

'Ballard's finest novel ... a triumph' *The Times*



JG BALLARD
HIGH-RISE

Introduction by Ned Beaman

J. G. BALLARD

High-Rise

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INTRODUCTION

BY NED BEAUMAN

In October 2013 the *Guardian* reported that everything had gone a bit *High-Rise* in a new housing development in Hayes, west London. The 600 flats at High Point Village, about half an hour up the M25 from J. G. Ballard's former home in Shepperton, are a mix of 'luxury' and 'affordable'. The two sorts are divided by gates. 'Tension came to a head in August after a disruption to the water supply left some residents in affordable homes without water for nearly two days. Some residents found an emergency hosepipe existed for the private homeowners only to be told it could not be used to temporarily supply affordable homes. Families claim that at one point they were reduced to filling up bottles from a decorative fountain at the entrance to the luxury housing area.'

To the disappointment of committed Ballardians, the feud didn't escalate any further. No one, as far as we know, was barbecuing Alsations on their balconies. High Point Village cannot quite validate the *Guardian's* original comment on *High-Rise*, which blares from the front cover of the 1975 paperback edition: 'A hideous warning.' Today, that would feel like an odd way to sell the book. Ballard's prescience is extraordinary – tipping Ronald Reagan for President in a 1967 short story, inventing Facebook in a 1977 *Vogue* essay – but a novel's predictive power is almost never the most interesting thing about it. I want to propose two readings of *High-Rise* here: the book is all about architecture; the book is not about architecture at all. And according to the latter, *High-Rise* is no more a 'warning' about barbarism in tower blocks than 1966's *The Crystal World* is a 'warning' about the African jungle freezing into crystal.

Yet it's true that this novel, more than any other of Ballard's early career, draws on what was actually going on in England at the time – the concrete tendencies, so to speak, of that country in the decade. In an interview with Jon Savage, Ballard connected the unnamed high-rise of *High-Rise* to Hulme Crescents in Manchester, the gargantuan housing development that had been ruled unfit for family occupation only two years after its construction. And Ballard's character Anthony Royal, the architect of the High Rise, surely has his basis in Ernő Goldfinger, the architect of Balfour Tower in Poplar and Trellick Tower in Kensington. Like Royal, Goldfinger anointed his own building by moving into its penthouse (although he quit Balfour Tower for a terraced house in Hampstead only two months later). And like Royal, Goldfinger was immanent in his creations, the man and the monument almost merging in the public imagination to the extent that an urban legend developed that Goldfinger had thrown himself from the top of Trellick Tower in despair at its failure.

Royal, Goldfinger and the more anonymous designers of Hulme Crescents are, of course, intellectual descendants of the French architect Le Corbusier, champion of the 'Radiant City' of high-tech modernist 'habitation units'. Le Corbusier promised a utopia, and in *High-Rise* Ballard gives us dystopia. But it would be a mistake to set Ballard and Le Corbusier entirely in opposition, because in fact they agree on a fundamental premise: that a new architecture can transform the moral and sentimental lives of human beings. As Ballard's character Robert Laing observes, 'a new social type was being created by the apartment building, a cool, unemotional personality impervious to the

psychological pressures of high-rise life.’

Forty years after Hulme Crescents, in our modern technocracy of think tanks and taskforces and ‘nudge units’, we tend to take this as a presupposition – that the place you live can change the way you behave. But it’s important to remember that most novelists are willing to permit this only within strict limits. In traditional literary fiction, you may be shaped by your worldly circumstances, but your fundamental moral soul remains intact and diamond-hard from your first breath to your last, and in the end it is this moral soul, good or evil or somewhere in between, that will guide your actions and determine your fate. If you’re too pliant in the grip of larger forces, then you certainly can’t be the protagonist of the story, because resisting larger forces is what protagonists are there for. Yet even the three main characters in *High-Rise* are perfectly happy to acknowledge that the responsibility for most of their actions lies with the building itself – this ‘huge animate presence, brooding over them and keeping a magisterial eye on the events taking place’ – or, in a broader sense, with high-rise living as a modern trend. Ballard’s casual deflation of human agency is one of his fiction’s most singular qualities. He told the *Paris Review* that his initial outline for *High-Rise* was ‘written in the form of a social worker’s report on the strange events that had taken place in this apartment block, an extended case history. I wish I’d kept it; I think it was better than the novel.’ A social worker’s report would allow for no protagonist, and perhaps no named individuals at all – the ultimate antidote to the conventional humanist chronicle.

Does the place you live really change the way you behave? A 2007 meta-study by Robert Gifford concluded that ‘children who live in high-rises have, on average, more behaviour problems. Residents in high-rises probably have fewer friendships in the buildings, and certainly help each other less. Crime and fear of crime probably are greater in high-rise buildings. A small proportion of suicides may be attributable to living in high-rises.’ So Laing may be correct that ‘people in high-rises tend not to care about tenants more than two floors below them’; take the example of High Point Village. And yet this is where we run up against the limitations of regarding *High-Rise* as a dispatch on twentieth-century urban life. When Ballard linked his *High-Rise* to Hulme Crescents, he must have been perfectly aware that there was a basic difference between the two: the former is intended for the rich, the latter for the poor. By setting his novel not in a council estate but a desirable, middle-class high-rise – regarded almost as a contradiction in terms in Britain at the time he was writing – Ballard was deliberately severing his tale from the reality of the Corbusian project.

‘The mutiny of these well-to-do professional people against the building they had collectively purchased,’ Royal claims, ‘was no different from the dozens of well-documented revolts by working-class tenants against municipal tower-blocks that had taken place at frequent intervals during the post-war years.’ Really? When a cheaply-constructed and badly-maintained ghetto for downtrodden families begins its collapse into squalor, no one can be too surprised. When a luxury condominium goes feral, that’s another story. Next to reality, *High-Rise* is like the account of a scientific experiment with a control group. The *High-Rise* and Hulme Crescents are comparable architecturally, but only Hulme Crescents is a locus of social neglect. If the *High-Rise* succeeds where Hulme Crescents fails, this proves that social neglect is the problem, not architecture; on the other hand, if they both fail in just the same way, this proves that the architecture is the problem, not social neglect. Is Ballard expecting us to find in the events of *High-Rise* a plausibility, even an inevitability? In which case we don’t have to wait for the *High-Rise* to be tested out in real life, because we already have such an irrefutable prophecy, a ‘terrible warning’, of what these rotten towers will do to us? Or, on the other hand, is he expecting us to recognise this case study as inherently preposterous? In which case we can

stop wringing our hands about the architecture, because our attempt to imagine how it might work for different social classes in identical ways has been enough to make vivid the impossibility of such an outcome?

Let's stop there. Clearly, even to pose such pedantic questions about this fangy and umbrous masterwork is to demonstrate the narrowness of reading it as a contribution to a specific debate in a specific time. As I said, *High-Rise* is all about architecture, but it's also not about architecture at all.

