
nico
the end



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PREFACE

Nico

The Gr newald-Forst cemetery is situated on the outskirts of Berlin, by the Wannsee Lake. In twentieth-century consciousness Berlin has been synonymous with a kind of claustrophobic angst, a landlocked Madagascar of bizarre hybrids. So it's strange that Nico should be buried in a pretty almost rural setting, within the perimeters of a city renowned for its monsters, but one for which she no longer felt much affinity.

Like many of her generation, born shortly before or during the war, she felt, at best, an uneasiness towards her country and its guilty past. She no longer saw herself as specifically German. She spoke English. She dreamt in English. She sang, mostly, in English. And although it saddened her to see the country divided geographically and politically, she never liked to stay there very long. Now she's a permanent resident.

From the start, Nico seemed destined for a life of strange tensions and weird scenes. Her father came from a rich background, her mother from a humble one. Needless to say, his family deemed it an unsuitable match. Nico was born Christa Paffgen in Cologne on October 16, 1938. Her father insisted on her being brought up a Catholic, with all the attendant mysteries and miseries.

When the war began, Nico's father was conscripted. He was apparently a poor soldier, unable to respond with convincing obedience to the military and ideological discipline of the Third Reich. In 1943 Nico's mother received a letter informing her that he'd been wounded in the head and had been taken to a military hospital. His injury resulted in brain damage, and he had become subject to bouts of insanity. The Nazi authorities had one simple, expedient solution for the treatment of the mentally ill – extermination.

Nico and her mother then moved to Berlin to stay with her aunt, but the Allied bombing was so intense they sought refuge with Nico's grandfather, a railway man, in Lubbenau – about nine kilometres east of Berlin. There Nico would play with her cousin in the local graveyard and watch the trains (those trains?) go by. At night she could see the burning red sky of Berlin in the distance.

After the war they returned to the city, her mother making her living as a tailor, dressing her daughter as finely as she could. She was a beautiful child and her mother was anxious that she should always look her best. Nico disdained the rigours of conventional German education, and at the age of fifteen, with the encouragement of Ostergaard, a Berlin couturier, she left school to become a professional model. Initially her mother was reluctant to allow it, but Ostergaard managed to persuade the doubtful parent, and by the age of seventeen Nico had become the best model in Berlin. Then, inevitably, she went to Paris, where she worked for, among others, Coco Chanel, who took a personal interest in her androgynous proteg e.

To further her career, and to escape Chanel's attentions, she went to New York to work for Eileen Ford. There, energised by the city and liberal amounts of amphetamine ('They used to give it us so we'd stay thin'), she earned \$100 a day, enough to buy the house in Ibiza that became her European base for the next decade. It was in Ibiza that she became 'Nico' – taking the name from a photographer friend in memory of his ex-boyfriend.

Nico moved from scene to scene. In Rome she became involved with the Cinecittà set and found herself conscripted into Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. It was a walk-on part that became extended into a definite role, due to the director's fascination with her phantom-like presence on the set. Not much real acting ability was demanded of her, more the skills of the catwalk. Fellini, though, was keen to develop her and use her for more pictures, but he became irritated by her habitual laziness. When she failed, after repeated warnings, to make an early morning camera-call, he fired her.

She pursued the idea of becoming an actress a while longer, taking part in Lee Strasberg Method classes in New York. Later she would claim that she had been in the same class as Marilyn Monroe.

Then came the music scene. Initially it involved a lot of hanging out. She took lessons in narcissism from Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones. He loved those Germanic blondes (though her hair was bleached and her blood mixed). Arm-in-arm they would pose for the adoring crowds at the Monterey Pop Festival or float regally down the King's Road, King and Queen of the carnival. At the time she cut her first record, a Gordon Lightfoot song called 'I'm Not Saying', instantly forgettable and also had her first meeting with her future mentor – Andy Warhol. He had just dropped in on Swinging London en route to New York after a holiday in North Africa sampling the tight delights of Moroccan youth.

In 1965 she did a spell as a cocktail singer at the Blue Angel Lounge on East 55th Street and soon found herself in the company of Bob Dylan. At that time the scene was divided between the Dylan camp – straight – and the Warhol camp – camp. Nico's temperament was more suited to Dylan's circle, she loved the man and his work, but Dylan's romantic attention was engaged elsewhere and there would be no real place for her except as an acolyte.

Warhol, on the other hand, had found a group at the Café Bizarre, playing curiously titled songs like 'Heroin' and 'Venus in Furs'. The Velvet Underground. Warhol decided that Nico should become their figurehead, much to the reluctance of the rest of the group, Lou Reed and John Cale in particular. Still, they acceded to their patron's demands – new instruments, free rehearsal space, food, drink, drugs, instant chic, in exchange for letting Nico do a couple of numbers. Nevertheless they delighted in giving her a bad time, bullying her into singing their way – which depended upon whatever caprice the drugs dictated. They'd torment her with tricks like switching off her microphone, or blasting her out with guitar noise – anything to make her feel more paranoid. Paranoia was the dominant theme on the Factory floor.

Lou Reed wrote a few tunes for her, which they got her to sing in that bleached, throwaway style – 'All Tomorrow's Parties', 'Femme Fatale', 'I'll Be Your Mirror' – but there was always a problem about who was doing what. Nico was not an instrumentalist, and therefore couldn't reintegrate with the rest of the group once her songs were over. Besides, Lou Reed was the leader, he wrote most of the material, he was the real singer.

‘Lou never really liked me,’ she once told me, ‘because of what my people did to his people.’

The truth was perhaps more banal – he resented being upstaged by her.

Although they only sold a modest amount of records in their time, the Velvet Underground exerted a potent influence and found their true apotheosis in the 1980s. They were perfectly in tune with the dominant themes of the decade – cynicism, careerism, amorality.

With the encouragement of Jim Morrison, amongst others, Nico went on to become a solo artist accompanying herself on harmonium and reverting to her real singing style – dark, European and deeply melancholic. John Cale, though antagonistic to her as a member of the Velvets, produced her best work: *Marble Index*; *Desert Shore*; *The End*; *Camera Obscura* – the last with myself as arranger.

She was never better than when sitting alone at her harmonium, singing one of her disturbing little songs with its hints of folk melody, German *Ländler* and Bach chorales – all in a voice so unbelievably deep it bordered on Wagnerian parody. There were times, intermittent to be sure, when even the most blasé of audiences, saturated with the gimmickry of the modern pop spectacle, were held in its dark embrace.

