

Ménage

by Simon Ings

The author has written a TV movie, *Gloria*, four science fiction novels, *Hothead*, *In the City of the Iron Fish*, *Hotwire*, and *Headlong*, and a mainstream novel with SF undertones that is set in contemporary London. The paperback edition of *Painkillers* was published in England this spring. Mr. Ings' short fiction publications include stories in *The Third Alternative*, *Interzone*, and on *Scifi.com*. "Ménage" is his first story for *Asimov's*.

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A few days after the operation, Frank Wilson—our old producer, Rachel's and mine—got together with me at the studio.

Everything was so swollen and sore and stiff; even my face was a blank, parietic mask. Which was lucky, as there was nothing I especially wanted to express.

Frank scratched his chin, at a loss. The blinds were down over the windows. He crossed the room and started to let in the daylight.

"God, no," I croaked, my voice horribly aged.

He looked around him at the leavings of the operation—the monitors, the plastic curtains, the plastic flowers—everywhere but at me. He was smiling this "better in no time!" smile. I didn't believe it and neither, I think, did he.

* * *

Frank's visitations became frequent and regular. God knows, at the best of times his presence was a screeching chalk. But the days when he didn't appear were worse. My eyes weren't focusing properly; I couldn't even read.

All I could do was lie there and imagine.

The nurses were very solicitous. A couple were even pretty.

"You want to toast my recovery one night?" I said.

Giggle. "Ooh, I don't suppose a little champers will hurt. There's some left over from Christmas!"

I said, "I don't mean in here, I mean—when I get out."

"Ooh, I'm not sure my fiancé would like that."

Sigh. "Best go and get it then."

"What?"

"Medicine for my broken heart. Your left-over champagne."

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“Medicine for my broken heart. Your left-over champagne.”

Giggle. “It’s only Lambrusco.”

* * *

I would get better. They promised me that. They insisted upon it. “We know you’re going to adjust.”

“All right!”

And sure enough, not long after that, I experienced what the scriptwriters on *Green Lanes*, my old show, call “A Sudden And Miraculous Recovery.” (The studio has its own short-hand;

every noun a writer utters has a just-audible capital letter.)

My face stopped ballooning, my eyes ceased to tear up, and my lids started blinking more or less together; my lips did not crack quite so often and my mouth lost its tell-tale crusts of spittle in the corners. Something inside me, siding with Dorothy Parker, had decided it might as well live.

They advised me on diet, on physiotherapy. They enumerated the medical and psychiatric services to which Frank and I were entitled. Sometimes they were nurses, sometimes civilians. The counselors were the worst.

“These episodes of depression should

be expected, cherished, and encouraged.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Anger is another natural response. It is part of the grieving process.”

“Really? Grieving? For what?”

“Well—”

They were too far out of the loop to have been told the truth. They imagined *Green Lanes* had gone against my wishes when it canned my character. (You surely remember Haringay High’s wolfish science teacher, Jerome Jones—if not by name, then at very least by the trademark twinkling of his eyes?)

“You must gird yourself for recurring bouts of intense, heart-breaking despair.”

“I’ll be sure to do that. Thank you, and goodbye.”

* * *

It was barely five minutes after one of these tête-à-têtes that Frank Wilson appeared, unannounced.

“What is it you want?” I shouted at him, drained of all patience. He was so hurt—well, I felt bad. It must have been the side-effects of the codeine. I let him stay.

I knew what he was up to. He was working his way around to helping me, of course. He was off on another of his leave-it-to-me, I-know-a-thing-or-two routines. (The qualities that make him a good producer are the very ones that make him an asshole.)

I knew what he had planned for me without him saying it. The last thing I wanted was to watch him play house.

But I might as well have been talking to an empty room. “I knew you’d come around!” Frank chuckled: malevolent as the dwarf in the fairy tale.

* * *

That weekend, I left the studio and took a train from Liverpool Street station. Frank appeared at the other end—Audley End, in fact—to drive us home. His car was a surprise: an old Ford Escort cabriolet. Sparkling, sterile, washing-machine white, fat exhaust pipe, Cosworth decal. I was speechless. But he might as well have saved his money—he drove this monster of a car

as though it were a Reliant. I longed for him to floor it. We did, at least, have the top down. The Indian-summer light was mellowing, and riding under the big sky, drinking in the smell of dust and straw, rich and hoppy as any ale, I smiled—I actually *smiled*, massaging expression into my face with tremulous little tugs of the zygomaticus major—to be out of London at last. We turned onto a dirt road bordered by hawthorn hedges, the foliage intagliated with dog-rose and fanned with Old Man's Beard. The track was arrow-straight, and went on for about a mile. There were fields either side of us—not the barren industrial sort, but still with remains of hedgerows, and a ripple to the land that

broke up the monotony: root vegetables, lettuces, rapeseed. A tell-tale column of golden dust rose up ahead of us; another vehicle. Even at Frank's cautious speed, we soon caught up. The house was still about a half-mile off and we crawled up to it in the wake of a spluttering tractor laden with bales of straw. I wondered how Frank kept his car so clean, living out here. He must be out every day, I thought. With his squeegee and his bucket. Whistling away.

* * *

We came to the house. There were rhododendrons in the front garden. The lawn was new, and sickly. The house, by contrast, was old and big and hunched in on itself. There was honeysuckle over

the door. Old roses, with real thorns. Next door to the cottage stood a hideous white concrete shell for a garage, with a row of pine trees meant one day for a screen. There was a lawnmower out, a pair of shears, a fork stuck in the earth with an old tweed jacket draped over it. I climbed out of the car. I knew that if Frank caught my eye I would have to make some gesture. The idea of congratulating him was grotesque. We entered the house through the back door.

Rachel was in the kitchen, kneading dough in a large Pyrex bowl. Her arms were dusted in flour up to her elbows. She looked up. She looked at me. There was a streak of flour, like war paint, under her right eye. I couldn't say

anything. I couldn't move.

Rachel's the creator of *Green Lanes*. It was she who dreamt up Jerome Jones: sixth form pin-up, coffee-lounge lizard, extra-curricular cocksman of Haringay High. She made me what I am.

In one sense, the reverse is also true.

The show continues, though she has left. No one quite understands—or forgives—the precipitate way she dropped her career. Her agent spends much of his time sourly declining ever more lucrative offers on her behalf. From *Big Brother* to *Brookside*, they need her magic.

Rachel crossed to the sink and washed the gunk off her fingers. She dried her hands on a tea towel. Her

hands were more delicate than I remembered them. Time had made them unfamiliar. They were dry and lined, a consequence, I suppose, of the life she led now: summer days in the garden, evenings spent painting and fitting out her new home. She tucked the towel around the rail of the Aga and spread it out to dry. She picked up a roll of Saran Wrap, tore off a square and pulled it over the bowl, sealing the dough inside. Her hair was more grey now: she had it tied roughly back in a scrunchy, and as usual wisps of it had escaped and hung tantalizingly close to her mouth. It was all I could do not to reach over and brush them back.

“How did it go?” she said. Her face

had acquired more lines, especially around her eyes. She looked older, but not yet old. She was becoming that sort of elfin woman whose skull, in the wrong light, rides too close to the skin. Her lips had not changed, and I wondered, ungallantly, if she had had a collagen injection, they were full and so pink. In some lights, it looked like she was already wearing lipstick. She blinked at me.

I recovered what I could of myself and said, “I have the world’s shittiest toothache. Apart from that it’s all right.”

