

Alan Carmichael

*The Writers’
Group*

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Part I

“Everyone has a novel inside them. And that’s where it should remain.”

Literary Agent

“But the part that is good is not original ...”

He knows without looking that the house is the one on the left. He has counted down, two by two, from the street corner. He knows it's the right place, though his eyes remain on the pavement ahead except to look once at his watch. He swears. Despite his careful timing, it is still five minutes before the hour.

He does not stop, does not look up to examine the house, or the door, or the curtains which he assumes are closed, but instead walks on. At the corner of the next street he looks at his watch again and sees that exactly two minutes have passed. He crosses the street, a further ten seconds, counts fifteen paces, turns a half-circle and begins to walk back. There is a woman in the far distance coming towards him, and it occurs to him that his nerve will fail if they pass outside the very house he is seeking. But she crosses the road well before.

Two more minutes have elapsed. It is, finally, three o'clock exactly. He turns, pushes a wooden gate, and walks up a short path. Rings the bell. It is done. The waiting is over.

Someone opens the door a fraction. A woman's face is in shadow. The eyes are tired. Hostile.

He thinks something is wrong, he thinks of walking away. But he says, 'Is Isabella there?' The old woman shifts her weight and pulls the door open a touch more. The man breathes in, takes a step forward and squeezes through. The front door closes behind him and she points to a room down the hallway on the left. He moves towards it and presses against the door handle. The room is empty. He looks back. The woman knocks on a second door and vanishes behind a third.

The man walks into the centre of the room letting the door swing shut. He takes off his coat and looks around. There is subdued lighting. A large double bed with a green spread. A chair, and a dressing table with a hairbrush, a lipstick and what appear to be plastic handcuffs. The blinds are drawn. A teddy bear is propped up on the pillows. A wardrobe is half open. Inside he sees a nurse's uniform and other outfits in leather and plastic. He lays down his coat and leans against the frame of the bed. He waits, absolutely still. His nervousness has gone. It has been superseded by another

kind of tension. An expectation. His hands are shaking. And then the door opens and she strides in.

Long black hair, centrally parted. Very straight and glistening. A black, see-through something, boots with silver heels. She is smiling. She is very beautiful.

He starts to speak. 'Hello I'm ...' She watches him but does not react. He reaches into a pocket and extracts an envelope. She accepts it though she does not check the contents. Instead she places the envelope on the dressing table. And then she does something which surprises him, and which he will remember for days ahead.

She walks up and kisses him on the lips ...

I know what she's going to say, Peter thought. The pause lengthened. *I just know ...*

'I think I'll leave it there,' said Harriet. Peter sighed. There was a rustling of papers, a few coughs and then silence.

'Yes -' another pause '- well ...'

'Hmm ...'

'So what happens next?'

'You're not writing from experience, I hope?'

'They never kiss.'

'Who says?'

'That's what I've heard. Kissing's too intimate.'

'How much was in the envelope?'

'That shit.'

'Who?'

'The man.'

'Why?'

'Well it's ...'

'What?'

'Exploitation.'

'How much *does* one pay?'

Peter, who had said nothing, glanced across at Shelley, also silent. Her eyes met his and she smiled before turning to the other two men in the group. Ben, the younger, was staring at his copy of the manuscript, as was Art, a generation older. Both gripped pens in their right hands. Both had crossed their legs.

'Well, what do our male members have to say?' said Shelley.

'Boo-boom.'

'Now, now,' said Virginia, around whose living room they were all seated, and who rather presented herself as the matronly voice of moderation. 'This is a piece of literature. And a good one, I think, Harriet.'

Harriet, the only one of them whose city job demanded a certain formality of dress, extended her stockinged legs and, with her left foot, detached the stiletto heel from her right. 'Ah,' she sighed. 'That's better.'

Lucy and Kath, occasional attendees who, when they did show, turned up together and sat next to each other, were giggling over something.

'What's the joke?' said Ben.

'Two hundred pounds.'

‘We were just checking it out,’ said Kath, holding up her phone. Ben leaned forward and she passed it to him.

‘Two hundred pounds an hour. It took ten seconds to find. Just google “London” “escort” “services”.’

‘These new phones,’ said Art. ‘Bloody marvellous. ’Ere, let me see.’ And he put his reading glasses back on to peer across. ‘Blimey, she’s not wearing much.’

Virginia got up and walked over to a side table where she refilled her glass with water. She stood there, drinking and frowning, with an imprecise sense of disapproval at what seemed the frivolous nature of the discussion so far. At the previous meeting she had told them in the pub afterwards how sober and ordered the atmosphere at home had become, now that her youngest son had finally been packed off to university. ‘Right. Harriet,’ she said firmly. She walked back to her seat and picked up the manuscript. ‘No thanks,’ she said as the phone was passed her way, ‘I don’t want to see.’

‘Yes, well. Harriet. It’s just about there,’ said Ben. ‘It just needs a bit of tightening up.’

‘Curtains and blinds ...’

‘What?’

‘First para. The room has curtains. Later, he notices the blinds are drawn.’

