



**THE
MAN WHO
TRAVELLED ON
MOTORWAYS**

TREVOR HOYLE

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The form and technique of the following were suggested to me by *Letters From The Underworld* in the volume also containing *The Gentle Maiden* and *The Landlady* by Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky (in the translation by C. J. Hogarth published by Everyman's Library in 1913), to whose memory I tender my grateful thanks.

T

Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation.

Graham Green

A VISIT TO A PAPER MILL

*With every piece of knowledge gained
(An additional neutrino sparks our brain)
We reckon to become better, improved men,
As in preparation for a second game.
Staring into space, the shock
Cracks home that this place,
This time, the only place and time –
And this our only face.
Then do we, anguished, contemplate
The secrets of the past:
One instant is all eternity,
This same instant is our last.*

Ano

I

I was then thirty years old, and so far, had lived a dull, ill-regulated existence, and I was called upon one day to investigate the goings-on in a paper mill. This paper mill was situated at the bottom of a street called, of all things, Cock Clod Street. I arrived there, and on the first day, which was a Sunday they let me park my car inside the green wrought-iron gates because the workers were off and there was room to move about, park cars, etc., without getting trampled underfoot or in anybody's way. I saw that the Mini belonging to Eloise and Dmitri Zeilnski was already there. The inside of this car was in a dreadful state: Dmitri Zeilnski was a photographer and he kept the car littered with discarded 35mm canisters and cartons. Dmitri Zeilnski inhabited life like a suit of second-hand clothes; that's to say he was in a different spacetime continuum to the rest of us. One got the feeling that at any moment he would flicker before one's eyes into nothingness, slipping stealthily into the past or the future, reappearing at some other time – yet so preoccupied with his work as to be completely oblivious to any change in himself or his surroundings.

I went inside the huge building. It was quiet, except for the sound of splashing water somewhere. The Millspaugh papermaking machine was stopped: 215 feet long, a massive lump of machinery with huge drum rolls in the centre section which must be each, at least, ten feet in diameter. It's the kind of machine that makes a good analogy for life. Having been sucked in and spawned at the 'wet end' the victim is stretched, scalded, filtered, flattened, starched, smoothed and wound tightly onto a drum, weighed, trimmed, stamped and consigned to oblivion. The atmosphere in the long machine-room was close, the humidity catching the back of the throat with a cloying dryness. Steam drifted out of the guts of the monster, water splashed underfoot into gratings; there was a kind of concealed violence in the long silent-pounding room as though at any moment it might unleash a terrible mechanical power. Naturally it was the machine itself that was responsible for giving this impression.

Dmitri Zeilnski and his wife Eloise were on the gantry setting up their equipment. I hadn't realised until now how much they hated each other. Coming upon them like this, from below the gantry, unnoticed, I both saw and heard their bickering long before they heard my footsteps on the metal stairs. As usual, Dmitri was totally preoccupied with his lenses and filters and other bits of accessories. Perhaps two-thirds of him was present in the spacetime vortex we were inhabiting.

Eloise, disgusting creature, was snuffling round his feet like a mangy animal, craven, subservient, utterly abject. She spat back, of course, but it was no kind of defence at all. If anything it betrayed the fact that her life was dependent on and dedicated to his. It is ghastly to see someone existing out of

someone else: that if that life should fail their life too would go with it. It's parasitical.

~~Dmitri Zeilnski shouted something furious at his wife as I came up the steps, and she was about to deliver some absolutely cutting sliver of invective when she saw me and smiled in her ragged toothless way. (Eloise Zeilnski isn't toothless but she gives one that impression.)~~

Dmitri immediately grasped my arm, pushing his wife out of the way, and ordered me to help him set up the equipment. I was embarrassed because he had so crudely shown her up in front of me, though to tell the truth I didn't like her any more than he did. I was glad to be in the huge, warm machine-room with Dmitri, assisting him, because one got the feeling that this was the centre of something, i.e: things were happening here as opposed to somewhere else. As I've said, this was a Sunday, and Sundays are always so quiet and dead that surely (I imagine) there is a monstrous party going on not far away if only one knew where to find it. One does not, of course, ever find it. The monstrous party with its boisterous people remains forever hidden.

Here we are then, Dmitri and Eloise Zeilnski and myself in the huge, long machine-room, on the green-painted gantry, setting up the equipment and waiting for something to happen. The atmosphere was humid. My sweater was scraping on my back. Dmitri was perspiring lightly. Eloise's hair was a tangly mess.

'What are we shooting here?' Dmitri asked me. 'Precisely what?'

Immediately I am on my guard; I know that I must behave professionally, and this means giving the impression of behaving professionally.

'It isn't so much the machine as the felts we require,' I replied. 'Admittedly they're not very photogenic.'

'No.'

Eloise Zeilnski looked pained at this. Anything which displeases her husband or constitutes any kind of annoyance to him is an irritant to her, a snag in the unbroken fabric of their life together. She apes his expression.

'There are two ways of doing this,' I said. 'One, we use unusual light angles of shade and shadow, thereby creating peculiar patterns so that the felts look like felts taken from various odd aspects. Second, colour filters, mixed, interchangeable and overlapped. The advertisements will be in colour, so we might as well take advantage of the fact.'

Dmitri Zeilnski conveys the impression of having taken in everything you've said without having heard or taken note of a single word. It is an annoying trait that I determine to practise and copy. Eloise is looking critically at the felts on the machine as though – Heaven forbid! – she might be capable of making a worthwhile contribution. Her husband glances at her with the keenest contempt and irritability. I'm beginning to get annoyed with her myself.

'Will it make any difference, the machine being stopped?' Dmitri asked.

I have to consider this. 'No it won't.' In truth I don't know whether or not it *will* make any difference, but I have learned that the essential thing in this business is never to show any hesitation. He Who Hesitates Is Lost; how true!

On a papermaking machine the felts are in effect long conveyor belts which support the 'stuff' – the slushy fibrous paper – while at the same time allowing the drainage of water. When the 'stuff' hits the first felt at the wet end it is 95.5 per cent water, and as you will appreciate the object is to drain this away, leaving behind the web of paper, now self-supporting, to run at speeds of around 1000 feet per minute through the machine. It was our job to photograph the felts.

I say 'our job' but in fact this was solely Dmitri Zeilnski's task; my purpose was far more devious. I had to research, literally, the background to the plant. I was very anxious to know what went on 'behind the scenes'. You see, I have always been intrigued by the unseen things that make other things happen. Do you understand this? In our twentieth century, when on the surface everything appears to

happen quite smoothly, in reality there is a fantastic amount of activity going on 'underground', so to speak. The paper mill is a perfect example of this principle. For instance, at first sight the mammoth Millspaugh (beautiful name for a juggernaut!) seems to move under its own volition. The enormous drum reels spin majestically, laws unto themselves; the paper web screams through at an incredible speed; the lights on the control panel – green, orange and purple – flicker on and off seemingly at will yet of course none of this happens without some other thing making it happen. The question naturally arises (to one with a mind like mine): what is making these things happen? Contrary to initial impressions these events are taking place because something unseen is providing the primeval motive power. Then what is it? Possibly this doesn't fascinate you as it does me; I can only say that different things interest different people.

