The Counterlife of Knight Errant Christie McKay

and

The Trials of Philip Roth: Writing as Ordeal and Punishment

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Abstract

The *Counterlife of Knight Errant* Christie McKay is a novel about a man with two lives. Christie McKay is a middle-aged academic who has a self-harming partner he cannot leave. On a sabbatical studying Don Quixote he meets another woman and falls in love. However, instead of leaving his self-harming nemesis, he concocts an absurd fantasy that will allow him to lead a double life and have a relationship with both women at the same time. His attempts to compartmentalize both lives leads to tragedy as the one crashes into the other with dire consequences. The novel was partly inspired by Philip Roth’s notion of ‘the counterlife’, this being the double life that is created in order to make the official one somehow more manageable. Thus the rococo fantasies of a Billy Liar or, more commonly, the prosaic extramarital affair.

The *Trials of Philip Roth: Writing as Ordeal and Punishment* examines the influence of a recurring trope in the writings of Philip Roth which I have called ‘The Trial’. I trace the development of this feature to a negative reaction to Roth’s early work, most notably the *Goodbye Columbus* collection of short stories and the novel *Portnoy’s Complaint*. The thesis examines the changing nature of this ‘trial’ conceit and how it is broadened and developed by Roth in the later works, especially in the so-called American Trilogy series of novels. I argue that the basic structure of the trial involves an individual, almost always a man, unjustly accused of some heinous crime by the presiding arbiters of moral taste. This individual is usually hounded and banished by their particular community. While acknowledging the complex differences between fiction and autobiography, I argue that Roth’s personal experiences of being on trial, in the earliest work for supposedly having ridiculed American suburban Jews, has helped to produce a body of work which feeds on rage and moral indignation and which repeatedly puts the individual up against a censorious community with suffocating concepts of normalcy.
Declaration

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It is a source of regret that my family are no longer around but would like to give special thanks to my mother for instilling in me a love of books from an early age. The words have been a source of constant comfort during difficult times.
The Counterlife of Knight Errant Christie McKay
SOME MEN SAID they were working late, others hid their phones. His lying wasn’t pathological. It wasn’t designed to enhance reality, more subdue or deny it. And besides, he’d had a few drinks. Actually he’d had a few everything. The woman at the bar was conservatively dressed in a short black dress and with proper high heels, as opposed to those unappealing built-up barges that women chugged around in. She was the sort of woman he liked. Her face had maternal warmth coupled with an obviously passionate nature, her nose was sharp and slightly mannish. Brown eyes and a slim and wiry body, lean. She had beautifully defined calves and they couldn’t have bridge abutments or piano supports. He needed delicate tapering. Bronzed, passionate, slightly gypsy. A brunette.

Well, if you were trying to fuck somebody you might as well have the full bill of your own particulars and he’d ticked them off. Toned, he’d ticked. Stunning, he’d ticked. Vivacious. Moves her hands dramatically. Liked the confident way she ordered drinks, pushing in and catching the eyes of bar staff. She would know what she liked in bed and wouldn’t be ashamed to ask. Strong women were the ones who eroticised you. Her body was strong too. Her hips swayed through the thin dress. Pert. There wasn’t a better word. Pert and strong. She could embrace you with those legs, crack you open. You’d empty yourself in great shuddering jerks. She’d laugh and smile and sex would be many things. And now she was here, in a noisy and
crowded Spanish bar that had once been frequented by Valle-Inclán, or so it said on the plaque. Valle-Inclán was a bohemian and so was McKay. Or at least he thought so. They both made up stories and he was making one up even before he had fully processed the encouraging fact about this plenitude of shared being, and when he had finally moved through the crowded noise of the bar he swam in her perfume and felt an almost physical pulse drawing him in. The tumblers had clicked into place. Chemical, it was definitely chemical, at least on his part. He looked at her hands and saw that her arms were toned and muscular. Silver accessories, but not too much. Her fingers, holding the fluted glass were long and slim. He imagined embracing her. He could already see his cock, dancing in her hands as they went back to his hotel. He imagined them having absorbed, if anonymous, hotel fucking. It would be hot and distant like some slow burning star. First, however, he had to get her out of the bar. This would be a simple matter of logistics.

The coke helped and so did the weed and so did the alcohol, but it was a tricky business nevertheless. Like baking. You needed exact portions, in this case marinated over a certain layer of gastric juice. You needed to eat, but not too much, not too little as well. You didn’t want to end up sounding like a gibbon on helium and neither did you want to finish all slow and lugubrious and at the bottom of your glass darkly. You needed a light-souled nonchalance which was difficult to manufacture as you aged and everything became more fraught with the possibility of failure. Nevertheless, and if you won, it felt like you were stealing something back.

‘Christie,’ he said, when they had finally started talking. ‘Christie McKay.’ He was a tall, middle-aged man considered handsome by most. He was also a terrible womaniser. Looking back, he thought it was the books that did it. Or the books that did it in this particular case. The book he was supposed to be writing on Knight-
errantry: Knight-errants in the modern world: from Don Quixote to James Bond...This, plus the fact that he’d just traipsed all over Castilla-La Mancha and filled his head with a lot of crap.

‘Christie, Christie McKay.’ The books and the paper he was supposed to be writing on Don Quixote; the fact that he was in a strange city and he’d never see her again; the fact that the alcohol set a fire in his stomach and the coke exploded neurones in his head. It had all added up to large, expansive sentiments. Sentiments impossible to contain within the standard description that he was a fucking teacher at a piddle-arsed university who was getting old and tired and whose life was running out. Could he still get away with something large and audacious and almost comic? Telling the truth about himself would actually have been a lie. Boring too. He wanted to tell “the truth” in the same way you might if having a condemned man’s last meal. Something forced out of you by danger and hence somehow more real and vital. He would make her feel privileged that this total stranger had shared something private and significant about his life. And that would help with the seduction which, if it occurred, would be the cherry on the cake. It would also stimulate the writing.

‘Christie. Christie McKay.’ It was a strange city and who would ever know? Big audacious lies were far more interesting than the inadequate rouge applied by most men. I am a senior manager at Fuddelfart and doofus...I work for a major...

Women today typically met Hobbesian men. Tired, frightened little twerps exactly like himself who worked themselves to death for organizations that didn’t give a remote bat’s fumet. A significant number of the women still wanted to be swept off their feet but this was impossible for the twerps. These poor, sad, lost males talked on and on about the tectonic imponderables that employed them. They pledged their
loyalty to the tectonic imponderables! They died that way. Dead Peasant Insurance. That’s what they were.

‘Let’s just say I work in security,’ sounded too much like a chirpy little geezer who drove a microwave, peered out from a grill and was little better than an errand boy. A ‘bloke’ trying to be mysterious, to big himself up. It held connotations of yellow, sweat stained underpants, cheap housing and flat feet. Let’s upmarket the whole thing.

The Foreign Office. Intelligence Analyst. Senior Intelligence Analyst sounded better. A real Knight-errant. Intelligence? According to his ex, he didn’t have any. So what did she know? Always sticking her nose where it wasn’t wanted and besides, the beautiful woman who was called Julia was now throwing back her hair and laughing. He’d done that. Laughing at his jokes. Laughing with him not at him, which is always nice. Who said he didn’t have intelligence? From having deliberately bumped her at the bar he was now, and only twenty minutes later, making the case that he was, in fact, a Senior Analyst with the Foreign Office rather than another desiccated sample in a twerp field. Every middle-aged woman in existence had already experienced a line of twerps and you had to be careful that you were not immediately bracketed with them—as he had often been in the past.

Why did he tell her then? She was asking. Because you are special, so special. Wasn’t it meant to be like, secret, duh? She was smiling. She didn’t believe a word of it. He pressed on, completely unruffled. He’d admitted that he was a Spy because she had asked what he did and he’d probably never see her again and they were total strangers. And sometimes, as a keeper of secrets, you felt completely smothered. He had been coming to the end of a very difficult time and several of his closest friends had died. He was lonely and he was tired of lying. He had picked her
out of the crowd because she was the most attractive thing in the room and seemed like a passionate woman. He was also addicted to sex. He would let his guard down and she would let her knickers down and everything would be fine. He smiled. Luckily, she had a sense of humour as well as a fiery character. She wouldn’t be dropping anything, she said, except him into the nearest canal. He smiled again and continued to make her laugh. And the case was going well because somewhere during the proceedings they had moved to a private booth. He was being witty and intriguing, they had ordered another bottle of wine and he was telling her all about the Don Quixote trail. He was doing it in a mixture of English and Spanish and she had turned out to be an English teacher who often visited England in the summer to brush up on her language skills. More in common.

He was averting his eyes from her legs. She liked him. After forty-five you really had to try quite hard \textit{not} to be a slobbery old beast with younger women. He was trying not to look at her breasts. There was nowhere to rest his eyes and now she was bending over the bar. He was a Professor of Creative Writing at a University? No, that was his \textit{cover}. His real job was as he had said. He felt good giving her the Merlin University ‘cover’ story. The one that \textit{wasn’t} really him. His business card said, ‘Education for all,’ and featured a toxic algae bloom or a mushroom cloud depending on how many drinks you had had. The precise drug baking that he had engineered in his body was now paying dividends. She was, at heart, a very conservative girl. All the wild ones usually were.

Why hadn’t he just given her the cover story, she’d asked. Because he’d felt covered by it, too well covered. It was killing him. He’d wanted to throw off the covers, so to speak, and let in a little air. He wouldn’t be throwing any covers off with her, she smiled. He looked at her significantly. He’d needed to tell somebody
the whole truth, he said. She’d caught him when he was vulnerable even though he
didn’t look or sound vulnerable. And she didn’t have to worry because he’d never
see her again. Although by now he knew that he would be seeing her again because
he’d definitely be taking her back to his hotel. He was no paper tiger! In his mind he
had somehow suddenly become a Senior Intelligence Analyst with the Foreign
Office who handed out cards saying, ‘Professor of Creative Writing, Merlin
University.’ It was all part of the cover, the deep cover.

The Foreign Office! In the booth, he put his arms around her and felt all that
important concrete flowing through his veins! Draped urns and flags, military salutes
on the television. The senokot! No, that was a suppository. That thing in London
with the wreaths? The baking fucked your memory that was true, but as the evening
wore on the wailing of a Flamenco singer came to his aid. He could feel Hemingway
and Greene just flowing through; he was in love with his own mystery. And so was
she! He was shot through with clarity and confidence. He made her laugh again. She
felt sorry for his friends. That must be hard, having a job like that. Yes, he said.
Everybody thought they knew what it was like because of the television. Death isn’t
romantic, he added, trying not to sound like Hem. He was now having a full-blown
romantic evening with a stranger. That was rare in your middle years which were all
about boredom and closed off sexual possibilities and younger people whom you
couldn’t stand. However, the magical marinade was working! She had had several
drinks. Possibilities were opening up. They had now been talking for several hours
and it seemed such a shame that the evening had to end. The booth was littered with
bottles and discarded dishes and the bar was almost empty. She didn’t want it to end
either.
They had walked through the streets of Madrid and he had carried her and nearly fallen. That’s not very Spy, she had laughed and by now it was all working so well. He felt like the man who had sold the Eiffel Tower! The odds were stacked against him? Look what Ali had done to George Foreman! They were just two little people out there enjoying themselves against the world. He wasn’t himself and she had met somebody mysterious and funny and in the early hours had returned to his hotel. There followed several hours of frantic fucking which confused her. Was he on drugs? No, he was the Spy who shagged her! She laughed and he smiled mysteriously.

‘You are silly Christie McKay. You are a very silly person.’

Didn’t he know it? Later, the ebullience of the night gave way to the stillness and empty buzz of a featureless room in a cheap hotel. As he lay next to her wrapped in cool sheets he thought with depression about his inevitable return to Merlin. It hadn’t all been a lie, however. He really did have something in common with James Bond and this was the fact that he was bored. Chronically and terrifically bored. Frightened too. Frightened and addicted to sex.
Professor Christopher Archibald McKay was returning home from a sabbatical in Madrid spent writing a paper on Knight-errantry and lost traditions of courtly love. He was a Professor of Creative and Critical Writing who frequently suffered from irritable bowel syndrome. He wasn’t a Spy. He was returning home after having met a person whom he felt was the woman of his dreams. His very own Dulcinea! A woman called Julia Lozano Montoro. A muse! He had stayed in Madrid for six extra weeks and extended his leave. He had also extended his ‘Spy/lie’ until it was now hanging out like a lolloping old tongue by Salvador Dali. He would, eventually, have to tuck it back in, but how? Julia was supposed to have been a fling, instead he had fallen in love with her.