“What’s the matter with your teeth?”

“It’s this whole face,” I said. “I can’t get used...” A weariness overtook me. I let my words trail away.

I didn't want to talk to her about these things. This unfamiliar face. This flabby, unconditioned body. I didn't want an easy camaraderie between us. I wanted her hands on my face. I wanted to measure the dryness of her skin against me. I couldn't decide whether the almond smell in the air was her baking or her skin. But she insisted. She ironed away. She flattened everything. She claimed she had a new project. "I haven't done anything for this demographic before!" she said.

It was, she said, a Third Age soap, for which they were casting real actors. (Synthespians don't do old age well.)

"That's nice," I said, not knowing whether to believe her or not. Surely I

would have heard, if she was developing something new? But if she were lying, or exaggerating—I was afraid to wonder what that said about her.

“The Beeb are very confident,” she said. She sounded like a film school graduate. Everybody worth their salt knows the BBC shows blanket enthusiasm about *everything*. They hate rejecting people, preferring to break them down, SS-style, in the rewrite stage. “They’re giving it its own channel,” she said: she meant a dedicated digital channel, like Channel 4 gave *Green Lanes* before their advertising revenue allowed them to webcast it for free. Funnily enough, I

didn't want to talk about the ratings or her casting problems, or scriptroom politics. Not after all we had been through together: the arguments, the crises, the successes we had shared. (Jerome Jones—for six years running he won us Best Male at the National Soap Awards; during her time at the studio, Rachel picked up an unprecedented three Baftas.) And what about our intimacies? Our rows? Our silences?

She was putting walls of words around herself: barricades of meeja-speak. To keep out the past. I beat against her defenses. “So, you’ve no plans for that novel you were going to write?”

“No.”

“Any news about that company you were going to set up?”

“No.”

“What about those short films you were going to do?”

I didn't mean to launch an attack on her. It just happened. “I remember what you used to say about elderly viewers,” I said. “Do you?”

Of course she remembered.

Just then, Frank reappeared. “Here we go!” he cheered, plucking a bottle of Crianza from the rack on the dresser.

Rachel beamed at him.

I wasn't ready for that.

I looked away.

* * *

Their house was nicer than I'd

expected. Something about Frank—so prissy, so precise, so practical—had led me to imagine doilies and dried flowers and horseshoes above the door. Actually, most everything was salvage, there wasn't too much of it, and with every room painted white, the effect was homely, contented, stylish—I liked it.

“Who did the decorating?” I asked Rachel the next day, meaning to pay her a compliment.

“Frank,” she said, which showed me how much I knew. “Frank does everything.”

He certainly did.

I thought, since they were working so hard on the house, that I'd show willing and do a spot of mowing for them. But

Frank got in there before me: “It won’t take ten minutes,” he announced.

I felt like cooking. “I thought we might go out tonight,” Frank said.

“Want a cup of tea?” I said. But it was Frank who made it. Like most passive-aggressives, Frank was happiest when he was helping people.

“You just put your feet up,” he’d say to Rachel, of an evening.

“Just relax.

“Are you comfortable there?”

It pleased him to bear burdens. Give him the chance, he’d suck you dry. Drained of motivation, stripped of healthy self-discipline, you were left feeling progressively more helpless.

“I’ll do the washing up,” I said.

Without a word, he stacked the dishwasher.

“I’ll do the pans, then.”

He ran water in and left them to soak.

But in the end it was up to me, wasn’t it? If I wanted something to do, why was I sprawled on my ass in front of the TV, waiting for Frank’s permission?

I got up.

“Oh, relax,” said Rachel. In his company, she was quite as bad as he was. I fancied a walk.

“Ooh!” Frank seemed very keen. “A walk is just what I need.”

I fancied it *now*.

“It won’t take me long to get ready,” he said.

Half an hour. He couldn’t find his

boots. Would he need a raincoat? He couldn't decide.

An hour. Now, where were his keys? Should he make a flask of tea? Where was his wallet?—oh, it was in his other jacket. How much daylight was there left?

One and a half hours. He discovered a hole in his boot. But he had others upstairs. There was a lot of cloud to the East. Maybe there was just time for a little toddle down to the pub. Did Rachel want to come... ?

I did what I should have done in the first place—I gave up on him. I went out.

And, of course, it was cold, it was dark.

And, yes, it was raining.

As I walked, I wondered, not for the first time, what the hell I was doing here. Frank felt that my visit was doing me good; that I needed this distraction, now that I was dropped from *Green Lanes*. Rachel's attitude, though—I couldn't figure it. I worried at it constantly, unable to resist the notion that their contentment was not without its exploitable flaws.

* * *

Dinner was waiting for me when I got back. Lots of opportunity here for Frank to wring his hands at the amount of time I was taking in the shower, the imminent ruination of the roast and so on: all nonsense. Dinner, then—and some pregnant looks. But acknowledging that I

had lost my temper wasn't going to do any of us any good, and nobody said anything.

In the bathroom, as I got ready for bed, I pummeled my cheek, held my face in warm water, rubbed and pummeled it again: but the prickle of the evening's cold was rooted deep in the bone, and for several days after, I could feel ants tunneling beneath the skin.

* * *

Every morning, Frank drove Rachel into Cambridge. She rented an office in town—not much more, she said, than a desk, a laptop, a good copier. “It’s good to get out of the house. It breaks up the day.”

Sometimes they met for lunch. Most

evenings, he drove her home; or she would pick up a taxi and arrive around three P.M. She no longer had a car of her own. It seemed an extraordinary sacrifice for her to make—one of Britain's foremost writers for TV, reliant now upon Frank or the national rail system to carry her from studio to location to business meeting. Only—of course—that was not her routine now.

On those afternoons that she came home early, I made the most of my time with her. I tried to tease out the threads of her life, to get her talking about her Third Age soap, even. But she was always tired, and glad to be done with it for the day. Besides, she had the evening meal to prepare. Not “dinner,” mind you.

Not plain and simple “food.” Always “The Evening Meal,” capitalized studio-style. Red meat, in the main. Roast vegetables, always. Gravy. Heavy pudding. At least she let me help. It felt good, to be sharing simple, domestic tasks with her. It felt intimate, though it probably wasn’t. It felt like the beginnings of a rapprochement; but after all, maybe it was just safe territory, a place where our differences had no room to express themselves.

“If you peel, I can do the gravy.”

Hardly a meeting of minds.

“Can you do us a favor?”

“Yes?”

She was up to her elbows in the dishe water.

“Can you push the hair out of my face?”

I brushed it behind her ear. There was a lot of grey in it.

“Thanks.”

I stood away. Her face was lit by greenish sunlight reflected off the dish water. There were lines at the corners of her mouth. She looked inexpressibly sad. I wanted to hold her.

* * *

Mornings were the worst. After a night's spooning with Frank, she woke infected with him, leaping out of their bedroom and bouncing about the house like a bumptious squirrel while Frank threw out tenderesses in a ghastly, Disneyesque falsetto, all soft “s'es” and

“w’s” for “r’s.”

“The-tea-an-the-toasht?”

They were like Chip and Dale.

“Hoooh, *the-tea-an-the-toasht!*”

* * *

They kissed constantly. Frank’s tongue was prodigious—a pit-bull reaming the marrow from a bone.

