to England had been announced. Bella's own letters were short and terse, and offered little news of her own life, only praise or enquiry about the life of the recipient. The more Amy thought about her, the more she became convinced that Bella was mad.

Now, beautifully coiffed, elegantly made-up, manicured, massaged at a cost which left her seething with rage, Amy stood on the platform waiting for the train to take her home to meet this monster. She got a couple of admiring looks which pleased her; a student pinched her bottom hard, which hurt her and annoyed her; but with confidence gained from parting with the huge sum of money to the beauty salon she said clearly and loudly, 'Please don't do that again,' and everybody looked at the student who went scarlet and got out at the next station. Two men congratulated her and she felt pleased that she was becoming mature.

She worked out that she would have two hours at home before the dreaded Bella arrived. That would be time to do the final fixing of the meal, have a bath and dress. Ed had taken the afternoon off and he was going to have arranged fresh flowers and done any last minute things.

'Won't she think it strange that you took time off work to do housework?' asked Amy.

'If she doesn't ask, we mightn't have to tell her,' he said, giggling like a schoolboy.

Amy told herself firmly that she was not a criminal, she hadn't kidnapped Ed, she had loved him and married him. She looked after him well by any standards, she encouraged him when he felt down but she didn't push him on to impossible heights. This appalling Bella couldn't fault her on her performance, surely? And if that was all true, which it undoubtedly was, then why did she feel so apprehensive? The train gave a great lurch which flung all those still standing into each other's arms. Carefully, they disentangled themselves, with little laughs and apologies; and it was a few moments before they realised that the train had actually stopped and they were not at a station.

'That's all we need,' said a florid-looking man with a briefcase. 'Told the wife I'd be home early, and now we're going to be stuck here all night.'

'Surely not?' asked a woman who looked tired and miserable. She was carrying a heavy bag of shopping. 'There'll be nobody to let the children in,' she added in a worried tone.

Amy began to realize the situation. Every minute here was a minute less in the elaborate count-down for Bella's arrival. If they were fifteen minutes delayed, then she might have to go without a bath. If they were half-an-hour delayed she might have to lose bath, and decorating the trifle. Her mind couldn't take in anything longer than half-an-hour's delay.

Very soon, a uniformed man came through the carriage assuring them that there was no danger, no crisis, but that there had been a fault which must be corrected, and that London Transport apologised infinitely but there would be a delay.

No, he didn't know how long the delay would be. Yes, he could assure them that there would be no danger.

No, there was no possibility of another train running into them.

Yes, he understood that it was a great inconvenience.

No. There was no way of doing anything more quickly than it was already being done.

Yes, people would be electrocuted and die if they stepped out on to the rails.

'That would appear to be that,' said the florid man. He looked at Amy appreciatively. 'I suppose if we are to be marooned, I'm to be congratulated on finding such an elegant shipmate. I'm Gerald Brent by the way.'

'I'm Amy Baker,' said Amy smiling.

'Mrs Baker, would you care to have a drink with me?' said Gerald Brent. He took a bottle of wine out of his briefcase, a penknife with a corkscrew attachment, and the top of his vacuum flask.

Laughing, Amy accepted.

'I'll drink from the other side,' said Gerald.

The well-known patience and docility of Londoners was beginning to be evident around the compartment. People were settling down to read the *Standard* and the *News*; one man was even having a little sleep of sorts; the worried woman had taken out a woman's magazine and resigned herself.

'Wife's mother is coming to dinner,' said Gerald. 'Terrible old bat. I'm not sorry to miss her, really. Anyway, this wine is much too good for her. Have another drop.'

Amy took the refill and looked at him to see if he was joking.

'You don't really think we'll miss dinner, do you?' she asked.

'Bound to,' said Gerald. He explained what must have gone wrong on the line, how a safety mechanism had worked properly but it would mean that it now had to be rewound by hand. They would have to bring personnel into the tunnel to do this.

