

I, Spy

ZACHARY STONE

Ken Follett

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1974 DIARY

To Tony Pitman from Elaine Caldwell ...

Merry Xmas !!!

2 January

I don't know why people keep diaries. Well, I don't know why ordinary people keep diaries. Politicians and generals keep diaries so that, when they sit down in retirement to write their ~~memoirs~~ dry and dusty memoirs, they can recall those insignificant little incidents without which their autobiographies would be drier and even more dusty. Teenage girls keep diaries because they've got no one else to talk to about their secret lusts. People who are having a good time do it to cheer them up later, when they're having a bad time. Well, I'll never write my memoirs; my lusts are not secret enough by half; and I'm not having a good time. Therefore I've got no reason to keep a diary. So I won't. Here endeth the diary.

3 January

Actually I have got a reason. Elaine gave me the diary. If I never write anything in it, I won't be able to look her in the eye and tell her I use it; then I won't be able to get off with her. And I fancy her. More important, she fancies me - and at twenty-five I'm old enough to know there aren't many beddable girls in the world who fancy me.

To tell the truth, I could quite easily look her in the eye and tell a lie. I'm a good liar. But I enjoyed the novelty of writing a few lines before bed yesterday, so I thought I'd do it again. No doubt the appeal will fade.

As well as that, nothing ever happens to me.

4 January

Saw Elaine in the garden this morning. She was hanging out washing. It's bitterly cold at the moment - I should think her undies are more likely to freeze solid than blow dry. We put our washing in front of the electric fire. Women are more efficient about these things.

I suppose some people might think we're in clover, living here. It's a pair of semi-detached houses owned by a very absentee landlord. There are four blokes in this one, four birds next door. If this was Chelsea the women would have knocked a hole in the wall for conjugal visits. Sadly, we're in Kenton, Harrow, Middlesex - part of the vast collar of dull suburbia that surrounds London from Romford to Southall - and, regardless of what the Sunday People might say, invited the fleshpots of Babylon it ain't. We ~~persuaded~~ the girls ~~taxxxx~~ in for a drink on Christmas Eve, but it had taken us all year to persuade them. My generation discovered free love, they say; but in my experience half of them have never heard of it - the female half.

Elaine is short and dark-haired, with a kind face and a dumpy body. If she lost a stone or two and learned how to put on make-up she'd be a wow. Our conversation over the garden fence was scintillating:

"Hello, Elaine, how are you?"

"Bloody cold. Our house just never gets warm. We're all wearing woolly vests."

"Thanks for the diary."

"Do you use it?"

"I write in it every night before I climb into my celd, lonely bed. Fancy coming to the pub this evening?"

"All right, then. Thanks."

No doubt Romeo could have done better, but Juliet never wore woolly vests. I would have invited her to the house instead of the pub, but there's never any booze here; you can't keep a bottle of whisky for more than a day and a half unless you lock it in a safe.

Anyway, we went to the Red Lien, because they sell wine by the glass. We rounded the evening off with chicken in the basket. I hadn't meant to be so flash, but we were getting on so well I thought it was worth it. She told me she's half Irish, works in Barclay's Bank in Wembley, and likes James Last. I told her

I'm boringly English, work for the Ministry of Defence in a boring desk job, and collect old blues records which bore everyone except me. I love the blues. I can listen to it for hours on end, and frequently do, especially when the house is empty. I prefer the old stuff, but I'm not purist about it: Eric Clapton will be quite good if he practises for another twenty years. Clearly music is one thing Elaine and I will never have in common. I mean, for Christ's sake, James Last! I wonder if she's older than she looks?

I see I've written quite a lot. I must be pissed. Never mind, tomorrow is Saturday.

5 January

Saturday nothing happened.

6 January

Sunday nothing happened.

7 January

This is getting silly.

13 January

Something happened.

It started on Friday, and today is Sunday, but this is the first chance I've had to open my diary. I asked Elaine for a drink again, but she had a headache. (Is that a euphemism for a menstrual period? Do girls still say that kind of thing? If so, just what did she think I planned to do to her on the way back from the Red Lion? The mind boggles. On the other hand, maybe she just had a headache.) Anyway, I went to the Lamb and Flag with Pete and Jeremy - Steve went away for the weekend. I bought the first round, as usual - they think I'm rich because I hold the lease and, to be truthful, I may have given them the impression that I'm a

Permanent Undersecretary rather than a mere Scientific Officer. So there we were, sipping pints of Young's and waiting for the old codgers to finish with the dartboard, when in walks Joe Jenkins. I haven't seen him for four years, and what a change!

We were at Imperial College together. He did physics, I did chemistry. He was a red-hot socialist in those days, always on about the Third World and the plight of the working class. He was so convinced the Revolution was imminent, I should think he went through a crisis of faith at the end of every week when it still hadn't happened. He dressed the part, too: cloth cap, old tweed jacket, leather boots in a vile tan shade with corrugated soles, and blue jeans in the days before denim became as much of a uniform as the dinner jacket. He used to walk down to Hoxton and sell the Worker's Press, or some such publication, outside sweat shops and wholesale warehouses.

He was an intellectual, really, and I/~~wasn't~~^{might} never have got to know him (I.C. is a big place), but he decided to take up darts. ^{Although} /He was hopeless - no hand-and-eye co-ordination - ~~but~~ he persisted, probably because he thought it was a more appropriately working-class pursuit than his real enthusiasm, which was Ancient Greece. I helped him buy a good set of arrows, and tried to show him how to throw them straight, ~~but~~ He never learned to hit the board better than two times out of three.

His attempts to get me interested in politics were about as successful as the darts lessons I gave him. He would go on and on about the Labour Theory of Value, getting quite passionate about it, and arrive at his conclusion like a marathon runner crossing the finish line; and I would just say: "No doubt you're right, Joe, but I don't give a damn."

I still don't, but the funny thing is, neither does he, any more. These days he couldn't look more of a capitalist if he wore a top hat and a tail coat. He always was distinctly upper-class, with a voice like a BBC newsreader and a family seat somewhere in Herefordshire. He waltzed into the Lamb and Flag in a rather gorgeous suede blouson jacket and a beige roll-neck sweater, and the

girl on his arm was straight off the cover of Vogue: blonde, malnourished, sexy, and dressed in a vague, shapeless creation that would have looked like an old blanket on anyone else but became the height of fashion when wrapped around her.

"Ye gods," he said, "it's Tony Pitman." He really does talk like this, and what's more it sounds perfectly natural.

They sat down with us and we did introductions. Her name was Sonja-with-a-j. It was my misfortune to buy another round: I couldn't let Joe do it because he'd just arrived, and I couldn't expect Pete or Jeremy to buy the first drink for my apparently-wealthy friends. Joe drank brandy and soda, but Sonja, bless her, had a pint of ale and supped it like a man. I started to like her.

I asked Joe what he was doing for a living.

"Usury," he said. "Started a new company specialising in personal loans to civil servants. The old man backed it, of course, otherwise I should never have got it off the ground. It's going quite well."

I knew the company. In fact I had borrowed fifteen hundred pounds from it to buy my car. I wonder whether he knows that. If he does, he didn't mention it. Nor did I, of course. Instead I said: "Whatever happened about the Revolution?"

"Indefinitely postponed. North Sea oil, y'knew." He sounded quite pleased about it.

With his usual bluntness Pete said: "It's amazing how a little money has turned all the college Bolsheviks into dark blue Tories."

Joe looked a bit uncomfortable at that - not without justification - so I changed the subject. "What I find astonishing is how few of us are using the information we took so much trouble to acquire there. Joe did physics."

Joe asked me: "Do you use your chemistry?"

"A little - but a bookkeeping course would have been more valuable. My department administers budgets for the various research efforts financed by the Ministry. You've got to understand vaguely what the boffins are on about, but mainly it's a question of organising their finances."

"Interesting?" Sonja said, opening her big dark eyes a little wider.

"Dull as chips," I said.

Joe said: "I was surprised when you didn't go into pure research. After all, you get a first."

I was surprised, too; but I didn't tell him that nobody would give me a job as an experimental chemist. Instead I said: "I never had an original mind, Joe. I was just good at taking exams." I didn't actually mean ^{that} ~~it~~, but come to think of it, ~~that~~ ^{it} might be true.

The conversation went on in a whatever-happened-to-old-so-and-so vein for a while, then Pete told a poor joke, whereupon Senja told a good one, and the evening livened up so much that by chucking-out time I was mellow enough to invite Joe and Senja back for coffee. Joe's got a Jaguar, of course, so we ~~w~~ all rode ~~back~~ in that.

Bringing them here made me realise what a dump this place is. Back in 1936 it was probably the height of elegance, with its pebble-dash walls, bay windows, and mock-Tudor gables. Now it's just kind of decayed. The garden is overgrown, there's damp in the lounge, and the kitchen is tiny. At some time the landlord must have bought a warehouse-full of cheap green paint, for everything is that colour - cheap green. Also, we never clean the place, which doesn't help.

However, Joe didn't seem to mind. In fact he asked me to go to a football match with him the following day.

After they went I noticed that neither of them had drunk any of their coffee. I should have warned them it was instant.

Why am I writing this down at such great length? (a) Because it's quite exciting, especially Saturday, which I haven't got to yet. (b) Because, having read the paper, I've got nothing else to do on a Sunday afternoon.

Reading the first fortnight of my diary, I find it sickeningly self-deprecating. I'm not a cynical, disappointed failure: just mildly discontented. I've got a job, I run a good second-hand Ford, and occasionally I get laid. (Very occasionally.) I can afford to spend one evening a week in the pub, buy all the

blues records I can find, and keep up the payments on my stereo. Banning myself down is like putting "Could do better" on a child's school report: it means the child has the brains but/^{lacks}~~not~~ the motivation, which is a greater handicap than lacking the brains. It's much more accurate to say "Won't do better." My life has "Won't do better" written all over it. There I go, running myself down again. The hell with it. I certainly did better on Saturday.

Joe took me to watch Chelsea play, and we went for a drink afterwards. Around seven o'clock he said he was having dinner with Sonja, and would I like to come? I assumed that was a hint that it was time for me to push off back to Kenton.

I said: "I know better than to play gooseberry. Besides - "

"Don't be silly," he said. "You must come."

"If I was having dinner with a girl like Sonja I wouldn't want any old college pals along," I told him.

"It's not like that with me and Sonja, really."

I must have given him a funny look, because he added: "I'm not a poofa. I went to bed with her once, but it just didn't catch fire."

"So why ... "

He shrugged. "I'm very fond of her. And I like having a lady friend I don't have to fuck every time I see her." He has this upper-class way of making swear words sound innocent.

"I'm not dressed." Actually I was wearing a blazer and a reasonably decent pair of trousers, but I didn't have a tie.

"You're fine. I'm not going to change. We won't go anywhere posh. De come, Sonja likes you."

That clinched it.

We did go somewhere posh, but I didn't see many ties. It's a gambling club Joe belongs to, called Tables. It's in a side street off Piccadilly, in the basement below an obscenely expensive shoe shop. Joe gave his car keys to a flunkey

who roared off in it, presumably to park it somewhere in the depths of St. James's.

Joe signed me in and we went into the cocktail bar to wait for Senja. We'd had a few pints, and there was clearly a good deal of boozing ahead of us that night, so I had Campari with a lot of soda, which - as Joe observed - is a good way of pretending to drink.

The bar had waiter service and free peanuts. When the door opened we could hear, softly and rather distantly, the rattle of roulette balls and the low murmur of rouge, impair et manque. I didn't exactly feel out of place, but in my blazer I wasn't the star of the show. Velvet suits and white shirts open at the collar seemed to be the uniform.

I nearly fell off my chair when Sonja walked in. She'd looked pretty stunning on Friday night, but now I realise that on that occasion she was dressing down. Saturday night she dressed up. As she crossed the carpet to our table I noticed the hum of conversation in the bar die down - I've never known that happen in real life. Her scrawny body was draped in some oyster-coloured fabric that made your skin crawl with the need to touch; and when she leaned forward I could see her tits. Her face is kind of bony and sunken, which accentuates her best features - very delicious lips and big dark eyes which I may have noted ~~already~~ earlier. I pulled myself together and caught the eye of a waiter, since Joe hadn't thought to.

We had another drink and then went into the restaurant for a meal which was almost as mouth-watering as Sonja. Joe politely offered to let me choose the wine, and I had some trouble persuading him that he should do it. Afterwards we walked, rather unsteadily, into the casino.

Joe had paid for everything up to now, but for him to buy my chips would have been overdoing it. Fortunately I had a tenner in my wallet. I was a bit taken aback to find that the cheapest chips were £1. Some of the tables had a minimum stake of £10, and I made a bit of a fool of myself by failing to notice that the first table I went to was one of those. ~~xxxxxxx~~ However nobody seemed too bothered about my gaffe - except me.

I won a couple of times - beginner's luck - then evolved a system. You bet on the red, which is odds of 2-1; and every time you lose you double your stake. This means that when eventually you win - you're bound to sooner or later - you get back everything you've lost so far, plus one. In the long run you can't lose, provided you've got unlimited money. I won this way until the ^{black} ~~red~~ came up four times in a row, at which point I had to bet £16 to keep the system going; and of course I didn't have £16. After that I just played hunches until I was broke.