* * *

Maybe it was purely psychosomatic, maybe the dirty weather—warm, febrile storms drifting in off the Atlantic—but my face began to hurt again, and viciously at night. The only relief I found was to absent myself around nine P.M. If we stayed up talking any later, my eyelids started twitching and a curious, generalized toothache set in that kept me

tossing and turning all night.

Even then, I couldn't sleep more than four or five hours before I was awoken by a fierce burning round the corners of my mouth.

I'd wake up at about five AM, and traipse down to the kitchen. It was a nice house to be in: just the right balance of cleanliness and clutter to feel comfortable. I liked it at night: reading, or watching the soaps, or knocking back coffee, or dialing in on the living-room laptop to CNN or Guardian On-line—everywhere you sat, the rooms lit you like a film star.

Moving softly so as not to disturb anyone—this was best of all. The truth was, I felt most comfortable as an

interloper. It gave me an illusion of control. I got to watching *Green Lanes* again, and it came home to me—without any rancor or bitterness—what an extraordinary show it was, that I had left. *Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week*: every soap writer worth their salt has dreamed that impossible dream at one time or another. The dream is as old as theater itself: imagine a drama that preserves Aristotelian unities of time and place by the simple expedient of never pausing, never ending—never, ever, going off the air.

Rachel was the first to turn it into reality.

Detractors say it was simply a matter of time before the dream was realized.

That shows like *Big Brother* showed the way—were, in their way, more radical. That it was only ever a question of waiting for the technology to get good enough. But that sells Rachel short. Dramatic, credible twenty-four hour drama is more than a matter of scale: it functions according to a completely different set of dramatic rules—rules no one ever had to figure out, until Rachel threw down the gauntlet with *Green Lanes*.

Colin and Jolene's kids have just discovered that their parents are swingers. It's being played for laughs at the moment, but you can see disaster looming as those impressionable angels prepare for their first term at Haringay

High, with all its attendant temptations.

Grahame from the garage is questioning his sexuality. Again. Sarah Lassiter the nurse and her husband Robert have left for the country hoping that this will give their broken-hearted little foster-daughter A Fresh Start. With Sarah gone from the hospital, *Green Lanes* is trying out a fresh bevy of night-shift hopefuls. A hospital auxiliary. A disgraced policeman (Clinging Barely To His Badge). An office cleaner with A Dysfunctional And Abusive Marriage. A loner cartoonist.

A loner cartoonist? A definite and dreadful no-no, that one. The scriptwriters should know better than to have allowed it through. Angst-of-

creation self indulgence. Dreadful. The punters would flee from it in droves. Jerome Jones's resignation from Haringay High (he's off—twinkly-eyed cad that he is—to the Roedeanesque “Greatham School for Ladies”) has given games teacher Yasmine Grant and love-lorn trades union rep Leonard Rushby “A Second Chance At Happiness.” They're Drinking Coffee now; they're digesting their Romantic Candle-Lit Dinner. Robert's lips give their trademark Wry Smirk. Yasmine buries her head in his chest. Robert cups her breast... I could feel it, still. I could feel it in my hand. Her breast. Her body. Vagaries of plot had driven Yasmine against Jerome—against me—very

often. Suspiciously often. You didn't have to be particularly insightful to spot the murky workings of Rachel's conscience. Yasmine was Rachel's way of keeping me sweet. It was manipulative of her, but flattering nonetheless. To have Yasmine under me.... The late-night episodes....

I turned off the TV. The urge to masturbate was strong and dreadful.

* * *

Rachel felt uneasy with my early-to-bed, early-to-rise routine. She thought I was avoiding her—that she had done something to offend me.

“Morning!” Rachel greeted me, stumbling down to the kitchen in her cream silk robe. It was meant for a much

younger woman, but she wore it well: all wild hair and pale as a Pre-Raphaelite painting.

I went to the back door and pulled on my boots.

“Where’re you off to?”

“Thought I’d wander round the wood and back,” I said.

“Have you had breakfast?”

“I had some cereal.”

“Oh,” she said, in a small voice.

“Okay.” She picked up a smile, and dropped it. “Have a nice time.”

* * *

More often, Rachel came downstairs to find me already gone. In the hour before dawn, the fresh dampness of everything was intoxicating: a tequila

slammer for the lungs.

There were some nearby woods, and a sunken roadway through the center of them, and an old grouse shoot full of dizzying, maze-like paths. Rachel lent me her mountain bike—I don't think she'd ever used it—and I had hours of fun toppling off the thing. One day, after a strong wind had brought down every crab-apple in the county, I tried riding along the sunken road. The apples under my wheels were as hard and smooth and slippery as ball bearings. I clobbered myself bloody all morning and came home grinning like a madman.

But come November, rain made the paths so muddy, even my infantile appetite for filth was satisfied, and I

searched out gentler pastimes. To the east lay an old Second World War aerodrome. Long stretches of broken concrete lay concealed behind shoulder-high grass. It was nothing to speak of in the light of day, but the sheer monotony and scale of it, in the blue hour before dawn, suggested an ancient burial complex.

“Would you like to go there with me?” I asked Rachel once, as I did up my boots.

“Oh, another time perhaps—I’m *exhausted*.”

“I can’t believe you’ve never been there.”

She shrugged.

Well, I didn’t know what to say after

that.

“I’d better get on with the Evening Meal,” she sighed, and levered herself off the sofa.

“I’ll help you.” If this was all I could have of her, then I was having it. I wasn’t proud. “I can tell you’ve been working hard,” I said, as she bent myopically over the kitchen counter and leafed through her battered Jane Grigson. “You’re all hunched up.”

“I’ll be all right,” she said.

“Tell me what we’re having and I’ll make a start,” I said. “You can grab yourself a bath—help you relax.”

She smiled to herself.

“What?”

“I thought you were going to offer me

a back-rub,” she said. Which gave me something to think about.

She closed the book and put it back on the window sill.

“I can give you a back-rub,” I said. “Do you want one?”

“I’m busy,” she said.

I stood there, useless, angry.

“Can you get the trout out of the fridge for me?”

I fetched and carried a little while and then I went upstairs to read. I couldn’t even find my place.

I thought about Rachel’s hair in the morning, spilling in wild coils round her shoulders and over the cream silk robe. I remembered the feel of her hair as I tucked it behind her ear. I thought about

her robe. I remembered seeing it hanging up in the bathroom. I let the book fall shut. A thrill went through me. Appalled at myself, I dropped the book on the floor, got up and went into the bathroom. There it was. I felt clammy. I touched it. The silk was as cold as cream on my fingers. I gathered it up to my face. It smelled of almonds. I don't know how long I stood there.

I went back to my room and sat on the bed with my book and this time I found my place. I read a page, then I read it again, and then I read it a third time. My left eyelid was flickering again. If I opened my mouth slowly, my jaw popped.

The back door squeaked open. I

listened for voices. I heard nothing distinct. I went back to the bathroom, realized what I was doing, turned on my heel and came out again immediately, slamming the door savagely shut behind me. A cheery cry from the kitchen—"Is that you?"

I took a deep breath. "Is it dinner time?" Frank said.

* * *

Rachel, after years of studio politics, knew how to keep her cards close to her chest; that was a given. But Frank's behavior was so off-beam, I couldn't figure it at all.

He began crashing us together, almost willing something to happen. He was like a particle physicist, who sends

atoms hurtling into each other to find out what they're made of.