'Three or four hours, at least,' he said.

It just wasn't possible, that in the whole of London, one tube line should have a mechanical failure, and she should be on it. It was simply beyond belief that this should happen on this one day out of the thousand or so days she had been married to Ed. It was quite inconceivable that Bella, the big black shadow over all their lives, was going to become like a mushroom cloud of menace and disappointment ever more. Ed would never recover from it. The evening would be a shambles, he would run out into the street looking for her. He might believe that she had left him as some kind of protest about Bella. Amy felt a wave of nausea at the horror of her situation, her face whitened and she looked as if she was going to fall.

'Steady,' said Gerald. 'You mustn't rush that wine, it's very good, full bodied, rich. Here. Sit on this corner.' He moved her to the corner of someone's seat. A London mateyness had now begun to develop and people who would have travelled unspeaking for years became animated and friendly through shared disaster.

Amy told Gerald all about Bella: she told him about opening the letter, she told him that Bella had strong-armed all her brothers into a forced, humble, gratitude. As she told him, it became even clearer to her just how destructive Bella had been; and how in Vancouver, San José and Mexico City, as well as London, four normal men were working like nervous beavers to thank this woman for giving up her youth to rear them. While in fact, Amy realised suddenly, all that Bella had done was give full vent

to normal maternal instincts, and got in return praise from authorities and social services. From four brothers she had got a slavish devotion.

Amy and Gerald finished the bottle of wine. Gerald muttered an occasional word of encouragement, and, whenever Amy began to panic at the thought of the ruined evening, he offered reassurance.

'Nonsense, of course he'll know where you are. They'll have it on the local news.'

'Heavens, girl, relax, he'll ring the station, they'll tell him.'

'Good God, woman, Bella doesn't expect you to get a pickaxe and hack your way out!'

He told her that his wife thought he drank too much, and that he did. He had once had an affair with his secretary, which his wife had never discovered, or he *thought* she'd never discovered; but he hadn't enjoyed the intrigue side of it, so he ended it, and his secretary called him a chauvinist bastard in front of three senior partners in the firm. It had been very distressing.

Coffee and sandwiches were brought in from the next station and a real party atmosphere began to develop. There was even a sing-song and by the time they did get out at ten p.m. to the flashing of photographers' light-bulbs and the attention of waiting crowds, Amy was quite unconcerned about Bella and the whole, ruined evening.

It was with a shock that she recognized Bella's features on the platform. Peering into the crowds emerging from the train she looked worried, and anxious for Amy's safety. Behind her were a worried Ed and a worried Blair.

'There she is,' cried Bella running forward, arms out. 'Amy, my little sister, are you all right? Are you hurt? Have you been looked after? My poor Amy, what an ordeal, what a catastrophe, for you!' She released her to let Ed hug her, and Blair hold her in a manful, silent grip.

Gerald watched the scene, and raised his hat before going on his way with a quizzical laugh.

Together the four of them went out of the station. Bella didn't look severe or plain, she looked aglow with interest and concern. She had telephoned the police four times, she had made sure that the train had been in no danger, she had taken first aid things to the station just in case. But now how wonderful, it had all ended happily and they were on the way back to Ed and Amy's lovely home. It had looked so really beautiful when she had arrived, those really cute window boxes, and my, how nice Amy sure kept everything, when she had to telephone she noticed just how fresh and dainty the whole house was. Well now, they could all go back and have that really delicious-looking dinner that she knew was there.

Blair smiled a great stalwart and supportive smile. And Ed looked like a child who got the candy; and Amy wondered why she could have resented Bella coming, she was so pleased that she was here. And even more pleased that she liked everything. Now, Amy would really go out of her way to give her a good shopping trip on the Saturday morning. After all, the only important thing was to please Bella.