‘Let me see ...’

‘And towards the end, he’s “absolutely still”. Yet his hands are shaking.’

‘Where are we now?’

‘And you tell us about “another kind of tension”.’

‘So?’

‘Do we need to be *told* if you’ve *shown* us already?’

‘And - “superseded” - it’s a “c”, not a second “s”.’

‘No it isn’t.’

‘I’ll spellcheck ...’

‘No need, Ben,’ said Harriet briskly. ‘It’s correct as it is.’

‘Ahem. Point-of-view?’

‘What about it?’

‘Second paragraph. He doesn’t look up. But he knows about those curtains. How? Remember, the reader sees the world through *his* eyes.’

‘That’s nitpicking.’

‘Either it’s right or it isn’t.’

‘Omniscient POV?’

‘Too many *he’s*,’ said Art. ‘The first two paras. *He* knows. *He* has counted. *He* knows. *He* does not stop. I’m always telling the junior subs to watch out for this.’

‘Come on, this is not *The Guardian*.’

‘I like it,’ said Virginia. ‘Short sentences. He *does* this, he *does* the other. It generates tension. We sense something is about to happen.’

‘If you want Dan Brown tension make them shorter.’

‘Dan Brown?’

‘It’s not a thriller. It’s not *genre*.’

‘Well, perhaps it is. Harriet?’

‘I ...’ It occurred to Peter, looking at her at that moment, that he could not recall ever having seen Harriet smile. Perhaps in these economic times it was considered not quite appropriate behaviour for fund managers and private equity specialists. ‘Well, I don’t read thrillers,’ she said. ‘My taste is literary. That’s what I read, that’s what I aspire to write.’

‘Haven’t we gone beyond that?’ said Ben. ‘Fiction these days is beyond labels.’

‘Is it? I wonder,’ said Virginia. ‘Tell us, Harriet, what happens next?’

‘Well, I want to show ...’

‘Does he have a name?’

‘... that he’s got a long way to fall, that there is an ugly underbelly to our society, even at what appear to be its most successful levels ...’

‘How do you define successful?’ said Art.

‘Well, the Bentley, the sylph-like wife, the private schools for the children. These things are just not enough.’

‘Don’t you think -’ said Virginia, ‘ - I’m not saying these things are not worth writing about - but - how original is that? Don’t we know that already?’

There was a keen intake of breath. Harriet looked up and glared at her.

‘Nothing wrong with repeating it,’ said Art. ‘These yuppy scumbags need to find out what the rest of us think of them.’

‘Some might call *me*’ - Harriet was whispering - ‘one of those yuppy scumbags.’ Her voice rose. ‘Although my bank did *not* get a government bailout.’

‘I didn’t mean ...’

‘Can I ask something?’ said Shelley. She coughed. ‘Sorry, can I ask you men a question ...’

Lucy and Kath giggled. ‘I know what you’re going to say,’ Lucy chirped.

‘Art. Ben. Have you ever done it?’

‘What?’ said Art, and Peter saw Ben reach for his glass of water as a rash of colour came to his cheeks.

‘Have you ever done it with a prostitute?’

Peter watched Ben’s face, now recovered, and vowed silently that he would never reveal himself in a similar way. He turned his blandest stare towards Shelley, knowing that he would be next.

‘Peter?’

Art broke the silence. ‘What do you take us for? Blimey, we’re not all like that.’

Kath was giggling again. ‘Come on, lads. What about those stag parties to Amsterdam? Ben, don’t tell me you’ve never been tempted by that kind of ...’

‘I’m always too drunk,’ said Ben.

Virginia breathed in and was about to speak, but said nothing. She usually took it upon herself to keep the discussion focused on literature, at least until they moved to the pub, but it occurred to her that this was a question worth exploring. She had aired her concerns, often to her girlfriends and even once or twice to the writers’ group, about what exactly her sons got up to at university. Could they ever, would they ever ...? She looked at Ben, only a few years older than the three of them, Ben, with his self-consciously precise movements, his pale blue v-neck sweater and white t-shirt, and she decided that he was not the type of person who would ever let himself be seduced into that kind of behaviour, despite his reddening just now. She could not see him even drinking too much - despite his protestation - or ever losing his temper. And she simply could not imagine him indulging in something so sordid as ... ‘Tell me, Harriet,’ she said, ‘did you do any research for this?’

And then she thought, reflecting on her ex-husband, the trouble with men was that you never knew.

‘Just the usual. The blogs. The kiss-and-tell stuff. *Callgirl this...*, *Highclass hooker that ...*’

‘Will there be loads of sex?’ Kath asked.

‘In my book?’

‘What does he do next?’

‘Do?’

‘Your hero. Does he, well, do it with Isabella?’

And then Harriet smiled. Peter gaped. ‘Sex and literature don’t mix,’ she said.

‘But there has to be a bit of ...’

‘Of what?’

‘The two of them, like, fucking.’

‘My dear, I don’t want this book to win the *Most Egregious and Gratuitous Act of Fornication in Literature Prize...*’

‘You mean the *Bad Sex Award*?’