I was at this point in time anxious not to get too involved in the photographing of the felts. For this reason: Dmitri Zeilnski became so absorbed that he lost all sense of time and place, and if one were to assist him he came to take such assistance for granted. One's hands became simply *a pair of hands*, without human attachment, which he regarded as his property to direct and dispose of as he thought fit. This is not flattering. It makes one feel ugly and small and disfigured; but more than this, it erodes the personality to a point where the self becomes a nothingness, a shadowy negative form without shape or substance. Antimatter if you like.

Anyway, I was determined not to become too involved. For my pains I would receive nothing: indeed less than nothing. To say that I hated Dmitri Zeilnski would be an overstatement. I neither hated nor despised him. His existence was a matter of complete indifference to me.

'I can't hang about for too long,' I said. 'I have other things to do.'

He sighed heavily. I knew he wanted me to stay so that he wouldn't be left alone with his wife. However, the benefit of my not being married to her was that I could leave her any time I chose. That was his problem, as they say.

'The electrician hasn't connected the power,' said Dmitri. It was my turn to sigh. For although it was his responsibility to take the photographs it was my responsibility to see to it that he had all the facilities he required in order to take such photographs.

'Very well,' I said despondently, 'I'll go and find the electrician.' I was reluctant to do this for reasons you can probably imagine: have *you* ever tried to find an electrician in a closed paper mill on a Sunday afternoon? No? Well let me tell you it is no easy task. Neither is it a very pleasant one. I shan't bore you with details of what it entails, you must take my word that my heart was like lead.

Eventually I did find the electrician, who promised to connect the supply to the power points indicated to him by Dmitri. Having done this I made my way back to the machine-room by a different route so that I wouldn't be spotted by either of the Zeilnskis. I was determined to find out what *move* the plant.

The making of paper is a fascinating business. During that winter I went on several occasions to the paper mill, each time becoming a little more fully aware of the magical way in which the raw wood pulp and esparto grass is transformed into smooth, unblemished, unbroken bands of pure white paper. In essence the process is simple enough; it starts to get complicated because nothing can be seen – everything happens inside vats, tanks, pipes, conduits, chambers, ducting, etc. In fact the whole complex assembly is one vast conglomeration of oddly-shaped metal containers, each with a specific if mysterious function. Can you see why it intrigued me?

Yet even the hardware described isn't the full story. I found this out by going off alone into the uttermost depths of the plant, climbing over hot blistering pipes and squeezing my tiny bulk through crude holes that had been knocked in the walls to permit the access of the pipes. Inside some of the vast subterranean rooms were the familiar throbbing vats and mildewed pipes, and these rooms led to

other rooms, equally large, in which more vats throbbed and their pipes wound this way and that, feeding stuff into the vats and taking it away again. Yet still I wasn't satisfied. There must be more to it than this, I can remember telling myself. 'What is the secret of the plant's volition; what is going on within the paper mill to give it the force of life?' These questions, I knew, were very important and needed answering.

Before I could progress any further, however, a distant hooter rasped faintly, and in the semi-twilight I could just make out the time by my watch. The problem now was how to return to the machine-room where I supposed Dmitri and Eloise Zeilnski would be taking down their equipment in preparation for going home. It was difficult to retrace my steps, for the rooms were to all intents and purposes identical, the vats and pipes too so similar as to defy individual identification. How, I wondered, could the people who worked here find their way about? Presumably the rooms were numbered, in case a breakdown occurred, to enable the repair team to locate the particular room in which the fault had taken place. Fortunately I had a gas lighter in my pocket and with this I began to search the rough brick walls for signs of a number or symbol – for anything that might give me a clue as to my position within the plant.

I don't suppose you have ever had to search for a number or symbol on a wall inside a paper mill: it is not an occupation I would recommend, I can tell you. It is so easy, so *easy*, to mistake a smear of concrete dust, or some white crumbling cement, for a sensible and decipherable legend. Oh how many times I held up the lighter, catching a glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye, stumbling towards it gratefully, straining my eyes upwards to see it, only to find I had been cheated by pale dust markings, shiny dripping water patches, or simply tricks of the unsteady light. It is no wonder men go mad when all their efforts are made an absolute mockery of.

Outside, without question, it was cold and blustery, for this was January, and January in Lancashire is an unwelcome experience. For no reason at all (at least none that I could fathom) the climate at this certain point in time reminded me of a cold, bleak drive through an oil refinery that I was to undertake, with the wind blowing the flaming jets to and fro, hither and thither, from side to side: lazy silent flames evaporating in the grey air. An oil refinery! Now there's a place to conjure with! What else has the atmosphere of foreboding, of a threatening world cataclysm? It is the end of all existence as we know it, a desolate burning hell with streamers of sulphurous smoke obscuring an eternal scudding sky. Do not think I am imagining such a place: I was to witness it with my very own eyes, and what's more it was devoid of human beings! That is my vision of hell on earth – a place bare of life, occupied only by a landscape of burning towers, erupting fire and smoke, *uncontrolled by an intelligence!*

I see a strained smile playing about your features. You think I am on the verge of sanity, that I'm skating on very thin ice. My answer to this is simple: doesn't life in our twentieth century push us all to the extremes of our minds? For myself, I try to lead a quiet life, I cultivate the calm pleasures, I refuse to read newspapers and magazines, yet even so the high-pitched scream of modern life penetrates my defences and strikes right into my skull. The scream is inside me, trying to get out – and I, who divorce myself from the world's harsh realities ...

People today must perforce have the minds of oxen. If they do not they break, crack apart. I have been giving a good deal of thought recently to mental health. How can it be improved? If one is anxious to build up a good stout physique the body doctors have the answer. Eat the right food, take exercise, refrain from over-indulgence in smoking, drinking and other abuses of the constitution. Breathe deeply, perhaps, and get a sound eight hours' sleep every night. All of which a sensible person can follow if he so chooses. Now tell me how to achieve the equivalent in and for the mind. Exercise of the mind? It seems to me that the more one exercises the mind the more neurotic one becomes. Food for the mind? What kind of food is best for the mind? The theologian would answer: the spiritu

kind, my son. Possibly true; but if in the exercise of the mind one comes to the conclusion that religion is a falsity, what course is to be taken? We can reject the evidence of the mind, embrace religion, and live our life through lies, or we can respect the power of our minds, throw God to one side, and thereafter go gradually mad with the thought of a barren universe.

The problem with Dmitri Zeilnski is that just when you think you have him pinned by the proverbials he fades into another spacetime continuum, his Nikon and Pentax slung over his shoulder. He is a swarthy man with heavy brows and dense black wavy hair. He wears thick-rimmed spectacles and his fingernails are cut very short and square. One of the most noticeable things about him is that his car is always in a mess. A conversation with him consists of not asking direct questions followed by his not replying. Nevertheless he is a fine chap, always providing that one doesn't do a tenth of what he asks. Eloise, of course, is a much more definitive figure. Servile, cringing, subservient, she is the kind of woman who would drive any man, not least her husband, to wander the world. A fact about the pair of them which has often perplexed me is their utter disregard for money. They spend money yet never seem to earn any. I should like to know how they do this, because it is a trick worth cultivating. Dmitri always has at least a pound in his pocket: perhaps it is always the same pound, which immediately it is spent reappears in his back pocket as if by magic. One has all the money in the world if one has just one pound note and that keeps reappearing in one's pocket.