SEVEN SISTERS

IT WAS VERY odd that they should live in Seven Sisters, Pat thought for the hundredth time. It seemed too much of a coincidence that anyone who was giving a wife-swapping party, with uninhibited fun and carefree swinging for sophisticated couples, should just happen to live in a place with the group name of Seven Sisters. She had said so to Stuart as well.

'They have to live somewhere,' he said unhelpfully.

Pat had studied the *A to Z*.

'I don't really see why they call it Seven Sisters, it's more Hornsey really,' she complained.

'If they'd called it Hornsey you'd probably say that that was even more suggestive,' said Stuart mildly.

For two weeks before the party, Pat lived on a high level of anxiety. She examined her new set of underwear with a worried frown. It was red and black, the black bits were lace and, in one instance, a rosette. Again and again she tried them on in the bathroom and examined herself critically in the mirror. She looked so very white, and the dark colours made her look almost dead. She wondered whether this would fire all the men with lust, whether they would be driven insane by the combination of dead white skin, red silk and black lace, or whether one of the women would take her aside and advise her to use a fake tan lotion. The awful thing was that there was no one to ask. Even if she were to write to this appalling magazine where Stuart had first seen the article about wife-swapping and

had replied to one of the box numbers, she still wouldn't get a reply in time.

Over and over she rehearsed what she would say: 'Hallo, *lovely* of you to ask us ... what a super house.' No, she couldn't tell this terrifying harlot who owned the house in Seven Sisters that it was lovely of her to have invited Pat and Stuart, since Pat and Stuart had in their corrupt and pleasure-seeking way told the Seven Sisters lot that they wanted to come and take off their clothes to go to bed with a load of strangers. The more she reminded herself that this is what they had arranged to do, the more faint and foolish she felt.

Even though she tried to put it from her mind, she wondered if there would be time for any conversation before they got down to action. Would she find herself stark naked in a corner talking to some other naked housewife about the children's drama group or the new supermarket? Would Stuart stand naked laughing with new people about the tomatoes they grew in their allotment?

That was the kind of thing that happened at the ordinary parties they went to ... tame little evenings where people kept their clothes on, and didn't mate with each other, and discussed how expensive the season tickets on the train had become, and how hard it was to find a doctor who could spend two minutes listening to you. Tame evenings, dull evenings. Getting in a rut, becoming old before their time, suburban even though they hadn't yet reached their middle-class suburbia, no excitement, nothing very different, nothing that made them gasp.

Two children, the national average, Stuart working in a bank ...

God Almighty! - Suppose some of the bank's clients were at the party! It wasn't so ridiculous. People don't live beside their banks, some of them could easily live off the Seven Sisters Road. Had Stuart thought of that? She had better tell him, they could call it all off. It would be foolish

to imperil his whole career... No. He must have thought of it. He was utterly set on going to this party now. He would only think she was groping around for some excuse.

... nice little flat, no garden unfortunately, but then they went to the allotment at weekends. Children very strong and happy, love their school. Debbie in the school play again this term, and Danny hoping to be picked for the third team. Lots of friends at school always running in and out of the neighbours' houses too and playing in the adventure playground at the end of the road. Not an earth-shaking life, but a happy one ... even the school Principal had said the other day ...

Sweet God! - Suppose the school ever got to hear of this! How utterly shaming for Debbie and Danny to be branded the children of perverts, sexual freaks. They might even be asked to leave lest their family shame might taint the other children. Relax. How could the school hear of it, unless other parents, or indeed some of the staff, were there being uninhibited and swinging in sophisticated adult fun? ... Yes, of course, if anyone was there, a conspiracy of silence would have to be maintained.

... anyway the school Principal had said that he had enormous admiration for the parents of today, since they made so many sacrifices for their children and were so supportive and aware of all their needs. But he felt sure that this effort was repaid in a thousand ways by the fact that they lived in a peaceful community, far away from the wars and tensions and differences that rend other countries.

