

Isobel Avens returns to Stepney in the spring

by M. John Harrison

The third of September this year I spent the evening watching TV in an upstairs flat in North London. Some story of love and transfiguration, cropped into all the wrong proportions for the small screen. The flat wasn't mine. It belonged to a friend I was staying with. There were French posters on the walls, dusty CDs stacked on the old-fashioned sideboard, piles of newspapers subsiding day by day into yellowing fans on the carpet. Outside, Tottenham stretched away, Greek driving schools, Turkish social clubs. Turn the TV off and you could hear nothing. Turn it back on and the film unrolled, passages of guilt with lost edges, photographed in white and blue light. At about half past eleven the phone rang. I picked it up. "Hello?"

It was Isobel Avens.

"Oh, China," she said. She burst into tears.

I said: "Can you drive?"

"No," she said.

I looked at my watch. "I'll come and fetch you."

"You can't," she said. "I'm here. You can't come here."

I said: "Be outside, love. Just try and get yourself downstairs. Be outside and I'll pick you up on the pavement there."

There was a silence.

"Can you do that?"

"Yes," she said.

Oh, Chian. The first two days she wouldn't get much further than that.

"Don't try to talk," I advised.

London was as quiet as a nursing home corridor. I turned up the car stereo. Tom Waits, Downtown Train. Music stuffed with sentiments you recognise but daren't admit to yourself. I let the BMW slip down Green Lanes, through Camden into the centre; then west. I was pushing the odd traffic light at orange, clipping the apex off a safe bend here and there. I told myself I wasn't going to get killed for her. What I meant was that if I did she would have no one left. I took the Embankment at eight thousand revs in fifth gear, nosing down heavily on the brakes at Chelsea Wharf to get round into Gunter Grove. No one was there to see. By half past twelve I was on Queensborough Road, where I found her standing very straight in the mercury light outside Alexander's building, the jacket of a Karl Lagerfeld suit thrown across her shoulders and one piece of expensive leather luggage at her feet. She bent

into the car. Her face was white and exhausted and her breath stank. The way Alexander had dumped her was as cruel as everything else he did. She had flown back steerage from the Miami clinic reeling from jet lag, expecting to fall into his arms and be loved and comforted. He told her, "As a doctor I don't think I can do any more for you." The ground hadn't just shifted on her: it was out from under her feet. Suddenly she was only his patient again. In the metallic glare of the street lamps, I noticed a stipple of ulceration across her collarbones. I switched on the courtesy light to look closer. Tiny hectic sores, closely spaced.

I said: "Christ, Isobel."

"It's just a virus," she said. "Just a side effect."

"Is anything worth this?"

She put her arms around me and sobbed.

"Oh, China, China."

It isn't that she wants me; only that she has no one else. Yet every time I smell her body my heart lurches. The years I lived with her I slept so soundly. Then Alexander did this irreversible thing to her, the thing she had always wanted, and now everything is fucked up and eerie and it will be that way forever.

I said: "I'll take you home."

"Will you stay?"

"What else?"

My name is Mick Rose, which is why people have always called me "China." From the moment we met, Isobel Avens was fascinated by that. Later, she would hold my face between her hands in the night and whisper dreamily over and over--"Oh, China, China, China. China." But it was something else that attracted her to me. The year we met, she lived in Stratford-on-Avon. I walked into the cafe at the little toy aerodrome they have there and it was she who served me. She was twenty-five years old: slow, heavy-bodied, easily delighted by the world. Her hair was red. She wore a rusty pink blouse, a black ankle-length skirt with lace at the hem. Her feet were like boats in great brown Dr. Marten's shoes. When she saw me looking down at them in amusement, she said: "Oh, these aren't my real Docs, these are my cheap imitation ones." She showed me how the left one was coming apart at the seams. "Brilliant, eh?" She smelled of vanilla and sex. She radiated heat. I could always feel the heat of her a yard away.

"I'd love to be able to fly," she told me.

She laughed and hugged herself.

"You must feel so free."

She thought I was the pilot of the little private Cessna she could see out of the cafe window. In fact I had only come to deliver its cargo--an unadmitted load for an unadmitted destination--some commercial research centre in Zurich or Budapest. At the time I called myself Rose Medical Services, Plc. My fleet comprised a single Vauxhall Astra van into which I had dropped the engine, brakes, and suspension of a two-litre GTE insurance write-off. I specialised. If it was small, I guaranteed to move it anywhere in Britain within twelve hours; occasionally, if the price was right, to selected points in Europe. Recombinant DNA: viruses at controlled temperatures, sometimes in live hosts: cell cultures in heavily armoured flasks. What they were used for I had no idea. I didn't really want an idea until much later; and that turned out to be much too late.

I said: "It can't be so hard to learn."

"Flying?"

"It can't be so hard."

Before a week was out we were inventing one another hand over fist. It was an extraordinary summer. You have to imagine this--

Saturday afternoon. Stratford Waterside. The river has a lively look despite the breathless air and heated sky above it. Waterside is full of jugglers and fire-eaters, entertaining thick crowds of Americans and Japanese. There is hardly room to move. Despite this, on a patch of grass by the water, two lovers, trapped in the great circular argument, are making that futile attempt all lovers make to get inside one another and stay there for good. He can't stop touching her because she wants him so. She wants him so because he can't stop touching her. A feeding swan surfaces, caught up with some strands of very pale green weed. Rippling in the sudden warm breeze which blows across the river from the direction of the theatre, these seem for a moment like ribbons tied with a delicate knot--the gentle, deliberate artifice of a conscious world.