'In a sense,' Laing muses, 'life in the high-rise had begun to resemble the world outside – there were the same ruthlessness and aggression concealed within a set of polite conventions.' These things are universal. The inhabitants of the High-Rise descend into barbarism with such unbridled willingness – are we really to believe the same would not have happened if they'd all been living in nice maisonettes? In an interview with Travis Elborough, Ballard said that when he spent three years as a teenager in a Japanese internment camp he got 'a tremendous insight into what makes up human behaviour' when he saw the adults around him 'stripped of any kind of defence ... humiliated and frightened'. Arguably, *High-Rise* could just as well have been set in an internment camp, or for that matter a cruise ship or a medieval convent or any other self-contained community. Perhaps the bare corridors of the High-Rise are appropriate not so much for their specifically modernist quality, but quite the opposite – because they're so generic, so placeless, like a black box theatre. Throughout the book we have the sense that the concrete musculature of the building is beginning to dissolve, leaving behind only a sort of oneiric grid, 'less a habitable architecture ... than the unconscious diagram of a mysterious psychic event'.

On this reading, the High-Rise finds its closest analogues not in the housing developments of London and Manchester but rather in the existentialist purgatories of Samuel Beckett, whose great short story 'The Lost Ones' was first published in English in 1971, four years before *High-Rise*. 'The Lost Ones' describes, with the neutrality of a social worker's report, the nightmarish facts of daily life inside a fifty-foot cylinder so densely populated that there is 'one body per square metre of available surface', each inhabitant 'searching for its lost one. Vast enough for the search to be in vain. Narrow enough for flight to be in vain.' Just as the forty floors described in *High-Rise* are divided into three sections for 'the three classical social groups', the cylinder has 'three distinct zones separated by clear-cut mental or imaginary frontiers', and is 'doomed in a more or less distant future to a state of anarchy given over to fury of violence' when the social order breaks down.

I'm not proposing 'The Lost Ones' as a direct inspiration for *High-Rise*; my point is only that the latter novel could be stripped of all context, all names, all 'social comment', and it would be just as persuasive an account of the savage competition and futile endeavour that take up so much of our time on this earth. *High-Rise* is not a 'warning' of what could happen; it's an account of what does happen everywhere, all the time. We aren't literally drowning each other's dogs and ransacking each other's flats, so instead we wage quiet wars with fake smiles, or just repress and sublimate and fantasise. Ballard's novel externalises all that. In 2014, high-rise living is no longer a novelty in the UK. Londoners will read this book beneath a skyline sheenier than ever with notched glass, 500-foot tubes ready for the admixture of volatile chemicals. And so this book might seem to take on a renewed relevance. But in fact its relevance has never wavered and never will. Any time in human history that two or more households have tried to share the same space, they have lived in the High-Rise.

New York, 2014

1 Critical Mass

Later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months. Now that everything had returned to normal, he was surprised that there had been no obvious beginning, no point beyond which their lives had moved into a clearly more sinister dimension. With its forty floors and thousand apartments, its supermarket and swimming-pools, bank and junior school – all in effect abandoned in the sky – the high-rise offered more than enough opportunities for violence and confrontation. Certainly his own studio apartment on the 25th floor was the last place Laing would have chosen as an early skirmish-ground. This over-priced cell, slotted almost at random into the cliff face of the apartment building, he had bought after his divorce specifically for its peace, quiet and anonymity. Curiously enough, despite all Laing's efforts to detach himself from his two thousand neighbours and the régime of trivial disputes and irritations that provided their only corporate life, it was here if anywhere that the first significant event had taken place – on this balcony where he had squatted beside a fire of telephone directories, eating the roast hind-quarter of the Alsatian before setting off to his lecture at the medical school.

While preparing breakfast soon after eleven o'clock one Saturday morning three months earlier, Dr Laing was startled by an explosion on the balcony outside his living-room. A bottle of sparkling wine had fallen from a floor fifty feet above, ricocheted off an awning as it hurtled downwards, and burst across the tiled balcony floor.

The living-room carpet was speckled with foam and broken glass. Laing stood in his bare feet among the sharp fragments, watching the agitated wine seethe across the cracked tiles. High above him, on the 31st floor, a party was in progress. He could hear the sounds of deliberately over-animated chatter, the aggressive blare of a record-player. Presumably the bottle had been knocked over the rail by a boisterous guest. Needless to say, no one at the party was in the least concerned about the ultimate destination of this missile – but as Laing had already discovered, people in high-rises tend not to care about tenants more than two floors below them.

Trying to identify the apartment, Laing stepped across the spreading pool of cold froth. Sitting there, he might easily have found himself with the longest hangover in the world. He leaned out over the rail and peered up at the face of the building, carefully counting the balconies. As usual, though the dimensions of the forty-storey block made his head reel. Lowering his eyes to the tiled floor, he steadied himself against the door pillar. The immense volume of open space that separated the building from the neighbouring high-rise a quarter of a mile away unsettled his sense of balance. At times he felt that he was living in the gondola of a ferris wheel permanently suspended three hundred feet above the ground.

None the less, Laing was still exhilarated by the high-rise, one of five identical units in the development project and the first to be completed and occupied. Together they were set in a million square area of abandoned dockland and warehousing along the north bank of the river. The five high-rises stood on the eastern perimeter of the project, looking out across an ornamental lake – at present an empty concrete basin surrounded by parking-lots and construction equipment. On the opposite shore stood the recently completed concert-hall, with Laing's medical school and the new television studios on either side. The massive scale of the glass and concrete architecture, and its striking

situation on a bend of the river, sharply separated the development project from the rundown area around it, ~~decaying nineteenth-century terraced houses and empty factories already zoned for~~ reclamation.

For all the proximity of the City two miles away to the west along the river, the office buildings of central London belonged to a different world, in time as well as space. Their glass curtain-walling and telecommunication aerials were obscured by the traffic smog, blurring Laing's memories of the past. Six months earlier, when he had sold the lease of his Chelsea house and moved to the security of the high-rise, he had travelled forward fifty years in time, away from crowded streets, traffic hold-ups and rush-hour journeys on the Underground to student supervisions in a shared office in the old teaching hospital.

Here, on the other hand, the dimensions of his life were space, light and the pleasures of a subtle kind of anonymity. The drive to the physiology department of the medical school took him five minutes, and apart from this single excursion Laing's life in the high-rise was as self-contained as the building itself. In effect, the apartment block was a small vertical city, its two thousand inhabitants boxed up into the sky. The tenants corporately owned the building, which they administered themselves through a resident manager and his staff.

For all its size, the high-rise contained an impressive range of services. The entire 10th floor was given over to a wide concourse, as large as an aircraft carrier's flight-deck, which contained a supermarket, bank and hairdressing salon, a swimming-pool and gymnasium, a well-stocked liquor store and a junior school for the few young children in the block. High above Laing, on the 35th floor was a second, smaller swimming-pool, a sauna and a restaurant. Delighted by this glut of conveniences, Laing made less and less effort to leave the building. He unpacked his record collection and played himself into his new life, sitting on his balcony and gazing across the parking-lots and concrete plazas below him. Although the apartment was no higher than the 25th floor, he felt for the first time that he was looking down at the sky, rather than up at it. Each day the towers of central London seemed slightly more distant, the landscape of an abandoned planet receding slowly from his mind. By contrast with the calm and unencumbered geometry of the concert-hall and television studios below him, the ragged skyline of the city resembled the disturbed encephalograph of an unresolved mental crisis.

The apartment had been expensive, its studio living-room and single bedroom, kitchen and bathroom dovetailed into each other to minimize space and eliminate internal corridors. To his sister Alice Frobisher, who lived with her publisher husband in a larger apartment three floors below, Laing had remarked, 'The architect must have spent his formative years in a space capsule – I'm surprised the walls don't curve ...'