For instance, lunchtimes during the week, he took to gathering us in his local pub. He'd carry the drinks over on a tray, nestled in a pile of crisp packets. Honey-roast Ham and Mustard. Country Roast Vegetable and Fish. Whatever. Then one time he didn't show up at all. Which left Rachel and me sipping halves of yeasty real ale in this weird little non-smokers' free-house neither of us particularly liked, surrounded by twee, anal little hand-written notices which said things like *If you have to use your mobile, be prepared to pay the fine!* and *Today is National Table-Sharing Day.*

True, they served great sausages and

mash, but even here they made you feel as though you were visiting a slightly malign elderly relative. Rachel: “De Boers sausages—sounds good.”

Publican: “—.”

Rachel: “Do you know what’s in them, then?”

Publican: “Of course.” Sly smile.

Rachel: “I’m sorry, am I missing something here?”

Rachel’s mobile rings.

Publican: “Ooh!”—sudden animation—“That’s *fifty pee* for charity!”

Rachel was embarrassed, drinking alone with me. Did she understand what Frank was up to?

I tried to talk to her about it, to clear the air, but all she said was: “Oh, let’s

get out of here.”

It wasn't far to the parking lot, but it was starting to rain and bitterly cold.

“We made their day in there,” I said, thinking of the light in the publican's eyes as he pointed to the charity jar.

But living with Frank had deadened her sense of irony. She linked arms with me as we entered the parking lot. She was shivering, chilled through. She was wearing her long brown coat—the thin one with the fake-fur collar so realistic that outraged freshmen sometimes threw cigarette butts at it. I put my arms around her. She tucked herself under my chin. Her hair tickled my nose. I bent and dared to kiss the top of her head. She was so cold, she probably didn't even

feel it. I ran my hand over her back. Her shoulder-blades were so distinct, so sharp, I could feel them moving under her coat like birds trapped beneath her skin. I gritted my teeth and my jaw popped, painfully. Gently, I pulled away from her, and tried rubbing the soreness away. We pressed on toward the car. While Rachel stowed her coat, I studied my face in the rearview, kneading gingerly at the flesh under my jaw. The bristles were thick and sparse against my palm. Frankly, I wasn't at my most alluring. But I went ahead anyway. "I bought you a present," I said, thickly, as she clipped herself in. But Rachel, speaking at the very same instant, didn't hear me. "I'll drop you off at home and

pop into Saffron Walden. We're out of milk, and I can get us some *treats* for tonight!"

"I'll come with you," I said.

"You'll catch your death!"

"It's only a shower." Sometimes she could be as bad as he was. She turned the heater up full-blast. "Keep you warm," she said.

"For God's sake."

We drove in silence.

"Shall we have some music?" she said.

By now, I wasn't sure it was worth it. But he who hesitates is lost. "Let me choose," I said. I fiddled with the buttons on the stereo, making a show of looking through Frank's Napster listing.

I knew it was Frank's. It was unmistakable. Everything But the Girl. The Beautiful South. Alanis Morissette. Texas. Then I took out my present and slipped it into the slot.

“Oh my God.” She looked at me. She looked back at the road. “Where did you find this?”

Ella Fitzgerald sings Cole Porter. Buddy Bregman's orchestra. *All Through the Night, Do I Love You, Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye.*

“I haven't heard this in years!”

“Do you want me to change it?”

“God, no!”

I couldn't resist teasing her: “If you prefer, Frank's got a Sheryl Crow I haven't heard—”

“No! Oh please!”

I Love Paris. Miss Otis Regrets.

“Oh, it’s so lovely!”

“I thought you’d like it,” I said.

“I never get to hear anything decent any more.”

“Why not?”

“Vinyl won’t fit in the slot.”

Saffron Walden was one big Volvo convention. Exhaust plumed in the chilly early-evening air. The disc spun to an end. It was stifling, Rachel had the cabin heat turned too high, so I opened my window. The air was thick with poison.

“Oh, play it again!”

“ ‘Play it again, Sam.’ ”

“Go on. It brings back memories.”

As well it might. Working late at the

studio, hammering out this or that twist in old Twinkly Eyes' mercurial character—his sharkish staff-room politics, his never-less-than-scientific after-school experiments—it was all we ever listened to. *Too Darn Hot*.

The Waitrose parking lot was a free-for-all. Rachel found the volume button and cranked it all the way up. We lowered the windows and leaned out, grinning madly at everyone until, unnerved, a scowling man in a flat cap, laboriously reversing his Hyundai, let us steal his spot.

“Wait here,” she said.

“I’ll come in with you.”

“No, no, you’re nicely dry!” She unclipped the door. Her skirt stretched

and rose as she climbed out. She pulled her coat around her and ran for the store. I watched the backs of her knees.

I waited. I checked out the Sheryl Crow. I played some more Ella Fitzgerald. I felt empty. I hadn't bought Ella for the sake of shared memories. I hadn't bought it because I thought Rachel would like it. I had bought it for ammunition. I had bought it to do a job, and now the job was done. I was being as manipulative as Frank, only with me it was worse, because I was conscious of what I was doing. There was a half tube of Werther's Originals in the door pocket. I took one and sucked. My jaw popped and scraped. I soothed it with my hand.

There was a tap on the glass. Rachel was grinning ear to ear. She had bags in both hands. I opened the door for her. I had this nightmare vision of her leaning in and saying: “Look at tonight’s *treats!*”

What she said was: “Why don’t we listen to some old stuff tonight?”

* * *

The room had been her study to start with, only to fill up with clutter when she acquired her office in town. There was so much tat stowed away in there: old furniture, clothes, curtains.

She still had her old hi-fi—the one she’d kept at the studio, to keep her sane through those frequent all-nighters. God knows what was going on inside that thing, but if you as much as stood up, the

record player cut out and Radio 4 came on.

“Hold your glass out,” she said.

At least Frank knew his wine.

We began sensibly. Ella. Billie. Bird. The Duke. Another bottle.

“Are you hungry?”

“...ish.”

“I’ll bring us some stuff from the fridge,” she said, and left the room. There was a table-lamp with an orange shade by the window. I plugged it in, crossed to the door, and snapped off the main light. It was like a brothel suddenly. So much for mood enhancement: I turned the main light back on. Rachel came in with a tray piled high with oatcakes and Styrofoam

delicatessen tubs and middle-class cheese. She set it down on the floor by the player. Radio 4 cut in: some chatter about the “—*problems of combining bookshelves, putting the strain on more than one literary marriage—*”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” she muttered.

I got the record player working again while Rachel laid out a picnic. She turned on the table light, then went to the door and turned off the main light. “That’s better,” she said. It was like the inside of a seventies porn movie. She stretched out beside me. The orange glow played on her legs.

We ate. We talked, and remembered, and relaxed. Half way through *After Dinner at the Little Club* with Kurt

Maier I froze, my hand on Rachel's calf. I was forgetting myself. Rachel sat back on her elbows. The orange table light made her face look even thinner than it was—almost fierce. Gingerly, I began to stroke. She closed her eyes. The needle rose up and the turntable clunked to a stop. I sat up.

“That was nice,” she said.

It was Keith Jarrett's *Standards* album that finally knocked us off the rails.

“Oh *God* listen to him!”

Rachel giggled.

Jarrett's so jealous of his music, he ruins even the studio recordings by whining along to the melody. We mewled with him a while, the way we

used to, then Rachel had the idea we should go through and find the especially dreadful bits.

“Jesus.”

“He’s like a cat in a cake tin.”