"Oh, look! Look!" she says.

He says: "Would you like to be a swan?"

"I'd have to leave the aerodrome."

He says: "Come and live with me and be a swan."

Neither of them has the slightest idea what they are talking about.

Business was good. Within three months I had bought a second van. I persuaded Isobel Avens to leave Stratford and throw in with me. On the morning of her last day at the aerodrome, she woke up early and shook me until I was awake, too.

"China!" she said.

“What?”

“China!”

I said: “What?”

“I flew!”

It was a dream of praxis. It was a hint of what she might have. It was her first step on the escalator up to Alexander’s clinic.

“I was in a huge computer room. Everyone’s work was displayed on one screen like a wall. I couldn’t find my A-prompt!” People laughed at her, but nicely. “It was all good fun, and they were very helpful.” Suddenly she had learned what she had to know, and she was floating up and flying into the screen, and through it, “out of the room, into the air above the world.” The sky was crowded with other people, she said. “But I just went swooping past and around and between them.” She let herself fall just for the fun of it: she soared, her whole body taut and trembling like the fabric of a kite. Her breath went out with a great laugh. Whenever she was tired, she could perch like a bird. “I loved it!” she told me. “Oh, I loved it!”

How can you be so jealous of a dream?

I said: “It sounds as if you won’t need me soon.”

She clutched at me.

“You help me to fly,” she said. “Don’t dare go away, China! Don’t dare!”

She pulled my face close to hers and gave me little dabbing kisses on the mouth and eyes. I looked at my watch. Half past six. The bed was already damp and hot: I could see that we were going to make it worse. She pulled me on top of her, and at the height of things, sweating and intuned and breathless and on the edge, she whispered, “Oh, lovely, lovely, lovely,” as if she had seen something I couldn’t. “So lovely, so beautiful!” Her eyes moved as if she was watching something pass. I could only watch her, moving under me, marvellous and wet, solid and real, everything I ever wanted.

The worst thing you can do at the beginning of something fragile is to say what it is. The night I drove her back from Queensborough Road to her little house in the gentrified East End, things were very simple. For forty-eight hours all she would do was wail and sob and throw up on me. She refused to eat, she couldn’t bear to sleep. If she dropped off for ten minutes, she would wake silent for the instant it took her to remember what had happened. Then this appalling dull asthmatic noise would come out of her--”zhhh, zhjh, zhjh,” somewhere between retching and whining--as she tried to suppress the memory, and wake me up, and sob, all at the same time.

I was always awake anyway.

“Hush now, it will get better. I know.”

I knew because she had done the same thing to me.

“China, I’m so sorry.”

“Hush. Don’t be sorry. Get better.”

“I’m so sorry to have made you feel like this.”

I wiped her nose.

“Hush.”

That part was easy. I could dress her ulcers and take care of what was coming out of them, relieve the other effects of what they had done to her in Miami, and watch for whatever else might happen. I could hold her in my arms all night and tell lies and believe I was only there for her.

But soon she asked me, “Will you live here again, China?”

“You know it’s all I want,” I said.

She warned: “I’m not promising anything.”

“I don’t want you to,” I said. I said: “I just want you to need me for something.”

That whole September we were as awkward as children. We didn’t quite know what to say. We didn’t quite know what to do with one another. We could see it would take time and patience. We shared the bed rather shyly, and showed one another quite ordinary things as gifts.

“Look!”

Sunshine fell across the breakfast table, onto lilies and pink napery. (I am not making this up.)

“Look!”

A grey cat nosed out of a doorway in London E3.

“Did you have a nice weekend?”

“It was a lovely weekend. Lovely.”

“Look.”

Canary Wharf, shining in the oblique evening light!

In our earliest days together, while she was still working at the aerodrome, I had watched with almost uncontrollable delight as she moved about a room. I had

stayed awake while she slept, so that I could prop myself up on one elbow and look at her and shiver with happiness. Now when I watched, it was with fear. For her. For both of us. She had come down off the tightrope for awhile. But things were still so precariously balanced. Her new body was all soft new colours in the bedside lamplight. She was thin now, and shaped quite differently: but as hot as ever, hot as a child with fever. When I fucked her she was like a bundle of hot wires. I was like a boy. I trembled and caught my breath when I felt with my fingertips the damp feathery lips of her cunt, but I was too aware of the dangers to be carried away. I didn't dare let her see how much this meant to me. Neither of us knew what to want of the other anymore. We had forgotten one another's rhythms. In addition she was remembering someone else's: it was Alexander who had constructed for me this bundle of hot, thin, hollow bones, wrapped round me in the night by desires and demands I didn't yet know how to fulfill. Before the Miami treatments she had loved me to watch her as she became aroused. Now she needed to hide, at least for a time. She would pull at my arms and shoulders, shy and desperate at the same time; then, as soon as I understood that she wanted to be fucked, push her face into the side of mine so I couldn't look at her. After awhile she would turn onto her side; encourage me to enter from behind; stare away into some distance implied by us, our failures, the dark room. I told myself I didn't care if she was thinking of him. Just so long as she had got this far, which was far enough to begin to be cured in her sex where he had wounded her as badly as anywhere else. I told myself I couldn't heal her there, only allow her to use me to heal herself.