Stuart had said that people who went to these parties were normal, ordinary, good, respectable citizens like everyone else. He said that all they were doing was trying to push forward the frontiers of pleasure. They were trying to add to the delights of normal sexual love between a married couple ... and be less selfish about it ... by offering to share that love with other married couples. He had read,

and he believed that there was a lot of truth in it, that this kind of generosity, this giving of your rights in your partner to other friends, was an act of love in itself. And, even more important in these treacherous days, it completely bypassed the need to be 'unfaithful' to the other partner - there would be no forbidden lovers, or illicit affairs. It would all be out in the open. It would be healthy and good.

Stuart talked about it with the enthusiasm he had when he first talked about his allotment. His eyes had that gleam that they once had when he had planned a life of self-sufficiency. The rest of London might starve, might poison itself with nuclear fallout, but Stuart and Pat and Debbie and Danny would grow what they needed for survival on their little allotment, and, aha, who'd laugh then? Pat had asked mildly how Stuart would protect his runner beans and cabbages against twelve million starving Londoners, if they were the only family which had managed to be self-sufficient. Stuart had said it was a technicality.

The Saturday and Sunday gardening continued, it had lost its first flush of real excitement, but nowadays it brought them a gentle pleasure. Perhaps this would happen with wife-swapping too, Pat thought. Soon the heady excitement and flush of enthusiasm would pass, and they would settle into a weekly wife-swap happily and resignedly travelling to Seven Sisters, or Barking, or Rickmansworth, or Biggin Hill.

Stuart seemed so alarmingly calm about it all. This as much as anything disturbed Pat. She had asked him, did he think he should get new jockey-shorts.

'No, love, I've plenty up in the wardrobe,' he had said mystified.

'For the *party*,' she had hissed.

'Why should I need new jockey-shorts?' he had asked, as puzzled as if she had said he should buy a new transistor radio. 'I have nine pairs upstairs. I tell you, I have plenty.'

As the event drew nearer, Pat worried more about Stuart. Did he have no nerves, no feelings, that he could take it all so calmly ... the fact that he had written to a box number and a woman with a voice like a circular saw had telephoned?

She had never given too much thought to their sex life. It had always seemed very pleasant and adequate, and she certainly didn't regard herself as frigid, not in the sense of the women's magazine articles on the topic. She couldn't remember saying that she had a headache, or that she didn't feel like it. There was, she supposed, a sort of sameness about it. But then, for heaven's sake, some things *are* the same. The taste of a bar of chocolate or a gin and lime is always the same. The sound of Beethoven's Fifth or Johnny Mathis is always the same. Why this great urge for something different?

Pat was hurt and puzzled. She had read about women who discovered that their meek and conventional husbands actually liked bondage or violent pornography... so perhaps she should feel relieved that Stuart had suggested only nice old middle-class wife-swapping. Still, Pat felt aggrieved. If she were prepared to live for the rest of their days with their life as it was now, saving for the house, going on a caravan holiday once a year, and making love comfortably in the darkness and privacy of their own room twice a week, then it was somehow ungrateful of Stuart not to feel the same about it.

Pat had an appointment with the hairdresser on the afternoon of the Terrible Day.

'Going somewhere nice?' asked the hairdresser in her bright, routine way.

'Eer ... yes,' said Pat.

'Oh, to a function is it?' asked the hairdresser.

'Um. No, no. Not a function. Private house. Old friends, and new friends. A party. An ordinary party,' Pat screamed defensively.

The hairdresser shrugged.

'Very nice, I'm sure,' she said huffily.

The baby-sitter arrived on time. Pat had hoped that she might ring and say she couldn't come. That would mean the end of this ludicrous outing across London to copulate with strangers. The only tingles of excitement she felt were the ones which ran through her brain asking her if she were certifiably insane.

Debbie and Danny barely looked up from the television.

'Goodnight, Mum. Goodnight, Dad. Come in and see us when you get back.'

Pat's eyes filled with tears.

'Stuart love ...' she began.

'Goodnight, you lot,' Stuart said firmly.