At first Laing found something alienating about the concrete landscape of the project – a architecture designed for war, on the unconscious level if no other. After all the tensions of his divorce, the last thing he wanted to look out on each morning was a row of concrete bunkers.

However, Alice soon convinced him of the intangible appeal of life in a luxury high-rise. Seven years older than Laing, she made a shrewd assessment of her brother's needs in the months after her divorce. She stressed the efficiency of the building's services, the total privacy. 'You could be alone here, in an empty building – think of *that*, Robert.' She added, illogically, 'Besides, it's full of the kind of people you ought to meet.'

Here she was making a point that had not escaped Laing during his inspection visits. The two

thousand tenants formed a virtually homogeneous collection of well-to-do professional people – lawyers, doctors, tax consultants, senior academics and advertising executives, along with a smaller group of airline pilots, film-industry technicians and trios of air-hostesses sharing apartments. By the usual financial and educational yardsticks they were probably closer to each other than the members of any conceivable social mix, with the same tastes and attitudes, fads and styles – clearly reflected in the choice of automobiles in the parking-lots that surrounded the high-rise, in the elegant but somehow standardized way in which they furnished their apartments, in the selection of sophisticated foods in the supermarket delicatessen, in the tones of their self-confident voices. In short, they constituted the perfect background into which Laing could merge invisibly. His sister's excited vision of Laing alone in an empty building was closer to the truth than she realized. The high-rise was a huge machine designed to serve, not the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation. Its staff of air-conditioning conduits, elevators, garbage-disposal chutes and electrical switching systems provided a never-failing supply of care and attention that a century earlier would have needed an army of tireless servants.

Besides all this, once Laing had been appointed senior lecturer in physiology at the new medical school, the purchase of an apartment nearby made sense. It helped him as well to postpone once again any decision to give up teaching and take up general practice. But as he told himself, he was still waiting for his real patients to appear – perhaps he would find them here in the high-rise. Rationalizing his doubts over the cost of the apartment, Laing signed a ninety-nine-year lease and moved into his one-thousandth share of the cliff face.

The sounds of the party continued high over his head, magnified by the currents of air that surged erratically around the building. The last of the wine rilled along the balcony gutter, sparkling its way into the already immaculate drains. Laing placed his bare foot on the cold tiles and with his thumb detached the label from its glass fragment. He recognized the wine immediately, a brand of expensive imitation champagne that was sold pre-chilled in the 10th-floor liquor store and was its most popular line.

They had been drinking the same wine at Alice's party the previous evening, in its way as confusing an affair as the one taking place that moment over his head. Only too keen to relax after demonstrating all afternoon in the physiology laboratories, and with an eye on an attractive fellow guest, Laing had inexplicably found himself in a minor confrontation with his immediate neighbours on the 25th floor: an ambitious young orthodontic surgeon named Steele and his pushy fashion-consultant wife. Half-way through a drunken conversation Laing had suddenly realized that he had managed to offend them deeply over their shared garbage-disposal chute. The two had cornered Laing behind his sister's balcony where Steele fired a series of pointed questions at him, as though seriously disturbed by a patient's irresponsible attitude towards his own mouth. His slim face topped by a centre parting – always a clear indication to Laing of some odd character strain – pressed ever closer, and he half-expected Steele to ram a metal clamp or retractor between his teeth. His intense, glamorous wife followed up the attack in some way challenged by Laing's offhand manner, his detachment from the serious business of living in the high-rise. Laing's fondness for pre-lunch cocktails, his nude sunbathing on the balcony and his generally raffish air obviously unnerved her. She clearly felt that at the age of thirty Laing should have been working twelve hours a day in a fashionable consultancy, and be in every way as respectably self-aggrandizing as her husband. No doubt she regarded Laing as some kind of interned escapee from the medical profession, with a secret tunnel into a less responsible world.

This low-level bickering surprised Laing, but after his arrival at the apartment building he soon recognized the extraordinary number of thinly veiled antagonisms around him. The high-rise had a second life of its own. The talk at Alice's party moved on two levels – never far below the froth of professional gossip was a hard mantle of personal rivalry. At times he felt that they were all waiting for someone to make a serious mistake.

After breakfast, Laing cleared the glass from the balcony. Two of the decorative tiles had been cracked. Mildly irritated, Laing picked up the bottle neck, still with its wired cork and foil in place, and tossed it over the balcony rail. A few seconds later he heard it shatter among the cars parked below.

Pulling himself together, Laing peered cautiously over the ledge – he might easily have knocked someone's windscreen. Laughing aloud at this aberrant gesture, he looked up at the 31st floor. What were they celebrating at eleven-thirty in the morning? Laing listened to the noise mount as more guests arrived. Was this a party that had accidentally started too early, or one that had been going on all night and was now getting its second wind? The internal time of the high-rise, like an artificial psychological climate, operated to its own rhythms, generated by a combination of alcohol and insomnia.

On the balcony diagonally above him one of Laing's neighbours, Charlotte Melville, was setting out a tray of drinks on a table. Queasily aware of his strained liver, Laing remembered that at Alice's party the previous evening he had accepted an invitation to cocktails. Thankfully, Charlotte had rescued him from the orthodontic surgeon with the disposal-chute obsessions. Laing had been too drunk to get anywhere with this good-looking widow of thirty-five, apart from learning that she was a copywriter with a small but lively advertising agency. The proximity of her apartment, like her easy style, appealed to Laing, exciting in him a confusing blend of lechery and romantic possibility – as he grew older, he found himself becoming more romantic and more callous at the same time.

Sex was one thing, Laing kept on reminding himself, that the high-rise potentially provided an abundance. Bored wives, dressed up as if for a lavish midnight gala on the observation roof, hurried around the swimming-pools and restaurant in the slack hours of the early afternoon, or strolled arm-in-arm along the 10th-floor concourse. Laing watched them saunter past him with a fascinated but cautious eye. For all his feigned cynicism, he knew that he was in a vulnerable zone in this period soon after his divorce – one happy affair, with Charlotte Melville or anyone else, and he would slide straight into another marriage. He had come to the high-rise to get away from all relationships. Even his sister's presence, and the reminders of their high-strung mother, a doctor's widow slowly sliding into alcoholism, at one time seemed too close for comfort.

However, Charlotte had briskly put all these fears to rest. She was still preoccupied by her husband's death from leukaemia, her six-year-old son's welfare and, she admitted to Laing, her insomnia – a common complaint in the high-rise, almost an epidemic. All the residents he had met, on hearing that Laing was a physician, at some point brought up their difficulties in sleeping. At parties people discussed their insomnia in the same way that they referred to the other built-in design flaws of the apartment block. In the early hours of the morning the two thousand tenants subsided below the silent tide of Second.

Laing had first met Charlotte in the 35th-floor swimming-pool, where he usually swam, partly to be on his own, and partly to avoid the children who used the 10th-floor pool. When he invited her to

meal in the restaurant she promptly accepted, but as they sat down at the table she said pointedly 'Look, I only want to talk about myself.'

Laing had liked that.