At the start of something so fragile, the worst mistake you can make is to say what you hope. But inside your heart you can't help speaking, and by that speech you have already blown it.

After Isobel and I moved down to London from Stratford, business began to take up most of my time. Out of an instinctive caution, I dropped the word "medical" from the company description and called myself simply Rose Services. Rose Services soon became twenty quick vans, some low-cost storage space, and a licence to carry the products of new genetic research to and from Eastern Europe. If I was to take advantage of the expanding markets there, I decided, I would need an office.

"Let's go to Budapest," I said to Isobel.

She hugged my arm.

"Will there be ice on the Danube?" she said.

"There will."

There was.

"China, we came all the way to Hungary!"

She had never been out of Britain. She had never flown in an aeroplane. She

was delighted even by the hotel. I had booked us into a place called the Palace, on Rakoczi Street. Like the city itself, the Palace had once been something: now it was a dump. Bare flex hung out of the light switches on the fourth-floor corridors. The wallpaper had charred in elegant spirals above the corners of the radiators. Every morning in the famous Jugendstil restaurant, they served us watery orange squash. The rooms were too hot. Everything else--coffee, food, water from the cold tap--was lukewarm. It was never quiet, even very late at night. Ambulances and police cars warbled past. Drunks screamed suddenly or made noises like animals. But our room had French windows opening onto a balcony with wrought-iron railings. From there in the freezing air, we could look across a sort of high courtyard with one or two flakes of snow falling into it, at the other balconies and their lighted windows. That first evening, Isobel loved it.

“China, isn’t it fantastic? Isn’t it?”

Then something happened to her in her sleep. I wouldn’t have known, but I woke up unbearably hot at 3:00 a.m., sweating and dry-mouthed beneath the peculiar fawn-fur blanket they give you to sleep under at the Palace. The bathroom was even hotter than the bedroom and smelled faintly of very old piss. When I turned the tap on to splash my face, nothing came out of it. I stood there in the dark for a moment, swaying, while I waited for it to run. I heard Isobel say reasonably: “It’s a system fault.”

After a moment she said, “Oh no. Oh no,” in such a quiet, sad voice that I went back to the bed and touched her gently.

“Isobel. Wake up.”

She began to whimper and throw herself about.

“The system’s down,” she tried to explain to someone.

“Isobel. Isobel.”

“The system!”

“Isobel.”

She woke up and clutched at me. She pushed her face blindly into my chest. She trembled.

“China!”

It was February, a year or two after we had met. I didn’t know it, but things were already going wrong for her. Her dreams had begun to waste her from the inside.

She said indistinctly: “I want to go back home.”

“Isobel, it was only a dream.”

“I couldn’t fly,” she said.

She stared up at me in astonishment.

“China, I couldn’t fly.”

At breakfast she hardly spoke. All morning she was thoughtful and withdrawn. But when I suggested that we walk down to the Danube via the Basilica at St. Stephen’s, cross over to Buda and eat lunch, she seemed delighted. The air was cold and clear. The trees were distinct and photographic in the bright pale February light. We stared out across the New City from the Disney-white battlements of Fishermen’s Bastion. “Those bridges!” Isobel said. “Look at them in the sun!” She had bought a new camera for the trip, a Pentax with a motor-wind and zoom. “I’m going to take a panorama.” She eyed the distorted reflection of the Bastion in the mirror-glass windows of the Hilton hotel. “Stand over there, China, I want one of you, too. No, there, you idiot!” Snow began to fall, in flakes the size of five-forint pieces.

“China!”

For the rest of the day--for the rest of the holiday--she was as delighted by things as ever. We visited the zoo. (“Look! Owls!”) We caught a train to Szentendre. We photographed one another beneath the huge winged woman at the top of the Gellert Hill. We translated the titles of the newsstand paperbacks.

“What does this mean, ‘Nagy Secz’?”

“You know very well what it means, Isobel.”

I looked at my watch.

I said: “It’s time to eat.”

“Oh no. Must we?”

Isobel hated Hungarian food.

“China,” she would complain, “why has everything got cream on it?”

But she loved the red and grey buses. She loved the street signs, TOTO LOTTO, HIRLAP, TRAFIK. She loved Old Buda, redeemed by the snow: white, clean, properly picturesque.

And she couldn’t get enough of the Danube.

“Look. China, it’s fucking huge! Isn’t it fucking huge?”

I said: “Look at the speed of it.”

At midnight on our last day we stood in the exact centre of the Erzsebet bridge, gazing north. Szentendre and Danube Bend were out there somewhere,

locked in a Middle European night stretching all the way to Czechoslovakia. Ice floes like huge lily pads raced toward us in the dark. You could hear them turning and dipping under one another, piling up briefly round the huge piers, jostling across the whole vast breadth of the river as they rushed south. No river is ugly after dark. But the Danube doesn't care for anyone: without warning the Medieval cold came up off the water and reached onto the bridge for us. It was as if we had seen something move. We stepped back, straight into the traffic which grinds all night across the bridge from Buda into Pest.

“China!”

“Be careful!”

You have to imagine this--

Two naive and happy middleclass people embracing on a bridge. Caught between the river and the road, they grin and shiver at one another, unable to distinguish between identity and geography, love and the need to keep warm.

“Look at the speed of it.”

“Oh, China, the Danube!”