McKay was walking up the high street of the rainy city of Merlin where he worked at the university of the same name: a little league institution that had fallen on hard times. McKay lived in West Merlin, a sort of village in the city, which consisted of fashionable eateries, trendy, unprofitable bookshops, and people engaged in alternative and equally unprofitable pursuits. Having walked three feet from the airport taxi, McKay was already wet and dripping. His umbrella had inverted itself in the Merlin winds and the front wheel of his suitcase had buckled, which meant the thing was now lurching all over the pavement like a Tug in high seas. As he walked along the main street of West Merlin, McKay noticed that
another barber shop had opened. There was also a new pawnbroker, a massage parlour and a cosmetic care clinic with an adjacent herbalist. Presumably the joined up thinking was that the girls who worked in the massage parlour would be given discounts at the clinic, whilst the clients could pick up some gloop from the herbalist which might be rubbed all over should any itching develop. The next door florist would also help to placate a guilty conscience. All in all, a wonderful symbiosis and after passing, ‘Whores to your doors,’ aka ‘The Dream Girl Delivery Service’, McKay very quickly reached his own domicile—located in a narrow side street called Lantern Lane. It was shaded by mature trees which always provided a variegated covering of leaf mould, which he was now passing over, and which had gummed up the remaining wheels on his Case. Better variegated leaf mould, however, than the speckled, foul smelling vomit which was continually pouring from the neighbouring pubs and rookeries. And anyway, he’d pretty much decided that speckled vomit and leaf mould were the least of his worries now that he was going to inform the nemesis of his life, a Filipino woman called Toy Baritua, and a person he had been with for the last eleven years, that it, whatever ‘it’ was, was all over. In his lectures on critical thinking McKay always passionately indoctrinated his students with the belief that there was a solution to every problem and that reason was one of the highest virtues. He taught it, but he no longer believed it. Toy had cut her wrists down to the bone when he had tried to leave before. He could remember the sickening lurch, the late night calls and the panic. If he left her, she would probably kill herself. So the problem was, he couldn’t leave and he couldn’t stay. He was in love with a new person, but he also loved an old one. He was in limbo.

McKay had two people who could help him strategise: Professor Jerry ‘Three Pigs’ Moran and his other best friend, a dyslexic, ex-gangster called Craig McGrath.
McGrath lived in the neighbouring village of Ostrich-on-Cannabis and McKay needed to see him. A friend in need is a friend indeed and not, as McGrath would often insist, a pest. He had to act and he had to act fast. Julia would be visiting him from Spain and they were ultimately going to live together. It wasn’t too soon and it wasn’t silly. These things could happen, even if you were old and fucked. No, especially if you were old and fucked. Love is blind— and deaf as well. And besides, there was no more room for mistakes. Time was running out.
3: Julia

They were in Julia’s favourite Chocolateria in Madrid. Julia and her best friend Carmen Anza. They always visited the place on La Cabalgata de Reyes. The waiters remembered them as little girls.

Julia Montoro had finally met what she called a ‘real man.’ Es todo un hombre! Men in Spain, these days, didn’t know who they were. Their wives bossed them around. They did equal amounts of housework or were obliged, by law, to do so. Many of them had a pathetically browbeaten, manacled expression. Of course you still had the immigrants from South America who engaged in ‘La maté porque era mía’—I killed her because she was mine—horrors, and tried to act like something from a cave, but they were also nothing more than spoilt mama’s boys. Not men at all, and like Spanish men they were all tired: tired after work, tired after childcare and tired in the blood. There was something diabolically different about the person she had met. This man was not going to be swept away by intellect, a great body or a pretty face. It was obvious he’d had many women before and wasn’t about to surrender anything to anybody. Such people had their own, irresistible appeal. Julia was used to the slobbery dog breed of men. Men whom she easily conquered and grew bored with.

‘He’s crazy,’ said her friend Carmen Anza, as the churros arrived. When meeting up for coffee in the city they had pledged to speak in English. Carmen was also an English teacher and the old thing about using the language or losing it was a truism. They lapsed into Spanish whenever words failed them, and Julia had the uneasy feeling that, with regards to Christie, words were increasingly blocking up Carmen’s mouth like stony pebbles. ‘Really crazy,’ the woman spat out. ‘Estás como una
‘Are you alright?’ Carmen asked.

‘Me? I’m fine,’ Julia looked back at Carmen. ‘What do you mean?’

Carmen looked shy. She always looked shy when she had something embarrassing to impart.

‘I mean,’ she continued, ‘some fantasy is berry good for a relationship, but we need to keep a grip no? Carlos Fernando dresses up as a Viking. I know is embarrassing. Well, we call them raids. I get tied to a tree and…’ She made some further remarks about British men and then stopped talking. She could see the way Julia was changing and felt it wiser to be silent.

For her part, Julia was looking at Carmen with a profound sense of disappointment. The woman had a stereotype about British men. The older ones, Carmen supposed, wore bad clothes, drank too much, owned a collection of slovenly habits and were lousy in bed— they had no rhythm. Julia had controlled herself upon receiving this information. She wasn’t going to start screaming before dinner. She smiled sweetly and dipped the churro into the thick, black chocolate. Being a slob was, in a way, part of Christie’s cover. You couldn’t wonder around looking like Daniel Craig or a model from a fashion magazine. Shabby chic, that’s what it was and Carmen had never approved of her choice in men and now that she, Julia, had a real one, as opposed to a person who collected three inch ‘Action’ figures and who taught a silly salsa class for extranjeros, the woman was jealous. Many friends had commented recently on how unhappy Carmen looked, and Julia supposed, deep down, that this was because the fabled sense of Argentinean rhythm did not extend to the bedroom. ‘One squirt and finished,’ was Julia’s sole experience of men from
South America. She had explained why Christie would have to be away and would work odd hours. Carmen seemed unnaturally suspicious. It was just plain and simple jealousy. She looked up at her and tried to reassure, but before she could speak Carmen dropped the dreaded words. ‘You don’t think is possible he has another woman?’ Her friend took a big bite of the churro and looked down at her shoes.

There was a brief silence.

Julia hated the way Spanish people, even the ones who had been teaching and learning English for years, and who should have know better, still made the English verb do all the work. She smiled. ‘It’s possible,’ she corrected, and then hastened to add, in case Carmen’s inadequate English was further strained, ‘And no, I don’t.’ In all her relationships with men she, Julia, had been in charge. She had never, to use a horrible English expression ‘been dumped.’ She had been the dumper and not the dumpee. And in all her bar hopping adventures with Carmen, she had also been the Princess of the pair. Men flocked to her and ignored Carmen. Carmen was tall and gawky, she had large teeth and was older than Julia. When they had been introduced Christie had taught her a wonderful expression. Carmen was, apparently, ‘a little broad about the beam.’ Julia worked out everyday. She knew she had a great body.

Men were always hitting at her, or was that hitting on her? She had forgotten.

‘But couldn’t it…’

‘No it couldn’t,’ Julia said, cutting Carmen off. ‘You just know when you have met the love of your life. Trust me you just know.’ Carmen nodded but was clearly unconvinced. Julia called the waiter and ordered another racion de churros y porras She was thinking about how Christie had confused the words ‘porro’ for joint and ‘porra’ for ‘deep fried bread stick.’ They’d gone to a dodgy part of Chueca and
bought a bag of marijuana. ‘It’s *porro* love,’ she had had to intervene. It was the sort of mistake a person with a job like Christie’s should not have made.

They had finished the churros and moved on. Carmen sank five mojitos at a Cuban bar and things progressed to what Julia could only call a female consciousness lowering tone. ‘Los hombres son unos cerdos,’ or ‘men are such pigs.’ Carmen was unhappy because Julia had recently hedged this to, ‘some men, given the right set of circumstances, can indeed be pigs.’ Carmen was also unhappy with Carlos Fernando. He was often late from the dance class and she had started to smell his underpants. When he returned home he insisted on a shower. This was, he absurdly claimed because he was sweaty. Julia had commiserated but as the evening progressed started to get a nasty, gnawing feeling deep inside. It really wouldn’t be unreasonable to be more suspicious about a man you were planning to spend the rest of your life with.

She tried to reassure Carmen and Carmen tried to nod. This was difficult because her face was on the table. Carmen was more of a weekend alcoholic. Julia smiled and picked up the face that was threatening to drown in the pool of beer in the growing vortex of the table. For her part, Carmen was vaguely aware that Julia had said she was getting married. This didn’t really impress her but she still hoped that she would play a central part in the proceedings.
4: Confession

**T**HEY WERE LOOKING at him with familiar, incredulous stares. McGrath was wearing his usual paint-splattered grey jumper, having just redecorated one of his houses and Three Pigs, who was back from the University, was in glorious academic corduroy. They were in McKay’s kitchen, which was cluttered with notes for the new lecture series on Don Quixote. Three Pigs was shaking his head and McKay knew the man was going to start in on a familiar litany.

‘Philip Messbell, unemployed air traffic controller,’ The Pigs said. ‘A man who brought down a plane, was depressed, and had to medicate through sex. A person who never, in fact, existed.’

‘Robert Ryan,’ chipped in McGrath. ‘Ex-fighter pilot delivering Duffle Coats to Kurdish refugees.’

‘I’ve often wondered,’ continued The Pigs, ‘why you never tried to pass as Barack Obama. I mean why not black your face? Why not try to pass as the 44th President of the United States?’

‘The Urban Inuit Movement,’ said McGrath. ‘That was really cruel. Firstly said he was a billionaire, like in that sex book for women, and much later “confessed” that he didn’t really have any money and was part of the Urban Inuit Movement. People who lived their values. You even made an igloo out of hubcaps in the New Forest!’

McKay’s internet dates. This was different. This wasn’t the same. In the past he’d sometimes been what he called ‘economical’ with the truth. ‘Bankrupt,’ McGrath had replied. ‘You mean bankrupt with the truth.’
‘Point is,’ McKay now said and was immediately interrupted by McGrath.

‘Point is she’s leaving on a jet plane. From Spain. Point is she gave up her fucking job. Point is you are still involved with Fu Manchu’s daughter from hell and haven’t told her a thing!’

McKay didn’t always appreciate McGrath’s ‘telling-it-like-it-was’, fierce philosophy of life. He’d met the man seven years ago when he was researching a gangster character for a novel he was still writing. He’d got the contact from a Detective Inspector at a police college connected to his old university. He didn’t suspect, at the time, that he’d end up renting a house from the man. He flattered himself that their relationship mirrored the one enjoyed by the sociologist Laurie Taylor and the master criminal John McVicar, but he wasn’t always sure who was in the ascendancy.

He’d known Jerry ‘Three Pigs’ Moran, so called because he had a girlfriend from the Philippines who owned three pigs, for nearly twenty years. The Pigs was a Professor of Business Studies, not a subject that McKay, from a Humanities background, granted much credence. Unlike McGrath who was huge, The Pigs was a stubby homunculus with a crab back from lifting too many weights and thick legs from his days as a champion hill runner. McGrath was a ruddy-faced alcoholic with a greying, walrus moustache and a vast, pendulous gut. The crab and the walrus: his two best friends.

‘So let me get this right,’ said The Pigs, squaring up to McKay. ‘You told this Julia that you were a fucking Spy so that if you ever need to see Toy in an emergency, or she cuts herself, you could rush out of your new house, which you’ll be sharing with this Julia, and go over and see Toy, who’ll live just down the road? And the golden lie, that will allow you never to explain, is that you were on some
kind of mission highly improbable? And so this Julia won’t ask any questions? Is that the ‘thinking’ we’re looking at here?’

‘Pretty much,’ admitted McKay. ‘I was drunk at the time.’ He was aware that drunkenness was a symptom and not an absolute cause. He’d often levelled this one at McGrath.

‘I’m saying nothing,’ said The Pigs, whose expression said it all. ‘And only the other day,’ so the man was saying something after all, ‘you were telling this one that he needed to understand the difference between fiction and reality and a lot of other crap about how his character, which is based on him, isn’t actually him. I think you’ve lost the plot. In fact, I’m not sure you ever had one.’

McKay didn’t let this remark overtly bother him. His Agent had been saying the same thing for years. What did he know? The Pigs pushed past McKay and left the house, ‘I’ll see you later,’ he said. ‘I can’t deal with this right now.’

McKay had expected this kind of reaction and so wasn’t distracted. They heard the man close the door to the house and McGrath turned on the kitchen extractor and passed McKay a weed. McKay accepted and remembered how they’d first met. The ex, reformed gangster, had bought a farm in the tiny village of Little Snooting. The village had had ambitions to be a northern version of Bourton-on-the-Water. McGrath had quickly started a policy of farm diversification which involved seventy ostriches and a hundred metre polytunnel, stuffed with cannabis plants. Everything had been fine until the electric fence containing the birds suffered an outage and the creatures had pecked their way through the sheeting and eaten all the plants. The amorous Kantling behaviour of a stoned male ostrich was, according to McGrath, a sight to behold. McGrath went briefly to prison and the local media renamed Little Snooting, ‘Ostrich-On-Cannabis.’ The television people then erected a wooden bird
with bulging eyes and crazy red, painted veins and placed it at the entrance to the village. ‘There is one thing I learned from all that,’ McGrath had said later, ‘and that’s the uselessness of polytunnels. Always use clip lock shipping crates. Air tight, vermin proof and you can bury them under the ground.’ McGrath still lived in Little Snooting with his wife and two sons. Nobody spoke to them.

‘You have to expect that kind of reaction,’ he now said to McKay, ‘pathological lying tends to have that effect on people. Trust me, I know.’

‘So what am I going to do?’ asked McKay who was momentarily glad that he could count, amongst his friends, a load of criminals whose code of honour in the Merlin underworld was expressed by the maxim, ‘Fuck off those who fuck off you. Look after those who look after you.’

If it had been a bunch of nice middle-class people, the air, McKay was sure, would have had a distinctly chilly edge, with the cold fronted wafts of judgement piling up against him. He was glad that he had a load of scumbag friends and felt a certain sentimental warmth and pride flow through his body. He was just worried that McGrath might one day say something like, ‘And now I want you to do me a favour.’ That would be too much like The Godfather and boundaries, snobby and elitist ones, had to be maintained. McGrath might be a multi-millionaire, permanently retired and living the good life in a pastoral paradise, but he was still, at the end of the day, a labourer who had somehow hit the motherlode. McKay was a professor and that had to count for something. He pushed down the fact that his job at Merlin now thoroughly depressed him, reminding him of his first ever job at Dalethorpe’s Pork Pies. Being a professor and a published novelist had to count for something.