It was all very novel and exciting, and the three of us were light-hearted - not to say light-headed - and gay. We laughed a lot, by contrast with most of the gamblers, who were deadly serious - not surprisingly: £20 notes were crossing the tables like confetti. Looking back on it through the angry mists of today's hangover, I suspect that Sonja was not quite as happy as she had been telling jokes and drinking pints in the Lamb and Flag, but that might be wishful thinking on my part.

Something that was definitely wishful thinking: at one point I decided that Sonja would probably spend the night with me if I asked her. A deep and distant part of me which remains forever sober stopped me from asking her, thank God.

We staggered out of the club in the early hours. The flunkey brought Joe's car, and got a £3 tip. Sonja kissed me goodbye - pow! - and I got into a taxi.

When I finally got back to Kenton I had to wake Jeremy to borrow ten pounds from him for the fare.

16 January

A decent interval having elapsed (Jesus, there's a civil servant's phrase!) I phoned Joe at his office in the West End today.

"I just wanted to say Thankyou for Saturday. It was great."

"My pleasure. Jolly good fun, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Let me take you and Sonja out one night. I'd like to return your hospitality."

"My dear chap, how kind. But there's no need."

I ignored that, as presumably I was meant to. "Let's go to the theatre. Is there anything you'd particularly like to see?"

"I'll leave it to you. But I'd like to see a play - I've never been crazy about lines of girls kicking their legs up."

"All right. This Saturday?"

"Um ... I'm supposed to go to the country this weekend. Would you mind terribly if we made it next Saturday?"

"Fine." Actually that suits me much better. That will be 26 January, so if I pay for everything by cheque, my salary will be in the bank before the cheques are cleared. "I'll get tickets for something, and call you next week to arrange where to meet."

"Thanks awfully."

So I booked four tickets for Coriolanus. It's a play they're not likely to have seen, unless they're real Shakespeare nuts, in which case they won't mind seeing it again.

The fourth ticket is for Elaine. I'm not sure how wise this is. She might not like the play, but she'll pretend she does, so that's all right. She'll enjoy the night out, she'll be impressed by Joe and Sonja, and she may in consequence permit me to take liberties afterwards. Her presence will keep me from making a fool of myself over Sonja; and at least the two of them will know I'm not totally without a love life. On the other hand, they won't be impressed by Elaine; but still, I must resist this undignified impulse to pretend I'm one of the beautiful people like them.

I quite like putting my thoughts down in this diary. It clears my mind.

21 January

A typical day:

Got up at 7.25 (late, again) to the sound of Radio One. Dressed in tweed

jacket (Barten's), brown Terylene trousers (Carnaby Street) and high-heeled boots (The Chelsea Cobbler - an extravagance). Electric shave, cornflakes, tea. Briefcase, umbrella, and out. Bus to Kenton Station, Tube to Trafalgar Square, short walk to office.

More tea, this from the machine in the corridor. The morning post. A request from Portsmouth for funds to be transferred at the end of each month instead of the beginning of the following month, to help the laboratory's cash flow. Refused, to help the Government's cash flow. ~~The~~ The Administrator at Portsmouth is a sly old bastard, but not half as sly as yours sincerely. Routine audits on two stations: filed. Progress report from the Warwick University project, which is ^{in time} underspending (they'll learn better/~~eventually~~).

Tea and a biscuit at 11.30. Read the Warwick report again, and understood it this time. (It wasn't the science that baffled me, it was the Professor's syntax.)

Lunch: shepherd's pie, baked beans, chips, and three pints of Werthington 'E'. Fifteen minutes in the Harlequin record shop, where I bought an album by Louisiana Red.

Conference at 2.30 with Flatulent Fisher, fat boy from Legal, to run over some of the small print in an Admiralty contract with British Oxygen. Coffee at 3.30, followed by titillating conversation about brassieres with my Supervising Officer's secretary.

An hour of make-work, then briefcase, umbrella, out. Rain. Trafalgar Square Station like a sheep-dip. Slight headache on Tube due to Werthington 'E', made worse by reading Evening News standing up.

Boiled egg for tea. An evening with Louisiana Red. Kentucky Fried Chicken for supper.

Wrote diary.

That's what I mean when I write "Nothing happened."

27 January

Joe is an interesting fellow. He's one of these people who have to hit life at full tilt. His attitude to pleasure is that of a lion to its prey: he must chase it, kill it, then gorge himself on it until he can hardly move. For that reason the theatre is not ideal entertainment for him: it is passive - physically at least - and non-participatory.

I've only just noticed this about him. The first couple of evenings we spent together, I saw only his joie de vivre. Last night I glimpsed the tension underneath. It's a puzzle, because he has no reason to be like this. The lion overeats because he can't be sure when he'll get his next square meal. Joe was born to the good life, and he's as secure in it as he can possibly be. There's the family fortune as well as his own profitable business, and he's obviously very capable of staying rich and enjoying it. I might be over-analysing him, but I don't think so. It could have something to do with ^{his} being a lapsed Socialist.

However, his restlessness was very slight, and the evening was really a great success, I think. Elaine surprised me in a number of ways, all pleasant. First of all she dressed remarkably well, in a dress and coat which emphasised her good points - roundness, softness, a certain cuddly quality - and disguised her faults, which are principally shapelessness and a complete lack of Sonja's kind of half-hidden brute sex appeal. The two women together did not look as much like chalk and cheese as I had feared.

We met up in the theatre bar at 7.30. The second way Elaine surprised me was by talking intelligently, and completely without pretension, about Shakespeare's Roman plays. She even knew that Coriolanus was written in 1608, which I didn't. There's a lesson for you, Tony Pitman: just because a girl works in a bank and likes James Last, she doesn't have to be pig-ignorant.

The play was marvellous, and afterwards I took them to a modest, unfashionable Italian restaurant where the food is always okay and sometimes superb. Sonja said I was terribly clever to have "discovered" it.

During the meal I realised that she always called Joe "Joseph", and I asked

her about it.

"It's his name," she said. "Joseph Percival Andrew Jenkins-Mulholland."

I snorted with laughter at this - why are people's middle names so comical? - and Joe turned to Elaine and explained. "At one time it rather suited my politics to call myself Joe Jenkins," he said. "But the family always call me Joseph. And they don't often use the Jenkins part, which is a throwback to some long-forgotten political marriage between my family and somebody from just the other side of the Welsh border. My mother calls herself Mrs Mulholland."

I said: "Don't ever do the simple-country-folk act, Joe. Mrs Mulholland might sound like the kind of ~~kind~~ woman you see pushing a trolley round Tesco's, but it only needs three people to die and she's Lady Hereford, or something."

Joe said to Elaine: "Teny gives these things a little more attention than they deserve."

There was acid in that one, but I'd asked for it. The trace of a disapproving frown momentarily clouded Sonja's forehead and consoled me.

Elaine said, rather graciously: "Joseph Mulholland suits you. You're definitely not a Joe Jenkins."

Now, she's right about that. He's what we middle-class yobs call a Right Nigel. His speech is frightfully mannered, he has a long face with big teeth and no chin like a horse, and he often laughs too loud. He is elegantly dressed and beautifully polite, with the consideration for others which comes from never having to worry unduly about yourself.

About this time the foursome divided, with Elaine and Joe talking together at one end of the table and Sonja and me at the other. Sonja took the opportunity to say: "I'm glad you brought Elaine - she's sweet."

I thought this was rather condescending, so I just nodded. To keep the conversation going I asked her how she met Joe. Her answer to this rather routine inquiry was unexpectedly interesting.

"He helped me get out of Czechoslovakia," she said. "It's a long story."

"It sounds like a good one. Tell it to me."

"All right," she said. "I was born in Brno in 1944, the only daughter of a coal miner. You want these details?"

"You bet." Any excuse to carry on looking into her eyes.

"I went to college in Prague. In 1967 I wrote some drama reviews which were published in a student magazine - nothing subversive, but very much in the mood of that time. After the Dubcek Spring, though ... Well, I was considered unsound. I was expelled from the Party, and I spent a couple of months in jail."

Well, I hadn't noticed it before, but now I could see that she had a face
looked at
which might well have/seen the inside of a Communist ~~jail~~ prison.

I must have appeared a bit blitzed by her revelation, for she put her hand over my wrist - pew! - and smiled. "Don't look so sad. I wasn't badly treated. I was young, you see, and I had plainly fallen under the influence of older and more cynical people. All I needed was re-education. That was the line they took, happily."

I nodded. "How does Joe come into the story? He was in college with me in 1968."

"He came to Prague in 1970."

(I vaguely remembered something about a hitch-hiking holiday after Finals.)

"We met in a cafe and fell mildly in love, and I told him the story of my life. I wanted to get out. You know, the Party is the only channel for ambition over there, and once you've been expelled there's just no future. So Joe said he would smuggle me out."

I glanced over at Joe with something like awe. I mean, in those places you get thirty years for smuggling half a bottle of gin - Christ knows what they would have done to him if he'd got caught. "How did he do it?"

"Very cleverly. There was a girl in his party who looked a little like me - blonde, same shape face. I had my hair cut and made up my face to resemble her passport photograph, then went across the border at Bratislava with her passport. Joe installed me in a hotel in Vienna, then went back, carrying the other girl's passport, and brought her through."

*Impossible
passport would
have been stamped*

Impossible. Passport would have been stamped

"Jesus Christ, I bet he was laying ostrich eggs." This uncouth remark was almost involuntary.

She smiled, but she didn't mean it. "He said he's never been so frightened in his whole life."

"And you?"

She shrugged. "I've been frightened by the KGB. It/~~kills~~^{deadens} the nerve, you know."

She told me this blood-curdling tale in a rather flat voice, with all the while a curious blankness behind her eyes, if that's not too flowery a phrase. It is too flowery. What I mean is, she didn't go pale at the memory, or fidget the way people do when talking about things they'd rather not recall, or toss her head with pride, or struggle visibly to keep the lid on her emotions. It was as if it had ~~not~~ happened to someone else. Still, I suppose she must have related it all a hundred times before.

Joe broke our mood by saying: "You two have gone rather quiet."

I said: "I've just been hearing about your espionage career."

His reaction was the opposite of hers: he went quite pallid and dropped his dessert-spoon. Clearly, the thing had been a trauma for him. He must once have been very much in love with Senja, I should think.

"I take my hat off to you," I said. "I'd never have had the guts."

Of course, Elaine wanted to know what it was all about, so Senja gave her a shortened version. By the time that was over we were on our second cup of coffee, the restaurant was empty but for us, and the waiters were making conspicuous watch-checking gestures. I paid the bill - it was thirty fucking quid! - and felt obliged to leave a four-pound tip, which broke my heart.

We strolled down to Leicester Square. Senja kissed me goodbye. Joe kissed Elaine. We parted company and made for our respective cars.

Driving back up the Edgware Road, Elaine said: "I'd no idea you had such interesting friends."

"The dullest people can have interesting friends."

"Don't be silly," she said. I took it as a compliment. I have to make the best of what I can get, in the compliments line. Elaine said: "Senja's very beautiful."

"She liked you, too."

I drove slowly, to compensate for the booze I was carrying. We got home around 1.30 this morning. Elaine invited me into her half of the house for coffee, and I prepared to make my play. It was not to be: Margaret and Pam were still up, finishing a bottle of Spanish white wine and listening to Radio Luxembourg. All four of us had coffee, and afterwards I kissed Elaine goodnight on the bloody doorstep.

As kisses go, it was quite good. I have to make the best of what I can get in that line, too.

3 February

Sunday afternoon again, and an hour to kill before the God shows finish and the decent television begins. I've just got back from a weekend with Mum and Dad.

They live in Essex, not far from Frinton, the seaside town which is famous as the most respectable place in Great Britain. I forget how it got that reputation. Mum and Dad have a big three-bedroom bungalow with about half an acre of garden, a couple of miles from the sea.

Dad is 55, and semi-retired - that means he doesn't go to work, but the company pays him a retainer and keeps his name on the letterhead as a consultant. He used to be a solicitor, and gained a minor reputation for his ^{expertise} ~~skill~~ in tax avoidance. It's not much of an epitaph: "Here lies Anthony Pitman Snr, one of the best 100 tax lawyers in the Home Counties." However, he looks back with satisfaction. And who am I to criticise? I should be so famous. He's a small, tweedy man with receding sandy hair and a bushy moustache. He smokes 20 Players cigarettes a day and rarely drinks anything stronger than cider. He reads the Daily Telegraph from cover to cover except the sport, and grows dahlias with an enthusiasm akin to

obsession. He has been in love with my mother for forty years.

Mum is actually half an inch taller than he, and a good deal heavier. She's one of these big bosomey middle-aged women with permed hair. The hair is grey now, but I can remember when it was sleek jet black.