Suddenly she turned away.

She said: “I'm cold now.”

She thought for a moment.

“I don't want to go on the aeroplane,” she said. “They're not the real thing after all.”

I took her hands between mine.

“It will be okay when you get home,” I promised.

But London didn't seem to help. For months I woke in the night to find she was awake, too, staring emptily up at the ceiling in the darkness. Unable to comprehend her despair, I would consult my watch and ask her, “Do you want anything?” She would shake her head and advise patiently, “Go to sleep now, love,” as if she was being kept awake by a bad period.

I bought the house in Stepney at about that time. It was in a prettily renovated terrace with reproduction Victorian street lamps. There were wrought-iron security grids over every other front door, and someone had planted the extensive shared gardens at the back with ilex, ornamental rowan, even a fig. Isobel loved it. She decorated the rooms herself, then filled them with the sound of her favourite music--The Blue Aeroplanes' Yr Own World; Tom Petty, Learning to Fly. For our bedroom she bought two big blanket chests and polished them to a deep buttery colour. “Come and look, China! Aren't they beautiful?” Inside, they smelled of new

wood. The whole house smelled of new wood for days after we moved in: beeswax, new wood, dried roses.

I said: "I want it to be yours."

It had to be in her name anyway, I admitted: for accounting purposes.

"But also in case anything happens."

She laughed.

"China, what could happen?"

What happened was that one of my local drivers went sick, and I asked her to deliver something for me.

I said: "It's not far. Just across to Brook Green. Some clinic."

I passed her the details.

"A Dr. Alexander. You could make it in an hour, there and back."

She stared at me.

"You could make it in an hour," she said.

She read the job sheet.

"What do they do there?" she asked.

I said irritably: "How would I know? Cosmetic medicine. Fantasy factory stuff. Does it matter?"

She put her arms round me.

"China, I was only trying to be interested."

"Never ask them what they do with the stuff," I warned her. "Will you do it?"

She said: "If you kiss me properly."

"How was it?" I asked when she got back.

She laughed.

"At first they thought I was a patient!"

Running upstairs to change, she called down:

"I quite like West London."

Isobel's new body delighted her. But she seemed bemused too, as if it had been given to someone else. How much had Alexander promised her? How much

had she expected from the Miami treatments? All I knew was that she had flown out obsessed and returned ill. When she talked, she would talk only about the flight home. "I could see a sunrise over the wing of the airliner, red and gold. I was trying hard to read a book, but I couldn't stop looking out at this cold wintery sunrise above the clouds. It seemed to last for hours." She stared at me as if she had just thought of something. "How could I see a sunrise, China? It was dark when we landed!"

Her dreams had always drawn her away from ordinary things. All that gentle, warm September she was trying to get back.

"Do you like me again?" she would ask shyly.

It was hard for her to say what she meant. Standing in front of the mirror in the morning in the soft grey slanting light from the bedroom window, dazed and sidetracked by her own narcissism, she could only repeat: "Do you like me this way?"

Or at night in bed: "Is it good this way? Is it good? What does it feel like?"

"Isobel--"

In the end it was always easier to let her evade the issue.

"I never stopped liking you," I would lie, and she would reply absently, as if I hadn't spoken:

"Because I want us to like each other again."

And then add, presenting her back to the mirror and looking at herself over one shoulder:

"I wish I'd had more done. My legs are still too fat."

If part of her was still trying to fly back from Miami and all Miami entailed, much of the rest was in Brook Green with Alexander. As September died into October, and then the first few cold days of November, I found that increasingly hard to bear. She cried in the night, but no longer woke me up for comfort. Her gaze would come unfocussed in the afternoons. Unable to be near her while, thinking of him, she pretended to leaf through Vogue and Harper's, I walked out into the rainy unredeemed Whitechapel streets. Suddenly it was an hour later and I was watching the lights come on in a hardware shop window on Roman Road.

Other times, when it seemed to be going well, I couldn't contain my delight. I got up in the night and thrashed the BMW to Sheffield and back; parked

outside the house and slept an hour in the rear seat; crossed the river in the morning to queue for croissants at Ayre's Bakery in Peckham, playing Empire Burlesque so loud that if I touched the windscreen gently I could feel it tremble,

much as she used to do, beneath my fingertips.

I was trying to get back, too.

“I’ll take you to the theatre,” I said: “Waiting for Godot. Do you want to see the fireworks?” I said: “I brought you a present--.”

A Monsoon dress. Two small stone birds for the garden; anemones; and a cheap Boots nailbrush shaped like a pig.

“Don’t try to get so close, China,” she said. “Please.”

I said: “I just want to be something to you.”

She touched my arm. She said: “China, it’s too soon. We’re here together, after all: isn’t that enough for now?”

She said: “And anyway, how could you ever be anything else?”

She said: “I love you.”

“But you’re not in love with me.”

“I told you I couldn’t promise you that.”

By Christmas we were shouting at one another again, late into the night, every night. I slept on the futon in the spare room. There I dreamed of Isobel and woke sweating.

You have to imagine this--

The Pavilion, quite a good Thai restaurant on Wardour Street. Isobel has just given me the most beautiful jacket, wrapped in birthday paper. She leans across the table. “French Connection, China. Very smart.” The waitresses, who believe we are lovers, laugh delightedly as I try it on. But later, when I buy a red rose and offer it to Isobel, she says, “What use would I have for that?” in a voice of such contempt I begin to cry. In the dream, I am 50 years old that day. I wake thinking everything is finished.