‘Wouldn’t complain if mine did.’

‘So, Hattie,’ said Art, ‘what does happen next?’ Peter saw Harriet’s face tighten very slightly at the diminutive. The thought came to him that Art was getting his own back at the women, that this was payback for the suggestion that all males might stoop so low as to consider the services of a call-girl.

‘I see him’ - Harriet turned to look at Virginia - ‘I see him leaving that house feeling smugly pleased, elated even. He resolves to do it again. And again. But then, over time, he becomes obsessed, addicted, he even, dare I say it, falls in love ...’

‘You can’t let him off the hook in that way.’

‘Boo-boom.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well it suggests he’s the victim, not the villain.’

‘That’s what I want to show, that none of us are entirely innocent, but that we all suffer one way or another.’

None of us IS innocent, Peter thought, and then he wondered whether his pedantry really mattered, whether it was usage alone which defined what was correct or not.

‘I used to know a couple of women who worked as prostitutes.’ Shelley was speaking. ‘Two girls at university. They did it one day a week.’

Peter looked down at his copy of Harriet’s manuscript and listened to Shelley’s light Australian accent. Her voice, low and slightly husky, would be perfect for radio, he thought. As he listened, eyes averted, he pictured her in his mind, her blonde hair over black sweater and black jeans. A blue woollen scarf, which she continued to wear indoors, knotted at the neck. She described how one of her friends had been approached outside the senate building, how her friend was horrified at first, even if secretly flattered, and yet, once she learned how much money she could make, had allowed an unadmitted fascination to be indulged. It did indeed turn

out to be considerably more lucrative than working behind the bar at the students union, and soon she had persuaded a girlfriend to join her and then later, though here for some reason Peter suspected she was stretching the truth, a gay male friend to act as a ladies' escort.

Peter allowed himself to be mesmerised by the very slightly rasping tone of Shelley's voice, and as she presented her tale, it seemed to him that her story had something of the sense of remove from the hard physical world that Harriet's fiction had, a dissociation which came from the failure to pin down how and why it is that people do the hard things they do. He tried to imagine Shelley's friends as they were faced with their first clients. Or Harriet's protagonist when he picked up the phone to book his assignation. Wasn't fiction supposed to place him there, *just there*, on the cusp of that leap into the unknown? Or did it offer something entirely different, a means of glossing over the real struggle of any such leap? Perhaps this soft option was the voyeurism it really provided, a cheap prurience and not the real thing.

And as Shelley continued to talk, he looked up and stared at her pale and beautiful face, now lit up by the animation of her storytelling.

At that moment, Virginia raised her eyes as well, though in her case it was from her wristwatch as she reflected on whether to call time on the meeting and move on to a pub nearby. But she paused as she caught sight of Peter gazing at Shelley. With one hand he was caressing a cheek, as if he might shield his own face from other eyes. Virginia sighed. She had sometimes wondered about the possibility of some romantic entanglement emerging from the group, indeed she had wondered whether it might be a subject for one of her own bitter-sweet literary confections.

She sighed again and smiled. *She's out of your league, my friend*, she thought.

*

Three of them remained in the pub.

Lucy, Kath and Ben had made their separate excuses as the meeting ended. Harriet had stayed for one quick glass of wine, citing a seven o'clock breakfast conference the following morning. Art had in quick succession consumed three pints of Guinness before his daughter showed up - with a scowl at the line of empty

glasses in front of him and a look, if not up to the heavens, then at least to the high stucco ceiling - to drive him home.

The group had met Art's daughter a few times before. And he had spoken of her on many occasions, usually to complain, either about her teetotalism or her political views now that she occupied the post of senior op-ed writer for a midmarket tabloid.

'Come on Rosa, one more,' he pleaded as she waved the car keys.

'Dad, that old rag you work for needs you at your desk tomorrow morning. All bright and bushy-tailed.' She presented the others with her brightest smile and took his arm.

Peter, Shelley and Virginia watched them lurch out the pub.

Virginia had remained because she was curious - curious as to whether her intuition about Peter and Shelley was correct. But both were behaving with impeccable reserve. Instead Shelley was asking about what had just five minutes before become the talking point of what was left of the evening.

'So, Peter, you've been very quiet about this.'

'Well, I ...' He sighed. 'I wasn't going to tell anyone until I had had replies from them all. But, it just came out.'

'Which ones did you write to?' Virginia asked. Peter had been telling the stragglers that he had submitted samples of work to a number of literary agencies.

He shrugged. 'Half-a-dozen I picked from the internet. Some biggies, a couple of one-woman-bands.'

'Any replies?' said Shelley.

'One' - he smiled broadly - 'by return of post.'

'Don't they email?' said Shelley.

'Some agents are not very technology literate.'

'What did it say?'

'You know, the usual pre-printed stuff. *Thank you for considering our agency. Now fuck off.*'

'It didn't.'

'The exaggeration is only slight. ... *could not see a market ... did not love your work.* There wasn't even a signature.'