The scenes shifted – initially according to the dictates of her career, latterly according to the demands of her heroin addiction. In the early eighties there had been a huge influx into Britain of high-grade heroin from Iran. (Heroin is a useful commodity in times of political turmoil – five times the value of gold.) For a junkie Britain was the place to be, and Nico found herself a niche in Manchester, where there was, and still is, a thriving drug and music scene.

Nico was not a pop star. ‘Famous, not popular,’ was how one Japanese promoter described her. In fact she wasn’t even that famous. She never made much money as a singer, and what little she did make she spent immediately. She didn’t own a house or a car or a TV or even a single copy of one of her own records. She had a handful of friends who would visit her occasionally with cakes and biscuits and a few crumbs of gossip that would sustain her interest for a little while before you sensed your presence was no longer necessary.

It was a way of life she’d followed since she was a teenager, a life without any of the more familiar creature comforts that people acquire to fend off boredom and loneliness. The Chanel suit she’d been given in her days as a *Vogue* model had long since been jettisoned in favour of the more androgynous black trousers and jacket. Her heroin addiction had, at one time, provided some sort of psychic refuge – filling her days with the traditional junkie routine of trying to score – the inexorable search for a good connection.

But even these squalid adventures began to lose their special *frisson*; towards the end of her life she turned her back on the drug that had become synonymous with her name and persona. Or she simply ran out of veins.

I first met Nico in November 1981 in a now-defunct Oxford nightclub, playing to an audience of amphetaminated undergraduates hyped-up on the Velvet Underground myth and enjoying their brief fling with Bohemian lowlife before taking up their careers in advertising. She seemed both amused and bemused by her celebrity. Once again the promiscuous attentions of the pop world had settled upon her, identifying her as the precursor to a tortured nihilism then fashionable amongst the young.

In the cramped dressing-room, while poetically thin young men hung upon her every word and

Nico lookalikes with pale lipstick stared relentlessly at their 'Warhol superstar', hoping to discern the secrets of her charisma, she rummaged through her cavernous shoulder bag with increasing desperation. The little wrapper of heroin she'd spent so much of the day trying to obtain had disappeared.

She cursed herself for being so careless, becoming more and more frantic in her search. She would have to perform without the confidence the drug gave her. As she rose to go to the stage, she spotted the small white envelope beneath her chair and handed it to her, thus sealing the bond of a working relationship that was to last the rest of her life.

Nico kept on working because she had to. There was her habit to maintain, a permanent drain on her resources. Thousands of pounds were shot away on colossal binges, so that she'd end up after a three-month tour as broke as she'd begun it. This didn't seem to disconcert her, though – something would always turn up. She believed that fate, or some unforeseen coincidence of events, would rescue her from disaster at the last minute. Sometimes it did, but increasingly she came up against a more cynical response to her predicament. Her spiritual origins were in the Beatnik subculture of the fifties and the narcotic euphoria of the sixties. But the wild party was long since over and, in the cold light of the hard-bitten eighties, people were less inclined to offer the few remaining stragglers a lift home.

That she was a monster became apparent to all those who were with her for any length of time. She was a dreadful cadge, and her gratitude was so transparently insincere that it was almost endearing.

I knew her only in the last decade of her life, long after the credits came up. She had exhausted most people's patience or interest. What might have been the forgivable narcissism of a fashionable beauty had now become a tiresome and undignified egoism. After all, she was no longer charming or mysterious, what right then had she to tantrums or impatience? Her features, riven by years of narcotic abuse, bore little trace of the 'icy Germanic beauty' that has been chronicled so meticulously at the court of the Great Wigola. The 'dark Teutonic soul' that had once added such a puzzling bitterness to the sickly sweet froth of pop seemed to have become an absurd caricature of nihilism, a genuine emptiness.

She seemed as if blown away by it all ... The relentless pressure to stay cool, to allow the will of others, in the shape of the lens, to penetrate and push her towards her own annihilation. There's a Warhol/Morrissey film called *Chelsea Girls* whose leitmotif is a broken sequence of Nico crying and really crying. About what, who knows. But the pain is visceral, the tears are real. It's an art-house animal experiment. Method: give her all the stuff she wants, and slip in something new, untried and untested. Context: private loft preview for the Artocracy. Result: a Modern Morality Play. Chastening.

The people who gravitated towards Nico were generally those on the margins of polite rock'n'roll society. It sounds quaint now – given the age of the medium, its vast corporate identity, its entrenched conservatism – but there was a time when rock music embodied some sort of threat, or if not that, at least a kind of freshness and spontaneity. Perhaps Nico represented a bit of that lost world of recklessness, of extremes.

We were all peripheral people ... peripheral to her, just as she had been peripheral to the world that had made her and later eclipsed her in terms of wealth and celebrity. We worked in a

environment into which no respectable A&R man would enter, places in which the strung-out or the lonely would go to console themselves, in the company of one who seemed to embody their alienation.

All of this was far, far away from Warholian glamour, with its surface glitter of camp self-effacement and its chilling undertow of ruthless self-interest. No longer a Factory factotum, Nico nevertheless retained a certain loyalty towards her one-time mentor.

‘Andy always seems too busy to see me when I call him,’ she complained.

‘That’s probably because you keep asking him for money,’ I offered, knowing full well, and perhaps she did, that she’d long since outlived her use to him. Her beauty faded, her celebrity marginalised, she’d lost her iconographic value as an image of the ‘European Moon Goddess’, once so essential an acquisition to the great collector’s gallery of social archetypes.

Into this void I stumbled. Although I’d fiddled around with groups in my teens in Manchester, I’d never been to college, got myself a degree, and was about to start on a Master of Philosophy course at Oxford. I had some months to go before my course began, and I was mooching around for something to do that was unrelated to academic work. I’d been practising at my piano, perhaps in the hope of finding bar work, maybe abroad, when an old school-friend looked me up, a certain Dr Demetrius.

Dr Demetrius

He wasn’t a doctor, nor was his real name Demetrius. He had a whole string of pseudonyms and aliases. He insisted it gave his life a ‘poetic mystery’ – it also left a false trail for hungry creditors. We’d known each other since childhood in Manchester. He’d always had a gang around him; he’d always derived his greatest satisfaction from pulling people of disparate backgrounds into his circle. Demetrius had been working as a promoter on the Manchester New Wave scene since the late sixties and seventies and he’d put Nico on at one of his venues. He’d introduced us when she came to Oxford a couple of months earlier and I’d mentioned to him that if ever she needed a piano player, I’d be grateful if she’d give me a try-out, as I liked her stuff. He’d called me to say she was putting a group together for a tour of Italy ... why didn’t I come up to Manchester, get better acquainted?