He just didn’t know what anymore.
They moved out of the house and McKay thought about Julia. McGrath made the comment that McKay had ‘led her up the garden path,’ which was more untruth. It wasn’t the garden path they’d traversed, more like Bwindi Impenetrable Forest.
SHE WAS A SMALL, olive-skinned Filipino. She was thirty-five. She looked fifteen. As he entered the flat in the leafy cul-de-sac where she lived, she said, ‘You like living alone. You don’t want to be with me anymore!’ He didn’t respond, since she was stating the obvious. He was also thinking of orange groves in the Basque Country and hotel rooms in Madrid. He’d had to park a good distance away from where Toy lived and the clouds had dumped all over him. He hadn’t lived with her for ages and he still helped her out. She was on a low income, working in a reprographics room in a school. He felt it only fair. He felt the lies he told were also fair since they simply represented his pathetic attempts to live. And yet certain types of people could get away with untruths. They had ‘a gift for inaccurate précis,’ they were ‘incorrigible rogues.’ He was just a liar.

‘Do you want something to eat?’ she was looking at him. ‘How come you’re so late? Why was your phone off?’

‘I went on a Retreat. You know the one I told you about?’ A retreat to Madrid. I’ve met another woman! I’m in love with somebody else! Toy was giving him her best ‘knowing’ smirk.

‘You mean you went to see some whores Christie? You were shagging your stinking whores!’ They had lived together in the red light district of Dubai for six years. It had taken its toll.

‘I told you before,’ he finally responded, sitting down. ‘I don’t have a horse. And if I did, I’d be sure to wash it.’ She needed work on pronunciation.

‘You’d fuck it too!’ she retorted. ‘If it had a skirt and heels.’
He changed the subject, picking up a copy of a celebrity magazine. Toy was obsessed with all that.

‘Did your brother crucify himself this year?’ He was looking at the crosses on the walls. The strange thing was that she hardly ever went to church.

‘Have you seen the latest vampire film?’ he continued. ‘It’s with that bloke you like.’

‘Fuck off,’ she replied.

She knew him better than anybody and there was intimacy, of an unfortunate kind, in this. A post-intimacy that was the fag end of a long, co-dependent, complicated relationship. He noticed that she’d lost weight. She’d been going to an aerobics class and had started salsa lessons. He sat down on the sofa and stared at the huge Plasma. Since they had split up she had increased the hours she spent goggle eyed in front of it. He was glad that she’d taken up the dance classes. She seemed to be enjoying them and was becoming increasingly confident, which was good. The television was fixed, as it always was, on a talent show. The amount of crap he’d watched because of her. He read Dostoevsky while she flipped through the Argos Catalogue, and when friends asked what they had in common, he’d stated that ‘having things in common’ was not important and that there was, in fact an enviable synthesis when people had nothing in common. He blamed her for the fact that he now found the Argos catalogue more interesting than Dostoevsky. He was a novelist for God’s sake. This was not supposed to happen.

‘So where were you? What happened?’ She was sitting down next to him. She wasn’t going to let it go. Looking around the flat he was aware of how little there was of Toy. The shelves contained his old books and DVDs; the walls were plastered in his prints from the Middle East. There was a wooden caribou with a conical hatted
figure and above this, a tiny, die cast jeepney. Add to this some family photos and fridge magnets and that was all she’d got. She’d accused him of even taking the cats away, although it was on her suggestion, because she’d said she couldn’t afford them anymore. He felt that his personality had eclipsed hers. More guilt.

‘I told you,’ he now said, ‘the Retreat took all week.’

‘Retreat? You mean a ‘treat’ Christie. You mean you gave yourself a treat and didn’t take me.’

He didn’t know why he felt sorry for her. She was from the country that had produced Lapu Lapu, the Chief who had cut off Magellen’s head. To think people bought that Madame Butterfly crap!

‘It wasn’t the sort of thing you’d like,’ he hated the sounds he had to make. ‘We meditated and chanted. We drank a clear soup.’

‘Oh bullshit,’ she laughed. ‘You look like you’ve put on weight. You look like one of those fat rabbits on your campus. I can’t believe you were even there.’

‘It’s up to you’, he said, opening a newspaper, ‘but I was.’

‘Where is your phone?’ She was trying to search him. He controlled his anger.

‘You have hidden your phone. I just checked your coat. I’m going to check. I’m going to ring them up and find out. What was the name of the place?’

Five minutes in the flat and she had already gone through his pockets. He’d left the phone in the car. He gave her the name of the Buddhist Retreat that he’d researched the previous week.

‘You have no business searching for my phone’, he said, ‘and you certainly are not allowed to look at it.’

She made a child’s noise and rolled her eyes.
‘Come on, why don’t you just admit you were out fucking some bitch and you turned your phone off for the whole weekend? I know you Christie,’ she smiled.

‘And now that bitch has gone back to China, you can come over and see me.’

There were a lot of Chinese students at Merlin, Toy thought he was seeing one. It would be the worst possible insult if she found out he was actually seeing an older woman. He decided to change tack.

‘Congratulations on passing your Citizenship Exam. You have to admit, I helped you there.’

‘Pah! You didn’t even know how many members were in the Welsh Assembly! It was multiple choice. I asked you how many, you didn’t know. You didn’t even know there was a Welsh Assembly. Some citizen you are! I asked and you said something about singing.’

‘That’s not true.’ He felt compelled to defend himself. The conversations with Toy were always ridiculous. He only wrote them down to check that he hadn’t imagined them.

‘I knew about the Welsh Assembly, it’s just the other stuff I fell down on.’

‘You did badly on the test! You a university professor and you did badly. How fair is it for the rest of us?’

‘Well it’s not fair,’ he admitted. ‘So when is the interview?’

‘A month,’ she replied. ‘I have all the documents inside my wallet. Gas bills with our names on. A copy of the rental contract with our names on. A copy of everything with our names on. All you have to do is pretend we are still in a meaningful relationship. Can you do that for me you think?’

He sighed. ‘Of course. I’m sure everything will work out.’
She gave him a look, as if there was still a very remote possibility that it would. ‘I made some Adobo,’ she said, ‘but when you were late I threw it in the garbage. It’s your fault. You made me do it.’

He didn’t think of the millions of things he had apparently ‘made’ Toy do. They would practise the guff they were going to give the immigration people and then he would watch TV and wait for her to sleep. When she was asleep he would sneak out to the car and ring Julia in Spain. He would tell her he had gone on a Retreat. He would use the same excuse. He would tell her that the people in the Retreat didn’t allow outside phone calls and that he had been especially brave, sneaking out in the middle of the night, and on such a windswept night, to make one. He was now hoping that Toy’s interview would go well, and once she received permanent leave to remain in the UK they could start the process of properly breaking up. He could then move away with Julia. At least that was the plan.
6: Yurt

Her first time to see him in Britain. He had booked them into a luxury Yurt in the middle of the Scottish Highlands; perhaps it was taking things too far. Toy wasn’t some airborne pathogen. He’d figured, however, that Julia would need a gentle introduction to life in Britain. A Yurt in the middle of nowhere and with a roaring log fire seemed ideal. On the way up he’d worried that the Yurt would really be a Yurt, uncomfortable and with a few stinking skins and freezing cold into the bargain. Luckily, however, it had a fire, was wall insulated and possessed a mini-bar: ‘mini’ meaning small, ‘bar’ meaning bar and not some ugly, chugging tub. The price had been worth it. He was now standing up, naked, covered with skins. More Conan than 007. They’d only been there for a single day and she was already starting to ask more and more questions about the damned ‘job.’

‘And I told you,’ he continued, nearly tripping over the sheepskin and feeling more ridiculous all the time, ‘My work is Top Secret. You can’t just reveal it. You might be endangering my life.’ That much was true, if Toy ever found out. ‘You might be endangering other peoples’ lives. Christ why didn’t you think?’ She had told her family.

‘I know, I know. I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.’ She was anguished. ‘It was only my sister. Do you remember? It was the weekend of the leak?’ He remembered and tried not to. He felt a sinking feeling of shame. Ah yes, the weekend of the leak. ‘You know about leaks?’ he asked. He gave her the significant look. It was something they’d perfected.
‘Yes, yes,’ she replied, becoming impatient. ‘I know about the ceiling and the water and the leaks. I know about the job of the plumber. You’ve always told me the truth and I lied to you. I feel terrible.’ Jesus. *The Plumber, the Leaks and the Ceiling, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.* He’d had to talk to Toy on his mobile while Julia had been standing right next to him. A plumber, he’d later told her, was somebody who plugged intelligence leaks. The ceiling was a higher echelon within ‘the organization,’ and raw intelligence had been dripping onto ‘the floor’ from ‘the ceiling.’

‘We need to talk,’ she now said. ‘We need to communicate. We need to be open with each other. I’d like to meet some of your friends.’ He felt shocked. She was turning into a Spy fucking groupie! How many did she want to meet? What the hell was wrong with her? Why did she insist on making things so complicated? What would Sean do? How about Rodger? Show some resilience for a start.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘You can meet them anytime you want.’

‘When?’ she asked.

‘Soon,’ he replied, refilling her glass. ‘Very soon.’

She was happy again. She went on to tell him that they could have a life together in Spain. That they’d put the past behind them. They’d spend some time in England and then move on. A firm foundation was everything. Her ex never understood the importance of a firm foundation. Her ex went around with his head in the clouds. He would later repeat this remark to Jerry Three Pigs. ‘With his head in the clouds and not up his ass,’ the fool had said. ‘That’s just Geography.’

And there was truth in that. He had to remember that he *wasn’t* a Spy, but a greying and portly Professor of Creative Writing who was, at least from a layman’s perspective, cheating on his partner with his mistress. Except he wasn’t really *with*
Toy anymore, even if he couldn’t stop seeing her, even if he felt it impossible to push her away. It was complicated. He pushed the confusion back and conjured up sardonic Rodger saying, ‘something’s come up again’ while pointing to the tented bed sheet. He thought of Julia in her purple lacy underwear. Yes, okay, he was a lying shit. This didn’t alter the fact that she’d betrayed him. She had informed her sister that he was a Spy, and even though he technically wasn’t, this was a betrayal. Could you really trust a person like that? ‘The role is playing you! Yer not playing the role! Not anymore.’ What the fuck did Three pigs know?

‘Why do you have two mobile phones?’ She was now frying eggs and singing a happy song. Another wheel fell off his wagon. ‘And what are all these pills in your briefcase? I was looking for the keys to the car; to bring in that chorizo I bought from Spain.’

Pills, shit! She was turning into Inspector Clouseau! He was James Bond. He was Rodger the dodger. He wasn’t some disgusting old invalid managing his cholesterol and blood pressure with pills!

‘You didn’t touch the red ones or the blue?’ He had to look serious. He had to do serious. ‘You know if we go on a Mission there is the danger of capture?’ He let his voice trail off sadly. Had he really just said that?

Sean didn’t do dick pills and neither did Rodge.

‘I don’t need them,’ he continued. ‘They’re good just in case something comes up.’

‘And what is going to come up?’

‘Nothing. Nothing without those little bastards! Especially after all those drinks. We’d better keep them all the same.’
‘I thought you’d be more careful,’ she said. ‘I mean aren’t you supposed to be famous for meticulous attention to detail and planning? Why is it you can never find anything?’

Was she on to him, was she taking the piss? Didn’t Spies do bloody socks?

‘I’m only human. I fuck up like everybody else.’ He did his best to make ‘fucking up’ a virtuous affliction.

‘I see,’ she said, and clearly didn’t. He was sure she’d bring it up later. Probably as they were about to have sex. When women felt they were on to something, they were like ticks on a hound. They burrowed and wouldn’t let go.

They ate the breakfast she had made and he swallowed a cold glass of horshata. She was looking at him and saying that she, too, had a secret to impart. A big secret. The biggest of her life! Was he ready? She looked nervous. She had been building up to it. She sat down. He swallowed hard. He knew what was coming. She had made a tent with her hands and had placed her chin on top of her thumbs. Her facial expression said, ‘Here goes!’ Her nose was wrinkly and she had cocked her head to one side. It was a gesture that always aroused him, just like the way she sneered when something offended her. He could feel himself falling. She was going to tell him she had discovered that the whole relationship was built exclusively on what she said she hated most i.e. ‘lies and bullshit.’ She was going to tell him that everything was over. She was going to tell him that he was a complete and utter bastard and that she knew about Toy. He could feel a hole in the floor. He could feel himself becoming a person shaped hole in the world. Flush after use. This was it. The day of execution and the trial hadn’t even begun.

‘I’m pregnant,’ she said, smiling. She had announced it quietly. It was a simple, untrammelled smile. He removed his hands from the underside of the kitchen chair
where they’d been quietly sweating. The Stasi had collected sweat from drain pools
under chairs.

‘Pregnant,’ he smiled. The smile was stamped on his face.

‘I’m so happy,’ she said, moving across the table and giving him a hug. ‘It’s
something I’ve always wanted, especially now I’m with a person whom I can trust
and love.’