'Why do they need to *love* a person's work? Sounds a bit dopey.'

'It's agent-speak.'

'Well I think what you've done's very brave,' said Virginia.

'But Peter. You ...' Shelley was gazing at him. She breathed out. 'Your novel's not ready yet.'

‘It kind of is,’ said Peter. ‘I’ve had a working draft for a while now. As you all know.’

‘When do you expect to hear from the others?’ said Virginia.

‘I sent in the submissions a few weeks back,’ said Peter. ‘Anytime, I guess.’

‘That’s so exciting,’ said Virginia. ‘You’re so brave.’

‘You think?’

Peter was wondering whether he had been wise to tell even the two of them. He had been careful to keep his hobby hidden from everyone apart from his wife Janice and immediate family. And - with the exception of the agency submissions - the writers’ group, of course. His colleagues at work, and friends he knew in every other capacity, he hoped to surprise only when he had achieved success as a writer and his hobby had somehow, miraculously, become his trade. He had a fantasy that he might be walking down the street with his boss or a mate from five-a-side, and they would pass a bookstore. The two of them would pause, stare at the hardbacks stacked in the front window display, and his companion would turn to him, open-mouthed, wide-eyed - ‘That book. It’s your name on the cover. That’s YOU.’ And Peter would turn away self-deprecatingly and perhaps blush slightly. ‘Just something I’ve been working on in my spare time.’

Because somehow the alternative - to set his friends up with the knowledge that he was slaving away at this enterprise evenings and weekends, to bore them with the intricate details of the hows and whys of the publishing industry, and then to fail - was not worth thinking about.

Some in the group disagreed.

‘Would you call yourself a writer?’ someone had once asked. ‘Even though you’re not published yet?’

‘Not me,’ said Kath.

‘Me neither,’ said Lucy. ‘It would be like, so fake.’

‘But why?’ Ben had argued. ‘If you play the piano for fun, a bit of Bach and Mozart, you call yourself a musician. If you hang your watercolours on the living room wall you call yourself a painter. Why shouldn’t we call ourselves writers?’

Peter had been embarrassed by the conversation. It went against the grain to be so aspirational. It smacked of an American type of forwardness, a modern but, to him, misplaced concept of self-esteem - that phrase so loved by social workers and self-help gurus - an idea that something wanted was the same thing as something

achieved. But it wasn't. Some people failed. Would-be writers too. It seemed more in character, perhaps more British, to hold off until the quarry was bagged.

And yet, as he waited for the yes-or-no from the agencies, as if his success were to be defined in these binary terms, by the flip of a reader's coin, the tension became unbearable. He expected the letters at any time. Every evening as he returned from work he would riffle through the mail, he would ask Janice and the children whether they had opened anything for him, or, worse, in the case of the children, used it for drawing or cutting and pasting. Every morning, as he left, he wondered whether his d-day had come. It was this tension, plus the two glasses of wine, that led him to let slip his news to the hangers-on at the pub.

'Well, you're the first,' said Shelley. 'The first to take the plunge.'

'I'm not sure I'd be brave enough,' said Virginia.

'Brave?'

'I'd be mortified by the rejections. I don't think I'd ever have the courage to open their letters.'

Peter did not tell her he felt the same dread, that opening the first letter had been exquisite torture. But as they finished their drinks and prepared to leave, she touched him on the arm and said again, 'I think what you've done is brilliant.'

'We'll all be doing it soon enough,' he said.

'That's for certain,' said Shelley. 'I mean, one of us must, must, *must* make it.'

'Make what?' said Virginia.

'Make it,' said Shelley. 'Get the agent, the deal, the Guardian review, the prize.'

'Get the megabucks,' said Peter. 'I hope Shelley's right. Someone in our writing group will surely do it.'

'Don't you think, Virginia?' said Shelley. 'One of us? Over the next year?'

'Why year?' said Virginia.

'Why not?' They gathered up jackets and scarves. Virginia still looked doubtful. 'Don't you agree?'

'You sound like Harriet,' she said. 'With her business plans, milestones, action points and ... all that nonsense.'

'Think of it like a ...' Shelley paused, perhaps as she searched for a better analogy.

'... a narrative arc?' said Peter.

Shelley turned to him. 'That's the one.' She reached across and patted him on the arm. 'Well, you've just fired the starting gun. Well done.'

And then she leaned over, put a hand on his shoulder, and kissed him on the cheek.

“... and the part that is original is not good.”

attrib. Samuel Johnson

There was a metallic rasping, the sound of envelopes fluttering, and two dull plops as one parcel and then another fell to the floor. Even upstairs everyone could hear it.

Sleep would be impossible now.

Peter pulled the duvet over his head, drew his knees up to his chest, and thought to himself that a mere sixty seconds ago he did not know what he knew now. Could he re-create that moment, that cosy warmth, could he re-think it into being? Just for a second or two?

Could he make what was, not?

Two minutes later, he felt small legs climbing onto the bed.

‘OK, Katie,’ said Janice at his side. ‘Mummy will be up in a moment.’