At noon, when he arrived at Charlotte's apartment, a second guest was already present, a television producer named Richard Wilder. A thick-set, pugnacious man who had once been a professional rugby-league player. Wilder lived with his wife and two sons on the 2nd floor of the building. The noisy parties he held with his friends on the lower levels – airline pilots and hostesses sharing apartments – had already put him at the centre of various disputes. To some extent the irregular hours of the tenants on the lower levels had cut them off from their neighbours above. In an unguarded moment Laing's sister had whispered to him that there was a brothel operating somewhere in the high-rise. The mysterious movements of the air-hostesses as they pursued their busy social lives, particularly on the floors above her own, clearly unsettled Alice, as if they in some way interfered with the natural social order of the building, its system of precedences entirely based on floor-height. Laing had noticed that he and his fellow tenants were far more tolerant of any noise or nuisance from the floors above than they were from those below them. However, he liked Wilder, with his loud voice and rugby-scrum manners. He let a needed dimension of the unfamiliar into the apartment block. His relationship with Charlotte Melville was hard to gauge – his powerful sexual aggression was overlaid by a tremendous restlessness. No wonder his wife, a pale young woman with a postgraduate degree who reviewed children's books for the literary weeklies, seemed permanently exhausted.

As Laing stood on the balcony, accepting a drink from Charlotte, the noise of the party came down from the bright air, as if the sky itself had been wired for sound. Charlotte pointed to a fragment of glass on Laing's balcony that had escaped his brush.

'Are you under attack? I heard something fall.' She called to Wilder, who was lounging back in the centre of her sofa, examining his heavy legs. 'It's those people on the 31st floor.'

'Which people?' Laing asked. He assumed that she was referring to a specific group, a clique of over-aggressive film actors or tax consultants, or perhaps a freak aggregation of dipsomaniacs. But Charlotte shrugged vaguely, as if it was unnecessary to be more specific. Clearly some kind of demarcation had taken place in her mind, like his own facile identification of people by the floors on which they lived.

'By the way, what are we all celebrating?' he asked as they returned to the living-room.

'Don't you know?' Wilder gestured at the walls and ceiling. 'Full house. We've achieved critical mass.'

'Richard means that the last apartment has been occupied,' Charlotte explained. 'Incidentally, the contractors promised us a free party when the thousandth apartment was sold.'

'I'll be interested to see if they hold it,' Wilder remarked. Clearly he enjoyed running down the high-rise. 'The elusive Anthony Royal was supposed to provide the booze. You've met him, I think,' he said to Laing. 'The architect who designed our hanging paradise.'

'We play squash together,' Laing rejoined. Aware of the hint of challenge in Wilder's voice, he added, 'Once a week – I hardly know the man, but I like him.'

Wilder sat forward, cradling his heavy head in his fists. Laing noticed that he was continually touching himself, for ever inspecting the hair on his massive calves, smelling the backs of his scarring

hands, as if he had just discovered his own body. 'You're favoured to have met him,' Wilder said. 'I like to know why. An isolated character – I ought to resent him, but somehow I feel sorry for the man hovering over us like some kind of fallen angel.'

'He has a penthouse apartment,' Laing commented. He had no wish to become involved in any tangle of war over his brief friendship with Royal. He had met this well-to-do architect, a former member of the consortium which had designed the development project, during the final stages of Royal's recovery from a minor car accident. Laing had helped him to set up the complex callisthenics machine in the penthouse where Royal spent his time, the focus of a great deal of curiosity and attention. As everyone continually repeated, Royal lived 'on top' of the building, as if in some kind of glamorous shack.

'Royal was the first person to move in here,' Wilder informed him. 'There's something about him I haven't put my finger on. Perhaps even a sense of guilt – he hangs around up there as if he's waiting to be found out. I expected him to leave months ago. He has a rich young wife, so why stay on in this glorified tenement?' Before Laing could protest, Wilder pressed on. 'I know Charlotte has her reservations about life here – the trouble with these places is that they're not designed for children. The only open space turns out to be someone else's car-park. By the way, doctor, I'm planning to do a television documentary about high-rises, a really hard look at the physical and psychological pressures of living in a huge condominium such as this one.'

'You'll have a lot of material.'

'Too much, as always. I wonder if Royal would take part – you might ask him, doctor. As one of the architects of the block and its first tenant, his views would be interesting. Your own, too ...'

As Wilder talked away rapidly, his words over-running the cigarette smoke coming from his mouth, Laing turned his attention to Charlotte. She was watching Wilder intently, nodding at each of his points. Laing liked her determination to stick up for herself and her small son, her evident sanity and good sense. His own marriage, to a fellow physician and specialist in tropical medicine, had been a brief but total disaster, a reflection of heaven-only-knew what needs. With unerring judgment Laing had involved himself with this highly strung and ambitious young doctor, for whom Laing's refusal to give up teaching – in itself suspicious – and involve himself directly in the political aspects of preventive medicine had provided a limitless opportunity for bickering and confrontation. After only six months together she had suddenly joined an international famine-relief organization and left on a three-year tour. But Laing had made no attempt to follow her. For reasons he could not yet explain, he had been reluctant to give up teaching, and the admittedly doubtful security of being with students who were still almost his own age.

Charlotte, he guessed, would understand this. In his mind Laing projected the possible course of an affair with her. The proximity and distance which the high-rise provided at the same time, that neutral emotional background against which the most intriguing relationships might develop, had begun to interest him for its own sake. For some reason he found himself drawing back even within this still imaginary encounter, sensing that they were all far more involved with each other than they realized. An almost tangible network of rivalries and intrigues bound them together.

As he guessed, even this apparently casual meeting in Charlotte's apartment had been set up to test his attitude to the upper-level residents who were trying to exclude children from the 35th-floor swimming-pool.

'The terms of our leases guarantee us equal access to all facilities,' Charlotte explained. 'We've

decided to set up a parents' action group.'

'Doesn't that leave me out?'

'We need a doctor on the committee. The paediatric argument would come much more forcefully from you, Robert.'

'Well, perhaps ...' Laing hesitated to commit himself. Before he knew it, he would be a character in a highly charged television documentary, or taking part in a sit-in outside the office of the building manager. Reluctant at this stage to be snared into an inter-floor wrangle, Laing stood up and excused himself. As he left, Charlotte had equipped herself with a checklist of grievances. Sitting beside Wilder, she began to tick off the complaints to be placed before the building manager, like a conscientious teacher preparing the syllabus for the next term.

When Laing returned to his apartment, the party on the 31st floor had ended. He stood on his balcony in the silence, enjoying the magnificent play of light across the neighbouring block four hundred yards away. The building had just been completed, and by coincidence the first tenants were arriving on the very morning that the last had moved into his own block. A furniture pantechicon was backing into the entrance to the freight elevator, and the carpets and stereo-speakers, dressing-tables and bedside lamps would soon be carried up the elevator shaft to form the elements of a private world.

Thinking of the rush of pleasure and excitement which the new tenants would feel as they gazed out for the first time from their aerial ledge on the cliff face, Laing contrasted it with the conversation he had just heard between Wilder and Charlotte Melville. However reluctantly, he now had to accept something he had been trying to repress – that the previous six months had been a period of continuous bickering among his neighbours, of trivial disputes over the faulty elevators and air conditioning, inexplicable electrical failures, noise, competition for parking space and, in short, the host of minor defects which the architects were supposed specifically to have designed out of the over-priced apartments. The underlying tensions among the residents were remarkably strong, dampened down partly by the civilized tone of the building, and partly by the obvious need to make this huge apartment block a success.