Or this--

Budapest. Summer. Rakoczi Street. Each night Isobel waits for me to fall asleep before she leaves the hotel. Once outside, she walks restlessly up and down Rakoczi with all the other women. Beneath her beige linen suit she has on grey silk underwear. She cannot explain what is missing from her life, but will later write in a letter: “When sex fails for you--when it ceases to be central in your life--you enter middle age, a zone of the most unclear exits from which some of us never escape.” I wake and follow her. All night it feels like dawn. Next morning, in the halfabandoned Jugendstil dining room, a paper doily drifts to the floor like a leaf, while Isobel whispers urgently in someone else’s voice:

“It was never what you thought it was.”

Appalled by their directness, astonished to find myself so passive, I would struggle awake from dreams like this thinking: “What am I going to do? What am I going to do?” It was always early. It was always cold. Grey light silhouetted a vase of dried flowers on the dresser in front of the uncurtained window, but the room itself was still dark. I would look at my watch, turn over, and go back to sleep. One morning, in the week before Christmas, I got up and packed a bag instead. I made myself some coffee and drank it by the kitchen window, listening to the inbound city traffic build up half a mile away. When I switched the radio on it was playing Billy Joel’s *She’s Always a Woman*. I turned it off quickly, and at 8:00 woke Isobel. She smiled up at me.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m sorry about last night.”

I said: “I’m sick of it all. I can’t do it. I thought I could but I can’t.”

“China, what is this?”

I said: “You were so fucking sure he’d have you. Three months later it was you crying, not me.”

“China--”

“It’s time you helped,” I said.

I said: “I helped you. And when you bought me things out of gratitude I never once said ‘What use would I have for that?’”

She rubbed her hands over her eyes.

“China, what are you talking about?”

I shouted: “What a fool you made of yourself!” Then I said: “I only want to be something to you again.”

“I won’t stand for this,” Isobel whispered. “I can’t stand this.”

I said: “Neither can I. That’s why I’m going.”

“I still love him, China.”

I was on my way to the door. I said: “You can have him then.”

“China, I don’t want you to go.”

“Make up your mind.”

“I won’t say what you want me to.”

“Fuck off, then.”

“It’s you who’s fucking off, China.”

It’s easy to see now that when we stood on the Erzsebet Bridge the dream had already failed her. But at the time--and for some time afterward--I was still too close to her to see anything. It was still one long arc of delight for me, Stratford through Budapest, all the way to Stepney. So I could only watch puzzledly as she began to do pointless, increasingly spoiled things to herself. She caught the tube to Camden Lock and had her hair cut into the shape of a pigeon’s wing. She had her ankles tattooed with feathers. She starved herself, as if her own body were holding her down. She was going to revenge herself on it. She lost twenty pounds in a month. Out went everything she owned, to be replaced by size 9 jeans, little black spandex skirts, expensively tailored jackets which hung from their own ludicrous shoulder pads like washing.

“You don’t look like you anymore,” I said.

“Good. I always hated myself anyway.”

“I loved your bottom the way it was,” I said.

She laughed.

“You’ll look haggard if you lose anymore,” I said.

“Piss off, China. I won’t be a cow just so you can fuck a fat bottom.”

I was hurt by that, so I said:

“You’ll look old. Anyway, I didn’t think we fucked. I thought we made love.” Something caused me to add, “I’m losing you.” And then, even less reasonably: “Or you’re losing me.”

“China, don’t be such a baby.”

Then one afternoon in August she walked into the lounge and said, “China, I want to talk to you.” The second I heard this, I knew exactly what she was going to say. I looked away from her quickly and down into the book I was pretending to read, but it was too late. There was a kind of soft thud inside me. It was something broken. It was something not there anymore. I felt it. It was a door closing, and I wanted to be safely on the other side of it before she spoke.

“What?” I said.

She looked at me uncertainly.

“China, I--”

“What?”

“China, I haven’t been happy. Not for some time. You must have realised.

I've got a chance at an affair with someone and I want to take it."

I stared at her.

"Christ," I said. "Who?"

"Just someone I know."

"Who?" I said. And then, bitterly, "Who do you know, Isobel?" I meant: "Who do you know that isn't me?"

"It's only an affair," she said. And: "You must have realised I wasn't happy."

I said dully: "Who is this fucker?"

"It's David Alexander."

"Who?"

"David Alexander. For God's sake, China, you make everything so hard! At the clinic. David Alexander."

I had no idea who she was talking about. Then I remembered.

"Christ," I said. "He's just some fucking customer."

She went out. I heard the bedroom door slam. I stared at the books on the bookshelves, the pictures on the walls, the carpet dusty gold in the pale afternoon light. I couldn't understand why it was all still there. I couldn't understand anything. Twenty minutes later, when Isobel came back in again carrying a soft leather overnight bag, I was standing in the same place, in the middle of the floor. She said: "Do you know what your trouble is, China?"

"What?" I said.

"People are always just some fucking this or that to you."

"Don't go."

She said: "He's going to help me to fly, China."

"You always said I helped you to fly."

She looked away.

"It's not your fault it stopped working," she said. "It's me."

"Christ, you selfish bitch."

"He wants to help me to fly," she repeated dully.

And then: "China, I am selfish."