She's also Jewish. I didn't know this until Dad told me, quite casually, one day three or four years ago. Apparently her parents were furious with her for marrying a Gentile, and the wedding was something of a melodrama. Also they were inordinately wealthy and suspected Dad of gold-digging. The upshot was a fraught courtship ending in a furtive registry-office ceremony. ^{After} ~~When~~ I was born Mum's family offered, as a gesture of recenciliation, to set Dad up in business on his own - an error of judgement which postponed the armistice by several more years. When eventually they all met and forgave one another, they had little energy left for nurturing a relationship, and Mum hardly saw her parents during the second half of her life. I never saw them, as far as I recall, although presumably I was presented to them as an infant. They're both dead now. Mum wasn't in the will, and says she's glad about it. I believe her: she has all the money she wants, and a bequest might have opened up old scars.

It was an act of rebellion for Dad, too. In the 1930s, Germany was by no means the only place in Europe where Hitler's anti-Semitism struck a responsive chord among the middle classes. I've no doubt it took courage to marry a Jewess.

However, after their one great explosion of nonconformity they settled down to be the most predictable, conventional middle-class family you could wish to meet; and that's what they are now. I enjoy going to see them, so long as I don't have to stay more than a day or two. I like getting up in the morning to a warm house and opening the window to smell the sea. I like bacon and eggs for breakfast, when it's cooked by someone else. Yesterday I put on wellington boots and went out in the garden with the old man. We spent the morning turning the earth over to see if it was the same underneath as it was on top. I told him about going to the casino with Joe, and he grinned and said I was no gambler, I'd had the wrong sort of upbringing. In the afternoon I drove Mum to Frinton to look at the sea.

She asked me if I'd found a nice girl yet, and I told her about Elaine. I gave her to understand we aren't sleeping together, and she looked secretly satisfied, as if she'd wormed out of me something I hadn't wanted to tell her. I bought a bottle of wine for dinner, as that was the only way I'd get a drink all weekend.

This morning I had breakfast in bed with the Sunday ~~Evening~~ Express, probably the dullest newspaper in the world. Later, at lunch, Dad asked me about work.

"It's okay," I said. "It's not difficult, it's not interesting, it's not tiring."

He looked at me over his glasses. "When are you due for promotion?"

"This year or next, if I get it."

"What sort of thing are you working on now?"

"Oh, the same - administration of research budgets. You know I'm not allowed to talk about it too much."

Mum said: "Have some more, ~~hmmf~~ dear."

I got up to cut myself another slice of overdone roast beef. Doing my job is boring enough, without having to talk about it; and that was the real reason I didn't want to tell Dad about it. It is secret, but not very: if there ^{were} ~~was~~ such a classification as Bottom Secret, that's how my files would be labelled. All the Ministry's research is connected with means of making war, but the connection is often tenuous. Experimental food preservatives, for example, are relevant to nuclear submarines, but ~~they~~ preservatives won't win World War Three.

Dad reverted to the question of prospects. "So, promotion in a year or two."

"If I get it."

"I should hope there's no if about it," he said severely. "They're lucky to get a man with a First, and they ought to know it." He didn't go to university - took Articles instead - and so he has an inordinate respect for degrees. He still talks about "University men" as if they were a separate breed, instead of people who couldn't think what to do next when they finished school.

But I've explained all that to him before, and he takes no notice, so I didn't repeat myself. We got to talking about politics. He's a Tory, of course,

so the current situation infuriates him. "Miners holding the country to ransom" was a phrase used more than once during the discussion. He's almost as apoplectic as the Daily Telegraph about the likelihood that the miners will bring down the Heath government. I was able to calm him down, since I don't give a shit about the miners or the Heath government. I don't know whether the miners' case is fair, but I know fairness won't have anything to do with the result, one way or the other. Politics is a power struggle, and anyone who ^{says} thanks that stuff like justice and fair play enter into it is either disingenuous (if he's a politician) or credulous (if he's not). I didn't say that to Dad, of course; in his book, cynicism is only one step from socialism.

Anyway, tomorrow we get the result of the miners' ballot, and perhaps they'll switch the lights back on.

I drove back to London on the A12 at a leisurely pace. When I arrived Pam was in here inviting us all to a party next door on Saturday. Actually she called it a "debauch", but I don't think she meant it. We'll see.

7 February

As politics reared its ugly head during my last entry, I suppose I should record that on Monday the miners voted for an all-out strike, and today Mr Heath announced a general election. (Yawn.)

10 February

Very, very few Catholic girls take this line. The church has ceased plugging the subject.

Aargh! Elaine is a Catholic!

No Pill, no contraceptives of any kind, no nooky for Tony.

Damn, but that church has got something to answer for.

I really think single women who won't use contraceptives for religious reasons ought to wear a distinguishing badge or label, to save cuntstruck young men like me from wasting our time. I mean, married women wear a ring for that reason, don't they?

very, very few Catholic girls take this line, & the church has ceased plugging the subject

She told me when I was just about to -

I'm going to put this down in detail and in order, and hope that it will relieve my feelings.

The party started at 9.00 last night. The booze was mostly cheap wine, some of it drinkable, some otherwise. The guests were ^{preponderantly} ~~mostly~~ men, like they generally are at a party given by girls. I tried to buttonhole Elaine when I arrived, but she was tearing around being hostess, so I mingled, and eventually found a fellow blues addict to talk to. He's an Australian journalist, freelance but hoping for a job on the Daily Mirror. We agreed about Muddy Waters, Lightnin Hopkins and Little Walter, then parted company over Chuck Berry and almost came to blows about John Mayall. Meanwhile the stereo was giving us the Who, which ~~is~~ is a fair measure of both the average age and the musical sophistication of the assembled company. Around 11.00 the dancing started and, ^e ~~forseeing~~ _k the way the party was going, I eased up on the vine. Sure enough, an hour or so later the ravers collapsed in exhaustion and cried out for something smeechy. I moved in on the turntable and selected George Shearing, the blackest white man ever to play piano. Then I grabbed Elaine and started to get right up close.

Was it really so cold and calculating? I suppose it was. Thinking about it, I find my attitude to Elaine not very admirable. I keep running her down in my diary, saying she's plain and plump, and I've been pursuing her with only one base purpose in mind. I mean, where's the romance?

I did feel romantic when we started dancing. She was wearing an off-the-shoulder dress which fitted very loosely, and her skin - still fairly tanned from a fortnight in Benidorm last August - looked very touchable. After a couple of numbers she laid her head on my shoulder and squeezed me a little. I took this as a sign.

"Shall I kiss you here or in the garden?" I said. The great thing about this question is that it does not admit of the answer "No."

Elaine looked up at me and smiled, and then she said: "No."

So I kissed her there, and after a moment she kissed me back. This was very

nice, and went on for some time.

The French windows were open for ventilation, despite the time of year, so eventually I put my jacket around Elaine's shoulders and led her into the garden. She was all right, but I was freezing. We stood under the barren pear tree.

I feel it would be a bit rude to write down the precise anatomical details of what I did to Elaine under the pear tree. Suffice it to say that I discovered, first, that she has very tender nipples, and second, that she wears tights rather than stockings.

About the time I made this second discovery I decided she was interested enough in what I was doing for me to say: "Let's go to bed."

"No way," she said; and despite the fact that she continued to hold me quite delightfully tight, there was something in her tone of voice which told me she meant what she said. Also, "No way" is somehow so much more definite than "No." Plainly I wasn't going to get her into a bedroom. But perhaps, I thought, if we stayed in the garden, and things went on the way they were going ... Sadly, not even a knee-trembler was in store for me last night. I'd got one eager hand past the tights barrier when she called a sudden and very decisive halt.

"That's it," she said. "No more." And with that she removed my hand, gave me back my jacket, and walked ahead of me into the house.

It made me feel fifteen years old again, to go that far with a girl and then stop. It reminded me of the days at school when we used to have solemn discussions about the dangers of "going the whole way".

I followed her indoors, of course, and sat down beside her with my arm around her - I'm that much of a gentleman, at least.

I said: "What's the matter?"

She touched my face, quite kindly, and said: "If I hadn't stopped then I would have ended up doing something I'd regret."

"Why would you regret it?"

"My Church tells me it's wrong." And then it all came out.

Well, by that time it was too late to go after one of the other girls, and besides, I was already high on Elaine. So we sat there talking, and kissing a little now and then, and watching the other guests getting drunker, hornier, and more indiscreet.

Elaine told me she's not very religious. She goes rarely to mass and never to confession, and she says she'll take the Pill when she's married. But she believes there's such a thing as Sin, and fornication counts as Sin; and it seems that belief is rock-solid in her. To be honest, I detect within myself a tendency to like her better for that; but my age is no time for sentiment.

To pass the time, and to take my mind off my sexual frustration, I asked her about her family. She's Irish, of course.

"My parents came over in the early fifties, when I was very small," she said. "That's why I don't have the accent." (She has the rhythms, though: I noticed that "don't have" instead of "haven't got".) "My mother took me to church. Daddy was one of these people who think they can get the better of God if they move fast while His back's turned; but Mummy did everything with God looking over her shoulder. She made me undress in the dark, because God is everywhere and it wouldn't do for him to see."

"Were they happily married?"

"I think they were once. Mummy used to tell me about him coming courting her in his best suit and wellington boots. They began to grow apart after they settled down in London. Daddy started to drink a lot as soon as he could afford it. Mummy wanted to buy a house, but Daddy preferred to stay in Camden Town and get drunk three times a week. She turned to religion for consolation. I think he had a fancy woman, too, towards the end. He died of cancer eight years ago."

"I suppose he was a labourer," I said stupidly.

"He was a book-keeper, five feet four inches tall with a weak chest," she said crossly. "Why does everyone assume an Irishman must be a human donkey?"

"I ought to know better. My mother's Jewish, and she never makes chicken soup."

"I suppose your family's posh," she said.

"Not at all," I said, although I know what she meant. Here is English class distinction at its most foolish. Elaine and I have similar jobs and identical living conditions, and yet because my father is a slightly more elevated kind of professional man than hers was, I'm "posh". It annoys me that these things matter to people. What annoys me most is that they matter to me.

I said: "I'm not blue-blooded, just hot-blooded," hoping in this astonishingly subtle manner to bring the conversation back to sex.

To my surprise, she said: "So am I - that's what worries me." And then she kissed me quite hungrily.

At the time I thought all this was ^{rather} ~~quite~~ promising, but now, a few hours later, I'm not so sure. She might genuinely be a lusty but Godly virgin. Or she could be a tease.

Anyway, I like her enough to want to find out.

12 February

A financial crisis. My bank account is so overdrawn that, after my salary goes in at the end of this month, as soon as I've paid the rent I'll be overdrawn again. I suppose I should figure out my monthly budget.

		£
Salary		250.00
Income tax & National Insurance (approx.)		<u>50.00</u>
Take-home pay		200.00
Rent	35	
Gas, electricity, phone	10	
Shopping	30	
Fares	20	
Repayments on car	<u>55</u>	
	150	
Balance		<u><u>50.00</u></u>

Put like that, it looks quite healthy. But that balance of £50 has to cover clothes, car repairs, petrol, records, beer and general entertainment. Most

months I manage to stay within £50, more or less. But I've just realised that last month I spent £75 in two evenings with Joe Jenkins.

The sad fact is that I can't afford to be friends with Joe.

13 February

I'm glad I did that little financial exercise last night. It strengthened my determination not to make a fool of myself by trying to join the jet set. My resolve was still firm today when Joe phoned me at work, and I had the embarrassing task of telling him that his mixture is too rich for me. However, the conversation took a quite unexpected turn. It went like this.

"Tony, my dear chap, how was your suburban party?"

I winced and wished I hadn't told him about Elaine's "debauch". "I enjoyed it," I said, telling the truth but not the whole truth. "Was the ballet good?"

"To be perfectly frank with you, Tony, I wasn't crazy about it; but Senja liked it - you know how cultured these East Europeans are."

I laughed at the idea of ^{Joe}~~Tony~~ suffering through a "modern" ballet. His tastes are pretty wide, but he has the lowest boredom threshold of any man I know.

He went on: "By way of reparation we're having a totally uncultured weekend down in Berkshire. Would you like to come?"

"I'd love to," I began.

"Marvellous. We'll - "

"Hold on." I remembered those figures in my budget and took the plunge.

"Joe, you're very kind, and marvellous company and all that, and when I'm a rich man I hope we'll see an awful lot of each other. But as things are, I'm only a poor civil servant. I can't keep up with your lifestyle, and it would spoil things if I were to sponge off you." I said all that rather fast and took a deep breath.

There was a small hesitation on the other end of the phone. In that moment I looked around my office, seeing it as if I had just walked in for the first time. It really is extraordinarily blank and grey, like a washed-out watercolour. The desks, chairs and filing cabinets are grey-painted steel, the walls are dirty white,

the woodwork is an unpleasant shade of blue. Three of us share a fairly small space, but we can't overhear each other's telephone conversations because the noise from the typing pool next door comes through the cardboard walls loud and clear. By way of ornament we have a Beautiful England calendar (my supervisor, Harwood, took exception to the Playboy one), a diseased but nonetheless vicious little cactus, and a bad colour photograph of my colleague Mr Porbeys with his wife and three kids. The light is a little too bright, the air/^{is}always one degree warmer than is comfortable, and there's a permanent smell of typewriter cleaner and old files. The aforementioned Porbeys - middle-aged, middlebrow and at the peak of his career - has the window desk, so that if he cranes his neck he can see the traffic five floors below. Tom Grant and I sit side-by-side along one wall, facing the holy files (all files are holy in the Ministry of Defence).