Laing remembered a minor but unpleasant incident that had taken place the previous afternoon on the 10th-floor shopping concourse. As he waited to cash a cheque at the bank an altercation was going on outside the doors of the swimming-pool. A group of children, still wet from the water, were backing away from the imposing figure of a cost-accountant from the 17th floor. Facing him in the unequal contest was Helen Wilder. Her husband's pugnacity had long since drained any self-confidence from her. Nervously trying to control the children, she listened stoically to the accountant's reprimand, now and then making some weak retort.

Leaving the bank counter, Laing walked towards them, past the crowded check-out points of the supermarket and the lines of women under the driers in the hair-dressing salon. As he stood beside Mrs Wilder, waiting until she recognized him, he gathered that the accountant was complaining that her children, not for the first time, had been urinating in the pool.

Laing briefly interceded, but the accountant slammed away through the swing doors, confident that he had sufficiently intimidated Mrs Wilder to drive her brood of children away for ever.

'Thanks for taking my side – Richard was supposed to be here.' She picked a damp thread of hair out of her eyes. 'It's becoming impossible – we arrange set hours for the children but the adults com

anyway.’ She took Laing’s arm and squinted nervously across the crowded concourse. ‘Do you mind walking me back to the elevator? It must sound rather paranoid, but I’m becoming obsessed with the idea that one day we’ll be physically attacked ...’ She shuddered under her damp towel as she propelled the children forward. ‘It’s almost as if these aren’t the people who really live here.’

During the afternoon Laing found himself thinking of this last remark of Helen Wilder’s. Absurd though it sounded, the statement had a certain truth. Now and then his neighbours, the orthodontist, the surgeon and his wife, stepped on to their balcony and frowned at Laing, as if disapproving of the relaxed way in which he lay back in his reclining chair. Laing tried to visualize their life together – their hobbies, conversation, sexual acts. It was difficult to imagine any kind of domestic reality, as if the Steeles were a pair of secret agents unconvincingly trying to establish a marital role. By contrast Helen Wilder was real enough, but hardly belonged to the high-rise.

Laing lay back on his balcony, watching the dusk fall across the façades of the adjacent blocks. Their size appeared to vary according to the play of light over their surfaces. Sometimes, when he returned home in the evening from the medical school, he was convinced that the high-rise had managed to extend itself during the day. Lifted on its concrete legs, the forty-storey block appeared to be even higher, as if a group of off-duty construction workers from the television studios had casually added another floor. The five apartment buildings on the eastern perimeter of the mile-square project together formed a massive palisade that by dusk had already plunged the suburban streets behind them into darkness.

The high-rises seemed almost to challenge the sun itself – Anthony Royal and the architects who had designed the complex could not have foreseen the drama of confrontation each morning between these concrete slabs and the rising sun. It was only fitting that the sun first appeared between the legs of the apartment blocks, raising itself over the horizon as if nervous of waking this line of giant. During the morning, from his office on the top floor of the medical school, Laing would watch the shadows swing across the parking-lots and empty plazas of the project, sluice-gates opening to admit the day. For all his reservations, Laing was the first to concede that these huge buildings had won the attempt to colonize the sky.

Soon after nine o’clock that evening, an electrical failure temporarily blacked out the 9th, 10th and 11th floors. Looking back on this episode, Laing was surprised by the degree of confusion during the fifteen minutes of the blackout. Some two hundred people were present on the 10th-floor concourse and many were injured in the stampede for the elevators and staircases. A number of absurd but unpleasant altercations broke out in the darkness between those who wanted to descend to the apartments on the lower levels and the residents from the upper floors who insisted on escaping upwards into the cooler heights of the building. During the blackout two of the twenty elevators were put out of action. The air-conditioning had been switched off, and a woman passenger trapped in an elevator between the 10th and 11th floors became hysterical, possibly the victim of a minor sexual assault – the restoration of light in due course revealed its crop of illicit liaisons flourishing in the benevolent conditions of total darkness like a voracious plant species.

Laing was on his way to the gymnasium when the power failed. Uneager to join the mêlée on the concourse, he waited in a deserted classroom of the junior school. Sitting alone at one of the children’s miniature desks, surrounded by the dim outlines of their good-humoured drawings pinned

to the walls, he listened to their parents scuffling and shouting in the elevator lobby. When the light returned he walked out among the startled residents, and did his best to calm everyone down. He supervised the transfer of the hysterical woman passenger from the elevator to a lobby sofa. The heavy-boned wife of a jeweller on the 40th floor, she clung powerfully to Laing's arm, only releasing him when her husband appeared.

As the crowd of residents dispersed, their fingers punching the elevator destination buttons, Laing noticed that two children had sheltered during the blackout in another of the classrooms. They were standing now in the entrance to the swimming-pool, backing away defensively from the tall figure of the 17th-floor cost-accountant. This self-appointed guardian of the water held a long-handled pool skimmer like a bizarre weapon.

Angrily, Laing ran forward. But the children were not being driven from the pool. They stepped aside when Laing approached. The accountant stood by the water's edge, awkwardly reaching for the skimmer across the calm surface. At the deep end three swimmers, who had been treading water during the entire blackout, were clambering over the side. One of them, he noticed without thinking was Richard Wilder. Laing took the handle of the skimmer. As the children watched, he helped the accountant extend it across the water.

Floating in the centre of the pool was the drowned body of an Afghan hound.

2 Party Time

During these days after the drowning of the dog, the air of over-excitement within the high-rise gradually settled itself, but to Dr Laing this comparative calm was all the more ominous. The swimming-pool on the 10th floor remained deserted, partly, Laing assumed, because everyone felt that the water was contaminated by the dead Afghan. An almost palpable miasma hung over the slack water, as if the spirit of the drowned beast was gathering to itself all the forces of revenge and retribution present within the building.

On his way to the medical school a few mornings after the incident, Laing looked in at the 10th floor concourse. After booking a squash court for his weekly game that evening with Anthony Royce, he walked towards the entrance of the swimming-pool. He remembered the panic and stampede during the blackout. By contrast, the shopping mall was now almost empty, a single customer ordering his wines at the liquor store. Laing pushed back the swing doors and strolled around the pool. The changing cubicles were closed, the curtains drawn across the shower stalls. The official attendant, a retired physical-training instructor, was absent from his booth behind the diving-boards. Evidently the profanation of his water had been too much for him.

Laing stood by the tiled verge at the deep end, under the unvarying fluorescent light. Now and then the slight lateral movement of the building in the surrounding airstream sent a warning ripple across the flat surface of the water, as if in its pelagic deeps an immense creature was stirring in its sleep. He remembered helping the accountant to lift the Afghan from the water, and being surprised by its lightness. With its glamorous plumage drenched by the chlorinated water, the dog had lain like a large stoat on the coloured tiles. While they waited for the owner, a television actress on the 37th floor, to come down and collect the dog Laing examined it carefully. There were no external wounds or marks of restraint. Conceivably it had strayed from its apartment into a passing elevator and emerged on the shopping concourse during the confusion of the power failure, fallen into the swimming-pool and died there of exhaustion. But the explanation hardly fitted the facts. The blackout had lasted little more than fifteen minutes, and a dog of this size was powerful enough to swim for hours. Besides, it could simply have stood on its hind legs in the shallow end. But if it had been thrown into the pool and held below the water in the darkness by a strong swimmer ...