She kissed him. She asked him how he felt and he answered that he was very
happy. His hands, however, had gone back to gripping the chair. He wasn’t thinking
about what Rodger or Sean would do. They didn’t do children. They wouldn’t know.
An image from his favourite ‘Road Runner’ cartoon was evolving. How when the
coyote crashed into anything, he then froze and shattered. A single front tooth would
drop out of his mouth as he happily disintegrated into a little pile of chips on the
floor. This news would mean really leaving Toy. This news would mean really
choosing. This would mean no more bullshit. No more bullshit. My God! He didn’t
know what it might mean to Toy. All he knew was that she must never find out.
She’d wanted a child for so long and now he was having one with another woman.
He couldn’t think, he couldn’t breathe. This was all supposed to be so many things.
How should he react? What should he be feeling? Thoughts darted across his brain
like hares and he couldn’t seem to capture them. He thought some more of the lacy
underwear. Focus on that. Focus on that. Everything else will fall into place.

They spent the rest of their weekend in bed, but he was almost glad when he
waved her back onto the plane. ‘See you very soon darling,’ she said, walking
towards her gate.
Christopher Archibald McKay worried about the way he’d represented himself to Julia Montoro. He had given the impression that he was, to use a phrase much used by McGrath, a ‘man who can.’ This was in keeping with the ersatz technical abilities he supposed you needed as a Spy. The fact was, however, that he was hopeless when it came to doing anything around the house and certainly wouldn’t have been able to save the human race from evil genius intent on world domination. Pipes froze and cracked in McKay’s house; a fence at the back of his garden, and one that he’d personally erected, went slack in great lolling hoops; plugs sparked and zapped, radiators went unbled; deferential wallpapers started to slowly slide and bow. And once, when he’d borrowed some plumbers’ rods, he’d actually turned them anti-clockwise. The whole garden had ended up looking like a miniature Battle of the Somme.

At school, McKay had failed to make a chair in woodwork. In metalwork, he’d nearly poked out the eye of his teacher. He supposed that his technical and mechanical wizardry went so far as being able to change the bag in the Hoover and fix a bicycle when it had a puncture. ‘Just don’t,’ McGrath always said, and when McKay was watching him work, ‘touch anything.’

So all of this then, wasn’t, strictly speaking, congruent with the impressions he’d given Julia Montoro. A master Spy who could put the universe together and operate all manner of gadgetry. A person whom you might trust with small repair jobs. And to be fair to Julia, she hadn’t been completely credulous; years of writing short stories and novels had given McKay a certain felicity when it came to forms of, well, creative embellishment. He would have made a great Spy, or so he thought.
McGrath, on the other hand, could do everything except read. A Fixer who was currently exploiting McKay’s lack of DIY as a source of cheap labour. ‘I teach you so you don’t show yourself up,’ seemed to be the idea. The man was currently helping McKay settle into his new accommodation. He was going to move further away from Toy and Lantern Lane, but not too far. They were currently decorating the bedrooms and tidying up. ‘It’s good practise,’ McGrath now said and pointed to a grotty looking wardrobe. ‘Get you used to what I’ve had to do half my life. Do some real work for a change instead of all that poncing about at university?’

McKay eyed the man suspiciously. It was the phrase ‘real,’ as in ‘real’ work, that was so pre-theoretical. McGrath was a simple essentialist who had very little understanding of the complex nature of the real. Nevertheless, he played along.

‘What am I going to learn from this?’ he asked. ‘What are the learning outcomes of this task?’

‘Trust me,’ said McGrath, ‘open the door to the wardrobe and you’ll see.’

McKay did as he was told. It was a really large wardrobe and he peered inside. There seemed to be a lot of glue, splattered against the back wall and a small, needless hole, drilled at eye level in the front. ‘What’s all this?’ he asked. ‘Is the wardrobe leaking resin or something?’

‘Yeah, that’s it,’ McGrath was grinning. ‘Get and clean it will you?’

McKay looked at the man.

‘Why are you grinning? Why don’t you clean it?’

And then he got it.

‘That’s disgusting,’ he said, immediately stepping outside the wardrobe. ‘That’s perverse. It’s probably some kind of biohazard. You should burn it.’

‘Thought you’d appreciate it. You being a writer and all.’
‘He must have stood inside watching the bed,’ said McKay, appalled.

‘That’s right,’ said McGrath. ‘Watching and jerking off. Tenants eh?’

‘Watching what I wonder?’

‘We’ll never know,’ replied McGrath, as if pondering one of the deeper mysteries of the universe. ‘So you won’t, I take it, be needing the wardrobe in this little love nest I am preparing? A love nest, I hasten to add, at considerable discount, relative to your average four bed house. And which you are going to stay in, as agreed, for six months until you ship out away from Toy and go to Spain or Canada where you’ll all live happily ever after? And after you’ve finished your book on whatever it is you’re meant to be writing. Is that the agreement as I understand it?’ The man smiled.

McKay wasn’t really listening. The thing about hanging around with McGrath was that, despite being an illiterate dropout, the man gave him ideas. And he’d just had a corker: a fairy tale for adults based on the work of C.S. Lewis, ‘The Cuckold, the Bitch and the Wardrobe,’ would be unrecognizable in the way it developed. All of the action would take place inside a small wardrobe, inside a small bedroom.

Well, he reconsidered. It could work.

The topic segued onto talk on sex and McGrath made the same tired observation that he could never understand how his wife Mary, a former academic whom the man called ‘The Three Degrees,’ had chosen a person ‘like him,’ over a person ‘like McKay.’ Could the smarty pants, the man was looking at McKay, explain that one?

‘No,’ McKay now replied. ‘Although there is probably a virus, virtually unknown, that attacks the brain and removes…’

‘Whatever,’ said McGrath. ‘You may have it up here,’ the man pointed to his head, ‘but I’ve got it down here,’ he pointed to his groin.

‘I’m sure,’ said McKay, yawning.
‘Can I ask why you chose a place twenty minutes walk away from Toy. Could you not, I wonder, have chosen a more suitable spot on the other side of the world?’

‘I could not,’ said McKay.

‘Are you a Mormon, they have two don’t they, or just a moron?’

‘Probably both,’ admitted McKay.

‘I’ve told you a million times,’ said McGrath. ‘She’ll never kill herself. It’s all a myth.’

‘So you keep saying. Have you contacted that actor just in case?’

‘Yes,’ said McGrath

‘And he’ll be able to convince Julia that I am what I say I am, if she ever asks? And that I’m taking early retirement and so,’ he looked at McGrath, ‘and so I don’t have to keep this shit up beyond the six months it takes to finish my work and break up with Toy.’

‘You don’t have to keep anything up,’ replied McGrath. ‘It’s “keeping things up” that continually fucks you! You could simply tell the truth! Trust me, better in the long run.’

McKay didn’t ponder the irony of an ex-con lecturing him on truth.

‘Look,’ he shot back. ‘If Toy needs me, I’ll need an excuse to leave. Now I have an explanation that doesn’t require any other explanation. Top Secret! Burn after reading! The world needs me! That’s the genius of it. Bit better than working late at the office. Not that you’d give me any credit!’

‘The world needs you,’ smiled McGrath, looking at an encrusted paintbrush.

‘How much did you drink last night?’ The best form of defence was attack.

‘Within limits,’ McGrath responded primly. ‘Did you fuck anything recently? Are you being faithful to this girl?’
‘You’ll remember,’ McKay warned, ‘that my addiction leads to a healthy glow whilst yours can only produce canker and despair. The red faced fellow with the healthy glow is not the alcoholic old bean, but the sex addict.’

‘It’s probably the syphilis,’ countered McGrath, ‘that explains the healthy glow.’ McKay ignored this and asked how long it would take them to do the manly jobs.

‘By myself,’ McGrath mused, ‘several hours. With you helping? At least a week. Better get cracking shall we?’

‘Sure,’ said McKay and attempted a smile. He cranked up the matey discourse, boys sweating together on manly tasks and so on. Then he paused.

‘There’s just one other little thing I should tell you. I suppose I should have mentioned it earlier. It doesn’t really alter anything but I suppose I should have said something earlier.’

‘What?’ said McGrath, ripping open a packet of laminate flooring. McKay paused. He had trouble meeting the man’s eyes.

‘Julia’s pregnant.’
Work was almost a relief. McKay worked in the Botril Building at the University of Merlin. It had been reclad, but not properly refurbished. Its roof had a large number of concrete owls, placed there to keep away the pigeons. Perched on top of the owls were the pigeons that came from miles around just to sit on top of the owls and streak everything with guano. His office inside the Botril was a dimly lit affair which had inspired the soubriquet, ‘The Ghastly Hole.’ The Ghastly Hole had radiators that couldn’t be properly turned off in the summer and which, while giving off very little heat in the winter, took the skin off your hands if you tried to touch them in the summer.

McKay’s office looked out on a wall, a dull, grassy bank, and the arse end of an air conditioning unit. A photocopier could be found at the end of the corridor. It was sad and reminded him of an old horse just waiting to be taken out and shot. It left streaky marks on the clean alpine sides of the A4. He’d told McGrath about it once.

‘You’re transferring,’ was the pre-theoretical response.

Today he was sitting in one chair and had a student with him who was sitting in another. Donald was completing his final year of a BA in Literature and Creative Writing and had skin which reminded McKay of a Fly Agaric mushroom.

‘I just don’t know,’ Donald was now saying. ‘What I’m going to do with it.’ He was talking about his BA, and although ‘I don’t either’ would have been an honest response, McKay failed to give it. Neither did it seem politic to offer succour by pointing out that sixty-three Chinese postgraduates, who had recently completed the prestigious Merlin MBA, were now doing unpaid ‘Internships’ at the nationwide series of thrift shops which had supplied the owls.
Yes indeed, the Merlin University brand, with its collection of poop-streaked 1970s Fujiyamas, its stuffed student halls and its general haemorrhaging of staff was quickly losing its lustre. And now he was face to face with Goth-clad, fly agaric Donald and his novel, ‘The Sixteen Trials of Aragorn the Horse Lord.’

McKay briefly wished that he too was a bird, taking a sauna on the top of the building and just cooing as all the heat flew out. The only thing he really needed was to hear Julia’s voice and dream of orange groves and Spain and a lot of other, probably juvenile stuff.

‘Yes, well,’ he now said. ‘That all seems to be in order.’ Although Donald was writing in a genre he didn’t really like, he had to admit the boy had talent, even if he did pick his nose and surreptitiously wipe it under the chair. ‘I’ll see you again. Same time, same place, same face.’ He smiled and Donald stood up to leave. The boy was a vast, sodden clump. It was forever raining in Merlin.

When he heard the door close, McKay sniffed the other nostril. The Vicks Inhaler was a useful conceit. You could do as much marching powder right under other peoples’ noses and they never said anything. Recently the Vicks had been the only thing getting him through the meetings. _Terrible cold._ Ten minutes later and the phone finally rang.

‘Hi love. It’s me. How are you?’

Finally, it was Julia. His mood lifted. He’d never know if it was her or the Inhaler. It hardly mattered.

‘I’m really looking forward to seeing you again,’ he heard himself gushing. ‘I really love and miss you darling.’ He permitted himself a little reverie about the sex they had had in the Yurt. He thought about the lacy underwear. He tried not to think about all the other stuff.
‘Don’t worry,’ he heard himself continue, ‘everything is fine.’ The Inhaler was truly wonderful. They would be living within walking distance of his crazy ex-girlfriend. It hardly mattered. It was a quick call. She just wanted to say that she missed him. She was having a check-up today. Everything was well. They would speak soon.

He let her voice linger. Looking out the window and seeing the usual nothing he felt troubled. Julia made him feel like a Bowerbird when she said, ‘Is everything ready?’ The feeling that she was coming in to land wasn’t entirely agreeable.

When McKay replaced the phone, it immediately rang again.

‘Were you on the phone to your girlfriend?’ Toy.

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘I was as a matter of fact. How are you?’ It was great to talk to her too.

‘Alright,’ she replied. ‘You sound weird. Feeling guilty for having left me? I have everything ready for the interview. Are we all prepared?’

‘We are.’ Why had they rang at the same time? That was inauspicious but it hardly mattered. McKay told her not to worry. He told her it was purely a procedural thing. When he had finished reassuring he put the phone down with a flourish. It was great having all the instruments of modern communication sitting on a desk in front of you. The phone and a computer and a Kindle. The way the chair swivelled. It was fun swivelling in the chair. You could do anything if you tried, be anybody. All you needed was a chair and a computer and a Kindle.

After a round of paper shuffling he finally managed to walk out of the building and catch up with The Pigs in the Senior Common Room. This was a late 70s refurbished block of murderous concrete that had probably been the inspiration for a level in a computer game. It scarcely mattered and was, in its own way, lovely.
As he entered the room he noticed a clipboard with attached paper and a column for suggested improvements. Everybody complained about the food. ‘The custard dribbles but doesn’t run,’ he wrote with a flourish. ‘It’s like an old man with a prostate problem.’ That was worthy of Yeats! Or Larkin! He should send it off.

‘The Sixteen Trials of Aragorn the Horse Lord,’ said Jerry, sitting at an empty table and acknowledging McKay as he approached. ‘Nothing to my trials. You know what ‘The Hatter’ wants me to do?’

‘The Hatter’ was ‘The Mad Hatter’—Provost of the University of Merlin.

‘What?’ said McKay, sitting down and spilling the coffee. At least the Cafeteria wasn’t too busy this early in the morning.

‘Work on until I’m fucking seventy! I applied for voluntary severance. You know how they once tried to cut me right? Well all this time and for all these years I’ve been showing various people how vital I am for the Department; running round in circles, wagging my tail, and all, as we both know only too well, to keep the fucking job when I don’t even know if I want it anymore and when, as we both well know, a cleaner could probably do it?’