Seeing all this freshly, as in a vision, made me instantly regret my little speech to Joe, and I was ready to seize any excuse to go back on it all.

"I understand," Joe said. "But really, it's ridiculous - nobody with youth and brains on his side ought to be short of money."

"Ha, ha," I said.

"Look, Tony, seriously - let me help you if I can."

"I'd rather not borrow," I said, ready to jump at the chance.

"No, no, no. I'll have to think, but ... Let's meet for a drink this evening."

"All right."

"Savoy Hotel, American bar?"

I sighed, thinking of the prices there. "Fine."

I got to the hotel around six, regretting my Burton's jacket and the shertie raincoat that had been fashionable when I was sixteen; but I put a brave face on it and strolled into the bar as if I owned it. I ordered whisky and ate peanuts until Joe came, five or ten minutes later. He looked rather fine in a blue pin-stripe with bowler hat and rolled umbrella. He asked the waiter for a beer - I hadn't had the courage to ask for beer in a place like that. I must get into this

habit Joe has of doing whatever he wants regardless of what other people might think.

When he'd settled down I said: "Well, have you thought?"

"Sort of," he said. "I mean, the point is, you have a certain expertise which you're selling too cheaply. So, you must either seek a higher price, or find yourself more customers."

"Get a second job, you mean."

"That's another habit you have to get out of - thinking that the only way to make money is by having a job. In fact it's probably the worst way to earn. You should know that, with your Jewish ancestry."

(I didn't know he knew about that - when did I tell him?) I said: "Keep talking."

"Look, you're an expert. You have a first-class science degree and some experience in scientific management. There's sure to be someone somewhere who'll pay for the privilege of picking your brains."

"So I become ... "

"Some kind of consultant."

I shook my head. "My supervisor would never give me permission."

"That's the bloody civil service for you," he said, with a sort of savagery to which, I should think, I am more entitled than he. "They use you, pay you a pittance, put manacles on you and expect you to stay with them for fifty years." He made an open-handed what-the-hell gesture. "So don't tell them. There needn't be anything down in writing. Somebody comes to you for advice, you give it, and they pay you - in cash, if necessary."

"I don't know." Actually, I was thinking more of the difficulty of finding that someone, somewhere, than of my civil service vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. But Joe assumed otherwise.

"Look, Tony. Whatever you do, don't let me push you into doing something you're unhappy about. Loyalty is a personal thing, and if you think you owe your soul to the Ministry of Defence, so be it. But if you want ~~me~~ to root around among

my contacts and introduce you to one or two people, you only have to say the word."

I thought about it, but not for long. "There are no rules against being introduced to people," I said.

"All right. I'll see what I can do."

Nothing more was said about the uncultured weekend in Berkshire.

16 February

Actually, the early hours of 17 February, but it still feels like Saturday night. I'm writing this to make me sleepy after a marvellous evening with Elaine.

The day started inauspiciously. Jeremy went home for the weekend, and Pete and Steve - who work for Unilever - are on a course; so I've got the place to myself. I spent the morning at the launderette and went to Sainsbury's this afternoon to stock up on tea bags and tomato ketchup. I was watching Dr Who on TV and eating a peanut-butter sandwich when Elaine knocked on the door.

She said: "Would you happen to know how to cook a joint of beef?"

"I wrote the book on it," I said. "Come in."

We went into the kitchen and looked it up in the cookbook. "It's topside," Elaine said.

"Here we are. Thirty minutes per pound at 350 degrees, less ten minutes overall if you like it rare. Do you mean to tell me that with four women in the house you couldn't figure out how to do roast beef?"

"Oh, they're all away," she said.

Now, I'm not stupid. "Tell you what," I said, quick as a flash. "I'll help you cook it if I can help you eat it too."

She gave me a big smile and said: "Why not?"

I looked at my watch. "Great. Come in at about seven o'clock, and meanwhile I'll get a bottle of plonk."

I shaved and had a quick bath, then put on clean jeans and a new shirt. I nipped down to the Lamb and Flag and bought a two-litre bottle of valpolicella. When I got back Elaine was on the doorstep with a lump of meat in one hand and a

carrier-bag of vegetables in the other. She'd washed her hair and put on a loose-fitting peasant-girl dress, and she looked very fetching.

We wrapped the beef in foil and stuck it in the oven. We raided Jeremy's record collection and found some music we both liked - early Rolling Stones, that sort of thing. I looked through Elaine's carrier bag and found carrots, parsnips and spuds.

We spent a couple of happy hours banging about in the kitchen in our aprons. We roasted the parsnips, boiled the carrots, and baked the potatoes in their jackets. Because of the power cuts there are plenty of candles in the house, so I stuck a few ~~candles~~ in saucers and put them on the table. I even managed to find a couple of paper napkins.

I'm actually not much better at cooking than she is, but I stuck a fork into the meat and pronounced it done at about nine o'clock. I carved with a flourish and we dined in style. Even the wine tasted good, although God knows it was probably all sulphuric acid and purple dye, the price I paid for it.

"You're a good cook," Elaine said. "I can't boil an egg without burning it."

"You'll make someone a marvellous husband," I told her.

The conversation was all light and trivial, like it should be. She told me about her education at a convent school in Kilburn. During the services they all used to look for the dirty bits in the Bible. "There was a great mystery about the Sin of Sodom," she said. "None of us knew what it meant, and of course the school dictionaries were heavily censored - didn't even have "bum" in them. In the end Teresa McGinty looked it up in the public library. We giggled about it for weeks."

So I told her about my Austrian games teacher who taught a two-year course called "Hygiene" to the first and second forms. He gave us a list of the topics to be studied during the course. Last on the list was "The Reproductive System". The fourth-formers told us he would talk about football, politics, music and anything ~~in~~ else for two years, then say: "Well, lads, I'm sorry we haven't had time for the reproductive system." And that's exactly what happened. The girls, who had a much younger games teacher, did considerably better, and we got a great

deal of information out of their notebooks.

"I wonder if sex education has improved since we were at school," Elaine said.

"I expect people still get most of their data behind the cycle sheds like they always did."

ate all
We/~~finished~~ the beef, and agreed that desserts were too much trouble and we were both too full for cheese. Feeling bleated and tipsy, we settled down on the old sofa to watch TV and finish the wine. Now, our lounge will never get into Homes and Gardens, but this evening I couldn't have wished to be anywhere else. With the gas fire blazing, the stumps of candles sputtering out on the table, and the grey light from the telly lying over us like a benediction, the room was very snug and homey. In the half-dark you couldn't see the damp patch on the ceiling or the grotty curtains, and we were lovely and warm by virtue of reckless extravagance with the gas. I put my arm around Elaine and she curled her legs up beside her.

The midnight movie was one of these Hollywood thrillers made in the forties, where the men wear their snap-brim Fedora hats even when they've taken off their jackets. The dialogue was like firecrackers and the plot was like a mile of string in a tangled ball. Great.

When the TV closed down we lay on the sofa and had sex, of sorts. We didn't actually make love, although I'm still not sure how I restrained myself. I think she had more than one orgasm - I'm no expert on these things, and anyway it's not quite such a clear yes-or-no event as it is for men - and I suppose I can admit, on their own in the privacy of my diary, that these hands/have never before done that to a girl. However, there was no doubt that I had one. Her hands must be more experienced than mine. She did it with enthusiasm and tenderness.

I confess this girl has got to me. I mean, why am I being so coy about the whole thing? Why can't I just say that Elaine gave me a hand job?

Because the occasion on which that phrase is normally used is a sniggering all-male conversation in a public bar, and the tone of those discussions is generally contemptuous; and right now I don't feel in the least contemptuous toward

Elaine - quite the reverse. Sadly, I don't know any beautiful words for these things. The fact that I'm looking for prettier words must be a sign of something, but I haven't figured out precisely of what.

Am I in love with her?

Shape up, Pitman, and stop talking such balls.

Anyway, she wouldn't sleep here, not even on the sofa, not even after my remarkable display of self-control; so she went back to her house around four o'clock, which is half an hour ago.

You don't get many evenings like that in the average life. It was perfect, absolutely bloody perfect. I'm going to sleep like a log.

19 February

Dad was in Town today for a meeting with a firm of stockbrokers to whom he's tax adviser^e. He took me to lunch in one of his old-favourite Italian restaurants in Dean Street. Said the place had gone down. He must be paid well by the stockbrokers, because he asked me if I was all right for cash and pressed a £20 note into my sticky little hand. Wasn't that nice of him?

20 February

Interesting phone call at home this evening. Caller in a coin box.

"Can I speak to Mr Pitman, please?" Pleasant, deep voice; slight American accent - Canadian? - pub noise in the background.

"Speaking."

"Oh, good evening, my name's Barry. Joseph Mulholland gave me your number and said you and I should talk. I just stopped for a drink at a pub called the Red Lion, and I realised I'm probably quite close to where you live - am I right?"

"Yes."

"Maybe I could buy you a drink?"

"Thankyou. Um ... I'd ask you here, but my flatmate is spring-cleaning,"

I lied.

"Oh, if you're busy - "

"No, no. I'll be there in fifteen or twenty minutes."

"I'll be waiting."

"How will I recognise you?"

"I'll know you. Bye, now."

I hastily put on my one-and-only suit and a tie, and trotted off to the Red Lion. He was sitting in a corner nursing what looked like ^agin-and-tonic. "Hello," he said, not giving me any clue as to what I should call him.

I said: "Hello, Barry," and shook his hand, wondering whether Barry was his first or second name. He didn't say "Call me Aloysius" or anything, so I was no wiser.

"What'll you have?"

"A small whisky, please, Mr Barry." He didn't respond to the "Mister" either, and in fact
/as I still don't know his name.

He went up to the bar. He's a big man, probably six feet tall and quite wide at the shoulder. His hair is thick and very grey, and I suppose he's quite handsome. He was wearing a plain dark-grey suit with a white shirt and some kind of school or club tie, and - a very old-fashioned touch - a square of white handkerchief in his breast pocket. As he returned with the drinks, I thought he had a slight limp, but I may have been mistaken.

"How did you know what I look like?" I asked him.

"Joseph happened to show me a photograph of the Imperial College London Darts Team 1969," he said. "You've changed, but not much. Cheers." ^{iv}

I took a sip of whisky - the kind of small, appreciate ^{sort} sip you would expect from the/~~kind~~ of brilliant young man you might want to take on as a consultant.

"How do you know Jee?" I asked.

"I met him in 1970, and advised him on the setting-up of his business. I ^{firm}
have a small management consultancy/~~company~~, a private limited company. We don't advertise, working mainly on recommendation, so you don't see our name about very

much." (Come to think of it, he didn't actually tell me the name. Bit reticent with names, this Barry.) "We have virtually no staff, because I prefer to draw on the skills and knowledge of a large number of successful professionals who are prepared to help me on a part-time or freelance basis. People like yourself. Why don't you tell me a little about yourself?"

"Scientific management is my field," I said. "Everything from de-they-er-don't-they need a new linear accelerator, to why does a laboratory employing three people need a hundred reams of carbon paper." Some exaggeration there: in truth I'd have absolutely no say whatsoever in the decision whether to ^{build} ~~buy~~ a new linear accelerator.

"Joseph has briefed me on your professional background," he said. "I'd like to know a little more about you."

"What can I tell you? I'm twenty-five and single, the son of a solicitor. I like darts, women and the blues. I've never smoked pot, appeared in court or kicked a man when he's down. I could use a little more excitement and a lot more money."

"That's very good," he smiled. I thought so too. "Well, I can't offer you excitement, but perhaps I can do something about the money."

"What kind of thing would you want?"

"Basically, I'd need your help with clients in high-technology industries. It might be a question whether they need their own research and development division; or it might be something quite small, like whether to develop a highly job-specific high-temperature plastic. I'd want your expert guesses on viability and likely costs, that sort of thing."

I must say, this did not immediately seem to make irrefutably good sense. I mean, if you want that kind of specialised assessment, you don't straight away think: "Aha! What I need is a minor civil servant in the Ministry of Defence to help me!" However, I've always suspected that bullshit is the currency of the management-consultancy business. It's a bit like psychoanalysis: you already know everything they tell you, but what they do is help you believe it.

I was getting the feeling that Barry was a master of bullshit. Nevertheless, if he wanted me to supply him with more of the same, I wasn't going to refuse his money.

"Give me a real-life example," I said.

He thought for a moment. "As it happens, there isn't anything I could use you for ~~at the moment~~ right now. A couple of months ago we did a project for a mining consortium, assessing the real costs and benefits of their centralised management services operation, which included their research and development division. They have mines all over the world, and the question was whether to have a laboratory in each country of operation, or to keep them all together in one country, and if the latter, which country."

"Local versus central - a standard textbook management dilemma," I remarked. "Yes, I could certainly advise there, given sufficient information. But it would be a big job. What sort of remuneration would you offer?"

"It would depend on the quality of your answers," he said quickly. "To assure you that you wouldn't be wasting your time, we could agree on a minimum of a hundred pounds."