Surprised by his own suspicions, Laing made a second circuit of the pool. Something convinced him that the dog's drowning had been a provocative act, intended to invite further retaliation in its turn. The presence of the fifty or so dogs in the high-rise had long been a source of irritation. Almost all of them were owned by residents on the top ten floors – just as, conversely, most of the fifty children lived in the lower ten. Together the dogs formed a set of over-pampered pedigree pets whose owners were not noticeably concerned for their fellow tenants' comfort and privacy. The dogs barked around the car-parks when they were walked in the evening, fouling the pathways between the cars. On more than one occasion elevator doors were sprayed with urine. Laing had heard Helen Wilder complain that, rather than use their five high-speed elevators which carried them from a separate entrance lobby directly to the top floors, the dog-owners habitually transferred to the lower-level elevators, encouraging their pets to use them as lavatories.

This rivalry between the dog-owners and the parents of small children had in a sense already polarized the building. Between the upper and lower floors the central mass of apartments – roughly from the 10th floor to the 30th – formed a buffer state. During the brief interregnum after the dog

drowning a kind of knowing calm presided over the middle section of the high-rise, as if the residents had already realized what was taking place within the building.

Laing discovered this when he returned that evening from the medical school. By six o'clock the section of the parking-lot reserved for the 20th to the 25th floors would usually be full, forcing him to leave his car in the visitors' section three hundred yards from the building. Reasonably enough, the architects had zoned the parking-lots so that the higher a resident's apartment (and consequently the longer the journey by elevator), the nearer he parked to the building. The residents from the lower floors had to walk considerable distances to and from their cars each day – a sight not without its satisfaction, Laing had noticed. Somehow the high-rise played into the hands of the most petulant impulses.

That evening, however, as he reached the already crowded car-park, Laing was surprised by his fellow tenants' tolerant behaviour. He arrived at the same time as his neighbour Dr Steele. By right they should have raced each other for the last vacant place, and taken separate elevators to their floors. But tonight each beckoned the other forward in a show of exaggerated gallantry and waited while the other parked. They even walked together to the main entrance.

In the lobby a group of tenants stood outside the manager's office, remonstrating noisily with his secretary. The electrical supply system on the 9th floor was still out of order, and at night the floor was in darkness. Fortunately it was light until late in the summer evening, but the inconvenience to the fifty residents on the floor was considerable. None of the appliances in their apartments would function, and the limits of co-operation with their neighbours on the floors above and below had soon been reached.

Steele watched them unsympathetically. Although he was in his late twenties, his manner was already securely middle-aged. Laing found himself fascinated by his immaculate centre parting, almost an orifice.

'They're always complaining about something,' Steele confided to Laing as they stepped into an elevator. 'If it isn't this, it's that. They seem unwilling to accept that the services in a new building take time to settle down.'

'Still, it must be a nuisance to have no power.'

Steele shook his head. 'They persistently overload the master-fuses with their elaborate stereo systems and unnecessary appliances. Electronic baby-minders because the mothers are too lazy to get out of their easy chairs, special mashers for their children's food ...'

Laing waited for the journey to end, already regretting his new-found solidarity with his neighbour. For some reason, Steele made him nervous. Not for the first time, he wished he had purchased an apartment above the 30th floor. The high-speed elevators were bliss.

'The children here look well enough to me,' he remarked when they stepped out at the 25th floor.

The surgeon held his elbow in a surprisingly powerful grip. He smiled reassuringly, flashing his mouth like a miniature cathedral of polished ivory.

'Believe me, Laing. I see their teeth.'

The punitive tone in Steele's voice, as if he were describing a traditionally feckless band of migrant workers rather than his well-to-do neighbours, came as a surprise to Laing. He knew casually a few

the 9th floor residents – a sociologist who was a friend of Charlotte Melville’s, and an air-traffic controller who played string trios with friends on the 25th floor, an amusing and refined man to whom Laing often talked as he carried his cello into the elevator. But distance lent disenchantment.

The extent of this separation of loyalties was brought home to Laing when he set off to play squash with Anthony Royal. He took an elevator up to the 40th floor and, as usual, arrived ten minutes early so that he could go out on to the roof. The spectacular view always made Laing aware of his ambivalent feelings for this concrete landscape. Part of its appeal lay all too clearly in the fact that this was an environment built, not for man, but for man’s absence.

Laing leaned against the parapet, shivering pleasantly in his sports-clothes. He shielded his eyes from the strong air currents that rose off the face of the high-rise. The cluster of auditorium roof, curving roadway embankments and rectilinear curtain walling formed an intriguing medley of geometries – less a habitable architecture, he reflected, than the unconscious diagram of a mysterious psychic event.

Fifty feet away to Laing’s left a cocktail party was in progress. Two buffet tables covered with white cloths had been laid with trays of canapés and glasses, and a waiter was serving drinks behind a portable bar. Some thirty guests in evening dress stood about talking in small groups. For a few minutes Laing ignored them, absent-mindedly tapping his rackets case on the parapet, but something about the hard, over-animated chatter made him turn. Several of the guests were looking in his direction, and Laing was certain that they were talking about him. The party had moved nearer, and the closest guests were no more than ten feet away. All were residents from the top three floors. Even more unusual was the self-conscious formality of their dress. At none of the parties in the high-rise had Laing seen anyone dressed in anything other than casual wear, yet here the men wore dinner jackets and black ties, the women floor-length evening dresses. They carried themselves in a purposeful way, as if this were less a party than a planning conference.

Almost within arm’s reach, the immaculate figure of a well-to-do art dealer was squaring up to Laing, the lapels of his dinner-jacket flexing like an over-worked bellows. On either side of him were the middle-aged wives of a stock-exchange jobber and a society photographer, staring distastefully at Laing’s white sports-clothes and sneakers.

Laing picked up his rackets case and towel bag, but his way to the staircase was blocked by the people around him. The entire cocktail party had moved along the roof, and the waiter now stood alone between the bar and the buffet tables.

Laing leaned against the parapet, for the first time conscious of the immense distance to the ground below. He was encircled by a heavily breathing group of his fellow residents, so close that he could smell the medley of expensive scents and after-shaves. He was curious as to what exactly they were going to do, but at the same time was aware that at any moment a meaningless act of violence might occur.

‘Dr Laing...Ladies, would you release the doctor?’ At what seemed the last moment, a familiar figure with adroit hands and a soft walk called out reassuringly. Laing recognized the jeweller whose hysterical wife he had briefly examined during the power failure. As he greeted Laing the guests casually dispersed, like a group of extras switched to another scene. Without thinking, they strolled back to their drinks and canapés.

‘Was it fortunate that I arrived?’ The jeweller peered at Laing, as if puzzled by his presence in the private domain. ‘You’re here to play squash with Anthony Royal? I’m afraid he’s decided to decline

He added, as much to himself as to Laing. ‘My wife should have been here. She was treated appallingly, you know – they were like animals ...’

Slightly shaken, Laing accompanied him to the stairway. He looked back at the cocktail party, with its well-bred guests, uncertain whether he had imagined the imminent attack on him. After all, what could they have actually done – hardly tossed him over the edge?