We did a number of assignments together, in addition to the paper mill. Admittedly this was the most interesting, for the reasons I have explained. We even had plans to travel abroad but these came to nothing. He went and I stayed, and as you see I'm still here. What happened to Eloise Zeilnski is anybody's guess. (I heard the other day, on the phone, that after a suitable lapse of time she had followed him; what the current state of their relationship is I do not know.)

I come upon them, Dmitri and an Italian friend of his, in the saloon bar of a pub. Weak sunlight through the decorative windows of thickened glass, their lower parts opaque, gives their two faces a raw, fresh-washed look and makes their eyes appear amazingly translucent. Dmitri introduces me to his friend: I sit down. From the moment I do sit down there is a battle of wits, a contest of egos. Dmitri delights in asking me what I am doing so that he can knock me down; naturally the Italian is his ally. They drink halves of mild beer from dirty, lipstick-smearred glasses; I drink Guinness. It is midday and the pub is comparatively empty.

'So when are you going abroad?' Dmitri asks me. He asks me this in a friendly, interested tone of voice but he is waiting, just waiting, to knock me down.

'It will be sometime next year now,' I reply. He doesn't believe I will go; I am determined to go but I share his doubt.

He then launches into a long string of advice: his speciality. How to travel, where to go, who to see. I nod and look serious. I like him, though I hate him when he acts like this. His attitude is insulting. He is good at his job but not that good.

'My friend here knows of a cheap farmhouse you could stay at in northern Italy.'

'Oh yes?'

The Italian says in quite good but imperfect English: 'There is a small village twenty kilometres and more from the sea. My brother and his family live in a house next to the village. The rents are cheap.'

'The sea is the Adriatic?' I say.

'Yes,' the Italian says solemnly.

'Give him the address,' Dmitri says. 'I'll write it down and give you directions.' He is trying to be helpful and it would be churlish of me to refuse his help. Besides, perhaps one distant day I will indeed stay at a cheap farmhouse in an Italian village.

At this point we had very recently completed the paper mill assignment.

Dmitri writes down the address and draws a little map of how to get there. I thank them both for their advice and kindness. ~~Dmitri Zeilnski has capable brown hands and I resent this. He travels all over the world while I'm stuck here with an emotional deadweight of guilt round my neck. The Italian is smiling faintly and I begin to feel I am losing control of the situation. After all, what is the Italian? What more has he to offer than me? People with nothing to offer are so insufferably, illogically superior.~~

Dmitri says, 'We must meet up when you're abroad.'

'We might even do a job together,' I say hopelessly.

'There are too many doing jobs like that,' Dmitri answers. He has found the chink he has been looking for. It is practically an open invitation. He is going to knock me down. The Italian grins. Dmitri says, 'To do a job like that you need an entirely new approach, something never tried before.'

'An angle,' is all my cliché-ridden mind can think to say.

Dmitri smiles. It is obvious that he believes me incapable of dreaming up such an angle. He considers me young, naive, and foolish. This despite the paper mill experience.

'When are you leaving?' I ask.

Dmitri smiles his smugly confident brown-faced smile. (I do him a disservice; he isn't really smug at all, just so damn knowing.) 'I have a few things to finalise in London and then I'll be away. I'm expecting mail from the States.'

Big deal, I almost say.

I cannot help wondering how the hell Dmitri came to meet the Italian in the first place. Was he passing through the Italian's village and happened to stop and they got into conversation? It was possible but hardly likely. Meeting an English-speaking Italian in a remote village in the depths of the Italian countryside was too much of a coincidence. Something else was bothering me: the Italian was expensively dressed. I had been led to believe that Italy was a poor country, yet here was a native of that country wearing better and more modern clothes than I. I felt like asking, 'Where did you get your money from?'

At this precise moment Dmitri says, 'He owned a large garage in a big town in Italy and has just sold it,' answering my unspoken query as to how the Italian comes to be dressed so expensively and in such good, modern taste. One would think this a coincidence; in fact one would think the world to be full of coincidences, to be choc-a-bloc with them, for million upon million of coincidences like this one to be happening all the time. But there is no such thing as coincidence.

I notice that the floor of the saloon bar hasn't been swept, probably for days, possibly for weeks. It is thick with litter: cigarette packets, cellophane wrappers, tobacco ash, broken beer mats, torn newspapers, ripped crisp packets, all mixed with gobs of spit and spilled beer. I look with disgust at the floor.

'Does nobody ever sweep up these days?' I ask abstractedly.

The Italian shoots his immaculate cream cuffs and I notice on his genuine gold cuff-links the initials *RK*.

'Well,' Dmitri smiles, 'so when are you going then?'

'Do you mean abroad?'

'Where else?' Dmitri continues to smile.

'Oh not too long, perhaps in a month or so. I'm waiting for the money to come through and then I shall be off.'

The Italian won't stop staring at me with his dark-irised eyes, and he is beginning to make me feel nervous. I don't like people staring at me with dark-irised eyes.

'Well,' Dmitri says, there being nothing further to say at this point.

'How is Eloise?' I ask, making my attempt to knock *him* down.

Dmitri's face crinkles in a brown grimace. 'We are still together – that is I stay with her when I am in the country. But...' He grimaces once more. 'Did nothing ever come of the paper mill project?' 'How do you mean, "come of it"?'

This pendantsy annoys Dmitri: I can see it in his brown face. All he wants is a straight answer to a straight question. Ha-ha, never! If he thinks me a fool then I shall play the fool.

'Has the material been made into anything?' Dmitri says patiently.

'Not that I know of,' I reply, and it is evident that this non-answer angers Dmitri even more.

I go home feeling pleased with myself. Dmitri and his Italian friend have departed for South Wales following *my* directions. They could end up in Glasgow. I need not tell you how I spent the next three days. Later, Dmitri went abroad and it is over a year since I last saw him. What has become of him? Whom is he now bullying?

II

We get many glimpses of a secret underlife during our years as thinking beings, yet we choose to ignore them. For myself, I find that more and more I am drifting, or rather sinking, deeper and deeper into a fantastic half-shadowed world of memory, reminiscence, nostalgia and the like which seems more 'real' than this everyday outside world I am forced to inhabit in order to make a living. This is badly put. I shall make another attempt: at certain times I feel I am living surrounded by a great stillness. I feel that events that have happened will happen again. Indeed, I'm convinced that once an event has happened it continues to repeat itself endlessly, like the continuous loop of a cassette tape or a never-ending series of television action-replays. So that we foresee events before they happen (because they have already happened) – and after our instant-self has passed through the spacetime in which the event is happening the event then continues to happen, as I've said, *ad infinitum*. Thus I am still sitting at the table in the pub with the weak sunlight pouring over me as through half-frosted windows. I shall continue to sit there for all eternity. Dmitri will continue to ask me questions, and I shall forever evade answering them.