She tried to touch my hand but I moved it away.

“I can’t fucking believe this,” I said. “You want me to forgive you just because you can admit it?”

“I don’t want to lose you, China.”

I said: “You already have.”

“We don’t know what we might want,” she said. “Later on. Either of us.”

I remembered how we had been at the beginning: Stratford Waterside, whispers and moans, You help me to fly, China. “If you could hear yourself,” I said. “If you could just fucking hear yourself, Isobel.” She shrugged miserably and picked up her bag. I didn’t see her after that. I did have one letter from her. It was sad without being conciliatory, and ended: “You were the most amazing person I ever knew, China, and the fastest driver.”

I tore it up.

“Were!” I said. “Fucking were!”

By that time she had moved in with him, somewhere along the Network South East line from Waterloo: Chiswick, Kew, one of those old-fashioned suburbs on a bladder of land inflated into the picturesque curve of the river, with genteel deteriorating houseboats, an arts centre, and a wine bar on every corner. West London is full of places like that--”shabby,” “comfortable,” until you smell the money. Isobel kept the Stepney house. I would visit it once a month to collect my things, cry in the lounge, and take away some single pointless item--a compact disc I had bought her, a picture she had bought me. Every time I went back, the bedroom, with its wooden chests and paper birds, seemed to have filled up further with dust. Despite that, I could never quite tell if anything had changed. Had they been in there, the two of them? I stayed in the doorway, so as not to know. I had sold Rose Services and was living out in Tottenham, drinking Michelob beer and watching Channel 4 movies while I waited for my capital to run out. Some movies I liked better than others. I cried all the way through Alice in the Cities. I wasn’t sure why. But I knew why I was cheering Anthony Hopkins as The Good Father.

“You were the most amazing person I ever knew, China, and the fastest driver. I’ll always remember you.”

What did I care? Two days after I got the letter I drove over to Queens-borough Road at about 7:00 in the evening. I had just bought the BMW. I parked it at the kerb outside Alexander’s clinic, which was in a large postmodern block not far down from Hammersmith Gyratory. Some light rain was falling. I sat there watching the front entrance. After about twenty minutes Alexander’s receptionist came out, put her umbrella up, and went off toward the tube station. A bit later Alexander himself appeared at the security gate. I was disappointed by him.

He turned out to be a tall thin man, middle-aged, grey-haired, dressed in a light wool suit. He looked less like a doctor than a poet. He had that kind of fragile elegance some people maintain on the edge of panic, the energy of tensions unresolved, glassy, never very far from the surface. He would always seem worried. He looked along the street toward Shepherd's Bush, then down at his watch.

I opened the nearside passenger window.

"David Alexander?" I called.

I called: "Waiting for someone?"

He bent down puzzledly and looked into the BMW.

"Need a lift?" I offered.

"Do I know you?" he asked.

I thought: Say the wrong thing, you fucker. You're that close.

I said: "Not exactly."

"Then--"

"Forget it."

He stood back from the car suddenly, and I drove off.

Christmas. Central London. Traffic locked solid every late afternoon. Light in the shop windows in the rain. Light in the puddles. Light splashing up round your feet. I couldn't keep still. Once I'd walked away from Isobel, I couldn't stop walking. Everywhere I went, She's Always a Woman was on the radio. Harrods, Habitat, Hamleys: Billy Joel drove me out onto the wet pavement with another armful of children's toys. I even wrapped some of them--a wooden penguin with rubber feet, two packs of cards, a miniature jigsaw puzzle in the shape of her name. Every time I saw something I liked, it went home with me.

"I bought you a present," I imagined myself saying, "this fucking little spider that really jumps--"

"Look!"

Quite suddenly I was exhausted. Christmas Day I spent with the things I'd bought. Boxing Day, and the day after that, I lay in a chair staring at the television. Between shows I picked up the phone and put it down again, picked it up and put it down. I was going to call Isobel, then I wasn't. I was going to call her, but I closed the connection carefully every time the phone began to ring at her end. Then I decided to go back to Stepney for my clothes.

Imagine this--

Two a.m. The house was quiet.

Or this--

I stood on the pavement. When I looked in through the uncurtained ground-floor window I could see the little display of lights on the front of Isobel's CD player.

Or this--

For a moment my key didn't seem to fit the door.

Imagine this--

Late at night you enter a house in which you've been as happy as anywhere in your life: probably happier. You go into the front room, where streetlight falls unevenly across the rugs, the furniture, the mantelpiece and mirrors. On the sofa are strewn a dozen colourful, expensive shirts, blue and red and gold like macaws and money. Two or three of them have been slipped out of their cellophane, carefully refolded and partly wrapped in Christmas paper. "Dear China--" say the tags. "Dearest China." There are signs of a struggle but not necessarily with someone else. A curious stale smell fills the room, and a chair has been knocked over. It's really too dark to see.

Switch on the lights. Glasses and bottles. Food trodden into the best kilim. Half-empty plates, two days old.

"Isobel? Isobel!"

The bathroom was damp with condensation, the bath itself full of cold water smelling strongly of rose oil. Wet towels were underfoot, there and in the draughty bedroom, where the light was already on and Isobel's pink velvet curtains, half-drawn, let a faint yellow triangle of light into the garden below. The lower sash was open. When I pulled it down, a cat looked up from the empty flowerbed: ran off. I shivered. Isobel had pulled all her favourite underclothes out onto the floor and trodden mascara into them. She had written in lipstick on the dressing table mirror, in perfect mirror writing: "Leave me alone."