After that, things just got sillier and sillier. Rachel and the *Green Lanes* writers had had a long kitsch phase, around the second year of broadcast, and Rachel had managed to hang on to most of the albums. *Chacksfield Plays Simon & Garfunkel*, *The Ray Conniff Hi-Fi Companion*.

“Oh Christ! Listen to this! ‘*An improvisation on “Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy”*’ ‘! “

“What about this, then?”

“Oh, put it on! Put it on!”

Nina & Frederik: a Danish-Dutch couple who sing Calypso very badly and very, very sincerely. They even do the accents. On the back of the sleeve it said, in big bold letters, “You will have a good time in the company of NINA & FREDERIK.”

We did.

“Rachel?”

“Yes?”

“What do you have planned for tomorrow?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Why?”

“Why don’t you and I have a day out?”

“Where were you thinking?”

“Oh,” I said, “I don’t know. The beach. Dorset maybe. Cornwall.”

She looked at me a long time. “It’s quite a way,” she said.

“We could go now,” I said. “I’ll drive. You can sleep in the car.”

She laughed.

“I mean it.”

“It’s not that.”

“What then?”

“You’ve never been to Cornwall,” she said.

She misread my expression; she thought I didn’t understand. “You’ve only ever been to the Cornwall we made up,” she said. “Only the *Green*—”

She bit her tongue. “I’m sorry,” she said.

At least she had the decency to redden.

“I would like to see the real Cornwall,” I said, in a small voice. But she could see that I was angling for pity now, and she wasn’t having it.

“What about Frank?” she said.

“What about Frank?”

She laughed, and touched my cheek.

“We’ll have to take him with us.”

“Why?”

“How can we *not*?”

And of course, she was right.

Not for the first time, I wondered why Frank had agreed to the operation. Might there not—all his self-sacrifice aside—be an element of cruelty at play?

Rachel made to stand up. But I still had hold of her hand.

“What?”

“Rachel.” I tried to kiss her.

She pulled away.

I couldn't work her out. “Isn't this what you... ?”

“Of course I want you,” she breathed.

I was so overjoyed, I couldn't find the words. When I did find them, she put a finger to my lips. “There's no hurry,” she said. “Is there?”

I opened my mouth, slid my lips over her finger.

But she drew it away.

“What?”

“This isn't a game,” she said. I looked up.

The desire was gone from her eyes.

I couldn't understand what I'd done to break the mood. “Isn't it?”

“I want it to mean something.”

I bit my lip in irritation.

“Jerry?”

“Of course it means something,” I said. Second by second, the mood was evaporating. “You and I—we’re meant for each other.”

“You’re a smooth talker, Jerry.”

Desire was dead, and now even her sympathy was giving way.

“So?”

She shrugged.

My anger mounted. I said: “If you don’t know me by now—”

She laughed. It was a cold sound. “Oh Jerry,” she said. “I *do* know you!

Through and through! That’s the point!”

I felt taunted, childishly hurt. “Meaning? You want *meaning*? You sound like a schoolgirl.”

“Of course, you’d know about that,” she retorted.

“If only I looked now the way I looked on *Green Lanes*.... “

She gave a yell of triumph, as though I had given myself away. “How you *look*?” she said. “This has nothing to do with how you *look*.”

“I hate his face,” I said. “It hurts.”

She pulled away from me.

“I don’t know how you bear his smell,” I said. I couldn’t help myself.

“Come back,” I said.

But she was already out of reach.

“I’m sorry,” I said—but only to bring

her back. She wasn't fooled.

“We'd better clean that carpet,” she said, opening the door. “Before the wine stains.”

* * *

I woke with enough of a hangover that I missed my morning walk. It was an odd headache—there was more to it than just dehydration. There was a pressure. A high keening in the inner ear. A rhythmical concussion. It was the kind of headache that makes cows take shelter under trees. The kind that maddens dogs, and sours milk. The kind that presages a storm.

I looked out of the window.

Well, I thought, so much for my grasp of country lore. All around the horizon, a

band of wet, pale-yellow light separated the sky from the land, promising a fresh morning and a clear day. The sky was cloudless. Frank's cabriolet shone like a fairy-tale carriage.

I went to the bathroom and found a bottle of codeine and swallowed a couple.

I came down in time for breakfast: Bacon, eggs, bread, thirty-seven varieties of highbrow jam. "Passion-fruit, banana, and butter spread?"

"Try some," Rachel told me.

"Jesus Christ."

I sensed Frank reaching under the table to take Rachel's hand.

"Rachel," I said, pushing my plate away, "Do you want to take a walk with

me?”

“No,” she said.

“No?”

“I’ve got things to do.”

Dead silence as I tied up my boots. I took my waterproof from the back of the door and bundled it up in my hand. I opened the back door.

“See you, then,” Rachel said, in the smallest of small voices. It made me wonder if Frank had had words with her about the night before. I walked in the direction of the aerodrome. Usually I biked it, but the way I was feeling, I’d only do something stupid and crack my skull open. As it was, I kept forgetting to move in for the oncoming cars.

I was spoiling for something. The

truth was, I wanted to hurt Frank. I wanted to hurt him very much. Feeling as jealous of him as I did, and so angry at his complacent game-playing, I'd have happily hurt myself, just to hurt him. At last, straight ahead of me, like a promise faithfully if tardily kept, a thunderhead bloomed on the horizon. It was a dirty brown-black color: a cloud made of old blood. The beating began again, and the pain in my head was that tiny bit sharper now. It helped, knowing that Frank felt it too. Still I walked. I walked straight into that storm. I welcomed it: the perfect day fractured, the pretense at an end. I had to do something to end this ménage. I knew what I had to do, and I knew it meant my deletion. Right then, it did not seem too

big a price to pay.

True, I'd been canned, my character superseded by another. But my code was still valuable, still worth preserving. It wasn't as if there weren't copies of me.

“Frank,” I said.

“Frank!”

But Frank wouldn't come.

“Frank!”

Frank, who had let me in. Frank, who let me share. Frank, who only ever wanted to help, to fix.

“Frank!”

Nothing happened. He did not appear. He left me in charge. He left me alone in this body of his, this flabby white flesh. In charge of this face that I couldn't quite work, could never quite fit, and that

pained me so much, like an ill-fitting mask. Lightning flickered at the corner of my eye, like sunlight on chrome. The thunder came a good ten seconds later, and so faint, it might have been playing counterpoint to the beating in my brain. I looked for the thunderhead—my heart stuck in my throat.

It had risen to an impossible height. It impended, a distorted mushroom, lobed at the front like a brain, and as wrinkled. It rose over the hedge as I walked up the hill to meet it. We moved toward each other.

Ten minutes, I said to myself.

Ten minutes more and I'll be at the aerodrome. Ten minutes and I'll be in a place that might have been ours,

Rachel's and mine, and a new beginning:
Rachel, do you want to take a walk with me?

Suddenly the unfairness of it all—the ménage, what it had seemed to promise, and what it had actually become—turned liquid and rose up in me and I was crying so hard, I couldn't walk any further. Had I wanted so much? Were my expectations so unreasonable? All I had wanted was to be cradled awhile, now that *Green Lanes* was gone. I had thought that a modest existence, even a fractional one, was better than nothing. That half-life was better than no life at all. So I had accepted Frank's proposal, thinking perhaps to renew my friendship with the woman I'd been conceived by,

and learned from, and worked for, and—yes—loved. (Do not fall foul of the common prejudice. Do not suppose that actors, being merely what they are, are incapable of love.)