What follows is the story of Nico’s last ‘scene’ – the whole scene, the weird little universe she inhabited in the middle of nowhere and of which she was the fixed centre. The characters who orbited around her – the has-beens, the could-have-beens, the never-will-bes – are people whose lives are rarely sung in the deafening hyperbole of Rock History. We weren’t especially gifted, or at least our talents were rarely exploited to the full – aesthetic concerns being invariably subsumed beneath the more urgent need to score heroin. However, we did have one thing in common ... Nico.

She influenced us all. It may sound absurd but, despite the monstrous egotism and the sordid scenes, there was something almost *pure* about her. A kind of concentrated will. Not pretty, sweet or socially acceptable, certainly, but intense, uncompromising and disarmingly frank. She influenced us perhaps indirectly ... none of us wanted to *be* like her, selfish and ungracious, but she helped us map out a different landscape to our lives – different to the prevailing eighties one of getting-onism. We never, for an instant, thought of ourselves as part of the Music Business. We were just there when it didn’t happen.

AQUAVILLE

‘Libraries are where you go when you’re afraid of your dreams.’

You can’t get up to much in a library. They’re like monasteries but with the whispered torture of a thousand rustling nylons. SILENCE must be observed at all times, yet distractions are infinite as even the faintest train of thought is derailed by boredom or lust or the soft, over-ripe thud of bulging briefcases yielding their dead weight of learning; the screams of chairs dragged to favoured corners; and always the breathy flutter of the turning page.

It was November 1981 and I was going insane – though, as this was Oxford, very discreetly so – when a familiar rotund figure stood at the top of the steps to my flat, blocking out the daylight. I hadn’t seen him in five years, since when he’d put on an extra few stone, lost his hair, and awarded himself a doctorate.

‘Looks like I beat you to it, old boy,’ said Dr Demetrius in a mock Oxford accent as if he was still continuing some running argument, some unresolved rivalry from half a decade before.

Then the deepest female voice I’d ever heard, wearing a German accent as heavy as a leather Gestapo coat and louder than the foghorn on the Bismarck, boomed round the corner.

‘Where are yoooo?’

‘Neek ... Neek ...’ shouted Demetrius. ‘Come and meet my old friend Jim, or rather “James” as you believe it is now.’

‘Hey-lloo.’ There was a rather heavy-set woman of about forty staring through and beyond me and into the flat next door, with strange blue/grey eyes that were striated with red veins, like a map of Hell.

‘May I use your bathroom?’

I was a creature who scratched his dry claws about the catalogue room – what was this?

‘First on the left.’ I pointed. When she’d gone I asked Demetrius who she was.

‘Nico, the singer. You know, “Nico” – from the Velvet Underground.’

‘Oh ...’ I had a sudden flash of some bad time when I was about sixteen ... a girl grieving over some other guy who’d taken her innocence – someone older, smarter, more experienced, more mature. Now I remembered, Nico accompanied tears and sexual guilt. Music for a torn hymen.

‘She looks a bit the worse for wear,’ I said.

‘She needs a fix, old man,’ replied Demetrius.

‘In my bathroom?’

‘These are desperate times,’ he said.

Suddenly I had a famous junkie in my house. I was in a rush. I’d left my books in the library.

Junkies and famous people demand extra attention, like children. I wasn't ready for the responsibility

'I must get back ...'

'Don't you want to come with us?' asked Demetrius. Nico was playing at Scamps Disco, above Sainsbury's in the Westgate Shopping Centre.

'I don't think so. It's the noise ... the crowds ... I prefer the library. Libraries are where you go when you're afraid of other people,' I said.

'My friend.' Demetrius put his hand on my shoulder. 'You've spent too much time alone with books ... libraries are where you go when you're afraid of your dreams.'

For five years I had heard nothing of Demetrius, ever since we rented a run-down semi back in Manchester, and now here he was on my doorstep, unannounced, with a sixties icon in tow. Since we last seen each other Demetrius had been house manager of a punk club, running around the Manchester 'scene' in an ever-expanding suit until he was big enough to have the door held open for him at High & Mighty. Nico had arrived at just the right time. She was in need of a good manager, one who shared the same sophisticated cultural background, a man of subtlety and learning ... 'Demetrius was born.

Manchester: February 1982

The taxi pulled into a quiet suburban cul-de-sac on the southern edge of the city. Once comfortably affluent, now a little run-down. The people next door ran a kebab van.

I rang the bell ...

... and waited.

'Hey-lloooo?' There was that voice again, heavy with the whole weight of her being. 'Who is it?'

'It's James ... Jim ... the piano player?'

The door opened.

She looked puzzled. Then, slowly, a twitch of recognition crawled across her face. She smiled a sort of.

'Oh ... yees ... sure ... I guess you'd better come in.'

I followed her down the hallway into the back room. The curtains were closed. Everything had collapsed to floor level: cushions, TV, blankets. A gas fire wheezed on the wall. Below it, staring fixedly at the ceiling, lay a young man, a kid really. All he had on was a pair of Y-fronts and a ripped T-shirt ... I waited in the doorway. Was this a sex thing?

She went over to him and crouched by his side, fiddling around under some cushions, finally retrieving a hypodermic needle she'd secreted in haste. She held it point upwards and depressed the stopper. Then, quickly and without a word, she jabbed it into the kid's leg, pulling back the plunger, filling up the syringe.

Silently I sidestepped into the kitchen. It was cold, clean and pristine – no one had ever cooked a meal in there. There was a pan on the stove, half full of reddish water. The fridge was empty except for half a lemon. I found a full packet of tea in the cupboard, a fancy blend from Fortnum & Mason. I looked for the teapot. There wasn't one. That's why there was still plenty of tea. These were people who would never think of buying a teapot.

'Hi ...' She was at the door. I jumped, embarrassed at being caught poking around.

‘Sorry ... as you can see, we have nothing. We’re sta-arv- ing.’

Every word stretched and pulled. Every syllable weighed and counted. Gravitas, or emptiness?

‘Did you get here OK?’

‘Yes ... there’s a through train.’ I glanced at the pan of bloody water. ‘Your friend ... is he all right?’

‘He’s sick ... he has an aaabscess ... dirty needles. I have to syringe it out ... disgusting, no. She laughed. ‘That’s how we are, us wicked people.’ The half smile flickered again, briefly. ‘Do you think we’re wicked?’

‘Yes.’ I offered her a cigarette. ‘Very wicked.’