I found her in one of the big blanket boxes.

When I opened the lid a strange smell--beeswax, dried roses, vomit, whiskey--filled the room. In there with her she had an empty bottle of Jameson's: an old safety razor of mine and two or three blades. She had slit her wrists. But first she had tried to shave all the downy, half-grown feathers from her upper arms and breasts. When I reached into the box they whirled up round us both, soft blue and grey, the palest rose-pink. Miami! In some confused attempt to placate me, she had tried to get out of the dream the way you get out of a coat.

She was still alive.

“China,” she said. Sleepily, she held her arms up to me. She whispered:
“China.”

Alexander had made her look like a bird. But underneath the cosmetic trick she was still Isobel Avens. Whatever he had promised her, she could never have flown. I picked her up and carried her carefully down the stairs. Then I was crossing the pavement toward the BMW, throwing the nearside front door open and trying to get her into the passenger seat. Her arms and legs were everywhere, pivoting loose and awkward from the hips and elbows. “Christ, Isobel, you’ll have to help!” I didn’t panic until then.

“China,” whispered Isobel.

Blood ran into my shirt where she had put her arms round my neck.

I slammed the door.

“China.”

“What, love? What?”

“China.”

She could talk but she couldn’t hear.

“Hold on,” I said. I switched on the radio. Some station I didn’t know was playing the first few bars of a Joe Satriani track, *Always with You, Always with Me*. I felt as if I was outside myself. I thought: “Now’s the time to drive, China, you fucker.” The BMW seemed to fishtail out of the parking space of its own accord, into the empty arcadegame of Whitechapel. The city loomed up then fell back from us at odd angles, as if it had achieved the topological values of a Vorticist painting. I could hear the engine distantly, making a curious harsh overdriven whine as I held the revs up against the red line. Revs and brakes, revs and brakes: if you want to go fast in the city you hold it all the time between the engine and the brakes. Taxis, hoardings, white faces of pedestrians on traffic islands splashed with halogen pink, rushed up and were snatched away.

“Isobel?”

I had too much to do to look directly at her. I kept catching glimpses of her in weird, neon shop-light from Wallis or Next or What She Wants, lolling against the seat belt with her mouth half open. She knew how bad she was. She kept trying to smile across at me. Then she would drift off, or cornering forces would roll her head to one side as if she had no control of the muscles in her neck and she would end up staring and smiling out of the side window whispering: “China. China China China.”

“Isobel.”

She passed out again and didn't wake up.

"Shit, Isobel," I said.

We were on Hammersmith Gyrotory, deep in the shadow of the flyover. It was twenty minutes since I had found her. We were nearly there. I could almost see the clinic.

I said: "Shit, Isobel, I've lost it."

The piers of the flyover loomed above us, stained grey concrete plastered with anarchist graffiti and torn posters. Free and ballistic, the car waltzed sideways toward them, glad to be out of China Rose's hands at last.

"Fuck," I said. "Fuck fuck fuck."

We touched the kerb, tripped over our own feet, and began a long slow roll, like an airliner banking to starboard. We hit a postbox. The BMW jumped in a startled way and righted itself. Its offside rear suspension had collapsed. Uncomfortable with the new layout, still trying to get away from me, it spun twice and banged itself repeatedly into the opposite kerb with a sound exactly like some housewife's Metro running over the cat's-eyes on a cold Friday morning. Something snapped the window post on that side and broken glass blew in all over Isobel Avens' peaceful face. She opened her mouth. Thin vomit came out, the colour of tea: but I don't think she was conscious. Hammersmith Broadway, ninety-five miles an hour. I dropped a gear, picked the car up between steering and accelerator, shot out into Queensborough Road on the wrong side of the road. The boot lid popped open and fell off. It was dragged along behind us for a moment, then it went backward quickly and disappeared. "China."

Draped across my arms, Isobel was nothing but a lot of bones and heat. I carried her up the steps to Alexander's building and pressed for entry. The entryphone crackled but no one spoke. "Hello?" I said. After a moment the locks went back.

Look into the atrium of a West London building at night and everything is the same as it is in the day. Only the reception staff are missing, and that makes less difference than you would think. The contract furniture keeps working. The PX keeps working. The fax comes alive suddenly as you watch, with a query from Zurich, Singapore, LA. The air conditioning keeps on working. Someone has watered the plants, and they keep working too, making chlorophyll from the overhead lights. Paper curls out of the fax and stops. You can watch for as long as you like: nothing else will happen and no one will come. The air will be cool and warm at the same time, and you will be able to see your own reflection, very faintly in the treated glass.

"China."

Upstairs it was a floor of open-plan offices--health finance--and then a floor of consulting rooms. Up here the lights were off, and you could no longer hear the light traffic on Queensborough Road. It was 2:50 in the morning. I got into the consulting rooms and then Alexander's office, and walked up and down with Isobel in my arms, calling:

"Alexander?"

No one came.

"Alexander?"

Someone had let us in.

"Alexander!"