I nodded. "Perhaps the best thing for us to do would be for you to call me next time you have something I can help with, and we'll take it from there."

"All right." He seemed a bit worried about my reaction to the sum of £100. "When I say a minimum, I mean it - I would certainly hope that your reports would regularly be worth a good deal more."

But I wasn't going to give him any reassurance. "We'll just have to try it out and see," I said.

"There's one other point I'm obliged to emphasise. All our work is quite confidential. You wouldn't be able to talk to anyone about it."

"Of course." I hesitated, then decided to tell him. "From my own point of view, I wouldn't want it noised abroad that I was doing this kind of work for you. The civil service is a bit narrow-minded about these things."

"I understand. Well, we'd pay you in cash, leaving it up to you whether you

pay tax. You and I would always meet personally, so there'd be nothing written down except your reports, which would not have to be signed. We won't even talk on the phone, except perhaps to make appointments, and we could even avoid that if necessary."

I said: "Oh, I think you can phone me or write to me without worry."

He shrugged. "I prefer to meet personally, anyway."

Well, that was about it. We had another drink, and he told me he ~~was~~ is a bachelor, born in Regina, Saskatchewan, of Scots parents, and he lives in a flat in the Barbican, in the City. He's an engineer by training, but he believes in Joe's philosophy of selling your brains for the top price going. I found him a bit guarded and formal, even after his third gin. His clothes weren't really those of a rich man, but from the way he talks I gather he's making money hand over fist. And he drove me home in a blue Daimler.

I forgot to ask for his phone number.

25 February

Friday my car broke down, and I spent all weekend working on it with intermittent help from Jeremy and Pete and endless cups of tea from Elaine. In the end we discovered that the cylinder head is warped. I took it into a garage this morning for an estimate. Phoned them up at five o'clock and they said £200. Oh, bollocks.

28 February

General Election today. I didn't vote.

1 March

Just back from the usual Friday night diplomatic visit to the Lamb and Flag. I was sitting in the public bar supping ale with Elaine, Pete, Margaret and Pam when the barman called me to the phone. It was Barry.

"Tony, I thought I might catch you there. Something's come up that you may be able to work on for me."

"Good," I said, thinking of that warped cylinder head.

"Did I tell you we'd done some work for an international mining consortium?"

"Yes - on their centralised management services operation."

"That's it. Well, they're so pleased with our report that they've asked us to look at their labour relations. Now, we wanted to do some work on the psychology of underground labour, but we've found there's very little published research to help us. We want to propose that they set up a project on human behaviour in situations which are both cramped and physically enclosed. Are you following me?"

"Indeed." It was just as well I was only on my first pint, through.

"What we need is a projection of the cost, manpower, and time it would take."

"I'll need more details than that," I said. "Can you let me have a list of the specific aims of the research?"

"Certainly. I'll get it to you early next week."

"Fine."

"Enjoy your evening."

"Bye. Oh, Barry?"

"Still here."

"It occurs to me that the Ministry has done some work on this ~~projec~~ topic - in connection with submarines. It won't have been published; you know how secretive they are."

"Put the details in as an appendix to your projection."

"Will do. Bye."

Of course, the others wanted to know who had phoned me and why; but I thought - on the spur of the moment - that it might be wiser not to tell them, so I said: "A pal of mine who's a mechanic went over the garage's estimate for me. He says their price is reasonable."

"Poor you," Elaine said. "What are you going to do?"

I shrugged. "Bet on horses?"

3 March

Took Elaine to the movies last night. The local flea-pit was showing M.A.S.H. I haven't laughed so much for years. After the film we walked across the cemen, but it was much too cold for hanky-panky.

4 March

There was a note from Barry waiting for me when I got home tonight. At least, I assume it was from Barry. There was no stamp on the envelope - it must have been delivered by hand. Inside was a single sheet of plain paper - no letterhead, no compliments slip, no signature - bearing a typed list of research aims of this psychology project. I'm sure there's no need for him to be this furtive about the whole thing. Still, better that way than for him to be careless.

The research aims are simple. For men working alone or in groups of up to six, discover the optimum length of a shift, the best times and extents of tea-breaks, the optimum number of shifts per week and of holidays per year. In fact two optima are required for each question: optimum for productivity and optimum for labour relations. One thing they haven't thought of is that they may get varying results for different nationalities or races; I'll have to mention that.

I should think it will take three years. They'll need a couple of top psychologists, several research assistants and an army of volunteers. They'll have to put the volunteers in simulated underground conditions for various lengths of time, and subject them to various tests. As research projects go it will be quite cheap.

I'll write my report next weekend. Some time this week I can look up the Ministry file on those nuclear submarine experiments. I'll have to go through the file taking notes. It would be much easier to bring the file home, or at least photocopy it; but unfortunately the project is still classified, so I'd need permission from old Harwood, and I don't want to get involved in explanations. But I can give Barry a good summary of the Ministry's approach, its results, and the

cost of the whole thing.

I'm determined to do a good job. I need that money.

6 March

The Labour Party won the election and solved the national crisis instantly by the simple expedient of giving in to the miners. I'm sure it was the right thing to do, but no marks for ingenuity.

7 March

An anxious moment in the office this afternoon.

I was going through the file in preparation for my weekend work when Harwood walked in. He said: "Mr Pitman, why have you got the submarine psychology file out?"

I'm rather proud of the speed and plausibility of my answer. "I woke up in the middle of the night convinced I'd made a ten-thousand-pound error," I told him. "I'm just checking."

"Oh. Well, perhaps you'd pass it to me when you've finished," he said, and walked back out again.

Phew!

10 March

Almost midnight on Sunday, and I've just finished typing out my report for Barry on Jeremy's portable typewriter. I've been at it all weekend with notebooks, graph paper, pocket calculator, and textbooks. I haven't had time to see Elaine. The report is fifteen pages long, plus four pages of appendix on the Ministry work. I'm bushed.

12 March

Took my car into the garage today to have that cylinder head done.

I delivered my report yesterday. Barry phoned around seven o'clock and asked

me to meet him at the Red Lion. I set out, but as I was walking down Oakgreve Road his car pulled up at the kerb beside me. I handed him the envelope, and he just nodded and pulled away.

I was wondering when I'd get paid, and how. I needn't have worried. This morning on the Tube someone bumped into me very heavily, and when I got off the train there was a wad of notes in my pocket. ^{As soon as} ~~When~~ I got to the office I went into the bag to count them. It came to three hundred pounds!

I still think all this cloak-and-dagger stuff is overdone, but who am I to complain at these prices?

14 March

Barry was waiting for me in his blue Daimler outside Kenton station this evening. I jumped in and he drove up to Harrow-on-the-Hill, where we stopped and sat looking at the famous view over London. It's been a clear night, so I could spot the aircraft warning lights on top of the Post Office Tower ten miles away. The only people about were a few boys from the school in their antediluvian uniform - tail coats and stiff collars - strolling through the hilltop village as if nothing had changed for a hundred years. I always feel sorry for them. They must know how stupid they look. Still, I should be so rich.

"Your report was excellent," Barry said.

"Good."

"Very thorough, clearly written ... exactly what we wanted. Was the money satisfactory?"

"Yes." It was more than satisfactory, but I wasn't going to let him think he could get me cheaper next time.

"The appendix was particularly useful."

"I endeavour to give satisfaction, as Jeeves would say."

He didn't understand that. "Who?"

"Jeeves. You know, P.G. Wodehouse? The butler? Bertie Wooster?"

"Bertie Wooster?"

"I'm forgetting you're a foreigner. Jeeves is a fictional butler who solves all his master's problems very ingeniously in a series of novels by P.G. Wodehouse. And when the master, that's Bertie Wooster, thanks him, he always says: 'I endeavour to give satisfaction, sir.' "

"Literature was never my strong point," Barry said, just a bit crossly. Actually, I think the truth is that jokes aren't his ~~x~~ strong point. Well, now ~~that~~ I know I won't make any more.

He went on: "In fact there was something in the appendix that the client picked up on very strongly."

"They've seen it already?" I'd thought that my report would be a small part of a very large volume of findings submitted in three or six months' time.

"Their board haven't seen it, of course; but they have a liaison man that I talk to every other day, and I showed it to him." He reached into the back seat, opened a briefcase that was lying there, and drew out a photocopy of my stuff. He turned to the last page. "This is the bit that excited their interest."

He pointed to a small section headed Variations in Behaviour due to Stimulants and Depressants. I read over the section.

Results widely divergent from those outlined above were obtained with groups subjected to behaviour-modifying drugs. A section of the experimental team was "hived off" to pursue this line of inquiry, with the ultimate object of isolating a drug or drugs which would have a beneficial effect on social behaviour without significantly impairing the individual's working efficiency.

"You don't tell us whether they succeeded," Barry said with a smile.

"Oh, they did. They identified three or four complex inorganic compounds of the type they were looking for. I must say, I'm a bit sceptical about the value of all that, though. Remember, ~~all~~ this is to do with submarines. Somehow I can't see the Royal Navy getting its sailors doped up to the eyeballs so they can live on submarines indefinitely."

"I see your point. But it might be a little different for Paraguayan tin miners."

"I never thought of that."

Barry shot me an aren't-I-the-clever-one look and said: "I could pay you a good bonus for details of those drugs. Can you get them?"

"Um. I read the results, of course, but they're a bit more classified than the main experimental findings. I can't remember them, I couldn't memorise them, and it's not easy to photocopy the Grade Two files." I scratched my head. "Also, I think you can be presecuted for giving out that information."

"Tony, the last thing I want to do is pressure you into ~~doing~~ something against your better judgement. It's entirely up to you. If you decide to do it, I'll pay you another three hundred."

"Let me think about it."

"Also, whether you do this particular one or not, I'd like us to be a good deal more cautious about meeting, and so on." He reached into his briefcase again, and this time handed me what turned out to be a brochure for Servowarm gas central heating. "When I want to see you, I'll send you one of these through the post. The number of stamps on the envelope will tell you what day we should meet: if there are three stamps, we meet three days after the date of the postmark on the envelope. We'll meet at seven-thirty p.m., at this spot."

"How do I communicate with you?"

"Phone the Commonwealth Club and leave a message for Peter Porter. Any message; it doesn't matter, so long as there's a number in it. If the message is, say, 'Bring two bottles of wine,' I'll meet you in two days' time. Have you got that?"

"Sure, but isn't it all a bit melodramatic?"

"There's no harm in being careful. Now, if we want to communicate but not to meet, we can leave messages, reports, or money sealed in a polythene bag in the cistern of the water closet at the Lamb and Flag. To notify me that there's something there for me, send a Peter Porter message mentioning a colour. There'll be something in the toilet for you if you get a advertisement for insurance through the post from Sun Life."

"Do you live at the Commonwealth Club?" I asked him.

"No, but I walk through the lobby most days. If there's an envelope on the board for Peter Porter, I leave it there, then phone the club from a call-box and ask if there are any messages for Peter Porter."

"I think you've done this sort of thing before."

He smiled. "You're right, Tony: it is a bit melodramatic. But our ^{business} ~~work~~ is confidential, and when someone is doing useful work for me, ~~thxxxxx~~ I can't do too much to ensure he doesn't run any risks thereby."

He started the car then, and we drove back to my street. I spent the rest of the evening in front of the TV set, but I've no idea what programmes I saw. I'm a bit worried. The thing is, the formulae for those drugs are really secret: not just secret because the Ministry is paranoid, but secret because they do have some value, however marginal, in military terms. I was exaggerating - I think - when I said I could be prosecuted; but I'd certainly be fired if I were found out.

I'd be tempted to confess all to old Harwood, were it not that I've already broken the rules by doing a report for Barry.

And there is the little matter of three hundred quid to be earned.
would

If it were safe, I/~~do~~ it like a shot. There's no question of ethics involved, as far as I can see. For me, ethics is things like paying debts and being decent to decent women. Loyalty is for friends, not institutions like the Ministry of Defence. Besides, these drugs aren't that important, for Christ's sake.

However, it's the practical difficulties that are giving me pause.

In my department, when you want something photocopied you fill out a slip, sign it, and take the slip together ~~th~~ with the file (always the whole file, even if you only want one page copied) to the photocopying room and leave it there. A girl works the machine, and eventually a messenger brings the file back to you with your photostats.

That's for Grade One files, which are green. We also have red files and black files. To get a red file copied, your slip has to be countersigned by the head of department, in this case Harwood. (Black files can't be copied at all, at least not in this building; but there aren't many of them - I've only ever seen

them a couple of times.)

So, my problem is to either (a) get a red file copied without Harwood's signature, or (b) find some excuse for copying those formulae legitimately.

If I can't find a pretty watertight solution, I just won't do it.

15 March

I did it!

It was easy as falling off a log.

No, it wasn't. Why kid myself? I've been laying ostrich eggs all day.

First thing this morning, I got out the green file on the submarine experiments and the red file of the drug results, and started checking them.

Perboys looked over my shoulder, the nosey bugger. He scratched his head, showering me with dandruff, and said: "Haven't you got anything better to do than go over old files?"

I resent this kind of thing from him at the best of times. He's the same grade as me and Tom Grant, but because he's been around longer than God he thinks he's entitled to supervise us.