She had assumed that they would take the car and was startled when Stuart said that it was much simpler than driving to take the tube.

'Only one change,' he said. And to Pat the words seemed sinister and fraught with meaning. She wondered if he was saying that they would only swap with one couple when they got there. She felt nausea rise in her throat. Suppose it were like a dance in the tennis club years ago, when nobody asked you to dance and you ended up grateful for some awful person who eventually did suggest a shuffle around the floor. Could this happen tonight? Suppose some appalling, foul couple rejected by everyone else nodded encouragingly at them? Would they have to say yes? Did the house rules say that there was no opting out?

'Yes, but wouldn't it be nice to have the car coming home?' she asked.

'Mightn't feel like driving on the way back,' said Stuart succinctly.

Worn out with pleasure? Exhausted? Asleep on some strange other wife's bosom? Going home with someone else? Staying with the awful woman in Seven Sisters? What could he mean, he mightn't feel like driving? The whole

nightmare was now quite frightening. Why had she ever agreed to this wicked, and silly thing? Why had Stuart ever suggested it?

The tube came immediately, as trains always do when you are going to the dentist or a wife-swapping party. The stations flashed by. Stuart read the back of someone else's evening paper. Pat examined her face three times in her compact mirror.

'You look fine,' Stuart said to her when she got the compact out a fourth time.

'I suppose you're right. Anyway, it's not my face they'll be looking at,' she said resignedly.

'What? Oh. Oh yes,' said Stuart smiling supportively, and going back to reading the late football results.

'Do you think we'll take off our clothes immediately?' Pat asked wretchedly as they walked out of the station and towards the house.

'I don't know, I expect it depends on whether they have central heating,' Stuart said matter of factly.

Pat looked at him as if he were a total stranger.

'Did she give you any indication of how many people were going to be there?' Pat asked shrilly after another minute of walking. 'I mean, they're not very big houses. They can hardly have dozens.'

'No, she said just a few friends,' said Stuart. 'A few friends, she didn't say how many.'

'But we're not friends, we're sort of intruding on them in a way aren't we?' she begged. There were tears in her eyes. They were only one corner away from the house now. Right-turn that and they were in the road and there was no going back.

Stuart looked at her, moved by the tears he could hear in her voice.

'It'll be lovely, Pat dear. You'll love it. You're always a bit nervous at times like this.'

She looked at him, her eyes flashing.

'What do you mean at times like this? What "times like this" have there been before? When have we done anything remotely like this. It's the only time like this ...' To her horror, she burst into tears.

Stuart looked very distressed. He tried to touch her, to put his arm around her, but Pat pushed him away.

'No, stop saying it's all right, and that I'll love it. I'll hate it. I'm not going. That's final.'

'Well why didn't you say this before? Why did you wait until we're nearly there?' Stuart asked, his innocent, round face looking both foolish and puzzled at the same time. 'I can't understand why you didn't say to me that you thought it wasn't on, then we'd never have set it all up. I thought you wanted to come too.'

Pat gave a snort into her tissues.

'You *said* it sounded an adventurous thing ...' he said.

Pat coughed loudly.

'You *said* we'd try it once and if we didn't like it we'd have got it out of our system,' he went on.

Pat blew her nose.

'Why, love? Why have you changed your mind now? Just tell me. We'll do whatever you want to. We won't go if you really hate the idea. Just tell me.'

Pat looked at him through her red eyes. His face was indeed very round and innocent. She wondered that she had never noticed that before. He was simply another disappointed young bank clerk. Another man in a deadend job, with an average wife, a few drinks on a Saturday, two nice, but time-consuming and money-swallowing children, a car that needed a lot of money spent on it, or else needed to be replaced. They had a loan of a caravan each year, but he would never feel the sands of the West Indies or the Seychelles between his toes.