Another small head appeared round the door.

‘Daddy’s got two big letters,’ said Emily.

‘Daddy’s being a sleepy head,’ said Janice. ‘Come on, you horrors, let’s go make breakfast.’

Thank you for letting us see your material, which we have read and considered. Despite its qualities, it is not something we feel that we could successfully represent ...

Peter tensed as Janice rested a hand on his shoulder.

‘Here,’ she said, laying a mug of coffee on the table in front of him. ‘What does it say?’

‘Hmm. It’s not good’

His eyes moved down the page.

... Please note that this is a personal reaction ... and we wish you luck elsewhere.

He breathed in deeply. After a few seconds he picked up the second envelope and re-read the contents.

Please forgive this form letter. Due to the number of submissions we receive ...

‘Do you think they actually read it?’ said Janice.

... we regretfully consider this is not a project we could successfully handle ...

‘Here, look at this.’ Peter pointed at the last paragraph.

... and if you haven't yet seen Phyllida Fowst's SELL THAT BOOK! (£16.99 from most booksellers), you might wish to buy a copy from us for £12 inc postage and packing (£9.99 on Kindle). It tells everything you need to know about presenting your work to agents and publishers ...

‘The cheek,’ said Janice as she moved around the table.

He withdrew a fat pile of loose sheets from the crumpled brown paper.

‘Daddy, look at all those stamps,’ said Katie. ‘Can I keep them?’

He turned to the last page of the three sample chapters he had submitted and read the final few sentences. Sentences which he had believed - quite insanely - would leave readers thirsting for more. He looked up to catch Janice staring at him.

Later, as they unpacked the weekend's shopping from the back of the car, Janice broke the silence.

‘So how many replies have you had now?’

‘Two emails earlier in the week. And now these letters.’

‘Plus the one by return of post?’

‘A couple more still to go.’ He picked up the last of the bags.

‘You guessed it would be bad news, didn't you?’

They walked into the house.

‘What'll you do now?’ Janice continued as they drank tea at the kitchen table. The children played in the garden.

Peter sighed. ‘What do you think? Is my stuff any good? Really?’ He had shown his wife a full draft of his novel only a few weeks before. He had let her see the whole manuscript with a certain reluctance, a reluctance she seemed to share when it came to the reading. She told him it was pressure of work that prevented her from finishing it. Peter was, it pained him to admit, sceptical.

Yet a part of him was secretly thankful that it remained unread, or that if she had read it, had just skimmed. She had asked him the other night, as she so often did, why it was that he wrote. He thought but did not say, *I need to speak about the things I can't say to you*. And it came to him later, *And that truth is one of those things*. He wondered now whether this was apparent from a close reading of the text; or whether - more damningly - any presumed

psychological depth was not in fact there. Was his material shallow? Unengaging?

Janice said, 'You must persevere. Who was it - who's that boy-wizard woman - who had thirty rejections ...' Peter gritted his teeth as she spoke. '... before she got that first contract?'

She poured more tea, and then walked round the table, placed another cup in front of him, and started to rub his shoulders. 'What does your writers' group think?' she said.

He closed his eyes and imagined that it was Shelley applying the massage. His breathing slowed.

'Eh Peter? What do they think?'

He flexed his shoulder muscles and got up. 'I didn't actually tell them until last week.'

'Why not?' She looked quizzical. 'Isn't that what they're there for? To encourage, support? Provide the odd nudge in the right direction?'

He did not reply for a few moments. 'I've been telling them the last few months that it was still only in draft. That it still needed loads of editing.'

The kitchen door burst open. Katie and Emily charged in, ran around the kitchen table exactly two times, screamed at the top of their voices and ran out again.

'Hey,' Janice bawled. 'You two.'

Peter said, so quietly that she did not hear, 'Let them be.' *I like kids to be noisy*, he thought.

She turned back to him. Her scowl remained. 'Peter,' she said. 'You've never introduced me to the group.'

'You've never asked to meet them.' This was not strictly true. And he knew that even if it was, it was really up to him to extend the invitation.

'Are they ...' She scratched her head for a moment. 'Look, I don't mean to be rude. But are they any good?'

'What do you mean?'

'Are they really a help?'

'Of course they are.'

'You mean ... it's not just an excuse to get out the house and have a drink.'

'Janice.'

She looked at him. Her eyes narrowed. 'Why don't you do another course. Sharpen up your skills.'

‘The one I did was enough. Anyhow, that’s how the group came about.’

‘So? Is that an excuse?’

In a strange way he felt it was. ‘I’d have to leave the group.’

‘What? You make it sound like a marriage.’ Peter said nothing. Even he recognised the absurdity of the non-sequitur. ‘You’re not that close,’ she said. ‘Are you?’

He had met them at a Creative Writing lecture series held in a dingy hall with fiendishly uncomfortable wooden chairs and located somewhere off the campus of the London School of Economics. For two terms he had spent two hours of every Tuesday evening discussing such subjects as *Point-of-View*, *Show-not-Tell*, *The Secrets of Good Dialogue*.