‘Yep,’ said McKay. He didn’t feel like arguing against Jerry’s version of things. The ducks on the science pond were truly marvellous. It was like something from Jurassic park! The lumps of white bread had streamed down from Iceberg Alley and were threatening the model boat that was puttering around in the centre.

‘So I finally,’ Jerry continued, ‘get the chance to apply for voluntary Severance and they tell me I can only leave if I can prove that my job won’t have to be replaced. Shit! How do I do that? I’ve been proving the exact opposite for years! It’s the Hotel California here. You can check out but you can never leave!’
‘Easy,’ said McKay. ‘Times change. Problems change. Sometime they change
right out of existence!’

‘Except that the bastard is doing it deliberately. He knows I want to leave and so
now he wants to keep me on. It’s all spite.’

McKay ignored this. For a long time he had felt that he was living in a vast,
honeyless hive. Perhaps it was a form of anhedonia. Perhaps it was age. It hardly
mattered. And he was hoping that it would be lifted with Julia. Having a child to
cheer yourself up seemed a pretty regrettable and probably crummy thing to do. He
was doing it nevertheless.

‘Are you getting everything ready?’ said Jerry and once again the image of the
Bowerbird returned. I suppose you were going to tell me right? I suppose it had
crossed your mind? Your cannabis man rang me up.’

There was a prolonged silence which Jerry broke by reaching over and clinking
his spoon on the saucer. ‘You know you have mental problems?’ said Jerry. ‘You
know that right? You know that there is something very seriously wrong with you?
You know that right?’

McKay smiled at the fretting little man. He was looking at the Jurassic mallards
and Jerry was being irritating. ‘Of course I know that, you great big Boy Scout! It
hardly matters.’ And it didn’t. McKay knew things would work out. He just knew.
9: Interview

**They needed documents** addressed to them both. On the application forms were examples of ‘acceptable documentation.’ Toy had kept a great wad of acceptables, including council tax bills, water rates, bank statements, and building society savings books. It was early morning and they were sitting in his car across from a 70s redbrick building that looked depressingly functional and without character. The fast track appointment had meant getting up at four in the morning, which had meant arriving two hours early and having to wait for the office to open.

‘What does no recourse to public funds mean?’ Toy was reading a form. McKay didn’t immediately answer. He was thinking how, in three days time, he was going to have to pick Julia up from the airport and how the new house was still a mass of unpacked boxes. ‘It means you can’t have money from the State,’ he said. ‘It means you’re going to have to work like a slave.’

She pulled a face. ‘They really think this is a land of milk and honey. “In times of either peace or war have you, or any dependants who are applying with you, ever been involved, or suspected of involvement, in war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide?”’

‘No,’ he said, rubbing his forehead.

‘Not sure about that,’ she replied. ‘You have committed crimes against me.’ He ignored this and grabbed the form she was examining. He read out loud.

‘Have you or any dependants who are applying with you ever been a member of, or given support to, an organisation which has been concerned with terrorism? Well, have you?’ He looked at her. ‘Weren’t you in the Abu Sayaff?’

‘Funny.’
'You must answer every question in this section,’ he warned her. ‘It is an offence under Section 26(1)(c) of the Immigration Act 1971 to—Christ what a load of fucking old pants.’

She took the form away from him and read something back.

‘Have you, or any dependants who are applying with you, ever engaged in any other activities which might indicate that you may not be considered to be persons of good character?

‘You don’t clean your puwit properly’ she continued. ‘That’s typical of puti white men. They don’t wash their asses, they just use toilet paper. You also smoke cannabis all the time, drink and take coke.’

‘Put it down on the fucking form,’ he said. ‘How much longer have we got to wait?’

Three hours later and after sitting in a glass walled room that didn’t even have a vending machine they had started their ‘fast track’ interview. McKay was now a grand lighter and was intently staring at a young Pakistani male as he went through a seemingly endless roll of questions.

‘I’m looking at the points that you’ve stacked up and so far it isn’t quite enough.’

The guy was being Mr Eminently Reasonable. And he was just explaining that he was about to fuck up both their lives. McKay felt a great weariness descending. He needed this to work. He needed Toy to be given permanent leave and he needed to pull away. Everything had been going well. And now he needed to rally and rally fast. If this had been a scene in Africa it would have had a sweaty bureaucrat and a fly maddening the hours, some slow, overhead fan, circulating in treacle like air. The English equivalent was cold and grey and filled with officious posters about
immigration cheats and other unsavoury types who pretended to be in love. There was also a small, Iranian male crying somewhere in the toilets.

‘It’s because we’ve been living apart,’ McKay said, making sure that he kept his hands on his knees. For all he knew there was a galvanic response tester built into the chair. ‘As I’ve said,’

He smiled a ‘Mr Eminently reasonable’ smile right back. The smile understood the guy’s dilemma. ‘It must be hard,’ the smile said, ‘sitting in this little ampoule of light, deciding things about people you don’t care about whilst sticking your tongue out at the world like a lizard on a rock!’ Toy was sitting next to him. He could feel that she was angry but he had counselled her to keep calm. There was a large clock on the wall. He didn’t have a lot of time to get it right. And if he didn’t get it right he would have to sponsor her forever.

‘If you could perhaps write a letter in support of your application,’ Mr Eminently reasonable warbled, ‘it would probably help.’ He explained all this with another eminently reasonable yet pained expression of forbearance. One that clearly stated, ‘I am explaining all this for the umpteenth time.’

‘Absolutely,’ said McKay. ‘As I say it’s just because of the job situation. We’re one of those “Living apart, living together” couples. The period you’re looking at, was when I was working in London and Loi was up here. We had no choice. You have to go where the work is and Loi didn’t want to move down to London because she’d just been given her first ever job in England.’ He went all sappy, as if it was the greatest honour in the known universe to work at a crummy job in England. He fished out some Language. ‘I’m the Director of a unit, a unit inside a department, inside this university.’ Unit. Department. Director of a unit. It sounded appropriately life denying. ‘If there’s any problems you, or whoever, can contact me on the number
below.’ He turned on the smile again. There would sympathy. There would be tea and biscuits. The man, a flabby, early thirties, obvious Nazi, just stared back at him with complete indifference whilst handing him a piece of paper. ‘My relationship with Toy,’ he wanted to write, ‘and why she should be allowed to remain here until the next Ice Age!’ On the form he wrote about the history of the relationship, including where they’d been—hell, where they were going—nowhere and how they were bravely trying to strike out on a new life together back in dear old Blighty. When he reread the piece he noticed he had said that he was ‘Director of a nit.’ He certainly felt like a nit. A nit and a ninny as his old mum would have said.

On the way out Toy didn’t speak. Finally she said:

‘I’m joining the ESF.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The English Security Force. They hate Pakis.’

All of this because of the geek at the counter who was famously doing his job.

‘But you’re a Filipino,’ he counselled. ‘They’d probably hate you given a chance.’

‘I don’t care. I’m joining. There are too many Pakis in this country and somebody needs to say it.’

‘You have to shave your head,’ he said, ‘if you join that lot. They also don’t let you eat balot. Karaoke is banned.’

‘What?’

‘And you have to sing “God Save the Queen” every night.’

‘What? You mean that old…’

‘Yes, that wee smelling old lady.’

‘How do you know?’
‘I read it in one of their manifestos. You have to eat fish and chips everyday,’ he continued. ‘And you know how constipated that makes you. Plus they worship St George.’

‘Why?’

‘He killed a dragon who ran away with a woman. The dragon was really sweet.’ He paused and thought about cats. ‘It was a bit furry, like Mr Yeltsin. St George killed it with a lance. The poor dragon crawled off to die alone and St George went galumphing back. And that’s why you should never, ever, vote for people like that.’

Toy was thinking on it. Despite everything she had an exaggerated respect for his ‘book learning.’

When they got back to the car he slumped in the drivers’ seat and slowly let the breath fall away. He needed the Vicks. He needed it bad. It was now all within the remit of a higher power.

‘Are you going to show me your new place sometime?’ Toy asked. ‘You haven’t even told me where you live.’

He took a good long snort.

‘You shouldn’t take that stuff,’ Toy said, ‘its really bad for you.’
A LONG TIME AGO Christopher Archibald McKay won a travel writing competition. It resulted in a freelance job writing articles for a glossy London magazine that thrived on snobby, but essentially bogus distinctions between ‘tourists’ and ‘travellers.’ McKay wrote a few pieces and then got bored. People wanted ‘to travel.’ To travel had become an intransitive verb, an existential state, and what irritated McKay was that the more he read, the more he realized most people never actually went anywhere. Sure, they ‘travelled’ alright. McKay’s roving, freelance status had ended when he had got lost in a jungle and in a sarcastic, angry piece called, ‘It’s a jungle out there,’ had argued that most of the rainforests of the world should be concreted over with car parks and shopping malls. The editor fired him. This didn’t invalidate the original thesis: it was a jungle out there.

And he should have known the sensitivities because in the last ‘Travellers’ Tales’ competition, the same editor had published a story about a woman who had been raped. The raped woman was the ‘winner.’ And at the end of the story she had inserted an obligatory sentence, which was the launch into the piece. It read, ‘And so the (insert the word ‘rape’) when it happened, was entirely unexpected.’ After reading the story in the magazine, McKay realized that he never wanted to read the thing again. He also had his own story, but it was not something he wished to share with, ‘Far Flung: Intrepid Travel for the Free Spirited,’ and this story was itself part of the answer to the question which friends constantly asked: if you’re so unhappy why don’t you leave Toy?
It was also why he was sitting, on a Saturday morning, in the office of a man he had started to call, ‘The great bearded twit,’ a man who actually wasn’t a twit at all. A man who was always asking the right questions. And now that man was sitting in front of a wall of books. The man was balding. He had glasses and what appeared to be freckles on his skull. His remaining wispy strands were ginger. McKay could only think of him as ‘Sandy,’ although his name was Steve. McKay liked the twit’s cluttered office and felt comforted by the books and journals and the certificates on the walls. So what if the twit was Canadian? He seemed to know what he was doing. The alabaster bust of Freud was a bit arch but even so. If that was how he wanted to play it.

And now, and as McKay was sitting in Steve’s comfortable recliner, he became aware that the man was asking him why he didn’t want to ‘talk about it.’ Steve said he could be hypnotized. They could ‘go through’ whatever ‘it’ was together. He made it sound like they were driving through plutonium. Steve was sitting down with his hands folded in a sort of wigwam. Sometime he would invert the hands and they would become a cradle. He did this whenever he wanted McKay to share.

McKay was trying to talk about things he didn’t want to examine or remember. And even though he didn’t want to go back, he felt that he should. He was at the fucking up and losing it stage. He needed to put the brakes on.

‘Look,’ he finally cleared his throat. ‘I believe in what old Winston said, don’t you? When you’re going through hell, keep going.’

‘Rather defeats the object of all this don’t you think?’ The wigwam became the cradle.
McKay knew what he wanted. The bastard kept pushing. He wanted to take a little trip into hell and shine a light around. He wanted to stop, mark out a promising vista and have a little picnic. McKay could feel his hands rubbing his forehead and his eyes closing. There was nothing actually wrong with him even if he did feel depressed a lot of the time and self-medicate with Class A drugs and sex. Big deal! So did everybody else. McGrath was an alcoholic and Jerry liked running up hills. It was normal.

‘What I’d like you to do is relive the event in your mind. You don’t have to talk about it, but I’d like you to think about it and tell me how it makes you feel?’ How it made him feel? There weren’t words for how ‘it’ made him feel. Dead—that’s how it made him feel.

‘What I want you to do is cast your mind back. You are in a safe place and I am sitting next to you. You are feeling relaxed and there is no tension in your body. I repeat—you are safe and warm and comfortable. You are sitting here and you are looking at the fish. You are feeling happy and your arms and legs are sinking into the chair. You are starting to remember the initial stages of the event. Time is starting to wash over you.’

McKay closed his eyes and saw black waves rolling onto a deserted beach. He remembered the trip. He saw a man and a woman driving down the thin ribbon of a desert highway. The road was a tiny strip of metal dividing an endless stretch of sand. In places, the sand had covered the road. The road was empty. He had a bird’s eye view of the car, as if he were hovering above the highway. He recognized the occupants. She was excited because she’d never been to the East Coast. It was a major drive. You had to go off road, over miles of ungraded track before coming out onto a vast stretch of treacherous white ‘sabkha.’ At this point you looked at the
hundreds of miles of white glare and imagined yourself inside an Arabian arctic. Only the blurring heat rising from the ground belied this notion. You would drive through the middle of these salt flats on a thin margin of safety, taking extreme care not to push the Land Cruiser onto the white pudding that had, in the legends of local opinion, ‘swallowed castles.’ After negotiating the sabkha you were confronted by precipitous, rising dunes. These turned the car into a lifeboat as you were rocked and swallowed by the sand.

The only other people who did the route were oil geologists who had the driving skills McKay had just acquired. And as he started to remember the initial stages of the journey he also remembered the exhilaration and the freedom. Toy laughing and the music in the car. He remembered, as he drove through the dunes, that he had seen an isolated Bedu launch his falcon at a fleeing houbara. The peregrine swooped and narrowly missed the other bird. He thought it a good omen. The Bedu waved from the top of the dune. He remembered waving back.