I brushed my desk and said: "It's a miracle that someone with so little hair should have so much dandruff." That shut him up.

Tom said: "Still having nightmares about that file?"

I sighed. "You know how it is when you get it into your head that you've made a mistake, but you can't quite put your finger on it?"

"I leave those mistakes for posterity to find."

Perboys said: "If I were you I wouldn't turn over the stone."

"That's because you're not young and enthusiastic and destined for better things," I said.

He might have replied that I'm pushing thirty, apathetic, and stuck in a dead end, but he's not quick enough.

I worked over the files a little longer, and as it happens I did find an error. However, I didn't correct it.

Around morning-coffee time, when Porboys went to the toilet and Tom was out of the room, I detached a couple of pages of formulae from the red file. The pages are bound together with a fastener passed through a punch-hole in the top left-hand corner of the sheet, so all you have to do to detach them is make a slight tear in the paper. They often get torn accidentally, so we have little packets of ring-shaped reinforcers which you stick around the hole to mend them. Anyway, I took the pages out of the red file and put them loosely into the green file. Then I filled out a ~~photocopying~~ slip and took the green file to the photocopying room. I asked for the whole file to be copied.

I was very nervous, but on reflection I didn't have anything to worry about. It's possible that Harwood might have casually flicked through the file while it was out of my hands and spotted the misplaced sheets. But it was unlikely; and if he had, why should he imagine it was anything more than an accident?

I behaved normally for the next few hours, working on an audit. I had some whisky at lunchtime to calm my nerves. I didn't even notice that Harwood's secretary came in without a bra on - a lapse that caused Tom to speculate that I must be getting my end away regularly. Then Porboys said we should hurry up and get married, so we would grow up and realise that the centre of the Universe was not between a woman's legs; and the office seemed almost normal.

At 3.15 the messenger brought my photostats, together with the original file. I retrieved the crucial two pages, mended the tears with ring-reinforcers, and replaced them in the red file.

An hour or so later Harwood came in, saving me the trouble of going to see him. He said: "Such vigilance over one's own past mistakes is commendable, Mr Pitman, but don't forget we must keep our current workload up-to-date."

"I've been thinking that myself," I said. "I'll take a photostat of the green file home with me tonight and work on it at the weekend."

He raised his eyebrows, as well he might. It's not often I volunteer for weekend work. "Fine," he said. "Fine." He seemed about to say something else, but he just said "Fine" a third time then went out.

When he'd gone Tom said: "You're really worried about that file, aren't you?"

Before I could answer Perboys said: "There's more to it than that. He's got something up his sleeve. He wouldn't go creeping round Harwood's arse for nothing. We'll see what it is, sooner or later: something to do with the holidays list, or an assignment with perks, or some promotion the rest of us don't know about yet."

I said: "Hasn't it occurred to you that I might be frightened of ending up like you?"

He wagged a podgy finger at me. "The civil service will forgive you anything but insolence. I've told you that before, but you're determined to learn the hard way."

We continued to bicker, in a desultory way, until it was time to go home. When I got here I found a polythene bag in the kitchen and brought it up to my room. I folded the sheets of formulae into four, put them in the bag, then sealed the mouth of the bag with sellotape. I put the package in my jeans pocket.

A little later the usual crew assembled for the pilgrimage to the Lamb and Flag. We walked down the street, then I said I'd forgotten my wallet and came back. I wanted to phone from an empty house. I rang the Commonwealth Club and left a message for Peter Porter: "Bring red wine tonight." That's the sign that there's a letter for him in the toilet. I caught up with the others just as they were going in to the bar. After a couple of pints I went to the gents'. There's only one water closet, and it's completely enclosed - not the kind where you can see over the top of the door. I stood on the seat, lifted the lid of the water tank, and dropped the package inside.

It occurred to me that if the water can come down the pipe, maybe the package can too. So I pulled the chain to experiment. The package did not appear in the toilet bowl. I had another look in the tank, and saw that it's designed so that solid objects can't go down the tube. No doubt Barry thought of all this when he chose the spot.

I went back into the bar, and we had a very cheerful, noisy evening. I sat next to Elaine. The others all know we're having some kind of romance, so there's

a certain amount of good-natured kidding. I don't mind, and it doesn't seem to trouble Elaine.

I'm picking up the car tomorrow. I shall enjoy paying the £200 bill all in fivers.

17 March

Sunday afternoon, and I'm very happy.

The car is running like a top. I took Elaine out in it last night. We went to the movies and saw a James Bond double feature (she likes spy stories), then had a slap-up meal. On the way back I stopped the car beside the common. Before I had a chance to kiss her, she said: "Let's get in the back." So we did. Then we had oral sex. Both of us. And boy, she is so good at it! Judging by her reaction I'm quite good at it too.

Money, sex, and a mended car: what more can a man ask of life?

20 March

Yesterday I got a brochure about Sun Life insurance through the post. In the evening, on the way home, I dropped in at the Lamb and Flag for a swift half, went into the gents', and found £300 in a polythene bag in the water tank of the W.C.

Today I rang Joe Jenkins and invited him for a drink with my new-found wealth. We met in the American Bar of the Savoy again; but it's a very different feeling to walk in there with a pocket full of money!

Joe was quite ebullient, though he didn't say why. He asked me how I'd got on with Barry.

"Very well," I said. "I've already done one report for him, and been quite handsomely paid."

"I told you - there's always a solution to money problems," he said.

"Consultancy isn't all there is to it, though," I went on. "I also - "

He stopped me with an upheld hand, like a policeman on traffic duty. "Are

you sure you want to tell me?"

"Maybe not ... "

"I provided you with an introduction. From that point on, what happens is really none of my business: it's up to you."

"I understand," I said, not really understanding at all. "Still ... I mean, how much do you know about Barry's ^{operation} ~~business~~?"

He sat back and crossed his elegantly-trousered legs. "Not a great deal. I know the broad outlines, but none of the details."

A waiter wandered into my field of view, and I caught his eye and ordered more drinks. "On me," I told Joe. "I've got some catching up to do. This management consultancy business: it's all bullshit, isn't it?"

"Not entirely."

"Barry advised you once, he told me . What did he do for you that you couldn't have done yourself?"

"Three things, I think. One: he gave me an impressive-looking report, neatly typed and beautifully bound, which I could show to potential backers, creditors, partners, etcetera. Two: he gave me a completely objective outside opinion. Three: by virtue of being outside the business, he was able to put together a little information which was denied to me just because I was known to be inside, or rather about to get inside."

I took a long sip of my fresh whisky. There was an ^{idea} ~~unthought~~ forming at the back of my mind that seemed like it was going to be important. I thought aloud: "Number one - the beautifully-bound report - is bullshit, pure and simple and unashamed."

He nodded agreement.

"Number two is not far off it."

"I don't know ... "

"If you want a completely objective outside opinion you can ask your Auntie Cissy."

"Well ... all right - if you're determined to be rigorously cynical."

"I am, just for the moment. Which leaves point three. He was able to get

hold of information which you couldn't get. It must therefore have been information of a confidential nature."

"Is this leading somewhere?"

"I think so." That idea at the back of ~~mind~~ my mind was scratching at the door. It was time to bring it out into the daylight and look it over. "It seems to me that, bullshit aside, Barry's business is people's secrets ... " And then I found a name for the thought. "Industrial espionage," I finished.

He leaned forward. "There are two things to be said in answer to that." He flashed a grin. "Doesn't this remind you of the intellectual discussions we used to have at college?"

I laughed. "Yes. You always brought out your thoughts in a numbered list."

"One: the bullshit isn't completely superfluous."

"I agree. Sometimes you need someone else to tell you stuff you already know."

"Two: there's no clear line of demarkation between straightforward business intelligence, and what you call industrial espionage. That's why they haven't been able to make industrial espionage illegal: they can't define it."

I said: "I'm beginning to understand why one's dealings with Barry are always a bit sort of shady."

"All business is like that, Tony. Being cocooned in the civil service, you're maybe ... "

"Naive?"

"I was going to say innocent. If Barry bothers you, drop him. I assure you I shan't lose any sleep."

"He bothers me, but so do boredom and penury." I shrugged. "I'll have to think about it. Let's talk about something else. How's Sonja?"

"Wondering why she hasn't seen you for so long. Why don't we arrange another foursome. Are you still with Elaine?"

"Not half. How about Saturday?"

"Can't do. A week Saturday?"

"Fine. I'll talk to Elaine and call you. Did you enjoy your unclutured

weekend?"

He rolled his eyes. "Turned into a bloody orgy." He looked at his watch. "I'll have to tell you about it another time. I've got a business dinner."

I paid the bill and left a tip. It gave me great pleasure.

24 March

Went shopping for new clothes yesterday (Saturday) and took Elaine. I bought a blue pin-striped suit for the office, and she chose a red-and-blue Paisley tie to go with it. I also bought a suede jacket for £90, more than I've ever paid before for a single article of clothing.

Elaine can't come to dinner with Joe and Sonja next Saturday: she's promised to babysit for friends in Buislip. I think she would have liked me to say I'd go with her to keep her company; but I'm not crazy to spend Saturday night babysitting, and anyway I've promised Joe.

Took Elaine to the movies again last night. Usual orgy in the back of the car on the way home. Woof, woof.

25 March

Phoned Joe.

"Elaine can't make it on Saturday," I said.

"What a pity. Sonja wants to give us dinner at her place. You'll come on your own, won't you?"

"Sure."

He gave me the address. It's somewhere in Chelsea. I'm looking forward to this.

26 March

Jesus Christ Almighty, what a day.

No sooner had I sat down at my desk than old Harwood phoned me. I knew

anything he needed. You learn to read these little signs after a couple of years in Whitehall. You also learn to guess someone's rank by his appearance; and the puzzle was that Jakes was dressed like a nobody. If I'd seen him in the corridor I would have thought him a messenger.

"Sit down, Pitman," he said, and pulled out a chair for me. I noticed that he was slightly cross-eyed, something I always find terribly off-putting, because I never knew whether the person is looking at me or not, and I find myself switching my attention from one eye to the other all the bloody time.

"You're probably wondering what this is about," he said. He sat down and crossed his legs like a woman, the right thigh over the left then the right foot tucked inside the left ankle. He had a Midlands accent and a sort of schoolteacherly heartiness which didn't ring true. His voice was rather high-pitched. I would have put him down as a peofa if ~~knidzhmm~~ he hadn't been such a scruff.

"I'm sure I'll be told in good time," I said.

"I'm with security," he began. (Harwood had said the Home Office, but I let that pass.) "Every so often we run a random spot check. We take a file and go back over its history, talking to everyone who has used it, finding out why they used it and what they added to it, making sure the correct procedure has been followed and that it hasn't been used insecurely."

"I see." I was bloody terrified, but I tried not to show it. I knew what was coming.

"I'm running such a check on file NT 365/21 and its sub-files. This is a file about some experiments in the behaviour of submarine crews. Now, you were the last person to use the file, so I'm talking to you first. I'll be interviewing some of your colleagues, both here and in other buildings; and the first thing I must ask you to do is keep mum about all this. If people know in advance ~~that~~ ^{what} we're doing this, it rather defeats the object."

"What about Harwood?"

"You can tell him. I interviewed him last evening."

"So long as I know."

He picked up a bunch of files from the chair beside him. "Now, you took over this project from a colleague late in 1972 and administered it until September last year."

"Yes. It used to be Stan Merrill's. He was transferred to Admiralty."

"Quite. You added papers to the file seven times in 1972 and 1973. The project was wound up in June 1973. You completed the final sums and closed the file in September."

"Yes."

"When I say 'the file' I mean all three of them," he said. He spread them out on the round table; one green, one red, one black.

"I didn't know there was a black file on this project," I said.

He looked at the front of the folder, where you have to initial every time you touch the file. "Ah, yes, my mistake: you've never seen this one. Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Not at all."

He took out a battered tobacco tin and a small orange packet of cigarette papers and proceeded to roll his own. "Now, then, is there anything I ought to know about the handling of the file during that period?"

I frowned. "That's a vague question," I said. "Can't you be more precise?"

"It's meant to be a general question," he said, a little irritated. "Anything that sticks out in your memory as being unusual, inexplicable, incorrect."

I thought for a minute then said: "No."

He set fire to the end of his hand-made cigarette with an old petrol lighter. He drew hard and inhaled deeply, like they always do with those cigarettes, then he politely blew the smoke away from me. "All right. The next time you saw the file was on 7 March. Why did you reopen it?"

"I had a feeling I'd made a mistake."

He looked puzzled. "What made you think of it, six months later?"

"Actually, I woke up in the night with the feeling I'd blundered."

He consulted a notebook. "A ten-thousand-pound error?"

Harwood must have told him that. I said:
 /"I made that up. All I knew was that it was of significant size."

"Did you find the mistake?"

"Not then - not on 7 March. I was busy with other things, and I didn't have time to do a proper job. I got it out again later."

"Eight days later," he said. "15 March. On that date you had the entire green file photocopied."

"Yes. I did some work on it during the day, and took it home with me for the weekend."

"Why?"