And if, these last few days, I had overreached myself—if I had come to imagine that I might wrest her from him—what of it? What could I possibly do, poor, contingent thing that I was, a mere ghost in Frank's machine?

Now Frank—oh-so-helpful fixer Frank—would not even answer when I called.

“Frank!”

He would not even release me.

I had wanted a little after-life. What Frank had given me was hell. I stood

there like an idiot in the middle of the road, while the tears ran down my face. I stood there, waiting for the rain to come and wash my tears away.

* * *

But the rain did not come. The thunderhead receded, buffeted by a new weather front. Bank after bank of heavy blue-black cloud puffed up against the invisible assault. The whole sky turned black, as though the air, battling with itself, were growing bruised and broken. I had no more tears left to shed. Weary, wet-faced—disgusted, now, to find myself enmeshed in his flesh—I turned Frank's body back toward home.

I made it back mere seconds before the clouds broke at last, and now the rain

came down in solid sheets. It took only a couple of minutes, and the track was beaten to a muddy slough. I stood watching from the kitchen window, laughing with relief.

“The farmers’ll love that,” Rachel sighed, taking her place beside me. The alarm of Frank’s precious Cosworth had gone off. It was blinking and whining but you could barely hear it over the beating of the rain.

“Look at it! Just look at it!” I cheered. I was at the end of my tether.

* * *

Rachel made a Béarnaise to go with the steak. Frank showed up then, finally. Maybe that was all he was interested in—food. Maybe that was how I should

free myself. Maybe I should walk him to the pub, buy a dinner, and then just sit there, with the smell of the gravy assailing my nostrils. Refusing to let him eat, until at last he let me go.

“What do you reckon?” she asked me, brightly.

“Not bad,” I said, fatuous and brutal. “Eggs, isn’t it?”

The rain drummed steadily against the kitchen window. Distant lightning fractured the sky.

Afterward we went into the lounge with a fresh bottle and watched the news, or tried to, but rain lashed the windows so hard they were rattling in their frames, and all the electrical activity was making the picture fizz and

spool.

“...*devaluation*...”

The storm was so violent, the thunderclaps so close now, that Frank kept pumping up the volume of the little set until its plastic housing buzzed, distorting everything.

“...*resign*...”

“I just wanted to say thank you,” I said. Because of course, there was an easier way to bring this ménage to an end. A more direct, more honest way. And that was to tell Rachel how I was feeling.

It came out all wrong, of course.

“A wonderful rest.

“Really kind.

“Fantastic Béarnaise.

“So good of you.”

There really was no point spinning this out any longer.

“—Get out of your hair.”

Rachel put her wine glass down on the coffee table. She missed the edge of it and it fell and rolled under her seat, the wine making a neat lunar crescent on the creamy carpet. She stood up so fast she cracked her shin on the edge of the table. She stifled a sob and ran into the kitchen.

Frank took a deep breath, let it go, and deflated utterly into his seat. Then, like a bag of bones assembling itself, he got to his feet. “You fucking fuck,” he said. He snatched up the TV control and turned the volume all the way up, so I couldn’t

hear anything, and then he abandoned me.

In the kitchen, something slipped off the table and shattered. I didn't really know what to do.

Just then, I heard the back door open. I went to the window in time to see Rachel passing; she was in such a hurry, she was still buttoning up her raincoat. Her head was wrapped up like a pork joint in a clear plastic headscarf. Sheet lightning lit everything up as Rachel headed up the track. Not toward Thaxted, as I'd expected, but the other way, toward the woods. In that brief flash, she looked absurdly over-colored, all red cheeks and green boots, a figure out of a picture book. I leaned forward.

My nose snubbed the glass. Something dropped inside me. Something gave.

Frank's jacket was slung over a chair in the kitchen. I pocketed his keys. I eased the back door open against the wind.

I was only in running shoes. My feet got wet through in the few seconds it took me to fight my way to the car.

The soft-top was shivering and shuddering, as if at any moment the wind would tear it free. I unlocked the door. The car peeped a welcome. I lowered myself into the bucket seat and closed the door. It was the ordinary Escort layout inside. I found the ignition straight away. The engine caught immediately. The whole car thrummed and shuddered:

a dog shaking itself dry. I levered the stick into reverse. The reversing lights lit up the gateposts and the lane. I curled my toes nervously against the accelerator, came up with the clutch, and stalled.

I twisted the key back and forth to re-engage the motor. I eased more firmly down on the pedal. I came up with the clutch. The wheels spun, digging graves for themselves in the mud.

The kitchen door flew open.

I panicked. What was I thinking? That Frank could somehow fling himself out of the house and throw himself howling upon me, Sabatier in hand?

A neat trick, given that he was already *here*, held in abeyance, deep in flesh I—

for the moment—controlled.

Still, stupid as it sounds, I panicked; I floored the gas, and the car leapt back like a frightened animal. It skidded. It swerved. But God was kind, and when I opened my eyes, I found that I had come to rest out in the lane. Not only was I in one piece—the car was even pointed the right way. Grinning, I muscled the stick into first.

* * *

I caught up with her very quickly. She was still walking, head lowered before the wind, bent-backed—an old woman. I tooted the horn. She ignored me. I pulled to a stop a little in front of her and called to her. She walked around me. In the end, I had to go out and get her. I don't

remember what I said to make her come with me. Nothing edifying. It took me an age to get her into the car.

“Where were you going?” I asked her.

The rain dribbled out of my hair into my face.

“I wanted a walk in the woods.” With a quick, angry gesture, Rachel tore off her plastic headscarf. Her hair was all disordered underneath. It fell over her eyes. She looked older than I had ever seen her, and sulky as a three-year-old. My heart ached as if it would break.

“In *this*?”

“It’s in a dip,” she said, “it’s sheltered, it’s okay.”

“I’m surprised you could see where you were going.”

“Oh,” she whined, losing patience suddenly, “I wasn’t going anywhere.”

She bent down and tucked her boots to one side of the footwell. She’d insisted on taking them off before she got in the car, “or I’ll get mud *everywhere*” : Frank had her well trained. It was blowing so hard, rain blew in past her through the open door. Beads of it still clung to the dashboard. I turned the heater up.

“Are we going home, then?” she said. I looked out at the rain.

“Frank?”

“Not Frank,” I said. “Jerry.”

“Jerry?” she said, surprised. “What are you doing here?”

* * *

It was a good question.

No one, prior to the operation, had been able to explain it adequately: how it was that Frank and I could share.

“So how will I know when to take over Frank’s body?”

—You won’t need to know. It’ll just happen.

“And what if Frank wants to take control back?”

—It’s not up to him. It’s not up to either of you. It just happens.

“How?”

—The triggers work off the chemicals released in Frank’s brain during certain emotional responses. He’ll act when he wants to, you’ll act when you want to.

“And when I’m not acting?”

—You'll either be aware, or not aware.

“And who decides that?”

—It just happens.

“I mean, who decides?”

—A complex deep grammar of emotional triggers.

“A what?”

—A story, if you like.

“What story?”

—Your story. Frank's story. The story you'll share.

“But this isn't an episode of *Green Lanes!* This is really going to happen!”

—It's still a story.

* * *

And wasn't that, after all, Rachel's great discovery—the very thing that

made *Green Lanes* possible? Mind will make a story out of *anything*. Fiction is as essential to consciousness as the raw events themselves .