Their tutor, whose careless appearance and sunken eyes rather belied the glamorous photograph Peter had spotted when googling the two minor novels she had written, was encouraging as they sipped a farewell glass in the pub to which they had all decamped after the last lecture. ‘Well, at least you lot can write,’ she told them. ‘That’s more than I can say for last year’s lot.’ There were twelve class members at the bar, all the attendees except one, but that pleased Peter as he did not have to make conversation with the class bore, someone who had on two occasions reduced a fellow student to tears with his clunking and quite misdirected criticism.

‘So what are you all going to do next?’ their tutor asked as she accepted a second glass of wine from Peter. ‘I mean, let me tell you, it’s a difficult game, getting published.’

‘In fact, a few of us plan to carry on meeting.’ Emails had been swapped the week before.

‘We’re forming a Writers’ Group.’

‘You can join us.’

‘Only if you want to, of course.’

‘We’re just amateurs, after all.’

‘Not that we wouldn’t welcome ...’

And so it began. Although their tutor declined the invitation, citing a battery of excuses not one of which implied that she was just glad to see the back of them.

They started meeting after the summer, and, as autumn and winter came and went and another spring arrived, numbers gradually got whittled down to eight. They rotated venue at each other’s homes, though they never met at Peter’s in Finchley - his house was not considered close enough to the centre of town - and

the routine had become well established. Two or three of them would submit samples of a couple of thousand words a few days before. During the meetings, which began at seven, the author would read a section and then they would discuss the emailed passages, up to one hour per author. After this they would retire to the pub to chat, sometimes about literature, more usually about anything and everything besides.

Some of them continued to do other classes. He knew this was true of Ben and Harriet. This seemed a bit sad to Peter. It wasn't as if he felt that there was nothing left to learn, it was more that there had to be some sense of progression, measurable over time, and it seemed defeatist to retrace old steps and repeat those tedious exercises the tutors loved to prescribe - *Describe a smell, Describe a room from childhood, Describe a moment of pleasure or pain*. The scales and arpeggios of writing, those tutors insisted. As Virginia remarked, Horowitz never practised, though perhaps she might have foreseen the class bore's riposte, that she was of course no Horowitz.

Instead of a further course he had set himself a timetable, precisely as Virginia had accused Harriet of doing, with milestones and critical-action-points, and whose final goal - publication - was to take place exactly two years after he first opened a document and typed his first word. But that two years was almost up, and he had no clear idea how long this whole process was going to last.

The day's rejection slips were not making this question any clearer.

'I want to meet them.' Janice prepared papers at his side for her case the next day. The television was off, the children in bed.

'Who?'

'The group. The writers' group.'

'Why?'

'Why not?' She turned to him. 'Are the girls good looking?'

Peter snorted. 'Average.'

'So what are they like? Tell me.'

'I don't know. Just ordinary people.'

'Ordinary?' She sighed.

'What's your case tomorrow?'

'You're changing the subject.'

'I'm serious.'

Janice sighed again. 'Assault charge. Nasty piece of work.'

‘Think you’ll get him?’

‘Depends on the jury. And my marvellous summing up, of course.’

‘I’m sure you will.’

‘You know, perhaps I should write a book. With my experience of the courts. What is it they say, *Write about what you know?*’

Peter turned away as he winced at the cliché. ‘My dear, I’m sure you could do a very fine novel.’ This was more than a casual compliment.

‘You think?’

In fact, he had seen a few of her written legal opinions, and they were fluent and, to him, a non-lawyer, free of unnecessary jargon. No purple prose. And it worried him just a touch that she might in fact make a better job of writing fiction than him. Despite his course. Despite his plan.

Despite the group.

Later. In bed. Peter had just switched off the lights.

‘I’m serious, you know.’

‘What?’ They lay side by side in the dark.

‘I’d like to meet them.’

‘Who?’

‘The group. Your blessed writing group.’

Peter turned over on to his side. He opened his eyes and stared into the pillow. ‘When I’m published,’ he whispered.

“Trust the tale, not the teller.”

DH Lawrence

‘Mate, she said she’s sorry.’

It has occurred to Tony once or twice in the past that Stan is a useful bloke to have around. Stan is talking now. His left hip leans into the bar, his arms are folded in front of him and his left foot is hooked around the right, while a young guy facing him flicks drops of liquid from a leather jacket. Megan is fumbling in her bag for tissues. Her glass is on its side, while the ice and lemon drain away onto a beer mat.

Tony has only been away for a couple of minutes, and already things are looking bad. At a cracked sink in the gents a tap with a bad case of the hiccups sprayed boiling water onto the crotch of his trousers. There had been no wipes, and the loo paper just seemed to make the stains worse. He had buttoned up his jacket, the grey one, the smartest one he’s got, to give himself some protection from people’s stares.

And now this.

‘Megan, what happened?’ he says.

‘Your bird needs to be a bit more careful,’ the guy in the leather jacket says.

‘I said -’ and Stan straightens up ‘- she’s sorry.’