To give another example. Once I returned in the early hours of the morning from a long nightdrive (from whence I came I can't remember). I went to the huge black ugly building where I had an office. It was early, about six o'clock, and the only people moving about were the cleaners, old charladies with grotesque hands and wrinkled stockings. I had a wash, made some coffee, and tried to make a flat place on which to lie down by placing two chairs together. Very ordinary events, you will agree, but the odd thing is that I am still having a wash, making coffee, and trying to make a flat place on which to lie down by placing two chairs together. At this moment I am doing these things. As I sit here writing I am doing them.

I mention this specific time, place and event because I was very conscious of the great stillness previously referred to. Of course it *was* still, actually still, because there is little traffic about at six o'clock in the morning, even in the centre of Manchester. But the point I want to make is that the stillness was doom-laden. This silly phrase is the one that comes nearest to describing my awareness at that particular point in time. I felt – quite literally – that the fabric of the air was about to be ripped from end to end. As a drowning man I saw the skyline silhouette of an oil refinery, a cold featureless hospital corridor, an anonymous animal smashed flat on a midnight road, a girl with sparse red pubic hair, a black-faced man on a ladder pointing the side of a house, a harsh cornfield that left indentations on the skin, an hotel room to which I had been led by a slim, swarthy man with a disfigured face, a pub standing erect in the centre of a wilderness whose bars were slopping with Guinness, an enormous August sun beating through the windscreen directly into my eyes, a darkened room in which I danced

naked with a black girl, an exhibition stand crammed with gleaming motorcycles, a flat through whose blank windows clinical light scoured everything white, an occasion with wife and family eating fish and chips in the lost middle of Birmingham.

– All these events were happening at one and the same time. And I was participating in each of them. My entire life was enclosed in a series of giant glossy stills pinned to a cork board. The real events of my life had turned into photographs. More explicitly, they had become fiction. My life was fiction; I myself was a fictitious character.

(Apropos of this, the thought occurs to me that if people inhabit fiction how can they believe in fiction when they read it? The simple truth of the matter is that people do not believe in fiction today because they no longer believe in the validity of their own emotions or that they themselves have a separate reality. How the idea amuses me!)

Round about this period in which I had the conversation with Dmitri Zeilnski and the Italian – whether or not this was before or after the experience in the office I cannot recall – I became heavily involved in a bizarre situation in a neighbouring town. I went to this town to drink; that is, to get drunk. As to why I should need to get drunk you can no doubt guess. The town in question reeks of beer. It is very easy to get beaten up in this certain town. It is noted for miles around as a town of sex and violence. If I were to describe it to you, which I shall, it sounds like this:

The Town is both flourishing and decaying all at once. In the centre, at the apex of a hill, where four main roads meet, they have constructed massive concrete walkways and subways which circumnavigate the traffic flow. This configuration is not beautiful, neither is it ugly: it is so frightening that it is a threat to human existence. These walkways and subways, some of which include shopping precincts, are bleak draughty hells upon whose walls are smeared obscenities, excrement, blood from used and discarded sanitary towels, beer sick and advertising signs. Every breakable artefact has been broken. Every lamp behind its toughened wire-impregnated glass panel has been smashed. The steel ballustrading leans at weary attitudes as though resting from the nightly onslaught. The dedicated benches have been ripped out of the ground and lie splintered in the flower-beds. Slim aluminium poles carrying spiky remnants of white light globes have had their spines severely distorted. There is litter and dirt and soot everywhere, ushered into heaped corners by the perpetual gusting winds. Some of the paving stones have been wrenched up. No one is safe after dark. Above and below the walkways and subways the Christian traffic shatters past, the dim interiors of perfume peace reflecting the glow from flickering green needles in hermetically-sealed stainless steel casings. This traffic moves under its own volition, and is its own and everything else's justification for being. The tarmac of the roads is burnished to a deep brilliant black by the lipping tyres. It is truly an artery of the world – an artery that passes through a concrete bowel in less time than it takes to fart.

This is the flourishing part.

In the decaying part discarded hulks of cotton mills are strewn along the embankments of rusting railway tracks. Worthwhile slum clearance schemes have gone full ahead (to make more room for the Concrete Bowel) and now acres of family streets are piles of dust-laden nostalgia.

The Town is no more violent than it used to be but now the violence is openly on the streets. The people have finally learned – after many years of painstaking and expensive teaching, not to mention daily media conditioning – that materialism should be placed before and above everything while material objects themselves are worth nothing. It is a beautiful system, self-perpetuating, mutually sustaining, leading slowly but surely to its ultimate pinnacle of perfection: a factory where they make and smash objects on the same conveyor-belt.

In this environment I felt at home, because inside my head I too have a making-smashing device that keeps me company as I walk through this desolate society of ours. This device makes and smashes thoughts, ideas, hopes, aspirations, emotions even before they're fully formed. They are

aborted; stillborn.

It was on a Thursday that I decided to visit the Town. Needless to say I detested myself for having insufficient will power to resist the ugly temptations that were luring me there. As usual most of the street lighting was off, having failed or been broken. Gangs of youths roamed about, clomping their heavy boots up and down the walk-ways and subways. I hurried on quickly to the Pub. I remember particularly that there was a nasty stinging wind blowing ice-cold from the moors, sweeping down the street, gusting muck and grit into your eyes. 'If this is the best they can do ...' I remember thinking.

As I approached the door of the Pub my mind was in a turmoil of indecision. Was it right, because one felt superior to certain people, to use them as a means of sating one's perverse desires? (Not that this really bothered me.) And what if she penetrated my flimsy disguise and caught a glimpse – only a glimpse! – of the person that was supposed to be underneath? It was a chance I would have to take. Other questions too assailed me, but these could wait.

III

As I entered the Pub I had a strange feeling that I wouldn't be very welcome. However, as I have this feeling wherever I go it was not something to take me by surprise. Rather, I was prepared for it – or, *rather*, I prepared myself for it. She wasn't at the bar or behind the bar, so I seated myself in rather a dejected mood and waited to see what went on around me. After a while a girl entered whom I knew: she had told me in the past that her name was Shirl, and I had no reason to doubt this. With her was a tiny man, diminutive in fact, whose name I didn't catch, but who bit his fingernails. This was something that gave me great personal satisfaction. Almost immediately Shirl began to talk directly to me, ignoring the tiny man, which, if the truth were known, had the effect of unsettling me. I like to know where I am with people; I like to feel that everyone has a proper station in life. Now by rights she should have been engaging both of us in conversation equally – if not the tiny man more than me seeing that he was her companion – yet her biased attentions hinted that their relationship was not as appeared. This, as you will agree, can be most disturbing, especially to someone of such tender sensibilities as myself. At first the tiny man seemed oblivious of this discrepancy, sitting back quietly in his chair and now and then sipping his beer. Slowly I began to detect in him a certain impatience, annoyance even, and endeavoured to draw him into the conversation, occasionally dropping the odd remark which perhaps he might seize upon and thus insinuate himself into the discussion. Though whenever I did this Shirl instantly snatched at the phrase or question or whatever it was and once more directed her reply to me, all but turning her back on him. Indeed, he was an odd creature. Shirl herself was highly attractive, physically, and her attractiveness was enhanced by the unavoidable comparison between the two of them. As stated, he was tiny, and amazingly thin. His face was very pale, and in it his eyes gleamed like pieces of polished coal. Was it my imagination that he never blinked? He gave the impression of being innocuous, yet there was a hidden streak of restrained obscenity somewhere inside that chilled the blood. He was the type of man that fascinates women.