“If you think Frank can make you happy,” I said, “you’re wrong.” I felt mean, speaking that sentiment aloud through Frank’s mouth. But I figured I was past caring about etiquette. I put the car into gear and drove us up the track, to the minor road that leads away from Thaxted, and on toward Stanstead and points south. Twigs and branches and scrap lay everywhere; the wood had emptied itself all over the junction. Scraps of black wheeled in front of the headlights. Belatedly, I realized that they were birds: crows, thrown out of their

trees by the storm. The car thrummed and tilted slightly, caught by a strong gust.

“Well?” she said, waiting for me to turn the car around, to drive back to her house, and warmth, and—let’s face it—Frank.

I looked at her. I wasn’t here to jolly her along. I put the stick into first, turned left onto the metaled road, and headed south.

If she was surprised, she didn’t show it.

“It’s not your fault,” I said, “it’s Frank.”

She shrugged.

“Are you sure you’re dry enough in those things?”

She folded her arms. “Leave me alone.”

Dead branches had come down over the road. I took the hill gently in second gear—dropped to first around the corners. Here and there, skeins of mud smeared the road. Clogged gutters made fords in every dip.

“What’s he after, anyway?”

“What?”

“Frank,” I said. “What does he want?”

“He was just trying to be helpful,” she said—a little spark of the old irony. She bit at a broken nail. Her hands were red and chapped from the cold. I turned the heater up as high as it would go. (I wanted to warm her hands in mine. I wanted to feel their roughness. I wanted

to feel her grip.)

“In a world full of bad ideas,” I said, “his are some of the worst.”

“What do you mean?”

“Letting me in,” I said. “Letting me share his flesh. It can’t have been any easier for you than it’s been for me.”

Rachel watched me a moment. Then, quickly, she looked away, out of her window, hiding her face.

“What?” I said.

“Nothing.”

“What?”

We reached the brow of the hill. The woods fell behind us. The full force of the wind was upon us now. I dropped back from third into second because, try as I might, I couldn’t stop the car from

skidding round the corners. The rain, which had eased for a while, returned with redoubled fury. I hit the brake and turned on the fogs. I couldn't see a thing.

She turned to face me. I think she was trying to laugh. It was hard to tell. “

Frank?”

“So?”

“You think your sharing Frank's body was *Frank's* idea?”

The visibility was so bad, I only saw the junction as we started to cross the road. I floored the brake and the car slid to a soft stop in the verge beneath the fingerpost. I reversed and set us on the right course again. “Of course it was Frank's idea,” I said. “Look at the way he's been knocking us together like

pieces in a jigsaw. It's obvious."

"Frank," she echoed.

"Yes!"

This time, the laugh—if laugh it was—made it to her lips. "Jesus!"

"I'm not saying he doesn't love you," I said. "In his own damaged fashion."

"Of course he loves me," she said. "That's why he agreed to do it."

I stared at her.

"Watch the road," she said.

I stared into the rain.

"We used to do stuff," she said. "I was lonely, after I left *Green Lanes*. I felt used up. I felt *old*. Frank was—well, he wanted to help. But the truth is, he's not that interested. It doesn't do very much for him. Sex, I mean."

“Christ.”

“That’s why I asked him if he minded having you—”

I laughed. I thought it was a joke. A joke in bad taste, but... Rachel looked out of her side window again.

I stared at the back of her head.

“No,” I said, willing it away.

“And he said yes. He agreed.”

“*You* brought me here?”

“It was a mutual decision.”

“A *mutual*—”

“Don’t get angry,” she begged. “We thought the two of you could share.”

The rain eased slightly. The wind blew as hard as ever. I was more tired than I knew—all my reactions were slow now. Wrestling the car through the

wind, judging the power of the customized engine, all these things were taking their toll.

“I guess we didn’t really think it through,” Rachel admitted.

“I don’t believe I’m hearing this.”

“People in the real world, Jerry, they bolt things together.” Her voice was old.

“They make things *work*, any old how. They make compromises. They make their own happiness, out of scraps.” It was worse than old. It was dead.

“So what was the idea?” I swallowed. It was too grotesque. “Frank on weekdays, me for the weekends?”

“Something like that,” she said, and folded her arms.

It wasn’t true. My words had hurt her,

and now she was simply defending herself, matching me brutality for brutality.

If she had wanted me for sex, and *only* sex, she could have had me that night we rediscovered her record collection. But she had stopped us, that night. She had wanted us to wait. She had wanted something more.

What?

The wind was so strong and steady, the whole landscape appeared razed, west to east: hedges, fields, the branches of trees all lay at a crazy angle, trembling, as if at any second everything—trees, hedges, fence posts, roofs, even the car—might come unplucked and blow away.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She was still hiding behind a wall of coldness. “You were always my favorite, you know that. You’re the best actor we ever had.”

It was too much. I couldn’t bear to see her like this, so clammed up, so cold. And, as I cracked, I let it all out—all my emotional vomit. I told her how much I loved her. How I had always loved her, from the moment I became aware of my own existence, from the second I understood my own nature. And I would have told her more. I would have told her of all the times I had watched her through the CCTVs as she pulled her all-nighters at the studio. How I watched her grow good at her job. How I watched her grow tired. How I watched her grow

old. How I had (so often!) longed to be out of *Green Lanes*— rich a world as that was—and with her in *her* world, the “real” world (whatever *that* is).

“Come on, Jerry,” she coaxed, as to a child, an importunate, lovelorn twelve-year-old, “Don’t feel so bad.”

It was unendurable. “Why are you talking to me like this?”

“Because I made a mistake,” she said.

“What mistake?”

“I wanted you for sex, for romance, for the thrill.”

“You can *have* me for that!”

She laughed. “I know! Don’t you see? I know! Only I’ve come to realize, now you’re here—that’s not what I want.”

“Then what *is* it you want?”

“I thought I could change you,” she said.

Which drew me up.

“*Change me?*”

She laughed. “Pathetic,” she said, more easy, more friendly, now. “Isn’t it?”

“Change me? How?”

“How do you think?”

Slowly, the truth chuckled in.

She wanted to change me.

So what else was new? Every woman does. Every schoolgirl. “You wanted to *reform* me!”

She bit her lip in embarrassment.

“Is that it?”

“I couldn’t help it,” she said, in a small voice. “It’s the way you’re

written. The way I wrote you. Women can't help wanting to sand off your rough edges. It's your charm. Your floppy-haired charm." She shook her head, amazed at herself.

"You'd think if anyone was forewarned, it would be me, wouldn't you?"

"But I can change," I said, dogged. But I knew, in my heart of hearts, that it wasn't true.

I was a stud. I was written that way. *She* had written me that way. Her optimum fantasy male.

Her optimum *fantasy* male.

I was a pretty clapped-out stud by now, of course—after eight years of *Green Lanes* plotlines, who wouldn't

be? A canned stud, now that another actor, fresh from its beta test, had been launched upon *Green Lanes* in place of me. But for as long as a substrate somewhere—be it studio AI, or the blood and goo of a human central nervous system—ran a software engine called Jerome Jones, I was, and would always be, a stud.

“I love you,” I said. “I can change.”

“No.”

“Don’t people change?”

“Yes,” she said.

“So I’ll change.”

“You’re not a person,” she said.

“You’re an actor.”

“So what?” I demanded. “Are you trying to tell me there’s a difference?”

What difference? What fucking difference? I live twenty-four-seven, same as you do. I sleep. I shit. I fuck. There *are* no differences . Soapworld. Real world. They're mirror images of each other. That's what you always said. Or was that just a line of bullshit you fed the color supplements?"