She began to speak and then stopped. She must be very careful now. It was as if he had been a negative, and now somebody had shown her the developed print. She could

see all the frustrations, the hours of commuting, the thickening of his waist. Those things were far from the James Bond or Wild West books he read for a half-hour before he went to sleep each night.

A surge of understanding went out from her. He just needed some excitement, something out of the ordinary, some proof that he wasn't a mouse, that he was going to do something daring in his life before he grew old and retired and walked with a stick and crumpled and died.

Quite calmly she looked at him and said:

'I'm jealous. That's it. That's the truth.'

'You're what?' he said.

'I don't want them, to have you, to see you. I don't want those girls to ... you know, make free with you. I'd be very jealous. I love you. I don't want them loving you.'

'But Pat,' he said desperately. 'We've been through all this; it's got nothing to do with love. It's got to do with swapping. It's got to do with excitement, and frontiers ... and not doing the same things always ... till the end of our days.'

She had been right. She resolved that she would do everything her feeble imagination and some sex manuals could dream up if only they got home unscathed from Seven Sisters.

'You're too great,' she said hesitantly. They didn't use flowery endearments, they never paid each other extravagant compliments. It was hard to begin on a street in the middle of the evening in North London on the way to a wife-swapping orgy. But people have to begin somewhere.

'You're too ... important. Too precious, and exciting. I love it when we ... er ... screw. I don't want other women to share it. It's my ... er, pleasure.'

'Do you love it?' he asked innocently.

'Oh I do,' she closed her eyes, a sigh of genuine pleasure that she might in fact be going to win escaped her, and it sounded like genuine desire.

'I didn't think you minded all that much one way or another,' he said.

'If you knew how I do,' she said. And then firmly, 'But I wouldn't feel at all the same if you let all these women crawl over you ...'

She paused. It was a calculated risk. In fact she had given little thought to Stuart's part in the whole sorry business, she had been obsessed with her own role. But she thought that to say this would have been to confirm Stuart in thinking that he had married parochial, puritan riff-raff and that his excitement would be between the covers of books for the rest of his days.

'I often ... er ... get panicky in case some of the women who come into the bank might ... er, proposition you,' she said.

Stuart looked at her.

'There's no need to worry like that. That's kind of paranoid that jealousy,' he said soothingly. 'I've always been faithful to you. Even this business tonight is *with* you.'

'I don't want to share you with them,' she said. 'I'm not going to. They've got lousy old husbands, awful fellows. I've got you. Why should I be so generous?'

He paused. He looked up the road, he looked down the road. Her eyes never left his face. Down the road won.

'Suppose we got a couple of kebabs ...'

'And a bottle of wine.'

As they turned to go back to the station, a middle-aged couple stopped in a car to ask them where the Road was.

Pat asked them what number they wanted.

As she had suspected, it was number 17.

'Have fun,' she said as she gave them directions, and she and Stuart dissolved in laughter.

'They were a bit old,' said Stuart. 'Do you think it would have been very sordid and sort of pathetic?'

Pat wasn't going to let him think that.

'No there were probably fabulous birds there. Anyway, older ones are more passionate. She'd probably have had you pinned to the hearth rug the moment we got in the door.'

Under a street lamp, she thought his face looked a bit foolish. As if he had seen how tatty and grubby it might all have been. He was very gentle. In a great wave of affection she realised that indeed she would not have liked sharing him with anyone, and that an evening in bed with a bottle of wine, and a nice spicy donar kebab and all that black and red underwear might be the most exciting kind of thing that she had experienced for some time as well.

Women are so much more sensible about sex, she thought cheerfully as Stuart bought the tickets home. She had forgotten the weeks of anxiety, the endless examinations in the mirror, the ceaseless fears lest anyone should discover. Heady with relief she even allowed herself the indulgence of imagining what that elderly woman in the car might look like naked, and she smiled at Stuart who looked like a tiger now that his wife was too rabidly jealous to allow him to indulge in the wife-swapping party to which they had been invited. Horizons had been broadened without anyone having to do anything.