My nervousness was increasing by the minute: the last thing I wanted was a scene or an incident; I dread the thought of becoming conspicuous or of disturbing any living creature. That is why I have such high regard for maintaining one's proper station in life. It is important to know who and what and where you are at all times.

'Strange that we should have met just here,' said Shirl. 'I didn't know you came to this place.'

Glancing at her companion, I said, 'I don't intend staying very long. Do you know what times the trains are? Or the buses?'

'Oh, but you're not going,' said Shirl. She laughed. She wore glasses. 'We're staying all night,

aren't we?' she said, half to the tiny man, but not expecting or waiting for a reply, went on, 'This place isn't at all like it used to be. Don't you think so?'

'I can't really remember,' I said. I was hoping they'd go, for I had someone else to see.

'It used to get very crowded,' the tiny man said, addressing his remark to me.

'Really?' I said. Did he expect me to be surprised? I decided to show surprise, nodding my head to confirm the truth of his statement and raising my eyebrows to their fullest extent. He had the most penetrating gaze I had ever encountered. There was a handkerchief in his breast pocket on which his initials were embroidered, but I couldn't make them out.

'Oh yes,' Shirl said. 'Very crowded.' Her lips were sensually thick; they seemed to invite certain disgusting physical sensations. Through the oval-shaped lenses of her spectacles her eyes were fixed on mine. I hoped the tiny man wouldn't notice this.

Shirl said, 'You didn't come to my flat after all.'

I was astounded. 'Your flat?' I said. 'I didn't say I would come to your flat. Did I say that? I don't remember. When did I say that?'

The tiny man had leaned forward in his chair, no doubt so as not to miss a word of our conversation. His hands, I noticed, were pale and thin, covered in fine black hair. His sudden interest disconcerted me considerably. Shirl was not at all put out by this.

'I wouldn't have thought you were the kind of person likely to forget such a thing,' Shirl said.

'I'm sure I am not,' I said. 'Though I honestly can't remember ever promising such a thing.'

'Evidently you did promise,' said the tiny man, 'and then you forgot.'

'Yes, yes,' I agreed, attempting to smile. 'It seems I must have done. But it is strange all the same for I don't believe I know where your flat is.'

'Oh but I gave you directions,' Shirl said earnestly. 'I gave you the name of the street and the number of the house.'

It entered my head that possibly she was mistaken, but as there was little evidence of this apart from my own absence of memory it seemed that I must agree with the statement that I had indeed, at some time in the past, been invited to her flat. The tiny man's insistence was also a factor in my acknowledging the truth of Shirl's undoubtedly sincere conviction.

'And I was all prepared for you,' Shirl said. (What did she mean?)

'Are you in the habit of disappointing people?' the tiny man asked. He was now leaning so far forward that his head was level with the table.

'No, no,' I was quick to reply. 'Quite the reverse, in fact. Had I known – had I *remembered*—'

'You'll remember next time,' Shirl said, smiling faintly and narrowing her eyes.

'Well,' I said, nodding to the tiny man, 'yes ... I suppose next time I *will* remember. I shall make a – er – point of remembering. Shan't I?'

I wished that the tiny man would stop staring at me. His eyes were really quite peculiar. And I still wasn't sure in my own mind what sort of relationship existed between them. Was I expected to accompany Shirl to her flat? Or had the invitation been made before she struck up an acquaintance with the tiny man? But no! – Shirl had quite distinctly repeated the invitation, hinting at a 'next time'. Then what function did the tiny man fulfil? Surely he couldn't be her brother. Perhaps a distant relative? At any rate I wanted them to go, immediately if possible, because I had come to the Pub for a specific purpose and their presence was obtruding on the plans I had carefully laid for the evening.

'I detest people who give offence,' the tiny man said suddenly. At this Shirl laughed. 'Don't you?'

I wasn't sure who had asked the question; not that it mattered, for of course I agreed wholeheartedly with what had been said.

'Don't you?'

'It's the most unpleasant of things,' I said. I was surprised to find that this statement – could one

call it an accusation? – had nettled me. It had made sweat break out on my body. Were they suggesting that it was I who had given offence? Was that what they were getting at? If so, I should have liked to have known what led them to this conclusion, and what specifically I had said or done that had apparently been sufficient cause to give offence. As I say, I should not disturb a mouse if I could help it.

I said brusquely, ‘I also detest those who make wrongful accusations. There are plenty of them about if one cares to look far enough.’ I guessed that my severe tone would check them in their stride; it would certainly demonstrate that they couldn’t get away with everything, even if they thought they could.

‘We must be off,’ said the tiny man, finishing his drink and standing up all at once. So they closed ranks and retreated at the first sign of battle! Secretly I exulted. Such arrogance deserves to be stepped on instantly, as one would destroy without hesitation an ugly crawling slimy thing crossing one’s path.

‘Well, be seeing you,’ said Shirl, rising with what seemed to be a disquieting amount of hesitation. What else was she hinting at? Was she trying to lure me? Did she, in fact, want me to strike the tiny man?

Something surprised me at this moment. Now having risen, Shirl, it appeared, only came up to the tiny man’s shoulder. Not that she was tinier than he, but rather that he was taller than her. This amused me for a moment; then it upset me, because in point of fact the tiny man was quite tall – still extremely thin, but much taller than I had at first supposed. I am very small myself, with a deformity of some sort on my back, and I have a natural antagonism towards people who are tall and straight. Shirl was not very tall (taller than me, however), but round and plump, with pertinent breasts. I began to hate them both for their tallness.

‘Are you staying?’ Shirl said. She plucked the tall man’s handkerchief out of his breast pocket to dab her lips and I saw the initials *GD* embroidered in green, set slanting across one corner.

The tall man repeated Shirl’s question. His tiny black eyes were fixed viciously upon me. How I wished that one of the roaming gangs would set upon him as he walked along and kick him and hurt him. It would teach him a lesson. I could see the boots going in – one of them my boot – knocking the senses out of him. Sometimes I have wished evil on certain people and evil has befallen them, and how I wished evil on the tall man! If he thought he could intimidate me he had another thing coming.

Looking towards the door I saw Val catch sight of me. I had sensed that she was here somewhere (I have a sensitivity about such things). With Shirl and the tall man gone I could concentrate all my powers on the reason I had come to this dreadful room in the first place. And why had I come here? Even now, thinking back, to recall the purpose of my visit nauseates me more than I can say. A devil, or a demon, had driven me to seek out the one person who so repulsed me that all my being quivered in disgust and loathing, yet who also generated within me the most intense kind of excitement. All my life I have had to contend with these two opposing forces; they have warred incessantly and torn my insides to shreds, destroying in the process the good, noble ideals to which my being aspires. Why must each person be at civil war with himself?