‘Megan, let me get you another ...’ Tony says. His voice sounds squeaky.

‘Don’t worry, mate,’ Stan says. ‘Sorted.’ And already he has the barman’s attention. It had taken Tony five minutes to get served earlier.

‘Thanks, Stan,’ Megan says. ‘That’s really kind.’ She smiles sweetly. Tony does not like that smile. The guy in the leather jacket slouches off.

Two hours ago, he had high hopes for the evening. Megan, just started at school, is by common consent in the staff room the best looking of this year’s newbies - though Tony is careful not to take part in these conversations after the deputy head was heard to complain they were downright sexist. More important is she doesn’t yet know about Phoebe and the kids. Best not to talk about the ex at this stage of proceedings.

Tony is amazed as anyone that she accepted his invitation for a date. He has planned a quick drink, and later paella at that La Vieja Cabra just round the corner. But then, seven-fifteen, Stan had rung.

'Fancy a pint, mate?'

'Well, Stan, actually I'm meeting someone.'

'Bring him along.'

'Her, actually'

'Ooh, I see.'

Trouble is, Tony still owes Stan a tenner for that Moroccan blow. He finds he just can't get through the weekends these days without a bit of weed, especially now that he's lost the right to the kids Sundays. It's that bloody solicitor Phoebe is screwing.

So here they all are. 'Umm, Megan,' Tony says. But she is listening intently to Stan as he talks about his days as a Hell's Angel. 'Megan.' She looks vaguely annoyed as she turns to him. 'Time.' He taps his watch. 'The table's booked for eight-thirty.'

At that moment his head pitches forward into her blouse. His skull feels like it has been cracked open, and his ears are ringing. A second bottle lands close by and smashes on the floor. Over Megan's shoulder, in the mirror behind the bar, he sees the guy in the leather jacket propping the exit door open and lobbing things at them. He shouts, 'That's for fucking spilling your bird's drink over me.' A third bottle sprays beer over Tony's jacket as it hits his back. His head lurches forward again. 'Tony,' Megan screams.

The barman is out from behind his bar in a flash. Another bottle sails by. 'Cunts.' The kid scarpers. Megan looks horrified. He extricates himself from the contours of her perfumed silk and rubs the back of his head. 'What are you doing with your face in my chest?' she shrieks.

Stan is laughing. He thinks it's hilarious.

It's a disaster, Tony reflects. But at the same time he can't stop thinking about Megan's breasts.

Art breathed in. 'I think I'll leave it there,' he said.

'Carry on,' said Harriet. 'You've still got a page or two.'

'Nah.' Art was scribbling notes in the margin of his text. 'Anyway, it's crap.'

There was a rustling of pages and then a silence, which Virginia eventually interrupted.

'No. It's. Not.' She punctuated each word with a wave of her forefinger.

‘It’s good, Art,’ said Ben. ‘And ... it’s funny. Hard thing to do in fiction.’

‘One thing,’ said Peter. ‘Third para. You use the *pluperfect*. Yet you’re writing in the *historical present*. Do they really work together?’

‘What’s the pluperfect?’ said Lucy.

‘Look, can I say something?’ Kath spoke up. She sat right up close to Lucy. They were sharing the same manuscript. ‘Why do we read at all? I mean - nothing to do with your reading, Art, it’s great - but shouldn’t we have read the pieces beforehand?’

‘Yeah,’ said Ben. ‘We’d have more time for discussion.’

Harriet grimaced. ‘Sorry, sorry. I haven’t had a chance this week. Too busy.’

Peter looked up at Shelley who was running the fingers of her left hand through her hair as she scanned back through the text. He narrowed his eyes as he gazed, and then turned away sharply. *I’m ogling*, he thought. He felt he had to say something. ‘I don’t know. I just think ... -’ he improvised ‘- it gets us into the rhythm of the prose.’

‘But it’s the text that matters.’

‘It’s not just the text,’ said Shelley.

Peter said no more. In fact, the truth was he found the act of reading oddly soothing. He liked the sound of his own voice. And yet to say that would just come out so wrong.

‘The trouble is’ - Ben was speaking - ‘you mask the weaknesses. If a sentence doesn’t work, you unconsciously supply the emphasis to make it work.’

‘Well, have someone else read.’

‘I don’t want to read someone else’s stuff.’

‘I don’t want to read my stuff,’ said Art.

‘Hey, that’s ...’

‘... a bit extreme.’ Kath’s and Lucy’s voices echoed.

‘It just comes over as so crap,’ said Art. ‘Just so ... so ...’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘So what, Art?’ said Shelley.

‘So lightweight.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’ said Virginia. ‘Nothing wrong with lightweight. Think Wodehouse. Amis.’

‘Amis *Père*.’

‘Come on, that Wooster stuff’s not me.’ Art rubbed a hand over his close cropped head. ‘I’m more kebabs on the Old Kent Road.’

‘There’s humour to be found everywhere,’ said Ben. *How banal*, Peter thought, and he noticed Ben redden, as if he realised what he had said. Peter had to suppress a smile.