‘Now I remember. You’re the one who found my stuff that time in Ox-foord.’ There was an emphasis on the ‘foord’. ‘Jesus, if I had it now ... I hoped it might be someone else at the door.’

‘Thanks.’

She nodded in the direction of the other room: ‘I can’t be expected to take care of everyone. I’ve only one shot left. I guess that’s the test, huh?’

‘The test?’

‘You know – if you re-e-ally care for someone then you’ll share your last shot with them. No?’

‘I dunno ... I’ve never been in that position.’

She looked me up and down. She saw baggy trousers, sensible shoes. I saw black leather and motorbike boots.

‘You mean,’ she continued, surprised, ‘you’ve never been in lo-o-ve?’

‘No, I’ve never used a needle. The thought of it ... I get nauseous ...’

I guessed that for her there wasn’t much left to talk about. She changed the topic from drugs to money and started wring-ing her hands, pacing up and down.

‘I have no money ... *nothing*. The landlord asks for the rent all the time but I told him, I’m re-clo-o-ose, I bother no one!’ She wrung her hands again. ‘Do you have £20 you could lend me until I see Demetrius?’

‘Where *is* Demetrius?’ I asked, hoping to sidetrack her.

‘He always seems to be eating,’ she said, a mixture of anger and disappointment in her voice. She stepped a little closer. I could smell heavy perfume and something strange and sickly underneath. ‘What about the boy?’ she whispered. ‘What can *I* do? I can barely keep myself ... I’m not his mother.’

‘I’m sure Demetrius will think of something.’

Dr Demetrius had plenty of ideas and could make things happen. He also had £20.

The rehearsal was set for 3.00 p.m. at Echo’s. He was the bass player. We’d met each other before, occasionally, in darkened rooms. He lived in the heart of Prestwich, the quiet Jewish part of north Manchester. Tall, Victorian Gothic houses where the sun never shone. Engels had lived round the corner, writing by gaslight, and Demetrius took us to see his place on the way. The roof was gone, the windows smashed in – skinned and gutted, it just needed one of those ravenous winds off the moors to devour it completely. A Chinese delegation stood outside, querulous ... No shrine to the people here. Not even a plaque. They kept checking their mysterious guidebooks, perhaps to see if they’d got the right address.

‘Right address,’ said Demetrius as we drove past, ‘wrong philosophy.’

Echo’s place was a little more intact than Friedrich’s ... but only a little. Children were playing in the garden. Three of them, all girls. They had strange, evocative names, Justine, Sadie, Mercedes. Inside, the house was very Catholic: bleeding hearts that glowed in the dark; sacred hearts in blue and white satin with silver lettering; burning hearts whose flames of martyrdom flickered and spiralled; hearts with arrows; hearts with thorns; red hearts; black hearts. Enough to give the Jewish neighbour heart-failure.

Echo

Echo was small, made of wire and rags, just turned thirty. He wore a fedora hat and had bad teeth from too much amphetamine, but he was attractive in a way unique to the debauched. Beneath the haggard exterior lay a truly wasted interior. You knew he was consistent all the way through and could always be trusted to see the worst side of bad luck. He also spoke with a consistent softness, so that you had to have to ask him to repeat everything. You’d strain to catch the gist of what he was saying as the words surfaced in a tortured whisper from his tar-blackened lungs and his nicotine-lined throat and oozed through gaps in his crumbling teeth. It flattered you into thinking that only the wise could hear and understand, and enabled him to retread a twisted path through his own Vale of Tears.

His cigarettes were the cheapest brand, No. 6, sold in tens. His match broke as he tried to light one. ‘Tour of *Italy*’s OK but I’d prefer to be where it’s safe an’ warm an’ nothin’ changes.’

‘Is there such a place outside of the womb?’ I asked.

‘Yeh,’ he croaked, finally lighting his dimp. ‘Nico’s ’an’dbag.’

(Deep in the ambiotic still of Nico’s bag a small blue notebook sucks its thumb and awaits the desperate delivery of a dealer’s address.)

Demetrius left the artists alone, in Echo’s parlour, to wrestle with the Infinite; driving off in his sagging old Citroën Pallas in search of a phone. He never felt at ease unless there was a phone within reach and Echo’s place had few direct connections with the outside world. Even the entrance was a secret, tucked away at the side, past a barricade of dustbins and rusting prams.

‘Purra brew on, pet.’ Echo’s wife vanished obediently into the kitchen to make tea. (Once you go north of Hampstead, the sexual territories become more clearly defined.) Faith was even thinner than Echo and deeper into denial and repentance, if that was possible. She had shining red hair down to her waist that her children would take turns to comb. Faith was the perfect weeping Magdalene for Echo’s domestic Calvary.

Nico and Echo (Necho) sat together on the sofa, facing the fire.

‘Ow’re yer fixed, sweet’ eart?’

‘I’m down to my cottons,’ she replied glumly.

‘Give us twenny an’ I’ll pop round the corner.’

She handed him £20 that Demetrius had just ‘loaned’ her.

‘I’ll come with you ... d’you have – er – something sharp?’

‘Here you are.’ I pulled out my Swiss Army knife.

She looked at me, stupefied.

‘Come on,’ said Echo, ‘it’s a kosher gaff. We’ll be all right.’

He took her by the arm. As they were going out, I heard her say, 'He's a bit of a klutz, that Jim.'

'Nah,' said Echo, "'e's just a grammar-school boy, out of 'is depth.'

I stared at the children's goldfish. We commiserated blankly with each other. The Three Graces danced and sang among the yew trees and rhododendrons.

Hark! Hark!

The dogs do bark,

The beggars are coming to town;

One in rags,

One in jags,

And one in a velvet gown.

Beyond the garden was an empty church that marked the dividing line between the Torah and the Gospels. Echo would go sketching up there among the gravestones. He was a good artist, but indiscreet enough to let Faith see a nude portrait of his mistress ... all curves, roundness and fertility. He just couldn't resist showing it to visitors. It was his first wholly successful piece and he was proud of it. He tried to bluff Faith that it was a pure product of the imagination. She averted her gaze every time she walked past, as it hung there above the fireplace, Venus Triumphant.

'What d'yer reckon, Jim?' he'd croak time and again.

'Pretty good,' I'd say.

'She dunt much care fer the ol' jigga-jigga, but she can suck a bowlin' ball through a Lucerza straw.'

He insisted it was an arrangement they both preferred, as 'Left Footers'. Sex was best expressed with the least physicality. The conventional sex act could be messy and unprofitable, fraught with sudden embarrassments and disclosures. It was enough for him to have a pair of crimson lips around the tip of his being. Why be beastly? And what did Venus get? ... Immortality.