Be that as it may, Val and I had an understanding. We met infrequently, usually after dark, and always scurrying away at once to remote, inaccessible places where we were certain not to be disturbed. In truth this was not the entire reason. I could not – would not allow myself – to be seen in her company a moment longer than was absolutely necessary, and so no sooner would we meet than I hurried her away down a dark street or hired a taxi to take us miles from anywhere, up there on the wild swinging moors. Even in broad daylight one could walk all day and not see another human soul. In the summer (which this was not) the sun beat hotly on the coarse rasping grass and in the valleys were the rigid smokeless shapes of mill chimneys, embarrassed by the unaccustomed clear air.

The first thing to find was always a hollow, a small depression, some shallow private place warmer

by the sun and immune to prying eyes. Then I would tell her – without any preamble and as crudely as I could – to get undressed. She would obey without question, slowly, to my commands, removing her garments one by one, following the instructions I rapped out to her precisely to the letter: if she did not she knew the consequences. It was always my policy to have her undress completely, but to remain covered with certain undergarments so that I could see what effect they had, contrasting their flimsy, transparent appearance with the fullness they were supporting and partially concealing. As always on these occasions I took along an empty camera, the purpose of which was to deceive myself into believing that the exercise was one of pure art and objectivity. Having told her to partly remove a garment as far as the knees I then made her open her legs as far as the restricting garment would permit, and all but inserting the camera lens into the apex of her limbs, clicked the shutter several times to signify that her diseased cunt was now a matter of photographic record.

During all of this she remained pallid and mute, bending herself to my will as so much dull animal bulk, heavy with boredom and empty with incomprehension.

A fine bodily thing about her was the size of her breasts. The sheer enormity of her breasts. They were perfect in that each breast was in itself larger than her face; the shape and line of them were less important than this one primary fact. A favourite vantage point was to be had from directly below: she standing with legs apart above me and thrusting out her breasts for me to catch the outlines of her nipples against the sky. In this position, too, it was useful to have her bend outward at the knees, thus opening up to my gaze every innermost detail of her vulva, prepuce and clitoris. Not to study this disgusting spectacle, but in order to make the strain on her limbs grow to intolerable limits, I issued strict orders that she was to remain rigidly in this position until otherwise instructed. The sun being hot on my face, I would rise up and wander away for a while, taking a casual stroll to look down into the town or towards the wet black strip of road shivering in the heat, occasionally glancing back from various viewing points to see how she looked and to what extent detail was visible. It sometimes amused me to wonder at the reactions of a stranger, should one appear suddenly over the moor, coming upon this girl in a state of extreme impropriety. However, no one ever did appear, unfortunately.

Odd funny little gimmicks would occur to me from time to time, such as taking with me a candle to be inserted into her, and setting it alight, leaning back contentedly in the sun to watch the slow, steady progress of the invisible flame towards her pubic hairs. These, by the way, were reddish and sparse, and in some ways this displeased me, for I rate a woman's voluptuousness pro rata to the amount of body hair. It amused me to wait until the last possible moment before removing the candle, to see in Val's complacent expression a twitch of emotion, a shudder of hurt. Oh, my mind was full of devious little tricks! Another consisted of having Val press her breasts into the ground: the grass was sharp, and with any luck would slice finely into one or other of the white breasts, nicking it keenly and drawing blood. To aid this I would straddle her shoulders, or kneel into the nape of her neck, enjoying the knowledge of what this additional pressure might be doing to her. In this position I would read a chapter of a book or a magazine article, only shifting my weight to bear down more firmly, pressing her into the ground. The moment of greatest anticipation, of course, was when I released her and allowed her to rise; her ugly flattened breasts re-formed into their hanging shape, the nipples now raw and angry, and innumerable criss-crossed lines and indentations were imprinted in the bulky smoothness. I would bid her stand in front of me, and to her blank face would laugh at the pitiful sight she presented, making remarks aloud to myself and the world in general about her pathetic gross body, its features and failings, the misproportion of it, and what a complete and utter disaster she was as a so-called human being.

These experiences built up to a climax, as is normally the case; up to this point I had been most careful not to reveal any part of my own body. Now I told her to disrobe me, with the proviso that she

cleansed each portion with her tongue as it was opened to the light. This procedure took some considerable time, leading gradually to the action of her kneeling between my legs and licking my private parts. Whether or not she appreciated the privilege of being allowed to perform this, I never dared to inquire, or indeed discovered. All this while I subjected her to constant abuse, a stream of patient, well-spaced vilification relating to the coarseness of her nature and the ridiculousness of a situation in which she was allowed even to approach me. But of course it was lost on her; I had long ago ceased to believe that contact between us was feasible.

With Val kneeling and in an attitude of prayer before me, and I standing, would jerk forward my abdomen and strike repeatedly at her pale, broad face with the blunt, heavy end of my cock. Eventually it would emit premature semen, thick globular strings of stuff which stuck in shiny patches to her brow and cheeks. Only when I experienced the approaching sensation of release and exorcism from my loins would I permit her to actually take the cock in her mouth and savour its full largeness and strength. At these moments I sought to empty myself into her, urging the pumping action with all the exhortations I could summon, striving to achieve the optimum disposal of stuff through the stiffened muscle and into the gaping orifice available for the purpose. Not a drop must be wasted. And Val, to her credit, gulped at it gratefully. There were times, I will admit, when I deliberately withdrew so that some of it spilled onto her chin, making it shiny-wet, splashing down to spatter her white swaying breasts. This was of the utmost necessity, because only in this way could I despoil her to the point where she became sub-human, or, to be more exact, non-human. As you will have gathered she was less than real to me: devoid of personality, identity, separate existence even. Therefore to enable her to fulfil a meaningful role (in other words, to become real) it was essential that Val be made to occupy a position of the most base and ignoble kind. She was to be human and yet non-human, existing and yet non-existent.

On other, still sunny days I would have her lie spread-eagled, naked, while I walked barefoot over her body. My only cause for complaint was that she rarely, if ever, complained. Standing on her open thighs, with my cock erect, I would savour the feeling of warm unstable fleshiness beneath my feet; then moving along would place my two feet on her two breasts, maintaining this position until either grew tired of it or Val was having difficulty in drawing sufficient breath to replenish her lungs. Interestingly enough, standing thus, her face was masked by my cock, which in its aroused state interfered with my line of vision. It had the effect of considerably improving her looks. And when her chest had begun to heave with the effort of supporting me I would at once squat directly above her and lay my complete assemblage on her face. Her hot, rapid breathing was a pleasing stimulation, leading quickly to an abrupt, uncontrolled discharge which was directed onto various aspects of her features. Once, quite inadvertantly, it spat in her eye, causing some discomfort, but as this was hardly my fault I did not see how I could be held responsible, nor did I feel in the least contrite. I could hardly be blamed if another person insisted on keeping his or her eyes open under such circumstances.