‘I want you to move into areas that are challenging,’ Steve’s voice cut in. ‘Slowly you are moving outside your areas of comfort and into a terrain where you feel a certain anxiety, a certain trepidation. All the time you are…’

He was an intrepid traveller in his own head space. And now he was on the beach. This was intrepid travelling. They had set up camp and it was getting dark. There was a shack. An old tin shack and an oil drum. He remembered that the drum was red. The beach was empty. The sea was a silver skin just turning black as the sun sank from the sky and the roar of the surf slowly seemed to recede. He remembered the plastic cooler filled with champagne and the skewered meat, waiting to be grilled. It was the millennium. He remembered that he had had silly, engorged sentiments about humanity. A new time, a new beginning. The fire was burning. It was past
twelve. The world was not going to end after all. They had danced naked around a fire in a geological landscape which they shared with nobody. There were whale bones on the beach and pristine desert behind. They could be the last creatures on earth. He remembered talking to Toy. He was pointing to the black shape of Shark Island just off the coast. And there was something about that black, ugly outline that made him queasy. He remembered being swamped by a feeling of utter unease, a free floating, creeping dread. Whereas millions were being herded into stadiums and parks, McKay had always thought that if you wanted to meet God you’d have to look to the world’s lonely, forgotten, half-starved spaces. There was no point being corralled. And as he looked at the rock in the sea and his gaze took in the empty beach and the tiny fire; as it swept over his tiny vehicle lost in the vast landscape—a sudden, horrible thought occurred—if it was possible to meet God in such a location, then surely it was possible to meet his opposite number? And it was at this precise moment, thinking about strays and stragglers cut off from the herd, that his glance caught the headlights of the other vehicle cresting the rise. And then he felt something clamp in his chest and heard Steve’s voice.

‘You are coming back to me now. You are in a warm, safe room and everything is alright. You are relaxed and comfortable. There is nothing to worry about. You are amongst friends.’

It was like coming round in the dentist’s chair. Steve was looking at him in a comforting, yet concerned way.

‘You were telling me things,’ Steve said. ‘For a change. Did you know that? You were talking out loud.’

_I do that all the time, big fucking deal._
‘I think I did say something,’ McKay admitted. ‘I think I nodded off.’ He noticed that his shirt was damp and clingy.

‘You were getting a little anxious. You weren’t hyperventilating but your breathing changed. I thought it best we stop. We’ll continue from where we left off next week. Is that alright?’

McKay said that it was. He got up from the chair. His body felt heavy and tired; drained, that was the word.

‘Are we making progress?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know, are we?’

‘Can’t you just tell me?’

‘I can’t—no. It’s really up to you.’ Every fucking thing was up to him. He felt furious.

‘What do you feel about it?’ McKay grasped the language and threw it back. ‘Are we making progress?’

The man paused and reflected. ‘I would say that we have made progress, yes. It’s early days, however. We’re going to have to do a lot of work on the main issue which you admit is the problem. We need to be able to talk about it openly and this will necessitate quite a few sessions.’

McKay got up from the chair. More sessions. He permitted himself a brief feeling of irony and then looked at old carrot top. The Spanish had an expression about a person who had ‘never broken a plate.’ It was supposed to denote innocence. And that was the problem with old Sandy. He looked too well meaning and gentle for McKay to be completely cynical.

‘You know,’ he was saying to McKay, ‘that Toy needs to have therapy too. You know that right?’
McKay nodded. Toy thought that the only people who went to therapists were ‘nutters and freaks,’ and that therapists were ‘nutters and freaks’ themselves. He didn’t pass this on to kind old Sandy.

‘I’ll talk to her,’ he said.

He got up off the chair and slowly looked around. For no good reason he felt angry with the twit. There was a brass telescope by the balcony which looked out at a park and the sprawling city beyond.

‘What do you use that for? Spying on people? People dogging in the park?’ The twit smiled. He had seemingly heard it all before.

‘I’m a Birder. There are a pair of peregrines in the cemetery. Occasionally one catches sight of them.’

Does one. ‘You could shave the rest of your hair off,’ said McKay, ignoring this.

‘It’s no longer fashionable, even in Victoria, to be partially bald. It should be all or nothing these days.’

The Twit just stared at him and smiled.
11: Christmas

Christmas came. Toy had gone back to the Philippines to visit her family. Julia was now nearly a month into her pregnancy. Her family lived in an old, respectable suburb of Madrid. A large space lined with mature trees and each apartment block having its own pool. As he was standing inside her mother’s apartment McKay couldn’t help comparing his own background with Julia’s. He had grown up with a single mother in a small and damp council house. He was the only person in his street who had gone to university. Toy had grown up in Angeles, in little more than a rubbish dump, some shacks thrown together. Of the three, only Julia had had a life of relative ease, although her mother had, for years, looked after an invalid father. At one time McKay had thought that a person who had experienced a hard, fractured life, would, in many ways, be more balanced than a person who had a secure family and with everything on a plate. Post-Toy he knew that conception to be fatally flawed.

And now Julia’s family were standing in a kind of line. He was reminded of the early Dutch Militia pieces, the sort that Rembrandt struggled to get away from. He saw her mother for the first time. She was a small, suntanned, rather classy looking older woman with a slightly withheld, yet not unfriendly demeanour. What was the precise level of intimacy that was required? It seemed to vary. One guy called Paco, who owned a chain of restaurants called Casa Paco, had presented McKay with a four litre jeroboam of cloudy olive oil. He then clapped his arms around McKay’s body, giving him a bear hug and two wet kisses. ‘Está borracho,’ a disapproving old woman muttered. McKay had just learned that word. He had seen Los Borrachos in
the Prado. Uncle Paco was clearly a fan. ‘Don’t worry,’ he didn’t say, ‘so was my
dad, he drank himself to death too.’

‘It’s from the olive farm in Jaen,’ Julia said, moving down the line. ‘It’s specially
scented. Don’t worry, he got you something else I hope, not just this rubbish.’ She
pushed him forwards to her mother. He was starting to feel like a prize bull. He
worried about the way she spoke in front of her family. What happened if Uncle
Paco understood a few words? The mother, who was called Carmen, came forward.
This was it.

‘Encantada,’ she said. ‘You are very happy no? To come to Madrid. You like
Madrid? Well you are with my daughter. No chicas! Mi dorta! Mi dorta muy buena.
Las otras unas guarras!’ Lots of laughter up and down the line.

McKay was making notes. The daughter was the best and all the others pigs?
That was probably what she said. He gave the old woman a smile. He couldn’t
reconcile Julia’s description with this mad old bat. She was not an English speaker,
but had clearly learned a few lines. McKay felt that it was sweet of her to make the
effort.

‘Qué vas a hacer en Madrid?’ a young guy with a beard was talking. What was he
going to do in Spain? The listening was getting easier, but speaking was still a
chore. The woman had already mentioned the bulls and the beer and the Prado.
McKay remembered a shirt he had seen in the souvenir shops. ‘Spanish Olympics,’ it
had said. ‘Eating, drinking, fucking.’ He was going to do a lot of that. He was going
to bury himself in Julia and forget about Toy.

‘I love the Prado,’ he heard himself saying in Spanish. ‘All those lovely
paintings.’ It was a problem with being only an intermediate user of the language.
Lovely paintings! Was this lame-assed noodling the best Spanish he could muster?
He had moved down the line.

‘Cuando empezaste a interesarte por España? A young man called Joaquin was talking. Julia’s cousin. McKay remembered that he was studying to be a Vet.

It was a good question. When indeed had he become interested in Spain? The very first semblance of an interest could be traced to a plastic orange which, when pressed, popped out a plastic penis. There was also a ten-inch plastic priest who, when you patted the top of his head, shot out a red and angry cock. They were presents from people who bought towels with bulls on them, nodding donkeys, and sombreros. That was the type of neighbourhood that he had grown up in, which was a million miles from this kind of neighbourhood.

‘Parad de preguntarle!’ A tall, muscular guy, that must be the bullfighter Julia had mentioned, had told them to stop asking questions. Ramon, the hitman for corned beef, dragged him into the kitchen. ‘Este tío es un aguafiestas!’ Ramon whispered, pointing to somebody. Agua was water, Fiesta was Fiesta. The man was a water on the fiesta. ‘A party pooper,’ McKay supplied in English and Ramon repeated the word. Ramon asked McKay to carve the jamón which proved equally difficult. The leg of a great pig screwed into a Jamonero. The slices of jamón couldn’t be too thick and couldn’t be too thin. McKay tried in vain. No, that was too thick. No, that was too thin. He tried again. Ramon had bought a whole case of Vega Sicilia and was liberally tipping it back. He had looked at the two Euro Carton of Don Simon, the one McKay had hurriedly bought from Al Campo, and sloshed it down the sink. ‘Quién ha comprado esta mierda?’ Who bought this shit? McKay was feeling happy. His Spanish was improving all the time. ‘Ni idea,’ he replied, and so were his powers of dissembling. Ramon beckoned him over and poured some of the Vega Sicilia into his glass. The lights and the noise and the language. Everything
was blurring. He was laughing, Ramon was laughing and after McKay had cut a platter of what the latter critically called ‘too thicks, too thins,’ they moved into the garden. In the background he could see the snow topped Guadarrama of Madrid.

McKay was starting to relax and Ramon was suddenly a bull giving McKay a red capote while charging around the garden. McKay executed what he imagined were passable ‘pases taurinos,’ throwing plastic straws into the man’s backside as he lumbered about. On the third charge, Ramon tripped over a discarded child’s toy and landed on a cactus. He picked himself off the ground smiling and removed a six-inch thorn from his arm as if it was nothing. McKay reflected. Compared to a cornada up the ass, it was nothing. Ramon Alzamora—‘El Troyano.’ The Trojan. And ‘El Trojan,’ thought he was playing with another warrior. The only Trojans McKay knew were the ones imprisoned in pub vending machines. He felt bad for Ramon who was clearly, and despite his job as a hit man for corned beef, a nice guy.

‘You and me have somefin in common no?’ Some fin in common? Ramon was putting his arm around McKay’s shoulder. Julia had told McKay that Ramon was originally from a poor family and had nothing in common with many of the other family members who were mostly artists and academics and who thought bullfighting little more than an abridged version of the Inquisition’s ‘Auto-da-fe.’ The banning had spread throughout Spain and Ramon was clearly the last of a dying breed. And now the poor sod clearly felt he had met somebody who was not just another book reading, paper tiger. Somebody also engaged in dangerous work. Some fin in Common. What exactly? Ramon was giving him a drunken smile.

The man pulled an imaginary gun from a holster and shot it. He blew smoke from the imaginary muzzle. Jesus Christ, the absurd fantasy had enveloped them all. She had told them all, even though she had promised not to.
‘We understand each other you and me no?’

‘I guess,’ said McKay. Ramon led him out of the garden and onto the balcony.

Mano-a-mano. McKay had a horrible feeling that a bonding session about their work was about to occur. He looked around. Noise and music and life was inside and he was stuck with this increasingly lachrymose drunk. Ramon started speaking in Spanish. McKay got the gist. It was something about the game of life and death and how rare it was that warriors like them could meet in the struggle for survival. Pure Hollywood.

‘I can arrange for you to fit a bull,’ Ramon whispered. ‘Is a great honour.’

To fit a bull? He had no intention of fitting a bull into anything, especially himself. He looked at Ramon and told him that he’d be happy with ‘one of those posters.’ He hoped he didn’t sound lame. The man shrugged, clearly disappointed. McKay wasn’t bothered and he wasn’t thinking about bulls and ‘mano-a-mano.’ His mind, disconcertingly, was swirling around nappies and prams. Gripe water. Colic. Solids. Sweet smelling baby poo. Julia was pregnant with his child. She would be having his child. He was going to be a father. He kept saying it. He kept repeating it, but it still didn’t seem real. His feelings didn’t seem up for it. Why wasn’t he jumping around all gleeful?

The party had progressed into the small hours of the morning, and McKay had ended up on the floor staring at the small figures in the Belén. The truth will set you free. He somehow doubted it. The truth was that he should have told the truth right from the start. Julia didn’t know who he was. This wasn’t entirely healthy.

There was a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus with flowers in his hair in the Belén. Jesus as pansy. The pansy was looking at him sadly. He was the only one who seemed to understand And as he looked at the sad and disappointed Jesus he felt his
phone vibrating. It was Toy, texting ‘Happy Christmas’ from the Philippines.’ He
texted back. She said that she missed him and he responded that he missed her too. It
was true, in a way. At least she knew who he was. Julia came over. ‘Jerry Three
Pigs,’ he said, quickly putting the phone away.

When they got back to Julia’s flat they threw off their clothes. Sexually there was
heat and desire. When he was having sex everything seemed clear: he had to leave
Toy. After he’d had an orgasm everything seemed less clear. Was he fucking her or
digging into her body, covering himself? Apart from Ramon, the family scene at
Julia’s had to be contrasted with his own childhood memories. Julia’s family was
decidedly odd. An awful lot of relatives and a lot of polite conversations. They were
well-mannered and nice to each other. Why couldn’t one of them have fallen into the
Christmas tree? Accidentally set fire to the Belén? Some screaming? Crying in the
kitchen? Outrageous displays of public drunkenness? There was something
seriously wrong with Julia’s family. Some very serious seething was surely to be had
just beneath the surface. A worm in the apple? But where the fuck was it? He was
starting to wish he was back with Toy. Then they could have got seriously drunk and
thrown things around.
12: Mentally ill Bill

JULIA’S ARRIVAL at the airport, all the bags and unpacking, all the things she had bought. The hugs and the joy that they were finally going to start a new life together, was somewhat tempered, for McKay, by the knowledge that it had all been built on a sandcastle of lies and that he had to stop lying as soon as possible. Seemingly, however, he couldn’t. The lie had seemed absurd and delicious in Spain. That was when he had been reading about Don Quixote and was in a strange city seducing women whom he was never going to meet again. Only he’d gone on seeing her. Day after day, week after week. And now she’d arrived in England, had just settled into the house which she didn’t seem to really like and already he was introducing her to one of his ‘colleagues’ from work. From his ‘real’ job, as opposed to ‘the fascia of the university.’ All this just so he wouldn’t have to keep on inventing lies if Toy needed him. If he needed to go out in the middle of the night. What the hell had possessed him? Three Pigs had said that McKay had ‘moments of lucidity,’ was this one? ‘A brief chemical window opens,’ the bastard had said. ‘And then closes.’