As he pondered this, he noticed a familiar pale-haired figure in a white safari-jacket standing with one hand on the callisthenics machine in the penthouse overlooking the northern end of the roof. Resting at his feet was Royal’s Alsatian with its arctic coat, without doubt the premier dog in the high-rise. Making no attempt to hide himself, Anthony Royal was watching Laing with a thoughtful gaze. As always, his expression was an uneasy mixture of arrogance and defensiveness, as if he were all too aware of the built-in flaws of this huge building he had helped to design, but was determined to out-stare any criticism, even at the price of theatrical gestures such as the Alsatian and his white-hunter jacket. Although he was over fifty, his shoulder-length fair hair made him look uncannily youthful, as if the cooler air at these great heights had somehow preserved him from the ordinary processes of ageing. His bony forehead, still marked by the scars of his accident, was tilted to one side, and he seemed to be checking that an experiment he had set up had now been concluded.

Laing raised one hand and signalled to him as the jeweller ushered him briskly below, but Royal made no reply. Why had he not cancelled their squash game by telephone? For a moment Laing was certain that Royal had deliberately let him come up to the roof, knowing that the party was in progress, simply out of interest in the guests’ reactions and behaviour.

The next morning Laing rose early, eager to get on. He felt fresh and clear-headed, but without realizing why he decided to take the day off. Promptly at nine, after pacing about for two hours, he telephoned his secretary at the medical school and postponed that afternoon’s supervision. When she expressed regret at Laing’s illness he brushed this aside. ‘It’s all right, I’m not ill. Something important has come up.’

What? Puzzled by his own behaviour, Laing wandered around the small apartment. Charlotte Melville was also at home. She was dressed for the office in a formal business suit, but made no attempt to leave. She invited Laing over for coffee, but when he arrived an hour later she absently-mindedly handed him a glass of sherry. His visit, Laing soon discovered, was a pretext for him to examine her son. The boy was playing in his room, but according to Charlotte was not feeling well enough to go to the junior school on the 10th floor. Annoyingly, the young sister of an airline pilot whose wife on the 1st floor had declined to baby-sit.

‘It’s a nuisance, she’s usually only too keen. I’ve relied on her for months. She sounded rather vague on the phone, as if she was being evasive ...’

Laing listened sympathetically, wondering whether he should volunteer to look after the child. But there was no hint of this in Charlotte’s voice. Playing with the boy, Laing realized that there was nothing wrong with him. Lively as ever, he asked his mother if he could go to his 3rd-floor playground that afternoon. Without thinking, she refused. Laing watched her with growing interest. Like himself, Charlotte was waiting for something to happen.

They did not have long to wait. In the early afternoon the first of a fresh series of provocations took

place between the rival floors, setting in motion again the dormant machinery of disruption and hostility. The incidents were trivial enough, but Laing knew already that they reflected deep-rooted antagonisms that were breaking through the surface of life within the high-rise at more and more points. Many of the factors involved had long been obvious – complaints about noise and the abuse of the building's facilities, rivalries over the better-sited apartments (those away from elevator lobbies and the service shafts, with their eternal rumbling). There was even a certain petty envy of the more attractive women who were supposed to inhabit the upper floors, a widely held belief that Laing had enjoyed testing. During the electricity blackout the eighteen-year-old wife of a fashion photographer on the 38th floor had been assaulted in the hairdressing salon by an unknown woman. Presumably in retaliation, three air-hostesses from the 2nd floor were aggressively jostled by a party of marauding top-floor matrons led by the strong-shouldered wife of the jeweller.

Watching from Charlotte's balcony, Laing waited as the first of these incidents took place. Standing there with a pretty woman, a drink in one hand, he felt pleasantly light-headed. Below them, on the 9th floor, a children's party was in full swing. The parents made no attempt to restrain their offspring, in effect urging them to make as much noise as possible. Within half an hour, fuelled by a constant flow of alcohol, the parents took over from their children. Charlotte laughed openly as soft drinks were poured on to the cars below, drenching the windscreens and roofs of the expensive limousines and sports saloons in the front ranks.

These lively proceedings were watched by hundreds of residents who had come out on to the balconies. Playing up to their audience, the parents egged on their children. The party was soon out of control. Drunken children tottered about helplessly. High above them, on the 37th floor, a woman barrister began to shout angrily, outraged by the damage to her open-topped sports-car, whose black leather seats were covered with melting ice-cream.

A pleasant carnival atmosphere reigned. At least it made a change, Laing felt, from the former behaviour of the high-rise. Despite themselves, he and Charlotte joined in the laughter and applause as if they were spectators at an impromptu amateur circus.

A remarkable number of parties were being held that evening. Usually, few parties took place other than at weekends, but on this Wednesday evening everyone was involved in one revel or another. Telephones rang continuously, and Charlotte and Laing were invited to no less than six separate parties.

'I ought to get my hair done.' Charlotte took his arm happily, almost embracing Laing. 'What exactly are we celebrating?'

The question surprised Laing. He held Charlotte's shoulder, as if protecting her. 'God only knows – nothing to do with fun and games.'

One of the invitations had come from Richard Wilder. Instantly, both he and Charlotte declined.

'Why did we refuse?' Charlotte asked, her hand still on the receiver. 'He was expecting us to say no.'

'The Wilders live on the 2nd floor,' Laing explained. 'Things *are* rather rowdy down there ...'

'Robert, that's a rationalization.'

Behind Charlotte, as she spoke, her television set was showing the newsreel of an attempted prison break-out. The sound had been turned down, and the silent images of crouching warders and policemen and the tiers of barricaded cells, flickered between her legs. Everyone in the high-rise, Laing reflected,

watched television with the sound down. The same images glowed through his neighbours' doorway when he returned to his apartment. For the first time, people were leaving their front doors ajar and moving casually in and out of each other's apartments.

However, these intimacies did not extend beyond each resident's immediate floor. Elsewhere the polarization of the building proceeded apace. Finding that he had run out of liquor, Laing took the elevator down to the 10th-floor concourse. As he expected, there was a heavy run on alcohol, and long lines of impatient residents stood outside the liquor store. Seeing his sister Alice near the counter, Laing tried to enlist her help. Without hesitating, she turned him down, and promptly launched into a vigorous denunciation of the tomfoolery that afternoon. In some way she clearly associated Laing with the lower-floor tenants responsible, identifying him with Richard Wilder and his rowdies.

As Laing waited to be served, what resembled a punitive expedition from the upper floors caused a fracas in the swimming-pool. A party of residents from the top three floors arrived in a belligerent mood. Among them was the actress whose Afghan hound had drowned in the pool. She and her companions began by fooling about in the water, drinking champagne on a rubber raft against the swimming-pool rules and splashing people leaving the changing cubicles. After a futile attempt to intercede, the elderly attendant gave up and retreated to his booth behind the diving-boards.

The elevators were full of aggressive pushing and heaving. The signal buttons behaved erratically and the elevator shafts drummed as people pounded impatiently on the doors. On their way to a party on the 27th floor Laing and Charlotte were jostled when their elevator was carried down to the 3rd floor by a trio of drunken pilots. Bottles in hand, they had been trying for half an hour to reach the 10th floor. Seizing Charlotte good-humouredly around the waist, one of the pilots almost dragged her off to the small projection theatre beside the school which had previously been used for showing children's films. The theatre was now screening a private programme of blue movies, including one apparently made on the premises with locally recruited performers.