"Yes," she said. "It was."

Which shut me up.

There was a sudden, oblique silvering of fields to the East. In the rear-view, I caught a glimpse of the moon, rising through a gap in the cloud. The outskirts of Godmanchester were awash with refuse spilt from bins blown open in the gale.

"Jerry, where are we?"

“A1198,” I said.

“Is that supposed to mean something?”

“A14.”

“What?”

“M6. M5. Dorset. Cornwall by morning. Like we planned.”

“Are you mad?”

“Well we could go M1, M4....”

“Stop the car.”

“Fuck you. I want to see Cornwall.”

“Stop the— *Stop!*”

She didn't need to tell me. I already had the brake pedal flat to the floor. Cereal cartons bounded through the gutters. A tea bag caught in the wipers a second, then it was gone. Leaves hung motionless in the air before us, glittering in the headlights, fluttering in space as

though suspended by some delicate, magical force.

It wasn't a big tree. As trees go. We skidded, swerved, Rachel closed her eyes, and I felt my heart swell to see her sitting there, so calm, almost as if she had fallen asleep in her seat. I wished I'd had time to hold her. I may as well have done. I wasn't doing any good where I was.

We hurtled side-on into the fallen tree. A branch punched a hole straight through the rear side window, reared and tore through the roof. Skewered, the car slid up to the trunk and came to rest with the left front wheel about a foot in the air. Rachel drew breath. And again.

“Rachel?”

Her eyes came open.

“Rachel?”

She took another breath. She blinked. She looked at me.

“Are you okay?”

She said nothing. She got out of the car.

“Rachel?”

The branch stuck up out of the roof as though it had grown up through the floor of the car. The wind had torn the tree out by the root. A low brick wall lay in Lego pieces across the pavement. The wind was so strong, I could barely stand up. It was stripping the tree: I kept having to flinch and spit out leaves.

“Rachel?”

She stopped and leaned against the

trunk. Something pinged. The shredded roof tore free of the frame, and the car, released from the impaling branch, fell back on its wheels. Rachel slipped off the trunk and landed in the road. I offered her my hand.

She shook her head.

“Rachel.”

She looked at me. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I have to do this. *Cut.*”

“What?”

“*Cut!*”

I blinked at her. I smiled. I twinkled my eyes.

“*Curtain!* Oh my dear God,” she wailed. “Frank?”

The rain began again.

“You can’t have him,” I said.

There was horror in her eyes. “*Cut!*”

“You can’t have him,” I said. “I won’t let you.”

She wailed: “*Cut* when I tell you!”

“Stop ordering me about,” I said. “We don’t even work together any more.”

She burst into tears.

* * *

Incredibly, the cabriolet was still driveable, so when finally the ambulance got there, I followed Rachel to the hospital. The doctors could find nothing wrong with her but “we don’t like to take chances with concussion,” so they kept her in overnight.

I drove back to the cottage. I only had one headlight, and half way home I had to wrestle a buckled wheel arch free

where it was rubbing against the tire. The wind dropped. The rain came on again. I didn't have a roof any more, so I drove faster than I should to make a pocket of dry air behind the windshield. It was a good tactic, until the track, and after that of course I was sliding about all over the place, doing ten, fifteen miles an hour if I was lucky. By the time I got to the house, the car's interior was like a footbath. I pulled to a stop and again the bloody car ignored me: I ended up in a ditch.

Frank appeared as I got up to the door. I dropped his keys onto the kitchen table. "Ta," I said.

He made to hit me, but changed his mind. My bruises would only end up

being his own, the moment we next swapped control.

I went up to bed.

* * *

The next morning, Frank ordered a taxi to Audley End. He walked me to the gate to watch out for it, in case it had trouble negotiating the mud. The sunlight was bleary and hung-over, and already more dirty clouds were building to the south. The fields all around us were mashed to nothing.

All Frank was interested in was the cabriolet. The side of the ditch I'd run it into had collapsed, and the near-side wheel had sunk in mud up to the axle. The phone rang inside. Frank went in to answer it. It turned out the taxi driver

wasn't prepared to try the track, and I'd have to walk to the junction. I took up my burden and walked.

About a minute before I got to the taxi, it started to rain. When I got up to him, the driver was laying sheets of newspaper along the foot well and telling me to mind the upholstery.

I talked to him to take his mind off the sound of my shoes, scraping themselves deliberately and thoroughly across the back of his passenger seat. He was a gazetteer of disasters. Mud slides, hurricanoes, whirlpools, "dozens dead in France and Germany!"

He turned his windshield wipers up to their maximum setting. Sudden gusts thrummed against the door panels.

Clouds reared up into heads along the skyline, leaning in.

“Bloody hell,” the taxi driver said.

They were all there. Yasmine and her new boyfriend Billy. Colin and Jolene and the kids. Grahame from the garage. Stars of the hit 24-7 soap *Green Lanes*

—their faces as familiar to you as the faces of your own parents, your lovers, your children—there they were, leaning in, smiling, their teeth white and sharp against the sun.

Even canned characters had made the effort to turn out: Sarah the nurse and her husband Robert and their little girl. Kevin the Disgraced Pedophile Vicar (plenty of controversy over *that* plotline, I recall).

Up there in the sky, all around the cab, hung the entire, vast, extended family of the *Green Lanes* imaginary.

“Don’t see that often, do you?” said the cabby, looking up at the clouds. Surely, he could not be seeing what I was seeing?

The heads opened their mouths. The sky lit up.

Time stopped.

* * *

Time stops: a frame of celluloid, jammed in the gate.

Sheet lightning freezes and silences everything. The car engine cuts out. A scent tree, dangling from the rearview mirror, locks into position, twenty degrees off the vertical. The car is

stationary and the driver's breath is frozen in his chest. Spray from the left front wheel hangs like a flange of broken glass over the verge; the long, rain-flattened grass is as still and stiff as wire.

It looks for all the world as if the world has stopped—that the real world is, after all, only another soapland, only another manufactured place. But no.

The world is real enough, seamless and inexorable.

It's *me* that's the fabrication.

From now on, all that you see and hear is down to me.

As I shiver myself to pieces.

Much as I've tried to resist it, Rachel was right: the real world had no place in

it for me.

My face didn't fit. (Of course it didn't. It was *Frank's*. Besides, it *hurt!*) In the rearview, Frank stares back at me, pale and wide-eyed. His cheeks and brow have a smooth, un-lived-in quality, as though the constant back-and-forth between personalities—Frank's and mine—has left his face without a character of its own: a parietic blank.

Frank must be a very weak man, to have agreed to this invasion. Weak—or very much in love—to take me in the way he did.

And now I realize, it has always been in my power to release myself. It has always been up to me, whether or not to participate in this ménage. It's just that,

like Dorothy in Oz, I needed some time to realize what was staring me in the face.

I do not belong here. I do not belong anywhere. The writers on *Green Lanes* did their job well, and my story is over. Long concluded. Entirely resolved. Knowing this at last, accepting it, I am not afraid to bring the curtain down on myself. In the film of condensation covering the cab window, I trace the *Green Lanes* credits with my finger. So it is that we will be released—producer, actor—each after his fashion. One to flesh, the other to imagination. *Sound...*

Grip...

Set design...

Continuity...

Credits.

Words that, spinning clear of the screen, leave behind a perfect blank.
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