I’d like to meet some of your work friends. One of the first things he did was introduce her to Bill, in the vain hope that it would shut her up. Bill was an unemployed actor and friend of McGrath’s. He worked the admittance gate at Merlin. They met at Bill’s favourite restaurant. Bill, as usual, was short and looking forward to a freebie. He sat in a stall, in a suit, sipping a pink cocktail. McKay didn’t like the sight of that cocktail. Bill had promised not to drink.

McKay could feel his own hands shaking as he introduced them. Christ—if Bill fucked up. Julia slid into the booth and Bill attempted gallant and sophisticated. Sitting in the middle he noticed that Bill had put the money he had provided to good use. He had tried to look like an ‘Intelligence type.’ He had a Turnbull & Asser shirt,
and shoes from Lobb. Despite the shirt and shoes, however, he still looked like a slob. In fact, he looked better than a slob. He looked like an ‘Intelligence type’ who had run to fat. Run to fat? Bill couldn’t run anywhere. He hadn’t shaved either. And that cologne? McKay recognised it from before. Bill’s friend the boiler man had once provided constructive criticism. ‘You could knock a fly off a bucket of shit with that William.’ Bill went straight to it. He apologised for having been tortured.

‘You’ll have to forgive me. I feel disconnected, floaty these days. It’s the P.T.S.D.’

Julia, McKay guessed, might have trouble with this acronym. Perhaps she was confusing it with P.M.T. He was anxious she didn’t.

‘Post-traumatic Stress disorder,’ he explained. ‘For the longest time Bill couldn’t eat out. The sight of any metal instruments…’

‘You poor thing,’ said Julia. ‘It’s awful.’

‘It was,’ said Bill, looking far too pleased with himself. ‘Although the way I got away was a bit inspired I have to say.’

McKay had flashed Bill a warning look. They hadn’t done ‘the way he got away.’ He hadn’t ‘got away’ that was the point. Underneath the table he started to crush Bill’s left Lobb. Bill removed his foot from the hot compress and continued sadly.

‘It’s…it’s…’

‘Difficult to talk about?’ volunteered Julia.

‘Yes,’ nodded Bill.

With horror he watched Bill order another drink and drain it in a fishy gulp.

‘Don’t talk Bill,’ he quickly said. ‘You don’t need to say anything to us. We understand.’ It had all been a terrible mistake.
'No, no,' Bill replied, maddeningly tapping his head. ‘I think I want to talk. I need to talk.’ He paused before addressing Julia. ‘Is it okay?’

‘It’s perfectly fine,’ she replied. She was looked at him like a mother cow with a sick heifer. Bill was lapping it up.

‘They took me to a barn,’ Bill said, doing a passable imitation of a five mile smile, ‘an Albanian barn.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Julia.

Bill looked confused, ‘Just a barn,’ he said. ‘They kept me there for five hours. All sorts of awful things happened.’ Bill shuddered and closed his eyes. Julia squeezed his hand.

‘You don’t need to carry on,’ McKay heard himself begging. ‘Really you don’t.’

‘They used baling twine to bind my hands and feet,’ Bill was oblivious. ‘It was terrible. I thought I was going to betray everybody. It was only after the third hour that I noticed the small piece of jagged glass lying at my feet. When my captors went away for a break I knelt down and managed to pick it up with my hands. It was agonisingly slow cutting through that twine.’ Bill had a pregnant pause and ordered another drink. The drink came. The drink went. One more fishy gulp.

I know what this is to him, thought McKay bitterly, nothing but a fucking excuse, the best ever. The man had probably been drinking well before they arrived and his slurred speech was now starting to delineate the sequence of events after he had ‘cut himself free.’ These included:

1. Knocking out a guard with a chamber pot.
2. Stealing a motorbike.
3. Finding out that the ‘compound’ was surrounded by barbed wire.
4. Finding a dip in a field that enabled him to jump the motorbike over the wire and ride away.

Julia was enraptured. ‘Dios Mio,’ she said, ‘It’s just like ‘La Gran Evasion,’ only you really did escape.’

Bill looked at her sadly. ‘A part of me escaped. A part I left…’

‘Well,’ McKay said. ‘You got away. That’s the main thing.’

The food duly came. The food duly went. Bill ordered the most expensive items on the menu. He was beaming with grease and goodwill. He wasn’t paying.

‘Once you’ve been hungry,’ he said to Julia. ‘You never waste food.’

McKay had looked at Bill’s avalanched gut. He looked at his fat fingers grubbing about a tray of starters. Later he watched Bill eating a rack of lamb and sucking on the bones. It was impossible to believe that Bill had ever been hungry. Bill had been greedy and that was all.

When they left the restaurant he felt like he was walking on ice. He had his arm around Julia. Bill had tottered off in the opposite direction. He had told them it had been ‘emotional.’ He clearly expected an Oscar.

‘He was a very strange man,’ Julia said, getting into the car. ‘Part of me thought he was crazy. Part of me thought he was making the whole thing up. To be honest I don’t think he was normal. He had those expensive shoes and that nice shirt–but something was weird.’

Later in the evening and when Julia was asleep, Bill phoned.

‘Did I fuck up?’ the voice said. ‘I know I fucked up. Did I blow it?’

He had wanted to say, ‘You are, and will forever be, a completely irredeemable twat,’ but he paused. Bill was the B-Block car parking attendant. His wife and only child had died in a house fire. When he said he’d been tortured, he hadn’t really lied.
‘You did great Bill.’ McKay finally managed. ‘You fulfilled the early promise. You really should have been the man who loved the lady who loved Milk Tray. Really, it was too bad you didn’t get that job.’

‘Cheers mate,’ said Bill and hung up.

McKay had gone back to the bedroom and looked at Julia silently sleeping. She was pregnant and wearing pyjamas. He sat down on the cold flooring and bit his lip. Jesus Christ what had he done? Things were spinning out of control. Two vulnerable women. He had to start fixing Toy up. He had to help her to reconfigure her life and he had to move on. She must never find out about Julia and Julia must never find out about Toy. The truth was a mug’s game. It was time to start planning his retirement from ‘the service,’ however. He’d retire when Toy was sorted with somebody else.
The day after they had met Bill, McKay felt another visit to Steve coming on. The experience of having to dart between Julia and Toy was starting to overwhelm. And he needed to talk about things that were mouldering away inside. Not that talking would do any good, but anyhow. And besides, the Twit lived in a comforting suburb just outside Merlin. A village in the city. McKay felt the drive out there to be a relaxing one. It was like having Haldol pumped through the car and into your veins. Going to see the twit was turning into something that he no longer dreaded.

And so now he was back on the recliner having told Julia that he’d got to meet a ‘source’ in a ‘car park in Merlin.’ The leather Chaise made him sweat but the Twit was a purist who believed in the healing power of upholstery. And now they were back on the beach. For the longest time he’d felt like he’d been lying there, down in the sand like a bleached bone.

‘The truck came over the rise and…’ McKay paused. He always had to pause.

‘And what?’ Steve was looking at him. The cradle.

‘Continue in your own good time.’

That sounded weird, a weird fucking legalese. What was he—in a courtroom? McKay opted for scholarly instead and changed the subject.

‘You know there are different kinds of desert? People think of deserts and they think of billowing dunes. There are, however, deserts of ice and rock, scrub deserts; deserts that have red sand and salt flats that look…’ He suddenly couldn’t continue.

Who had written that poem about Desert Places? Scare yourself? You certainly could. ‘You know the funny thing when I first saw the truck?’

‘What?’
‘The wind picked up. I remember that.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s just that my students. Well, it’s nothing really. Local superstition. They were horrified when I told them I was going. It’s inaccessible. None of them ever went alone. They go in great convoys. The place name in Arabic, I forget, means ‘plague,’ something that happened years ago. All the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages, mostly poor fishermen and pearl divers died. The place was shunned and there was a health cordon on the infected people. Armed men perched on the surrounding dunes and shot anybody trying to escape. People trying to leave by boat were capsized and left to the sharks,’ he paused, ‘such places probably leave a stain.’

‘You were talking about the wind?’

‘My Arab students always said that people who went there alone usually had a horrible experience. Djinns and so on. Ghosts and spirits whispering outside the tent. And I noticed that when the truck appeared, the wind picked up. It was a slow, keening wind, telling me to leave. All the students were scared of djinns, but there must be some good ones too.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Stayed put.’

‘And then what happened?’

‘The truck came over the rise and descended onto the beach. It parked quite near. Some men got out. There were three of them. I could hear their voices. The wind carried their voices. At that point I started feeling bad. I could see that they were white guys. Guess what? I actually felt reassured by this. How’s that for racism?’

‘What was Toy doing?’

‘She was by the fire. She’d been cooking some of the meat. I remember that she’d
turned the music down. We’d both got dressed. When we first saw the lights of the truck bumping down the track we put our clothes back on, previously we’d been dancing. Jumping naked through the fire, trying to tempt the djinns. It was a bit of a lark.’

‘And then what happened?’

‘Well, Toy said that they were Russian and started to worry. It’s no secret there are some pretty bad characters from that part of the world milling around. And in Dubai there is, of course, a whole mafia; whole sections of the city are signposted in Cyrillic. Loads of bars and clubs and prostitutes. Vory V. Zakone, all that stuff. She wanted to leave.’

‘And did you?’

‘No. Actually I said probably the stupidest thing I’ve ever said in my life.’

‘Which was?’

‘“Don’t worry, I’ve taught plenty of Russians at university. I speak a little Russian.”’

‘And then what happened?’

McKay paused. ‘You know I’ve just remembered something, something I’d completely forgotten. I think I told you there was a shack and an oil drum?’

Steve nodded.

‘Well there was also a boat. A sort of repulsive wooden dhow, partially submerged by the sea; something that had foundered on the rocks and was covered in seaweed. I remember that it had a horrible eye. A gawping, painted eye. Red and blue and sort of prised open. It spooked me when we first arrived, but then I had a few beers, turned on the music and forgot about it.’

‘And then what happened?’
‘And then these guys started walking down to the sea. I couldn’t understand what
the hell they were doing. All this expanse of sand and they have to come pissing on
our patch. I mean, there were literally hundreds of miles of sand and they have to
park right next to me. It was then that I started to worry.’

‘Were they camping?’

‘No. They didn’t have any gear. And that was another odd thing. They hadn’t
brought wood. Wood is a precious commodity in the desert and I’d got ours before
we set out. You can’t just go cutting down any acacia. It probably belongs to
somebody.’

‘So what did they use?’

‘They started burning this disgusting old rope. Some half-decayed thing that was
attached to the dhow. Something covered in sand flies.’ McKay could feel himself
getting cold. The smell of the rope was taking him back. He could see the acrid
black smoke, could taste it in his mouth. The anger, when it came, was unexpected.

‘You know,’ he rubbed his forehead. ‘I don’t really know what I’m doing here. I
don’t really know why you are asking me all these fucking questions. I mean what is
this— the fucking Inquisition? You sit there and ask me all these things, all the time.
Shit. What am I doing here? You should have taken my advice about cutting your
hair. It’s grown and you now have a tree line around the mountain.’

Steve sniffed and paused. He waited and then spoke very gently.

‘What you said to me Christie, when you first came here, was that you had two
women in your life. One whom you could never leave, and one whom you’d fallen in
love with. This state of affairs, you said, was insupportable. You have one woman
who thinks you’re James Bond and the other, quoting you, ‘a total bastard.’ You said
that you were addicted to sex and that it had caused you all sorts of problems. You
didn’t tell me why you were addicted to sex. You also said that if you left Toy she
would kill herself, whereas if you told the other girl, Julia, ‘the truth’ i.e. that you
were not superman, she would probably leave you. You wanted to gain clarity about
what you should do and you came to me. You wanted, quoting you, “an impartial
source,” whom you could talk to.’

McKay closed his eyes. The way these people speak. Logging everything. There
was no way out.

‘Addicted to sex,’ he shot back. ‘How can you be “addicted” to a biological urge?
Jesus, it’s a contradiction in terms.’

The twit was silent for a while and was studying McKay with that maddening
species interest.

‘I think you can. If it massively interferes with your life. You are in a rather
tangled web aren’t you? ’

‘It’s alright,’ said McKay, suddenly deciding to calm down. ‘It’s true.’ He
shouldn’t blame Steve. The poor sod was doing his best. And the more he talked
about it, the more it flooded back. As well as the smell of the smoke he was now
having another memory. A book he’d been reading on the way to the island. He
could see the pages splashed by sunlight and the words slowly emerging from the
gloom. In the labyrinthine world of tunnels and crevices, where soft-bodied and
vulnerable creatures hide, there are specialized carnivores amongst the crustaceans,
continually stalking their prey. Armour, poison, camouflage and a hidden way of life
are very common in reef dwellers.