Among the stuff on his desk was a brochure for the clinic. "... modern 'magic wand'," I read. "Brand new proteins." I swept everything off onto the floor and tried to make Isobel comfortable by folding my coat under her head. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, but not to me. It was part of some conversation I couldn't hear. She kept rolling onto her side and retching over the edge of the desk, then laughing. I had picked up the phone and was working on an outside line when Alexander came in from the corridor. He had lost weight. He looked vague and empty, as if we had woken him out of a deep sleep. You can tear people like him apart like a piece of paper, but it doesn't change anything.

"Press 9," he advised me. "Then call an ambulance."

He glanced down at Isobel. He said: "It would have been better to take her straight to a hospital."

I put the phone down.

"I fucked up a perfectly good car to get here," I said.

He kept looking puzzledly at me and then out of the window at the BMW, half up on the pavement with smoke coming out of it.

I said: "That's a Hartge H27-24."

I said: "I could have afforded something in better taste, but I just haven't got any."

"I know you," he said. "You've done work for me."

I stared at him. He was right.

I had been moving things about for him since the old Astravan days; since before Stratford. And if I was just a contract to him, he was just some writing on a job sheet to me. He was the price of a Hartge BMW with racing suspension and

17-inch wheels.

“But you did this,” I reminded him.

I got him by the back of the neck and made him look closely at Isobel. Then I pushed him against the wall and stood away from him. I told him evenly: “I’m fucking glad I didn’t kill you when I wanted to.” I said: “Put her back together.”

He lifted his hands. “I can’t,” he said.

“Put her back together.”

“This is only an office,” he said. “She would have to go to Miami.”

I pointed to the telephone. I said: “Arrange it. Get her there.”

He examined her briefly.

“She was dying anyway,” he said. “The immune system work alone would have killed her. We did far more than we would normally do on a client. Most of it was illegal. It would be illegal to do most of it to a laboratory rat. Didn’t she tell you that?”

I said: “Get her there and put her back together again.”

“I can make her human again,” he offered. “I can cure her.”

I said: “She didn’t fucking want to be human.”

“I know,” he said.

He looked down at his desk; his hands. He whispered: “‘Help me to fly. Help me to fly!’”

“Fuck off,” I said.

“I loved her, too, you know. But I couldn’t make her understand that she could never have what she wanted. In the end she was just too demanding: effectively, she asked us to kill her.”

I didn’t want to know why he had let me have her back. I didn’t want to compare inadequacies with him. I said: “I don’t want to hear this.”

He shrugged. “She’ll die if we try it again,” he said emptily. “You’ve got no idea how these things work.”

“Put her back together.”

You tell me what else I could have said.

Here at the Alexander Clinic, we use the modern ‘magic wand’ of molecular biology to insert avian chromosomes into human skin-cells. Nurtured in the clinic’s

vats, the follicles of this new skin produce feathers instead of hair. It grafts beautifully. Brand new proteins speed acceptance. But in case of difficulties, we remake the immune system: aim it at infections of opportunity: fire it like a laser.

Our client chooses any kind of feather, from pinion to down, in any combination. She is as free to look at the sparrow as the bower bird or macaw. Feathers of any size or colour! But the real triumph is elsewhere--

Designer hormones trigger the 'brown fat' mechanism. Our client becomes as light and as hot to the touch as a female hawk. Then metabolically induced calcium shortages hollow the bones. She can be handled only with great care. And the dreams of flight! Engineered endorphins released during sexual arousal simulate the sidesweep, swoop, and mad fall of mating flight, the frantically beating heart, long sight. Sometimes the touch of her own feathers will be enough.

I lived in a hotel on the beach while it was done. Miami! TV prophecy, humidity like a wet sheet, an airport where they won't rent you a baggage trolley. You wouldn't think this listening to Bob Seger. Unless you are constantly approaching it from the sea, Miami is less a dream--less even a nightmare--than a place. All I remember is what British people always remember about Florida: the light in the afternoon storm, the extraordinary size and perfection of the food in the supermarkets. I never went near the clinic, though I telephoned Alexander's team every morning and evening. I was too scared. One day they were optimistic, the next they weren't. In the end I knew they had got involved again, they were excited by the possibilities. She was going to have what she wanted. They were going to do the best they could for her, if only because of the technical challenge.

She slipped in and out of the world until the next spring. But she didn't die, and in the end I was able to bring her home to the blackened, gentle East End in May, driving all the way from Heathrow down the inside lane of the motorway, as slowly and carefully as I knew how in my new off-the-peg 850i. I had adjusted the driving mirror so I could look into the back of the car. Isobel lay awkwardly across one corner of the rear seat. Her hands and face seemed tiny. In the soft wet English light, their adjusted bone structures looked more rather than less human. Lapped in her singular successes and failures, the sum of her life to that point, she was more rested than I had ever seen her.

About a mile away from the house, outside Whitechapel tube station, I let the car drift up to the kerb and stop. I switched the engine off and got out of the driving seat.

"It isn't far from here," I said.

I put the keys in her hand.

"I know you're tired," I said, "but I want you to drive yourself the rest of the way."

She said: “China, don’t go. Get back in the car.”

“It’s not far from here,” I said.

“China, please don’t go.”

“Drive yourself from now on.”

If you’re so clever, you tell me what else I could have done. All that time in Miami she had never let go, never once vacated the dream. The moment she closed her eyes, feathers were floating down past them. She knew what she wanted. Don’t mistake me: I wanted her to have it. But imagining myself stretched out next to her on the bed night after night, I could hear the sound those feathers made, and I knew I would never sleep again for the touch of them on my face.