Toby

Toby, the drummer, lifted the gate latch. Immediately the children fluttered around him, pulling at his cap, tugging at the sleeves of his leather jacket. They adored him. Everyone did. Tall, amiable, curly-haired, he had that perennial boyishness that girls especially find so attractive and unthreatening. (Though he could pack a punch, he preferred to take it out on his drums.)

I let him in.

'Hiya, Jim, what's er ...' He looked around. 'Who's er ... where's er ... ?'

I shrugged my shoulders and mimed a shot in the arm.

He nodded, flipped open his Bensons, threw me one, and settled into the *Daily Mirror*.

'Know'ow many dates we're doin'?' he asked, snorting a line of bathtub speed.

'All I know is, it's two weeks in Italy, the Dr Demetrius sunshine break.'

He offered me the rolled £5 note. I shook my head. He snorted the other line.

'Wur is 'e then, physician ter the famous?'

'Gone to find a phone. He's trying to locate someone called Raincoat.'

‘Raincoat?’

‘Yes. I’m sure that was his name ... the sound engineer.’

Toby laughed. ‘I know Raincoat ... “sound engineer” is it now? Last week’e wur a ladie ‘airdresser.’ He carried on laughing until he began to cough up his smoker’s phlegm, which he spat out the window.

(‘One in rags,
And one in jags ...’)

‘Toby ... Toby,’ waved the children.

After an hour of chainsmoking smalltalk we decided it might be a good idea if we at least set up the instruments.

The rehearsal room was, in effect, Echo’s spare bedroom, a place to hide from conjugal demands or excited children. Heaps of gutted speaker cabinets were piled up like empty coffins, guitars with no strings, blown-out amplifiers. In the corner, by the window, was Echo’s bed. And on the bed, arranged in a sculptural contrapposto, were Nico, and Echo, fast asleep, a hypodermic at their side. Despite their narcosis there was something innocent about them. They recalled one of those seventeenth-century marmoreal effigies of dead infants embracing ... skin an alabaster white, heads thrown back in a lifeless surrender to the Eternal.

‘That’s me off.’ Toby fixed the brim of his cap, buttoned up his jacket and was out the back door. I followed him.

Demetrius was in a parenthesis of bliss, sitting in his car, listening to country and western and chewing on a Big Mac.

Toby tapped on the window:

‘It’s not’appenin’, mate ... Scagged up.’

Dr Demetrius kept an office on the top floor of a crumbling but dignified Victorian block on Newton Street, near Piccadilly, in the centre of Manchester. Brooding nineteenth-century warehouses, empty then, at times of use to the Jewish and Asian wholesale garment trade.

A pickled old Irish misanthrope ran the lift:

‘Woy don’t yer fockin’ *walk* up, y’idle swines?’

Toby and I stood there, speechless.

Demetrius butted in: ‘Good afternoon, Tommy, top floor, toute suite, last one up is a Production dog.’

Old Tommy wheezed whiskey-stained threats under his breath as he cranked down the ancient brass handle. ‘Headen ... Godless, idle headen.’

As we stepped out he coughed up a crescendo of bronchitic malevolence. ‘Fock-ock-ocki Fairies ... should be strangulated at birth.’ The lift door slammed and he descended back to his cubbyhole in hell, waiting for someone else to hate.

‘Do step this way, gentlemen.’ Demetrius ushered us into the nerve centre of his entertainment empire. He lifted a stack of invitations to Dr Demetrius’s creditors meeting and annual ball off on

chair and brushed a cat off another.

‘Take a pew.’

I sat down and looked around.

Paperwork was strewn everywhere, heaps of unopened bills in the In tray. On the wall above his desk hung a photo of Carl Gustav Jung and another of Will Hay, the comedian, in his phone headmaster rig.

Dr Demetrius spoke with a pronounced Manchester accent which he tried to submerge beneath his curious telephone voice when feeling formal or trying to impress, which was most of the time. Sometimes, if there was a lull in the conversation, he would take the opportunity to recite some of his poetry in the telephone voice. People would quickly find something to say.

‘I often feel that the motorway is the modern river – “On tides of tarmac/we travel our trends.” (He self-quoted.)

Toby cut into the versifying, ‘Ow does it look, Doc? Yer can tell us straight, like.’

‘Now, what we have here,’ Demetrius began, ‘is essentially a conflict of interests, compounded by a multiplicity of needs ... Nico needs to work in order to buy heroin, and heroin in order to work. Echo needs Nico to buy heroin in order not to work; we, on the other hand, have but one simple need: Adventure.’

He pulled a Vick inhaler from his waistcoat pocket and took a deep sniff.

‘Aaaah ... Yes, gentlemen, Adventure. After all, is that not why we are gathered here now? There are other rewards in life, to be sure, but they are brittle and transient. Adventure sustains the Spirit, feeds the Will, makes us rise above our miserable subjectivity ... unlike our friend Echo, who prefers to wallow in his. A victim of unquestioning dogma, Echo crucifies himself for imagined sins.’ He poked a Trust House Forte biro at Toby. ‘Are we to stand motionless at the foot of the cross, in some bizarre Pietà of indecision?’

‘Don’t ask me, squire, I jus’ want me cab fare back ter Wythenshawe.’

‘May I suggest, Toby, that you set your sights a little higher than the windswept council estate of south Manchester? A golden egg of opportunity has been placed in our fragile nest. Let us endeavour to incubate it with our support, so that it may hatch into full plumage.’

‘I’m not sure I catch yer drift,’ said Toby.

Demetrius sighed, scratched his beard, and shook a couple of Valium from a small brown bottle (his father owned a chain of chemists). ‘Quite simply. Keep Echo off the stuff, and keep Nico on his feet ... I’m relying on you both. I’ve already redirected the career aspirations of that degenerate little freeloader with the septic leg who lived on her floor. “Artistic Adviser” indeed. An unfortunate attachment – though I suppose abscess makes the heart grow fonder.’ He chuckled to himself and necked the valium. ‘It’s up to us now to take care of her. Remember, this is “Nico”, “Chanteuse of the Velvet Underground”. Buy yourselves some dark sunglasses and a couple of black polonecks ... we need the art crowd behind us if we intend to make a go of this.’

He handed us three £10 notes each. Toby immediately went out and bought half a gram of heroin.

The days zigzagged into an endlessly frustrating stop/start come/go nowhere affair. Cabs from Demetrius’s office over to Echo’s and back again. Mysterious journeys down dark country lanes in the Saddleworth Moors, looking for Nico’s heroin connection; or through the windtunnels and concrete

labyrinths of the Hulme and Moss Side estates where the ice-cream men sold amphetamine before smack became more profitable. Suffer little children.