"I hadn't found the mistake during the day, and I felt that, since the mistake - if there was one - was mine, I ought not to spend too much office time on it, especially as we were busy. To be honest ... "

"Yes?"

"To be honest, the bloody thing was preying on my mind, and I wanted it sorted out."

"Did you get it sorted out?"

"I found the mistake, yes."

"What was it?"

"It was an accounting error. It hadn't cost the ^{taxpayer} ~~Ministry~~ any money, but it had slightly misrepresented the financial situation. For some of the later experiments, the research team borrowed a submarine. Now, the rule is that when they do that the cost of that machine - depreciation and maintenance - for whatever period they use it over, is charged to the project by the Navy. That way it appears in our budget instead of in the Navy's. Do you follow?"

"Surely."

"Well, I'd charged the project for every day and every part of a day. But the sub was used from noon on 15 April to noon on 21 April. I'd charged a full day for 15 April and a full day for 21 April - seven days. But the project had only used it for six full days. So I made the alteration."

"It sounds very trivial."

"Those subs cost £8,500 a day."

"I see." He looked at his notes again. "Why did you take out the red file?"

"The error might have been in there. I expect you know that red files can't be taken home. I had to check that one in the office."

"I see." He dropped his cigarette on the carpet and trod on it. He opened the red file and turned to the pages containing the formulae. I started to sweat.

"Can you see this?" he said. "These two pages have been torn, and mended with ring-reinforcers."

"Yes."

"Any idea why?"

"I presume the push-holes got worn. That's the usual reason."

"Did you mend them?"

"Mr Jakes, I wouldn't remember if I had. Did you sharpen your pencil during the last week of January?"

He smiled. "Fair enough."

"Your random spot checks are pretty thorough."

"No point in doing them sloppily. Don't be afraid to drink your coffee."

"It's cold."

"Well, there's only one more thing. The green file has ninety-seven sheets in it. According to the photocopying records, ninety-nine sheets went through the machine. Can you explain that?"

"Yes. I had made two pages of notes, which I left in the file by mistake when I sent it for copying. The girl doesn't know the difference between a genuine file document and a scrap of jetting paper, so she copied the notes."

"I see." He had a foolscap pad on the table beside him, which he had ignored throughout the interview. Now he pulled it towards him, tilting it over the edge of the table so I couldn't see what was on it, and scribbled rapidly for a minute, with the pencil I had used as an analogy. Then he looked up. "I like your suit. Is it new?"

"Bought it on Saturday."

"Tell me - Oh, the interview's over, by the way; I'm just curious - Tell me where you bought it?"

"Burton's. Thirty quid. I can't afford Savile Row on my salary."

"Burton's. Perhaps I'll go there. It's time I smartened myself up."

Mr Jakes, I thought, you are quite smart enough already. But I didn't say it.

He said: "Thankyou for your time, Pitman. Would you send Mr Porboys in to see me, please?"

I nodded and went out.

I don't mind admitting I was in a cold sweat when I got back to my office. I said to Perboys: "There's a bigwig interviewing everyone in the conference room, and it's your turn." He scurried out. I stood at his window and stared down at the traffic, trying to get a grip on myself.

Tom Grant asked me: "What's it all about?"

"Confidential," I told him. "Not supposed to say. Sorry."

"I know," he said. "Random security check."

I turned to him. "How did you know?"

"I've had one before. They take a file, or a project, or a particular document, and talk to everybody who was ever anything to do with it."

I was beginning to feel better. I said: "I assumed that was just a blind. I thought they must have some genuine suspicion about this file. When he said 'random' I was sure he was lying."

"No, it's a regular thing. You know when it's happening because people start disappearing for interviews and won't say where they've been. It's a joke."

"Yes, it is, really, isn't it," I said, but I wasn't laughing much.

When Perboys came back Tom had to go in - they had both handled the file during my holidays - and one or two people from other offices were interviewed, so by the end of the day the world and his wife knew what was going on, and I had calmed down a little.

At the start I was tetally convinced that they knew, somehow, about what I'd done; but now I'm not sure. Tom confirmed that these random checks were regular

procedure; and Jakes interviewed lots of people as well as me. All the same, he managed to pick on just about every sign I'd left: the two withdrawals of the file, the drugs file, the torn sheets, the extra photocopies, even the new suit I bought with the fucking money! I'm damn glad I found a genuine error on that file; and I'm rather proud of my fast explanation of the two extra photostats. I'd like to feel I've hornswoggled Jakes, but there's no way of knowing what that cross-eyed scruff is thinking.

I think I've probably got away with it, but it'll be a long time before I do anything like this again.

Jakes said he was with security, and Harwood mentioned the Home Office. I've just realised that there is a big security department in the Home Office; but it's usually known by its unofficial name: M.I.5.

29 March

This morning in the post, a brochure for Servowarm central heating. The envelope was postmarked yesterday and bore one stamp. Translation: Barry wanted to meet me this evening.

I thought about it on and off all day. My first inclination was to go, and tell him I didn't want anything more to do with him. Then I wondered if it wouldn't be simpler just to stay at home. Later it occurred to me that he might have a quite straightforward and perfectly safe assignment for me. Finally I decided I wouldn't be breaking any laws by seeing him, and I had nothing to lose.

So, after tea, I told the others I'd see them in the Lamb and Flag later, and drove up to Harrow-on-the-Hill. There was no sign of the blue Daimler when I pulled off the road, but after a moment a figure appeared beside the car and Barry got in.

He said: "Hi, how are you?"

"Not so good. Three days ago M.I.5 interrogated me about the nuclear submarine file."

He was silent and very still for a moment. I couldn't read his expression

because his face was in shadow. Then he said: "Well?"

"Well, yourself! You're the clandestine expert. What does it mean?"

"That depends on precisely what happened. You'd better tell me the details."

So I did. He listened quietly, nodding occasionally, and asking the odd question - he wanted a detailed description of Jakes, for example. I had the impression that every detail was being filed inside that handsome grey head. When I finished there was a pause while the computer clicked and whirred and digested the information. Then the answers came like a printout.

"They don't know it was you - that's certain. They may know there's been a leak, but even that's unlikely. The balance of probability is that it was a routine check."

"Terrific, terrific," I said sarcastically. "Do I get told your reasoning?"

"Of course." His reply was quite mild: I can't rattle him. "If they knew it was you, they would have you tailed. After you parked here, it was four minutes before another vehicle came up the hill. Therefore you're not being tailed, therefore they don't know it's you."

"That's a relief," I said, and this time there was no sarcasm.

"As for the rest of it, it does have the look of a routine check, although you can't ever be sure. If they were convinced there'd been a leak, they would be more interested in people's movements and contacts than in when the file had been handled and why. They would have tried to establish a link between you and my clients, for example. But it seems none of their questioning went in that direction. The only reason I hesitate to be definite is that I don't believe in coincidence."

"Perhaps they suspect but don't know there's been a leak."

"Maybe, but normally they would deal with a suspicion in much the same way they'd deal with hard information."

"Okay. Assuming they do either know or suspect, let's talk about how they got on to it."

"I take it you've told nobody."

"That's right."

"Not your lover, your mother, your priest?"

"No."

"Not ~~xxx~~ ~~xxx~~ Joseph Mulholland?"

"No."

"Then it would have to be my end."

"I'm glad we finally got around to admitting it."

"You've reason to be cross, Tony, but don't imagine that this is any less worrying for me than it is for you." He drummed his fingers on the dashboard, thinking. "I told nobody within my organisation, therefore it has to be the client. The liaison man might have told his managing director, who might possibly know people at the top of your organisation."

"I hope you'll do your best to knock out all these maybes and establish the truth."

"You can be sure there'll be hell to pay at my end."

"I'd be interested to know the result."

"Yeah." He seemed about to leave, then thought better of it. "Look, I came here tonight with another assignment for you. Do you want to know about it?"

"I probably won't do it, but you can try me."

"It's a low-risk thing, not involving secret information. I want you to give me a copy of the Ministry's internal phone book; plus, for every individual in the book about whom you know anything, his job, his personality, and his history. It's worth another three hundred pounds."

I was surprised. "What kind of client would want that information?"

"It's not for a client: it's for me. I keep vast files. Some time in the future, I may need the help of one of your colleagues. I ask everyone who does work for me to provide this kind of thing."

I wondered whether he had picked my name out of his files; then I realised that Joe had introduced us, and dismissed the idea. "Let me think about it, Barry," I said.

"Okay. And we should change our meeting-place. This is too conspicuous. In

future, let's meet ~~at~~ ⁱⁿ the men's clothing/~~department~~ ^{section} of the Army and Navy department store at 1.30."

"If we meet at all. I haven't made up my mind."

"Sure, sure." He took hold of the door handle. "Tony, I want you to know how sorry I am that our relationship has been marred, right at the start, by this piece of bad luck. I'll understand if you decide not to work for me any more; but I do hope you won't make that decision. Goodbye."

He shook my hand and got out of the car.

I stayed there for a while, gazing out at the lights of London spread below me like a Lurex carpet. I found myself weighing two equal but contrary convictions: one, that the sane, sensible and safe course is indisputably/~~that~~ ^{that} of never seeing Barry again; and the other, that I have made sane, sensible and safe decisions all my life, and where has it got me?

When I started the car and headed in the direction of the Lamb and Flag I still had not made up my mind. Nor have I yet.

31 March

It's six o'clock on Sunday afternoon, and I've just got out of bed after a hell of a Saturday night.

It seems a lot more than twenty-three hours ago that I put on my new suede jacket, kissed Elaine goodbye, and got in the car to drive to Chelsea. I feel at least a year older, so much happened last night. As I was totally zonked ~~at~~ ~~last~~ for a good part of the time, I'm having some difficulty recalling exactly what happened when. I must try to sort it all out and put it down in order.

I found her place without difficulty. She's got a big flat in one of those side-streets behind Harrods. I pressed the doorbell and had a fright when Sonja's voice said "Hello?" over my shoulder: it was one of those Entryphone things they have in posh buildings.

"It's Tony," I said into the machine, feeling stupid.

"Come on up - I've opened the door."

Sure enough, the door opened to my touch, and I went up to the top floor. Senja was standing in the entrance to her apartment. She looked nice enough to eat, as usual. Her long dress was pebble-coloured - she seems to go in for these colourless colours - and held up, I presume, by telepathy, since it had no shoulders, no back, and no straps.

Her flat is weird, but nice. It has block floors and lots of thick rugs and giant cushions. I mean, that's all it has: no tables, no three-piece suite, no dining chairs, no conventional furniture at all, unless you count a hi-fi unit in a corner with two speakers three feet tall. There are a few pictures on the walls, but really on the walls: painted on to the plaster. The windows have abstract designs painted on them instead of curtains. (It must be a bit gloomy in the day.) That's the main room, anyway: I didn't see much of the rest of the flat - maybe the bedroom has flowered wallpaper and furniture by G-plan, who knows?

The place was warm, with radiators as well as a log fire in a big old grate. Senja offered to take my jacket, but I kept it on: I didn't pay £90 for it just to leave it in the hall. I sat down on a floor cushion near an ice bucket. Sonja handed me two glasses and asked me to open the champagne.

I said: "Shouldn't we wait for Joe?"

"He sent his apologies. He can't make it."

So it was going to be a twosome. This looked promising. I popped the cork and poured the fizz. She offered me a cigarette from a box. I used to smoke, at college, but I gave it up - without any difficulty, strangely enough - and now I just have an occasional cigar.

So I said: "No, thanks."

"They aren't ordinary cigarettes," she said with a smile.

Now, it so happens that I've never smoked pot. I don't believe it's dangerous - there were a million pot-smokers at college, but I never met a heroin addict. However, those pot-smokers were incredibly boring people. All they could talk about was how everything was "really beautiful". It was like a club I didn't want to join. Last night I felt differently. Sonja belongs to a club I definitely

do want to join. So I took a joint. I drew on it, held the smoke in my lungs in the recommended chic manner, and passed it to her.

The speakers were murmuring something funky, and the log fire felt good. When we'd finished the joint Sonja brought in a plate of food and set it on the floor between us. It was slices of avocado pear wrapped in smoked salmon. I gathered we weren't going to sit down at a table for a conventional dinner party with serviettes, cutlery, and candelabra. We ate with our fingers.

We had more champagne, another joint, and a dish of spicy meatballs. I said: "Delicious. Where did you learn to cook like this?"

"It's a Czech recipe."

I nodded. My thought processes seemed to be slowing down. It was taking me ages to form a sentence. "Do you miss your home?"

"Sometimes." Long pause. "But, you know, I've made a break ... "

I listened to the music for a while. I was hearing the individual instruments very clearly: drums, bass, electric piano ... then a couple more instruments came in and I found I couldn't concentrate on more than two or three lines of melody at a time.

I wrenched my rambling attention back to the food. Another dish had appeared: stuffed vine leaves. The flavour was sensational. I said: "Are you a brilliant cook, or is it just the dope?"

She smiled, and didn't reply. I knew just how she felt. It was fun just to follow your own chains of thought wherever they might lead: actually speaking seemed rather too much effort. My throat got terribly dry, but the smallest sip of champagne quenched my thirst beautifully.