It was in this very position too – I should mention – that most frequently the mystical revelation came upon me; it was here that I came nearest to perceiving the precise reality of the secret underlife to which I have referred. In this situation I saw with utmost clarity the planet we inhabit as separate from the space which surrounds it: the skyline itself was the finite limit, and beyond was an endless void into whose depths one could plummet at any moment: I felt in acute physical danger of falling from the surface of the planet, arms and legs splayed outwards with centrifugal brute force, tumbling headlong into the furthest, deepest reaches of blackness and infinity. At the same time I knew beyond doubt that Val had been born with no other purpose than to lie thus beneath me. She was of the planet created out of it, and the strands of life which ran through the rocks, the earth, the air, also connected her to them and me to her. Time, space and human existence were all one and the same, indivisible, the one entity.

She came across to me in her lumpy sweater, scratched shoes shuffling in the debris, the hair on her head sticking out at all sorts of ridiculous angles. There were holes in her tights.

‘Hello, stranger,’ Val said, her eyes bulging through her thick glasses. No doubt she was without undergarments, for there, clearly to be seen, were the outlined protruberances of her nipples.

‘You dirty fucking whore,’ I said to her, unflinching, as ever, disgusted.

IV

Committing to paper the tangled world in which we live is not the easiest of tasks – nor the most rewarding, I might add. But as we slowly progress, hacking our way through the undergrowth, I hope eventually a glimmer of light will appear, that you will begin to comprehend the alternative universe of which I speak.

In the office I maintained in the big black building it was my custom to remain behind after the other staff had gone home, and, sitting in the hushed lamplight, contemplate the mess my life had become. Not for a million pounds would I have changed places with any other living soul, for although my life was a ridiculous sham, nevertheless it was the most precious life there had ever been. Besides self-pity is one of the few luxuries I permit myself. If one cannot feel slighted by the world what is the good of living?

On the desk in front of me were scattered the photographs taken by Dmitri Zeilnski at the paper mill: over four hundred in 35mm colour transparency form. They were in strips, each strip enclosed in a misted paper sheath. I gazed at the heap, wondering what on earth I should do with them. Fortunately, he had now departed abroad for a while, leaving me in peace, so there was time to think of something.

The ringing of the phone interrupted my morose thoughts, and picking up the instrument I prepared for the worst. To my surprise it was not who I had expected: it was Marl. Quite a lengthy period had elapsed since I had last spoken to her. She told me that she had managed, finally, to get a job.

‘I don’t suppose it is a very interesting job,’ I said. Already, and rather to my annoyance, my breath was quivering in my throat.

‘I demonstrate appliances,’ Marl said. ‘I go round from house to house demonstrating appliances. The idea is that I give a free demonstration and then the person is meant to buy the appliance. They are very expensive and there is a huge profit.’

She said this lightly, glibly, as though it were a clever thing to say. No doubt she was trying to impress me. I was sick of her type, and of her money-grubbing.

‘Are you at home?’ I asked gently.

She confirmed that she was.

‘Is your husband there with you?’

Marl said that she was alone.

‘Are you completely alone?’

‘Yes,’ Marl said, her voice adopting a puzzled tone, yet obviously intrigued at the same time.

‘Have you sold any appliances today?’ I inquired, changing the subject abruptly. I cannot stand it when people, women especially, anticipate me. Or rather, *think* they are anticipating me. It is insulting. It is degrading.

‘Do you know, I heard a rumour about you the other day,’ I said. I had heard no such rumour but it amused me to have her think I had.

‘A rumour about me?’ Marl said. ‘What was this rumour? Are you pulling my leg?’

‘What have you been doing to cause rumours?’ I asked her. This was calculated to bring forth a

confession or a denial.

~~‘What was the rumour about?’ She paused, and her voice became coquettish. ‘It wasn’t a bad rumour, I hope?’~~

‘Do you?’ I said, playing the game with her. The shallowness and insensibility of women never failed to astound me. They are so preoccupied with meaningless physical vanities that it is a struggle to conduct even a superficial conversation with them. Their tiny minds encompass the world, with the result that the world becomes tiny too. I should imagine there are women to whom this does not apply, but in my experience they are usually as ugly as sin, defeating the whole purpose of being women.

‘Listen,’ I said to her. ‘This selling of appliances is just a way to make money, isn’t it?’

‘Could be,’ said Marl. ‘Amongst other things.’

The stupidity of this reply made me squirm in my seat. For her to suppose that such infantile innuendo could possibly hope to interest or impress me demonstrated (if such demonstrations were necessary) to what lowly levels her mind aspired. It entered my head to dismiss her at once, to have done with her – but no; one of my besetting ‘sins’ is that I am never rude to anyone, least of all women. I then said something which made her laugh:

‘Tell me what you are wearing at this moment.’

‘Can you see me in your mind’s eye?’

‘I know what you look like, if that’s what you mean.’

It seemed to me, suddenly, that the office had become unaccountably warm. The receiver was moist in my hand. A torpid sluggishness was creeping from my stomach into my chest. This was the presentiment of a mystical experience.

‘I wish I could understand you,’ Marl said, ‘but I can’t.’

‘Do you think women understand anything?’ I said, attempting, successfully I hoped, to hide the contemptuous tone in my voice. To hell with her, I thought, having the arrogance to think that she had power over me. I had taught such women their manners before now.

‘Shall I tell you what I am wearing?’ Marl said, trying to subdue the eagerness in her voice.

‘Yes, tell me,’ I said shortly.

‘Well ... ’ Marl began, ‘I have on a dress – ’

‘What colour?’

‘Blue. I am wearing a blue dress. It has a V-neck with white frilly lace along it. It is quite short; quite short.’

‘Is it tight or loose?’ I asked.

‘Fairly tight. The material is thin and silky. Reasonably close-fitting, as I say.’

Of its own accord my hand had moved to rest on my thigh. The feeling of discomfort was growing. Why was the air so oppressive?

‘Apart from that I am wearing flesh-coloured tights, seamless, with an elasticated band round the waist. Also, to aid support, I have on a pretty micro-mesh bra decorated with little flowers—’

‘Which is adequate for its purpose?’ I said.

‘Generally speaking, yes.’

Who was that I could hear breathing into the mouthpiece?

‘And underneath the tights I have on briefs of the semi-transparent kind, in a shade of green. That about it.’

‘You are alone, you told me.’

‘Oh yes, alone.’

It stuck me as incredible, in this day and age, that such creatures should exist. Was there no shame left in the world? The age-old battle to overcome wickedness had been lost. We had not progressed one inch, not succeeded in the slightest degree. All the great preachers and prophets were of no more

consequence than the whining of a gnat. Not for the first time did it strike me that not living in this world could be actually condoned and sanctioned. Modern people were vain empty vessels with the odds weighing heavily against them. It was I who aspired to be beyond evil, who sought 'the good and the beautiful', but a decisive percentage of me had always, and would forever, deny the possibility of ever achieving it.

'Are you still there?' Marl said.

'Yes,' said I. 'With my cock full in my hand.'

She shuddered lightly. 'I am alone,' Marl said.

'I am alone, with my cock, my prick, my tool, full in my hand. It is encased in my fingers, its hot bigness standing up from my loins.'

'Tell me what I should do.'

'Do you feel the magic and power of it?' I had first of all to ask her. 'Do you believe in its magic and power?'