Art scowled. ‘There’s got to be something more. Some grit.’

‘Well ...’ Shelley was again twirling her hair through her fingers. ‘What’s it about? What’s the high-concept?’

‘You what?’

‘What are you writing about? Could you sell it to us in ten seconds.’

‘I’d bloody well need more than ten.’ Art scowled again. ‘It’s ... well it’s about redemption. Tony’s redemption. I know he comes across a bit of a klutz. And this thing with Megan looks as if it’s dead in the water. But she offers him - eventually - the possibility of retrieving something out of all the fuck-ups. Some shred of dignity.’

‘Good. That was brief enough,’ said Shelley. ‘And I’m sure the redemption bit will come out. We’re only on chapter three.’

‘What do the rest of you think?’ said Art. ‘Lucy? Kath?’

Peter saw Harriet frown. She was wearing her customary black business suit. She opened her bag and took out an elegant silver case. The act of extracting and then putting on her reading glasses was, he guessed, something of a defensive gesture. She had once confided to him that she was not especially fond of Art’s work. ‘Too blokey,’ she told him. ‘And that Tony. I just want to grab him and ... shake him.’ To an extent Peter agreed. It was not the kind of literature he himself would pick up at the local bookstore. Not that he ever bought anything except online these days.

And yet the prose had a certain easy readability. He had a suspicion that agents, fed up with the anguish and earnestness of so much that arrived on the slush pile, not least the stuff which might be submitted by some in this room, would sigh with relief at a few pages which, quite simply, made them giggle.

‘Kath? Lucy?’ Art said again.

‘I like it.’

‘It’s good.’

There was a pause. ‘Anything else?’ said Art.

‘Who says *bird* these days?’

‘Well, Kath, when I was a *nipper*, you took your *bird* to the *flicks* on a Saturday night. That of course may have been before you were born.’

Virginia was suppressing a smile. In fact, she was trying to recall what term, or terms, her sons used these days for the girls they

were chasing (and, a subsidiary question this, why was it that the Writers' Group led her so often to reflect on her family). She had been wondering to herself recently whether her younger son might - might, just possibly - be gay. How could one tell? It seemed to be one of those problems that parents, for the first time, in this generation, were forced to address as a matter of course. Would her parents or their parents have asked the question? And was she being prejudiced - she supposed there was an 'ism' of which she was guilty - was she being prejudiced by even considering it?

Was there someone she could ask? She began to think of a colleague of her ex-husband, one of the barristers at his chambers, a middle-aged man with a beautiful collection of suits. She remembered that it was known he shared a smart flat in Chelsea with his male companion, and yet this fact was simply taken as the state of affairs. She had of course met similar men, many of them valued friends, in the course of her charity work. But it would surely be indiscreet and forward to approach one of them. And what would they discuss? Whether the young man had a stash of Playboy magazines under his bed? Whether its absence proved something? And anyway all the pornography was on the internet these days. Or so she was told.

'Virginia?' Art was looking at her.

'Yes?'

'You were saying?'

'Was I?' And it came to her, with a faint and ghastly horror, that she must have been speaking her thoughts out loud. Was this incipient senility? 'So ...' she improvised, 'what do you call them these days?'

'Call what?'

'*Birds.*'

Lucy and Kath looked at each other, and then at Ben, as if the three were the group representatives not of a certain demographic but a separate species. As if the oldsters had stumbled into their midst rather as David Attenborough might chance upon a tribe of gorillas.

'Don't look at me,' said Ben. And, in an insight, it occurred to Virginia that he, Ben, might be the perfect person for that hypothetical conversation about her son.

'Well, would you chaps -' Art pointed at him and Kath and Lucy '- you three, would you ever read something like this if it wasn't for the group?'

‘Of course we would. Why shouldn’t we?’ said Kath.

‘You don’t think it’s too, well, old?’

‘In what sense old?’

‘Well ...’ Art got up, stretched, and began to pace around the room. He paused on every right step, as if there was some soreness there. ‘Does it seem written by old people? For old people? I mean, my mug’s never going to appear on *Hello* magazine. Is that a problem for anyone under thirty?’

Peter looked at him and then at Virginia. He wondered how they might appear on the back flap of a novel, and whether their mugshots might not be improved by some discreet photoshopping. For Art, a seventies rock star-turned-national treasure look, the type who receives the *Légion d’Honneur* in his dotage. In Virginia’s case, with her strong bone structure and managed grey hair, academic. Or, better, retired chief of MI5. ‘If it’s on looks alone,’ he said carelessly, ‘none of us here is going to land that publishing contract.’

‘Manners,’ said Virginia.

‘Thanks,’ said Kath. ‘That makes my day.’

‘You know how to charm the girls,’ said Harriet.

‘I’m sorry, I only meant ...’ Quite suddenly he felt ridiculous.

‘Anyway. Speak for yourself.’ Shelley was looking directly at him. She had a wide smile on her full lips.

Ridiculous, and in her case, of course, quite wrong.