Everything seemed utterly delightful: the food, the wine, the music, the atmosphere, Sonja. At one point we both sat still and silent, gazing into the flames, for what seemed like a very long time. I guess that was the peak of the drug trip.

A burning log fell off the fire on to the wood floor. I sprang up, grabbed the tongs, and put it back. It hadn't even scorched the blocks. I concluded that

the slowness was illusory. It's just the opposite of booze, ^{which makes} ~~that~~ ^{which makes} you think you can perform mechanical tasks well ^{when} ~~but~~ ^{when} you can't.

The log incident seemed to energise us (Sonja jumped up too, but not as fast as me). She brought in another dish: hot baked apples, with the cores removed and replaced by a stuffing of sultanas and other things in brandy.

I said: "Really, I've never had food like this. But eating is such an effort." I got up and changed the record.

She fed me, breaking off bits of apple, dipping them in the stuffing, and putting them in my mouth. It was quite sexy. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to take hold of the top of her dress and tug it gently down to her waist. She giggled pleasantly and continued to feed me. I stared, enchanted, at her beautiful tiny breasts. I was going to touch them - no question - but there didn't seem to be any hurry.

We had more champagne and more food - a chocolate mousses as light and airy as a cloud, strawberries which must have been air-freighted from California, and ripe crumbly Stilton cheese. We ate in an atmosphere of desultory lasciviousness, taking off clothes a little at a time in between courses. There was loads of food but we ate small quantities and never felt bloated. Gradually we got less interested in eating and more interested in sex. When we made love it lasted a long, long time.

I dozed for a while and had weird, fabulous dreams whose details I could remember only vaguely. The whole evening might have been a dream, but when I woke up there was Sonja's bony body naked beside me. She lay flat on her back with her mouth open and her legs apart, as innocent as a baby and somehow all the more sensual for it. I kissed her cunt and she woke up.

She said: "Hello, lover."

That was a nice thing to say.

I still felt a little high, but the slowness had gone and I knew the dope was wearing off. I didn't want to go to bed and waste the good feelings, and I certainly didn't

fancy going home.

"Let's go out," I said.

She smiled. "Just what I was going to say."

We got dressed. It was about 1.30 when we left the flat. I felt perfectly capable of driving, but I didn't trust my sense of competence, so we walked half a mile or so to the King's Road and went into a discotheque. Two hours and a bottle of champagne later we came out, hailed a taxi, and went to a casino in Park Lane where we had more champagne and played roulette. Sonja won, I lost.

It was dawn when we went back to her place. She offered me breakfast, but I didn't need food. So we made love again.

I drove home through ~~xxxx~~ Sunday-morning London, deserted streets and brittle sunshine. I arrived here at the same time as the paper boy. I'd spent all my money, taken illegal drugs, and been unfaithful to my girlfriend; but boy, did I feel good.

1 April

Thinking about it, I wonder where all that money went on Saturday night? Champagne costs the earth in clubs, of course; then we had to pay membership fees as well as entrance money; and taxis; and I suppose I got through a good few tenners in the casino.

Anyway, I'm obviously going to need some more money if I'm to take Sonja out again, so today I brought the Ministry of Defence internal phone book home for Barry, and I've spent this evening going through it and making some notes about the people I know.

I also phoned Sonja from the office while the others were out at lunch. I thanked her for the dinner party.

"I enjoyed it," she said, and it sounded like she meant it.

"How about letting me give you dinner next Saturday? I can't cook, but we could go to a restaurant."

"I'm sorry, I can't manage Saturday," she said.

This threw me. It sounded like a brush-off. It struck me that what had been

an unforgettable experience for me might have been, as far as she was concerned, just another Saturday night.

I just said: "Oh."

There was an awkward pause. She said: "Tony, I really can't make it. Please ask me for another night."

I breathed a sigh of relief and arranged to meet her a week later.

I'll probably take Elaine out this coming Saturday. Why not?

I've never before had two women at the same time.

5 April

Left the stuff for Barry in the toilet at the Lamb and Flag tonight. Take Elaine out tomorrow night, pick up £300 next week, Sonja on Saturday. Things are looking up.

I've been thinking about this diary. I like writing it, but I've put down all this stuff about Barry. If anybody should find it, I'll be done for. But I can't bring myself to burn it. I think I'll find a safer place to hide it. I have somewhere in mind.

1975 DIARY

To Tony from Elaine, with love

1 January

Yes, Elaine gave me another diary for Christmas. Wasn't that a big surprise? This one's bound in leather with gold-leaf lettering on the spine, and it can be locked shut with a little silver key. Very cute, but I wanted an electric shaver.

I'm writing this down ~~mat~~ Dad's place, which is where I put last year's diary when I stopped keeping it. It's been here all this time, in the secret hidey-hole of my youth - the place where I kept illicit sweets and purloined chocolate biscuits until they went mouldy. Over the years my hidey-hole has concealed a book of dirty pictures I found on the pavement at a bus stop; love notes from Gillian MacManners, a prepubescent blonde who worshipped me from the house across the road; the five-pound note I stole from Mr Jackson the history teacher and never spent (I felt so guilty about it that in the end I put the money in a collecting-tin on Poppy Day); a packet of Durex I bought at the barber's when I was fifteen and had no hope on earth of any opportunity to use them; some blasphemous occult books I read, with a great sense of wickedness, during my black magic phase; and, in later years, the odd copy of Playboy or Knave for lonely nights.

Now, however, it contains my 1974 diary, kept for a mere four months which may turn out to have been the most important four months of my life. Reading through it I wince at my blindness, my clumsiness, and my many faux naifs. In some ways, very little has changed - Barry, Joe, Senja and Elaine are still in my life - but my attitudes have altered a lot.

I think I look different, too. Nothing dramatic, maybe. There's no grey in my hair, but I have it cut shorter. The face is much the same: flat nose, sallow cheeks that have to be shaved twice a day, small ears, big grin, stop looking in the mirror, it's vain. I dress better, though I have to be careful not to look flash in the office. For work I wear good suits, well cut but plain and sober. The velvet jackets and silk shirts are for weekends. And I've stopped wearing those high-heeled shoes with platform soles: five foot six inches is a perfectly decent height and I no longer want to be higher.

Yes, Barry is still in my life. About once a month I bring home something for

him: research results, maps and plans of ^{all the} ~~various~~ research stations, pen-portraits of various senior civil servants, anything that comes my way about nuclear submarines and other weaponry. The payments vary from £300 to about £1,000. We rarely meet, and our dead letter box - which used to be the toilet at the Lamb and Flag - has changed half a dozen times. He's dropped the pretence of working for an international mining consortium as a management consultant. There's no doubt he's working for the Russians, though he's never actually said so.

Nothing ever came of the M.I.5 scare, and I'm now quite sure it was a routine check. We never heard any more about the unsightly Mr Jakes. I don't think I really needed to kick the diary habit. I'm going to start again.

3 January

Back home in Kenton. Of course, the other thing that happened during 1974 was that Nixon resigned, thereby bringing to an end American television's longest-running and most boring soap opera.

I've decided I need a secret identity. For a while I spent all the cash I got from Barry, but it's surprisingly hard to get through an average £500 a month when you have to spend it all on disposables, like clothes and entertainment. I mean, if it was legit I could buy a flat or a big car, but I have to conceal my wealth.

Anyway, the tenners have been piling up in my underwear drawer, and tonight I counted the money and it came to £2, 830. I don't know how long the bonanza will last. It could dry up any time. But I can't keep this much money around. Hence the secret identity. I'm going to open a bank account in another name. Let's see: I think I'll be ... Norman Selly.

Selly can use my home address, and if anybody asks he's a former tenant who moved out. Jeremy left us in August, and Pete and Steve are looking for somewhere closer to town, so quite soon there'll be no-one to doubt the story. I'll simply pick up Selly's mail for redirecting to his new address, which only I will know.

So the only problem is a reference for the bank. Who will be Norman Selly's

employer?

I could ask Barry, but he's never given me an address and I'm sure he won't want to. Elaine doesn't know anything about my clandestine life, and I don't plan to tell her yet, if ever. I'd rather not involve innocent parties like Joe Jenkins or Sonja.

I know. Selly can be a freelance commercial artist, and give his landlord as a reference. His landlord, of course, is Tony Pitman.

I think that's rather clever.

7 January

I've pulled quite a good stroke in the office.

It all started with old Porboys, who has become my implacable enemy. It was his internal phone book I gave to Barry back in April. I took it out of his desk one evening when he went home early. I had to tear out the first page, which had written on it "J.C. Porboys, Rm. 403A". Anyway, the old boy noticed its absence first thing the next morning. "Where's my internal phone book?" he snapped.

I ignored him and Tom said: "Dunno."

"I put it in my desk last night, I distinctly remember."

"Perhaps you dropped it in the waste-paper basket by mistake," I said helpfully.

Well, he spent most of the day looking for it. He emptied all his drawers, looked in the filing cabinets, insisted on examining Tom's and my directories to make sure they were ours, and found excuses to visit every other room on our floor to see if he could spot it. He couldn't get another copy from Supplies because the thing is out of print - they're preparing a new edition. He fussed about it for days, and hated having to borrow mine every time he needed a number. I told him he was getting absent-minded in his old age, and of course that was the last straw. He accused me of stealing the book just to infuriate him, and I think he really believes it.

He got his revenge when I was on holiday, by complaining to old Harwood that

my work was in such a mess he couldn't look after it while I was away. Harwood never mentioned it to me, but Tom did. After that I lost any compassion I might have had for the small, weak human being concealed inside the pedantic, self-important Porboys packaging.

About a month before Christmas Harwood called me in and gave me a special job. Each department, he said, had to prepare a forecast of its manpower requirements over the next five years; and he wanted me to do our bit of the forecast. "What extra staff will we need, and when?" was the way he put it. What I did was to show that we needed fewer staff, not more, at least for the next two years. Some of our ^{is} work/~~was~~ quite mechanical and could be done by a part-time bookkeeper. The point is that everyone knows it's Porboys's work which could be done by a bookkeeper, by and large.

If you're going to do this kind of thing in the civil service you have to do it carefully. Harwood was not a bit pleased with me for suggesting that his empire could be reduced. However, I saw that coming and sent a copy of my memo to the department chief, Watkinson, who is Harwood's boss; thereby ensuring that Harwood could not either suppress my findings or pass them off as his own.

So now the obvious thing for them to do is to promote me or Tom, give the extra work to Porboys, and give the vacant desk to a bookkeeper.

I'm marginally senior to Tom, and it so happens that I'm due for a promotion-review about now.

Watkinson spoke to me in the corridor today. "Thankyou for your note, Mr Pitman," he said, referring to my copy memo. "Most interesting. Well done."

My next promotion takes me into a grade with a higher security rating - and access to the black files.

9 January

At lunchtime I went into a busy West End branch of Barclay's Bank and opened an current account in the name of Norman Selly. I said I was a freelance commercial artist with an annual income of £6,000, and I wanted the bank account for my surplus

cash.

"Now, then, sir, how about a reference? People generally give their employer."

"Ah, but I'm self-employed. Will my landlord do?"

"Certainly."

"Anthony Pitman, civil servant, 121 Oakgrove Road, Kenton, Harrow, Middlesex."

For the specimen signature I wrote Selly's name in a beautiful copperplate handwriting I haven't used since the third form.

11 January

When Jeremy moved out last year, we had the choice of getting someone else or paying a little extra each for more space. I left the decision to Pete and Steve, and they opted to pay more. So we've been three for a while.

Pete and Steve moved out today. We rent this place furnished, but you wouldn't think so judging by the amount of stuff they took with them. They hired a Transit van and had to make two trips. They've rented half a house in Clerkenwell.

And left me on my own. Since I hold the lease to this place, I have to pay the full rent whether I have sub-tenants or not. As it happens, I'm in no hurry.

There was chaos all day, then a very dead feeling when they finally left. Elaine came in this evening to keep me company, bless her. I got some beer out of the fridge. She asked me if I'd done anything about replacing Pete and Steve.

"No. They only gave notice a week ago, and I haven't had time. Their rent is paid up for a month, anyway."

"What are you going to do?" she said.

I wiped a trace of beer-froth off her lip with my finger. "Put an advertisement in the paper, I suppose."

"I used the Harrow Observer." Elaine is the leaseholder of the other house, and one of her sub-tenants, Margaret, moved out at the same time as Jeremy - in fact they got married.

That chain of thought led me to say: "Do you hear from Margaret?"

"She's having a baby."

"Poor girl."

That was a dumb thing to say.

Elaine rounded on me. "What do you mean?" she said ^ocrasly.

I backpedalled. "I'm told it hurts."

"She's happily married, with a good home and enough money - it's natural to have children."

"Natural? I didn't think the modern woman believed that Nature placed that obligation upon her."

"How would you know?"

"I read Cosmopolitan."

"There you are, then."

She seemed to think that was conclusive, and I wasn't looking for ways to prolong the discussion. I said: "I'll put an ad in the paper, then."

"I wondered if you'd keep the place to yourself, or something."

"What on earth makes you think I could afford it?" (But it was that "or something" I was puzzling over.)

"You seem to have money enough lately."

Bloody observant, these women.