Nico-Watching: scanning her features for vestiges of that flawless beauty that I'd only ever glimpsed in a dim bedroom hopelessness, tuning into a voice that had only ever accompanied the late night confessional elegy for a lost virginity.

In photographs the light seemed to carve and recreate her, like living sculpture, slicing into those granite cheekbones, chiselling the profile. Close up it was a different picture. The long blonde hair of the Chelsea Girl was now a greying brown, her facial skin puffed and slack, her hands and arms scabbed and scarred by needletracks, and her eyes like a broken mirror. It wasn't necessarily the years that had been unkind to her – she was only forty-two – but the woman herself. She had simply traded in her previous glamorous image for something altogether more unappealing. Yet she didn't seem to care, insulated from self-appraisal by the warm, nullifying reassurance that heroin provides. She locked herself in so deep that she hadn't surveyed the exterior in a while.

I couldn't work out how to talk to her. She spoke her own language ... dreamy, cryptic. It was pointless trying to engage her with anodyne topics like current events or even music. But then, I was beginning to learn that musicians don't talk much. It's not that they're enigmatic or interesting. They just have nothing to say.

I didn't know if she was particularly unhappy, just strangely absent. Occasionally she'd throw out a casual remark like, 'I haven't had a bath in a year, you know.' What was I supposed to say? From day one she remarked on a certain fastidiousness.

'You're like a girl,' she'd say, 'always preening.'

My academic preoccupations amused her as well.

'How's life in Ox-foord?' she kept on asking, knowing perfectly well that 'life' and 'Oxfoord' viewed each other with mutual distaste. 'Such a pretty town ...' and then she'd laugh. 'Pretty' meaning exactly that to her: ornamental and useless. Girls were 'pretty' ... and a nuisance; she made it clear they would not be a welcome addition to our company with their 'squeaky little voices' and 'teedious love lives'. Then her mouth would take on a sneer and she'd lapse once more into silence, her thoughts pursuing themselves in a tumbling morphine rush ...

'Ah, poor Nico,' said Demetrius. 'Down what dark and empty avenues must the nightingale fly?'

After a week of near-total inertia, broken only by the sporadic tuning of guitars, I began to realize that a future with Nico was in fact an invitation to the land where time stood still and where long causes returned to inert promise. I knew the territory. It was just like a library.

Demetrius had pulled us all together from different corners of his life, expecting some sort of golden alchemical reaction. But we remained a bunch of base metal misfits, hitching up our rusty wagon to Nico's celebrity in the hope that it might take us somewhere, anywhere. As her 'manager' he tried to keep a grip on things, but his authority was undermined by his appearance. Fatter than a cream cheese bagel, undersize trilby perched precariously on his bald head, he lumbered around Echo place, crushing the children's toys, tripping over lead-wires, Caliban in a Burton suit.

Even when we got down to some serious attempt at a rehearsal, it was hopeless. No one knew what to do. It didn't matter how clever or proficient you might be (in fact, in Rock terms these are negative qualities), you couldn't fake the stuff. Either you felt it or you didn't.

A group of musicians have to find some purpose that unites them, apart from money. Pop groups are only gangs of preadults huddling together, finding a mutual coherence or security in the same two-chord language. Once they start to become individuals, curious and critical, then the thing falls apart and they grow up. It's a way of prolonging adolescence. We were all grownups except for Toby, and Nico wasn't really a team player.

Nico had ideas in her head but she couldn't communicate them, at least not precisely enough to convince everyone. But she knew when it worked and when it didn't, and the frustration was starting to get to her.

'No. No. Don't play it like that,' she would say to me. 'Play it more repetitiously ... the same thing over and over.'

She was right. But I couldn't do it. I'd always want to embellish. The secret was that every time you picked up an instrument it had to be like the first time. No amount of fancy gadgetry or effect could simulate directness and intensity. Trouble was I knew my scales.

Toby would 'Clack Clack Clack' the drumsticks, to lead us into a song, but the response would be ragged and indifferent, a splutter of notes, instead of one affirmative chord.

There was no way out except 'out'. So I stayed at the piano and played:



over ... and over ... again.

'That's nice,' said Nico.

Echo and I joined Demetrius at the Isola Bar.

'Fame is an exacting science,' he remarked, over a full English breakfast, 'and the famous are continually being tested.' He held up a tomato-shaped ketchup dispenser. 'To arrive at a three-dimensional image of oneself that can be engraved upon the contemporary consciousness, one has to eradicate that bitter-sweet fourth dimension of doubt.' He squirted a bright red blob on to his fried eggs. 'Doubt equals Irony equals Collapse equals Failure ... Pass the sugar.' Distractedly stirring his mug of tea, he continued, 'Fame, James, projects a gigantic shadow of loneliness upon the world. You to want to be alone is as impertinent a wish as it would be for most of us to desire instant celebrity.' He sipped from his mug with a delicately-crooked pinkie. 'Famous people do not have private lives and they are never alone ...'

'... even when they're dyin' from an overdose,' added Echo.

Nico's life seemed to be refined down to interviews which, in turn, were further distillations of the constant dialogue she enacted with herself.

A man and a woman sit silently in the control room of a radio station. He's young, about twenty,

five, fresh-faced, fair hair, pastel-framed glasses, baggy sweatshirt. She's of a certain age, long brown hair turning grey, dressed in a morning coat and a black leather wristband with silver skulls. There's a record on the turntable, 'Femme Fatale'; the song's about to end.