'Please tell me what I am to do,' Marl said.

'Do you believe in its magic?' I insisted on repeating. 'You must believe in its magic and its power.'

'Yes,' said Marl in a dull, low-pitched, mesmerised voice.

'The rod is magical; in its stiff hugeness is the secret, the mystery for which you have been searching.'

'Please, please,' said Marl. 'Instruct me.'

The office in which I sat was heavy with stillness. Behind the glass the dark sky moved restlessly. A million people inhabited the streets, seeking neat and tidy destinations. The city was in chaos: behind the impregnable buildings anarchy reigned. All was well, providing the traffic lights continued to function.

'Unfasten the dress you are wearing and remove it,' I said. The cock was right in front of me. 'Remove the dress from your body and discard it. Have you done this?'

'Yes,' said Marl in a whisper.

'Now put your right hand between your legs and press your fingers into the softest place.'

'I am doing it.'

'As you are doing it think of the thing I hold in my hand; it rises directly out of me, enclosed in my hand, erect with life. And as you think of it press your fingers rhythmically into the place between your legs. You must now slide forward on the chair and open your legs so as to permit improved access for your fingers.'

'I feel it,' Marl said.

'Your legs are open,' I said.

'They are open.'

'Next you must consider it necessary to remove the garments that are impeding the progress of your fingers. Peel away the outer garment, sliding it down from your thighs, over your knees, along your lower legs, disposing of it completely.'

'Are you holding it now?' Marl said.

'Yes.'

'Is it still big?'

'Yes.'

'And very hard?'

'Exceedingly hard.'

I then said, 'Describe to me what you are wearing and the position you are in.'

After only a momentary hesitation Marl said, 'I am wearing my bra, micro-mesh with little

flowers, and my briefs. My legs are long, white, and open wide.'

'Take off your briefs,' I said. She did so. 'With the tips of your fingers caress the inner sides of your thighs, working closer and closer to the softest place—'

'Oh is it still big?' said Marl.

'Yes,' I said. 'Big and impatient. Starting to bubble.'

'My fingers are now inside.'

'It is moist, wet—'

'Slippery.'

'Your cunt is beautiful open wide wetness,' I said. 'Rub your fingers along it to generate the wetness. The hairs surrounding it are smooth and slick with juice.'

'Let me remove my bra.'

'Not yet.'

'Let me.'

'First I must know if your breasts are swollen. They long to be held. Your nipples are hard, are they not? Your two breasts are confined tightly, swelling with the longing to be caressed with warm open hands.'

My cock was beginning to spit.

'They have become bigger,' said Marl. 'My nipples are stiff, protruding through the nylon mesh; their shapes are clearly to be seen. Tell me if your cock is still strong. Is it big in your hand? Describe your cock to me.'

'The skin is drawn tightly about it, infused with the core of magical power, and the rounded end has become wet. The whole length of it exceeds the width of my closed hand.'

'What is there at the base?' Marl asked.

'At the base are thick black hairs, out of which the cock rises with absolute rectitude, curving hard.'

'You do have thick hairs,' Marl said. 'I like to know that your hairs are thick and black. You must tell me to take off my bra.'

'Do you wish to be naked?'

'I want to free my breasts and lie with open legs, dreaming of your stiff cock.'

'Very well, take off your bra.' I said.

My cock was jerking in my hand.

'Enclose your breasts in your hands and squeeze them powerfully. Now touch the erect nipples with the tips of your fingers—'

'Is your cock really big at this moment?'

'Yes, yes; but now it is starting to come. The opaque sperm is pulsing from the broad, blunt end.'

'Oh,' Marl said.

'Shall I describe it to you?'

'Yes, describe it to me.'

'What is it I should describe?'

'Describe your cock to me and what is happening to it. You must say that it is big and hard, magical with power, and the sperm is starting to come from it.'

'A good deal of sperm is now being emitted, hot sperm running down my cock. Tell me where my cock should be at this moment and it will doubtless erupt with sperm. Where should it be?'

'Between my legs,' said Marl. 'My legs are open to receive it, slippery with wetness.'

'But where exactly should it be?' I asked.

'Inside me, large inside me.'

'Precisely where?'

'Inside my cunt.'

‘Yes?’

~~‘The full length of it up inside my cunt. I should be able to feel it thrusting upwards inside me. Is that what you want me to say? Is this making all the sperm come?’~~

‘It is coming fast now,’ I said.

‘Coming from the end and running down your cock?’

‘Sperm pumping out, lots of it.’

‘Hot thick sperm?’

‘Thick and slimy. Of course,’ I said, ‘the sperm should not be running to waste, it should be shooting up inside you with my cock tight in your cunt.’

‘I am coming,’ Marl said. She was moaning. ‘I am coming. Oh God I am coming. Oh fucking shitting cunt Christ I am coming. I am coming ... ’

I replaced the receiver and put my wet cock away. The one annoying thing, to me, is the nonsense talked about sex. The fuss made about it is out of all proportion to its importance. When observed in the cold light of day it is absurd to suppose that the act has any meaningful relevance.

V

The problem remained: what to do with the colour transparencies? By this time Dmitri Zeilnski would be far across the sea, either with or without his Italian friend. The eeriness of the Italian still plagued me – what was one supposed to make of him? It always disturbs me when people do not fit into the pattern of things.

For the umpteenth time I looked through the transparencies; each separate batch dealt with a particular facet of the papermaking process. It was all there, ostensibly, in glowing Kodacolor, and yet it wasn't. Dmitri had caught perfectly the purpose of the plant but not its reason for being there. For example, the giant Millspaugh was shown churning out reel after reel of paper, turning it from wet sludgy stuff into creamy white, neatly trimmed lengths of ‘stock’. But why hadn't he photographed those rooms and galleries behind and beneath the machine wherein could be found the real life and beginnings of power that gave the plant its volition? He should have known that surface things are false. One had to climb (as I had done!) over pipes and ducting, squeeze through shattered walls and squirm along passageways thick with dust to discover the living, moving guts of the place. In this shot, for instance –

I stared hard at it and my heart started to pound. It showed a room full of slapping pulleys. The rows of leather belts were connected to spindles on the ceiling, and from these other leather belts disappeared at speed through rectangular holes set high in the walls. Why hadn't I seen this room? Had Dmitri, by some remote chance, stumbled on a hidden section of the plant of whose existence I was ignorant? Feverishly I scattered the heap of transparencies, searching for the next shot in the sequence. There it was. In through holes came the leather belts, blurred with motion, winding onto hubbed wheels whose spokes were invisible due to their rotary movement. Now this was a revelation. How on earth had Dmitri managed to trace the evolution of force from its primeval source? I studied anxiously each of the transparencies in turn. Here was one showing the dust-laden galleries, and here another with a terrifying configuration of tubes and pipework, and yet another showing a figure kneeling in front of a wall, and an entire sequence devoted to a precise and detailed study of – not the foreground incidentals – but the intangible vortices of abstract inertia which spun the very planet beneath our feet.

The thought occurred to me that perhaps the planet itself was riddled with such subterranean galleries, shafts and passageways, connecting this chamber to that, one to the other, each of them

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