At the party on the 27th floor, given by Adrian Talbot, an effeminate but likeable psychiatrist at the medical school, Laing began to relax for the first time that day. He noticed immediately that all the guests were drawn from the apartments nearby. Their faces and voices were reassuringly familiar. In this sense, as he remarked to Talbot, they constituted the members of a village.

'Perhaps a clan would be more exact,' Talbot commented. 'The population of this apartment block is nowhere near so homogeneous as it looks at first sight. We'll soon be refusing to speak to anyone outside our own enclave.' He added, 'My car had its windscreen smashed this afternoon by a falling bottle. Could I move it back to where you people are?' As a qualified physician, Talbot was entitled to park in the ranks closest to the building. Laing, perhaps anticipating the dangers of proximity, had never made use of this concession. The psychiatrist's request was instantly granted by his fellow residents, an appeal to solidarity that no member of his clan could deny.

The party was one of the most successful Laing had attended. Unlike the majority of parties in the high-rise, at which well-bred guests stood about exchanging professional small-talk before excusing themselves, this one had real buoyancy, an atmosphere of true excitement. Within half an hour almost all the women were drunk, a yardstick Laing had long used to measure the success of a party.

When he complimented Talbot the psychiatrist was noncommittal. 'There's a quickening pulse in the air, all right, but has it anything to do with good humour or fellow-feeling? Rather the opposite, I'd guess.'

'You're not concerned?'

For some reason, less than I should be – but that’s true of us all.’

These agreeably expressed remarks cautioned Laing. Listening to the animated conversation around him, he was struck by the full extent of the antagonism being expressed, the hostility directed at people who lived in other sections of the high-rise. The malicious humour, the eagerness to believe any piece of gossip and any tall story about the shift-lessness of the lower-floor tenants, or the arrogance of the upper-floor, had all the intensity of racial prejudice.

But as Talbot had pointed out, Laing found himself un-worried by all this. He even took a certain crude pleasure in joining in the gossip, and in watching the usually circumspect Charlotte Melville pounce down several more than two drinks too many. At least it was a means by which they could reach each other.

However, as the party broke up a small but unpleasant episode took place outside the elevator door in the 27th-floor lobby. Although it was after ten o’clock, the entire building was alive with noise. Residents were barging in and out of each other’s apartments, shouting down the staircases like children refusing to go to bed. Confused by the endless button-punching, the elevators had come to a halt, and gangs of impatient passengers packed the lobbies. Although their next destination, a party given by a lexicographer on the 26th floor, was only one storey below them, everyone leaving Talbot’s party was determined not to use the stairs. Even Charlotte, face flushed and tottering happily on Laing’s arm, joined in the wild surge across the elevator lobby and drummed on the doors with her strong fists.

When at last an elevator arrived, the doors opened to reveal a solitary passenger, a thin-shouldered and neurasthenic young masseuse who lived with her mother on the 5th floor. Laing immediately recognized her as one of the ‘vagrants’, of whom there were many in the high-rise, bored apartment-bound housewives and stay-at-home adult daughters who spent a large part of their time riding the elevators and wandering the long corridors of the vast building, migrating endlessly in search of change or excitement.

Alarmed by the drunken crowd reeling towards her, the young woman snapped out of her reverie and pressed a button at random. A derisory hoot went up from the swaying guests. Within seconds she was pulled from the elevator and put through a mock-playful grilling. A statistician’s over-excited wife shouted at the hapless girl in a shrill voice, pushed a strong arm through the front rank of interrogators and slapped her face.

Pulling himself away from Charlotte, Laing stepped forward. The crowd’s mood was unpleasant but difficult to take seriously. His neighbours were like a group of unrehearsed extras playing a lynching scene.

‘Come on – I’ll see you to the stairs.’ Holding the young woman by her thin shoulders, he tried to steer her towards the door, but there was a chorus of sceptical shouts. The women among the guests pushed aside their husbands and began to punch the girl on the arms and chest.

Giving up, Laing stood to one side. He watched as the shocked young woman stumbled into the mouth of this eager gauntlet and was pummelled through a circuit of fists before she was allowed to disappear into the stairwell. His reflex of chivalry and good sense had been no match for this posse of middle-aged avenging angels. Uneasily, he thought: careful, Laing, or some stockbroker’s wife will unman you as expertly as she de-stones a pair of avocados.

The night passed noisily, with constant movement through the corridors, the sounds of shouts and breaking glass in the elevator shafts, the blare of music failing across the dark air.

3 Death of a Resident

A cloudless sky, as dull as the air over a cold vat, lay across the concrete walls and embankments of the development project. At dawn, after a confused night, Laing went out on to his balcony and looked down at the silent parking-lots below. Half a mile to the south, the river continued on its usual course from the city, but Laing searched the surrounding landscape, expecting it to have changed in some radical way. Wrapped in his bath-robe, he massaged his bruised shoulders. Although he had failed to realize it at the time, there had been a remarkable amount of physical violence during the parties. He touched the tender skin, prodding the musculature as if searching for another self, the physiologist who had taken a quiet studio in this expensive apartment building six months earlier. Everything had started to get out of hand. Disturbed by the continuous noise, he had slept for little more than an hour. Although the high-rise was silent, the last of the hundred or so separate parties held in the building had ended only five minutes beforehand.

Far below him, the cars in the front ranks of the parking-lot were spattered with broken eggs, wine and melted icecream. A dozen windscreens had been knocked out by falling bottles. Even at this early hour, at least twenty of Laing's fellow residents were standing on their balconies, gazing down at the debris gathering at the cliff-foot.

Unsettled, Laing prepared breakfast, absent-mindedly pouring away most of the coffee he had percolated before he tasted it. With an effort he reminded himself that he was due to demonstrate in the physiology department that morning. Already his attention was fixed on the events taking place within the high-rise, as if this huge building existed solely in his mind and would vanish if he stopped thinking about it. Staring at himself in the kitchen mirror, at his wine-stained hands and unshaven face, with its surprisingly good colour, he tried to switch himself on. For once, Laing, he told himself, figure your way out of your own head. The disturbing image of the posse of middle-aged women beating up the young masseuse anchored everything around him to a different plane of reality. His own reaction – the prompt side-step out of their way – summed up more than he realized about the progress of events.

At eight o'clock Laing set off for the medical school. The elevator was filled with broken glass and beer cans. Part of the control panel had been damaged in an obvious attempt to prevent the lower floors signalling the car. As he walked across the parking-lot Laing looked back at the high-rise, aware that he was leaving part of his mind behind him. When he reached the medical school he walked through the empty corridors of the building, with an effort re-establishing the identity of the offices and lecture theatres. He let himself into the dissecting rooms of the anatomy department and walked down the lines of glass-topped tables, staring at the partially dissected cadavers. The steady amputation of limbs and thorax, head and abdomen by teams of students, which would reduce each cadaver by term's end to a clutch of bones and a burial tag, exactly matched the erosion of the world around the high-rise.

During the day, as Laing took his supervision and lunched with his colleagues in the refectory, he thought continually about the apartment building, a Pandora's box whose thousand lids were one by one inwardly opening. The dominant tenants of the high-rise, Laing reflected, those who had adapted most successfully to life there, were not the unruly airline pilots and film technicians from the lower floors, nor the bad-tempered and aggressive wives of the well-to-do tax specialists on the upper levels. Although at first sight these people appeared to provoke all the tension and hostility, those real

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