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[Permission to reproduce lyrics refused]

d.j.: Heyyyy ... We're Piccadilly Radio. It's eight forty-five and I have here with me in the studio the original Femme Fatale herself ... the *Legendary Nico*, singer with the *cult sixties* group the *Velvet Underground* ... Created by *pop-art* supremo himself Mr Andy Warhol ... Welcome to Manchester Nico.

nico (*pause*): That song ... It's not about me ... I just sang it ... a long time ago.

d.j.: Right. Right. OK, Nico, before we talk about what you're doing now and why you're in Manchester, can we retrace our steps a little, just for our listeners?

nico: If we have to.

d.j.: You come from *Berlin* originally, I'm told?

nico: (*groans*): Oh ... (*sighs*) Yes ... well ... nearly ... kind of ... not exactly ...

d.j.: Now, er, that city has a special *mystique* ... the *Nazis* ... '*Cabaret*' an' all that ... What was it like?

nico: I didn't like it. I thought it was all rather tasteless.

d.j.: Tasteless? That's a rather unusual way to describe it.

nico: You know ... Overdone. That Liza Minnelli, she can't keep her mouth shut.

d.j. (*confused*): Liza Minnelli? Oh yeah, yeah ... No, I meant, when you were young, that special *mystique* of *Berlin*.

nico: Young? *Mystique*?

d.j.: Well, you know, they say *Berlin* was a kind of happening, dangerous, *action* kind of a place.

nico: Oh, yes, plenty of danger ... The buildings falling down around you ... The streets full of dust ... you choked ...

d.j.: Dear oh dear, Nico, that sounds pretty awful. Anyway, you began modelling in the fifties?

nico: We had to live in the country. At night you could see the city burning, the sky red as blood ...

d.j. (*coughs. Tries to clear a way out*): The War, a terrible time on both sides –

nico: ... The smell of burning buildings on the wind.

d.j.: OK ... This is Piccadilly Radio and I've just been talking to Nico of the fabulous *Velvet Underground*. (*Jazzy voices: 'Picc-adilly Ra-dio ... Manchester's Numero U-ni-o.'*)

'Enough!' Dr Demetrius slammed off the car radio.

'What does she think she's doing?' He pounded a heavy, leather-gloved hand on the steering wheel. 'Makes me look like a total nebbish ... Here I am, trying to stop her career going down the

toilet, while she's just flushing away ...' He yanked off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. The car swerved out of lane.

'Steady Doc,' said Toby, putting a hand on his shoulder.

Dr Demetrius was a man under siege. The creditors were closing in. The Philistines were at the gate, dropping brown paper envelopes through the letterbox.

'I must make a phone-call ... I don't know why I'm doing it for her.'

'I know,' said Echo slyly.

'Oh really? What do *you* know?'

'I know that you're no kosher medicine man ... "Doctor".'

'I see no reason to justify my existence to a creature whose inability to even get out of bed puts him little higher in the evolutionary chain than an invertebrate slug.'

'An' you'd be a man of backbone, eh? Demetrius Erectus ... I've seen the polaroids. Enough to stiffen the resolve are they?'

Demetrius lifted his trilby and wiped his pate with a stiff, grey handkerchief.

'Dear God, this is not the life for a searcher after Truth ... for one who seeks a poetic reality. The days of the great impresarios are gone. What room is there in this squat, tawdry business for a man of substance and vision?'

Echo slipped something into my hand – a polaroid photograph. A picture of Demetrius in a girl's white frock, so tight on him you could see each bulge of fat. He was bending over a chair, his naked behind raised up in the air, red lipstick smudged across his lips, his head turned towards the camera. He had a dark, possessed look in his eyes and a weird, almost disembodied grin. I handed it back to Echo. He leaned over and whispered in my ear.

'I've got a cupboardful on'im ...'

Demetrius caught us in the rear-view mirror.

'The Whisperers, forever relegated to the back seat of life, yet always ready to butt in with their miniature version of reality ... Why don't you damn well learn to speak up, Echo?'

He whammed on a Tammy Wynette tape.

It was raining. Manchester was golden. At night, when the yellow streetlights reflect from the wet pavements and the cathedrals of the cotton barons glower sternly in the dark, you would not be mistaken in thinking it the most beautiful city in England.

'*There's a phone,*' said Demetrius.

He double-parked beside it and got out.

The telephone was Dr Demetrius's umbilical link with a more stable world. Long before the mobile phone became such an essential accessory to urban dementia, Demetrius was trying to make the connection. It was territorial. Like a dog pissing on a lamp-post.

He banged on the window. Toby leaned over and wound it down.

'Anyone got a 10p?'

No one had a 10p. He scuttled off to the all-night chemist on the corner.

Hair lacquer was hanging thick in the air, the smell of cheap perfume, aphrodisia to all but the mean-hearted. They were crowding into Fagin's, the fantasy palace of the Wicked Lady and the Snowball, where the drinks were as sweet as the perfume, but less alcoholic. Echo and I looked at the

girls. That's where we wanted to be, leaning against the wall, standing in the shadows of love watching them dance around their handbags. The sexiest sight in the world.

Demetrius came back with a paper bag full of disposable syringes. ('It's a beautiful thing, but I can't use it,' said Nico the day before, handing him back a giant stainless-steel surgical hypodermic needle.) It was an instant 'open-sesame' having the title Doctor on his cheque book, people were always ready to ingratiate themselves.

'I'm tired out.' He sagged, breathless, into the driver's seat and started up the engine.

Echo and I blew kisses to the angels in the rain. They were yelling rendezvous to each other across the street, stamping their white stilettos impatiently, bare white legs blue veined with cold.

'They're not bothered about the weather,' said Echo, 'they're used to it. Everyone knows it always rains in Manchester.' He curled up in the corner of the seat and wrapped himself in a dirty old blanket Nico used to protect her harmonium.

We turned into Piccadilly.

'Bloody night,' said Demetrius. 'Windscreen wipers on the blink again ... Toby, get in the back with Jim and Echo. And give the screen a wipe while you're out there, would you?'

Toby grabbed the cloth perfunctorily. 'Ow come it's always yours truly that gets the soggy end of the rag?'

'Because you're a drummer,' said Demetrius. 'Drummers are another primitive life-form, of little use except as beasts of burden.'

She looked sad and incongruous, standing there in the rain.

'Why didn't you wait in the reception?' asked Demetrius.

'I just wanted to get out of that place. That guy was an aasshole.' She threw a half-smoked Marlboro into the gutter and immediately lit another.

'I mean, why do they even *pretend* to be interested? ... We could talk about something else ... Always the same old shit ... Berlin ... The Velvet Underground ... Who fucking cares? I don't.'

Demetrius hummed along to the cassette.

'Please turn that shit off.' Nico blew her cigarette smoke in his face. Demetrius coughed and switched off the cassette.

'Always the Velvet Underground ... I want to talk about *my* records.'

'No one buys your records,' said Demetrius.

'That's because no one plays them!'

'Not many people are that depressed.'

'You've got some nerve, fixing me an interview with a moron like that ... Do you know the kind of music he plays? Disco.'

Demetrius went into a mock-Yiddish routine:

'She don't like da Disco music. She don't like da Country & Western. I fix her an interview vid nice young Goy ... She don't like da interview ... Vat's da matta mit chew? ... I tell her, da Radio people, dey're busy, dey already booked an interview vid Beethoven ... I say to dem "But he's dead" ... "So vot?" day say, "Nobody listens to good music no more anyway."'

'Cra-a-zy,' said Nico, shaking her head.

We swung into Sunnyview Crescent. Demetrius put his arm around her a little earnestly, like a lover might do, and saw her to the step. They exchanged a few words and, as he gave her a kiss goodnight, he slipped something into her hand. She smiled. Everything would be all right again.

On the way back into town, Dr Demetrius yawned. Every day a new plan and a new problem.

‘Anyone else fancy driving for a bit?’ The only other driver was Echo and he was nodding out of the back seat.

Demetrius clocked him in the rear-view mirror. ‘Pathetic,’ he confided in his booming undertone to Toby and myself. ‘To see a grown man with responsibilities indulge himself like a child. We’re all aware of Nico’s arrested development. But one child’s enough! Either he gets his fingers out of his crib or he gets himself back on the dole queue.’

We stopped at the lights on Princess Park Way.

‘Will you just look at that?’ Demetrius tutted in commiseration and pointed to a twisted, crippled figure standing by the kerb.

The figure began to jerk and twist himself across the road, twitching and grimacing. His chin was tucked to one side and his right arm kept making a peculiar, arc-like, bowing motion.

‘What right have we to self-pity ...’ asked Demetrius as the cripple dragged himself past our car. ‘... when there are poor suffering bastards like that in our very midst, wandering and lost?’

‘Yeh,’ said Echo, opening his one good eye to review the pitiful tableau, ‘... an’ *I’ve* got ’em playin’ violin.’

March–April '82:
CHILDREN OF THE POPPY

Echo had an itch. He scratched his arm until the skin was red and raw and his crown of thorns tattoo seemed to weep blood.

We were outside his place, blocking the pavement with old black flight-cases.

‘So Jim – Jimmy – James ... ’ow come yer packin yer axe, as they say, in this neck o’ the woods? I wouldn’t have thought rock’n’roll was exactly your button, old bean.’

‘Job,’ I said. ‘I need a job.’

‘I thought they decided on’oo wuz the Sons of Learnin’ an’ ’oo wuz the Children of Toil first day of infants school.’

‘Then we’re doomed,’ I said.

He sniffed, his raw amphetamine-eroded nostrils flaring slightly. ‘Can’t see the attraction for yer.’ He nodded at the clapped-out van and the flight-cases with the fading names of long-defunct groups stencilled in grey on the side.

A major pop group might employ a fleet of fierce articulated trucks loaded with lighting, sound equipment, stage sets, wardrobe, merchandising, even a few instruments – indeed the whole panoply of hardware that goes with the raw vitality of the people’s music. Ours was a small affair. The glamour went no further than Nico.

Quite how Demetrius had managed to persuade her that it was necessary she perform with the group, I couldn’t work out. But none of us would have been going anywhere if it were not for her persistence and her gullibility. Without us she would be able to travel in comfort and earn more money. It didn’t make sense.

‘She’s not so thick as yer think, Jim – Jimmy. Don’t forget, she’s got the songs – what’ve you got?’

Perhaps Nico knew she was better when she sang alone. Maybe she wanted the spotlight to ease up on her for a while. Who could tell? She seemed so knowing and so credulous at the same time that it permanently wrong-footed you. You never knew where she was or where you stood in relation to her. Most of the time she disdained even to speak so there was no point trying to figure it out. We were here, that was all. The job was to load up this Mister Whippy van with Echo’s broken-down junk and pretend to be something.

Demetrius must have got the truck from someone who owed him one. The seats were the kind of thing you get on public transport, the bare minimum in terms of comfort. Plastic and metal. No headrests. We had to travel two thousand miles there and back in this. Nico hadn’t seen it yet; I just knew she was going to tear into Demetrius when she clapped eyes on it. The mind that child warning w

still visible beneath the thin coat of pale blue paint. On the side was written, in lean-to letters suggest velocity, 'r & o van hire salford'. The suspension sank with an ominous jolt each time we threw a case in the back.

After five minutes we stopped for another fag.

'But yer must've some ulterior motive for climbin' aboard The Good Ship Nico? Lemmesee . . . it's not the rock'n'roll cos yer know too many chords, an' it can't be the drugs cos yer've always got yer train fare'ome . . .'

'It must be the sex then.'

'Good grief . . . yer can't be serious. Sex? This is a *junkie* group. Yer do this when yer can't do anythin' else.'

'Then we're both free to pursue our separate interests,' I concluded.

Toby struggled up the path putting all his weight behind the massive flight-case that housed his drum kit. Echo and I watched him anxiously.

'Don't just fookin' stare . . . give us a bit of shoulder.'

We shoved the reluctant crate up Echo's garden path, the silly little castors getting stuck in every dip and hollow. Finally we reached the back of the truck. We needed a ramp. The thing was impossible to lift. We needed proper men.

Demetrius appeared. 'The shape of the legs is unimportant – but a finely turned ankle, that's the thing, *n'est-ce pas*, gentle-men?' He was towing an overstuffed leatherette suitcase on runners with a stick attachment – the kind of thing old ladies have. Under his right arm he carried a Bullworker. He dropped the Bullworker onto Toby's flight-case and parked his suitcase alongside.

'It's somehow deeply satisfying to see the working classes lathering up a good sweat. Like shi . . . horses. I exempt you of course from this, James, though for some unaccountable reason you wish to align yourself with the lower orders.' He sniffed his Vick inhaler. 'Breasts and buttocks for *them*, eh? He nodded at Toby and Echo. 'But the ankle, the asterisk, the footnote to the sonnet that is woman . . .'

'Get that fookin' bag of shag-mags an' dirty drawers away from my gear . . . Now!' Echo snapped.

'You want to know why you people will never be anything?' said Demetrius, snatching his bag. 'Can't take a joke.'

'Want ter know why yer'll always've dirty underwear?' said Echo, 'Cos yer shit yerself when someone looks yer in the eye.'

The stand-off was broken only when Mercy, Echo's youngest, came up to us. She was about seven. Beautiful. Skin a soft golden colour. She was carrying a bunch of lily-of-the-valley, which she gave to Toby.

'Thank you, my little dear.' Toby bent down and kissed her on the forehead.

There was something other-worldly about the child, but anyone who spent their days playing among gravestones would be that way. She had power. The little girl could even subdue Demetrius and he was an angry mountain in whose shadows the natives trembled. Or so he liked to think.

After we'd finished Toby, Echo and myself stared at the van, loaded to the gunwhales with crates. Demetrius was indoors being fed by Echo's wife.

'The suspension's gone – before *Faticus Omnivorus* has even sat in it,' Echo sneered.

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