A hidden way of life, that’s what all the lies were about and the only thing he was
hiding was himself. Himself from himself and himself from other people. He felt his
eyes getting moist. ‘Perhaps some things are better left buried,’ he heard himself
saying, ‘perhaps we should just leave it.’ *Foul deeds will rise. Though the earth overwhelm them to men’s eyes.* ‘Perhaps not,’ he quickly added. He should have studied engineering, literature was always snapping at your ankles.

It was warm outside the Twit’s office. A wintry sun was shining and the car had been heated. McKay sat in the vehicle and didn’t move. God knows why people did the things they did. How could you possibly hope to understand others when you couldn’t even understand yourself?
A WEEK AFTER HIS talk with the twit, Christie McKay arrived at Toy’s in the early evening. It had taken him ten minutes fast walking from leafy 42 Castlefields, where he now lived, to 111 Slinger Road, where Toy lived. He’d practically ran when he heard the news. Luckily, Julia had gone out to a Spanish cultural event. He had pleaded a headache. That headache was now gone. It had been a beautiful sunny day in the rainy city, a rare enough occurrence and Toy’s house was all cloistered up and muggy. He went into the kitchen and opened a window. It mustn’t be allowed to fuck up. Toy had met the guy on the Internet. Already McKay had hopes. The hopes emerged straight from the fridge. Whenever there was a new guy on the horizon his picture, next to the fridge magnets, happily disappeared.

‘Why don’t you buy yourself some new clothes?’ he had said, ‘I’ll pay for them. Smarten yourself up a bit. He sounds like a nice guy.’

She was sitting on the sofa staring at the television. She’d apparently been playing Mario Cart for the last four hours. She’d taken the day off work because of a cold but seemed to be in a good mood. It was hard to tell though. She could turn her moods on and off like a tap.

‘Yeah he’s alright,’ she said, not really listening. ‘He makes more money than you. He’s an accountant. He has a big car. He’s forty-seven.’

She didn’t know that McKay had already checked out the guy’s profile.

‘He’s a simple man,’ she continued, ‘unlike you. He likes going out a lot. He likes dancing a lot.’ Toy came from Cebu. A city big on music.

‘That’s wonderful. He sounds like a dreamboat.’
Toy snorted. He’d have to be careful not to overdo it. He was praying the guy would be alright.

“So is he coming to pick you up later or what? Innocuous, happy, eager to be of help.

“Yes he’ll be here in an hour.’

‘Okay we’ll I’ll get off and…’

‘No. I want you to stay. I want you to meet him. There’s no reason why you shouldn’t be friends. I’ve already told him you’re gay and like huge black cock.’

‘Great. Well, he sounds like a…”

‘Like a dreamboat. Why don’t you change the record?’

He shrugged. ‘I’m just saying he sounds nice.’ He was eager to get away. The Spanish music wouldn’t last all night and he had muted the phone. If Julia rang and he didn’t pick up she’d start getting worried.

‘He has a very well-appointed flat,’ said Toy paraphrasing from the profile. ‘He owns his own car. He likes Squash. He describes himself as “an interesting person.” What do you think about that?”

It was difficult to lie. He was thinking that she’d eat the accountant alive.

‘He sounds great.’

‘Oh cut the shit. He sounds like a twat.’

‘Well.’ It was hard to suppress a grin. He had to remind himself that this was “Operation offload Toy onto willing sap.” If she started going out and dating she might start to feel better.

She yawned and got up from the sofa. ‘I’m going to get ready. He’ll be here soon. I made some chicken adobe for you. Why don’t you eat it? I’m going to wear
something really sexy. Try not to get jealous. Try not to think of us fucking will you!’

He sat there with fingers crossed on the sofa. He was praying that they’d end up fucking. ‘I don’t think like that Toy. I’m really happy for you.’

‘Because you don’t care about me. You never have.’

‘That’s not true,’ he quickly countered. If she got stuck on this lament it would ruin her mood for the whole night.

‘Anyway,’ she went into the bedroom. ‘I’m going to have a shower and get ready. Please eat the food.’

She moved into the other room and he could hear her rummaging around. He went into the kitchen and started to heat up the adobe. He found the pictures in the tray by the cupboard. There were images of him and Toy at the top of Ben Nevis, a picture of the two of them in a shisha café in Dubai, another hugging at his best friend’s wedding. He buried them under a pile of paper. He didn’t want to look at them. He thought of something McGrath had said about rental properties: how when the tenants had gone you simply whitewashed everything away. You could do that with houses.

The person who was coming over was a harmless dweeb called Nigel. McKay wished he could tell Nigel how to circumnavigate Toy’s moods. He wished he could give Nigel a roving taxonomy of her complaints. Judging from the profile the man had hardly been outside England. He looked stable enough though. The sort of bedrock that Toy needed. McKay could imagine her turning the guy into a slave. Winding him around her little finger. She had done that with him for years.

‘How do I look?’ she came out of the bedroom. She was wearing a short, leather skirt and killer heels.
‘Great.’ *Like a sleazy Asian whore from an American Vietnam movie.* Poor Nigel.

He produced an image of a freckled, flabby looking guy with bad skin. He was probably just leaving his ‘well-appointed flat’ in his ‘own car.’ McKay had a horrible vision of the future: the man all bedraggled, banging on his door and sobbing; saying, ‘I just want her back.’

He coughed and looked at the floor. ‘I’ve stashed the pictures. Probably best if I’m going to be your ‘friend.’

She gave him a sour look. ‘You hid the pictures? You don’t care about me. You never did.’

Once again he quickly avoided the quagmire.

‘So you’ve dropped Bowser and are using Donkey Kong?’

She just stared at him.

‘Sometimes Christie you are pathetic.’

He was saved by a knock at the door. A car had drawn up. It was Nigel. A willing lamb to the slaughter. Toy had had hundreds of hits on the Internet site. On some level the guy must have realized he was punching above his weight. McKay saw him as a typical, middle-aged, English loser. Somebody used to disappointed, sallow English women with kids. Single, sad mothers who always put their kids first and Nigel last. And now this tiny Asian car wreck. Toy had said he was taking her to the Opera Aida. It seemed a bit of an expensive strategy for a first date. ‘He’s not cheap like you Christie,’ she had said. She’d like Aida, McKay reflected. She’d probably see herself as the wronged slave girl.

‘You’re a lot fatter than your profile suggests,’ said Toy Right there, at the door.

‘But I’m sure it’s the right type of fat,’ Christie added. He was worse. And he was a native speaker. Words just tumbled onto his tongue too.
He shot her a look. Nigel blushed. He made some kind of joke. Thank God the
dude had a sense of humour.

Toy introduced him as her friend ‘Boris Karloff.’ Nigel didn’t pick up. Not into
films. Toy winked at him when Nigel turned around. He felt concerned. He didn’t
want to play ‘us against Nigel.’ He wanted her to get off with Nigel! He tried to
indicate with thumbs up that Nigel seemed sweet and nice. Nigel, however, was
already making a mess of it, was already trying too hard. He had shiny black shoes.
He had polished them. Somehow his trousers seemed too short. He had parked his
car outside in the parking space. He now said that he didn’t want to get it towed and
that it was a new car. New cars these days were as cheap as chips. You could get
them, for, well, for next to nothing! There followed a brief disquisition on the state of
the motor trade.

‘Boris doesn’t have a car,’ said Toy. ‘He takes the bus everywhere. It’s great to
meet a man with a car.’ He didn’t care what she said. He just wanted to go home to
Julia.

Nigel fidgeted. He had arrived with droopy flowers which Toy plonked in a vase.
It emerged that he was the Chief financial accountant for a company called ‘Dewson
Tipper Tubes.’ He was also into some weird religion which McKay hardly
processed. McKay didn’t know what a tipper tube was and had no real desire to
learn. In twenty minutes, however, he felt his head filling up with macaroni like
structures. Nigel was originally from Wolverhampton. In the kitchen Toy said to
McKay, ‘I can’t understand a word he says.’

‘Don’t worry love,’ he replied. ‘It’s just a matter of tuning in your ear.’

‘Or tuning it out,’ she responded.
'The thing is,’ Nigel was saying. People these days don’t have the right values. They prioritise the wrong things. There will, ultimately, have to be an accounting, a reckoning.’

McKay felt irritated. He wanted Toy to have this date. Nigel was alright. It was stupid to start thinking that he was some kind of a nut.’

‘Just try to enjoy the evening baby,’ he whispered. ‘He’s got you some nice tickets. No big deal. You don’t like the guy you never have to see him again. Just give him a chance. Toy was giving him a panic-stricken look. ‘Are you leaving so soon? Why don’t you stay a bit longer? After I get back I’ll call you. We can play Mario Cart.’

He started to panic. ‘I’ll probably be in bed.’ He tried to be as gentle as he could. ‘You’ll be with Nigel,’ he added. He could see her face hardening.

‘Yes and you’ll probably be in bed fucking someone else.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ he said. ‘I told you I’m not seeing anyone.’

They moved back into the living room and he handed Nigel some of the Filipino snacks that Toy had made.

‘I’ve got to get going,’ he said. ‘I hope you two have a great evening.’ Toy was sitting on Nigel’s lap. The guy was looking confused. Toy gave him an ostentations kiss in front of McKay. ‘We’re going to have a great time don’t you worry,’ she said. It occurred to him that Nigel was probably thinking he was some kind of bizarre cuckold and it had all been arranged. McKay said goodbye to Nigel and Toy opened the door to the flat. Outside it was raining.

‘I hope you get fucking soaked,’ she said, slamming the door.
JULIA HAD BEEN polite about McGrath’s house. She had wanted something with ‘character.’ She clearly imagined herself living in a mews house, or perhaps something with beams. McKay hadn’t told her that ‘character,’ and translated into rental accommodation below a certain price, meant crappy windows and dark and comfortless Edwardian hovels. Windows whose winter sills you had to mop, washing machines which raged and spluttered on top of inadequate rubbers; a pong of wall-to-wall carpet and pet stink.

McGrath’s place, a conventional, red brick detached, may have lacked old-world kitsch; it may have screamed cookie cutter sameness and sad monotony, but it was warm and functional. Enough, until they moved away. And if it didn’t have ‘character,’ it did have ‘characters.’ The house on the corner held a packrat who hadn’t been seen for years; the Irish bloke opposite manufactured, exactly like Godzilla, pyroclastic bursts if you accidentally used his bins; the man next door had been made redundant and had ploughed his redundancy into a research project developing a ‘bike rack.’ Only the other day he had told McKay that he had finally obtained a ‘firm order.’ ‘Which Firm?’ McKay had asked, greatly encouraged and even more so since he had heard the wife screaming, late into the night, about how they were ‘broke,’ about how she was pregnant, and about how she had married, ‘the biggest loser the world has ever seen.’

‘A firm order,’ the man had repeated, looking at McKay as if he were the dullard, ‘from the bloke at forty-three.’
The bloke at. The woman at. The man across the road. ‘Don’t you know any of these people?’ Julia had asked when they first moved in.

‘Not really,’ McKay admitted. ‘Nobody speaks to anybody anymore.’

And now she was standing in the middle of the room with the wooden flooring that didn’t stink and the decent windows and the nice rugs and the good insulation and sort of turning up her nose. He felt slightly disappointed but loved her anyway. It was simply pedantic Julia, being pedantic Julia.

It was Saturday morning and they had just got out of bed. McKay had moved over to the front window and surreptitiously checked outside. Moving outside the house had started to feel increasingly like carrying out a low flying raid over enemy territory. He had started to see Toy everywhere: behind bushes, in shops, hiding behind lamp posts.

‘I’m not sure I like this place,’ Julia now repeated, moving around the kitchen in her pyjamas. ‘I wish you’d waited until I got here. It reminds me of my own place back in Spain. Why did you choose here?’

He didn’t know the answer to that. Or rather he did and didn’t want to go there. He talked about crime and safety; he mentioned the close proximity of shops. He clinched it by referring to the quality of the local hospital and its wonderful care scheme for expectant mothers. He didn’t say that his ex-girlfriend lived, ‘just around the corner’ and that he was hoping to get all the stuff from the Lock-Up before leaving her. He didn’t say that he couldn’t quite leave her, not yet. And he didn’t go on to elaborate that he’d been unable to leave her for the past nine years. And he also didn’t reveal McGrath’s quip that, whilst not being dumber than an ox, he certainly wasn’t any smarter. These things would have revealed him as a creature of
contradictions. And Julia, he was starting to realize, was not good when it came to processing contradictions. People shouldn’t have them seemed to be the general idea.

She was now talking about the living space and the kitchen that was part of it. Why hadn’t he got a separate place? Didn’t he think about the smells? He was starting to find her complaining irritating. He smiled it off, ‘I thought about rollicking around in that bed for hours and screaming when I come and having the screams reverberate through the paper thin walls and waking up all the neighbours.’

She smiled. ‘As opposed to what exactly? That’s all you ever think about.’

As opposed to, he thought, Toy’s screwed up misery. The endless desperation and depression. The fear and loathing which had become a part of his life.

He carried her into the bedroom and put her on the bed. He touched her stomach. ‘It won’t be showing for a while yet eh?’

She smiled again and shook her head. ‘I think you want to fuck me,’ she said matter-of-factly and took off her green jumper. ‘I think I want to fuck you too.’

‘I want to make love to you,’ he corrected, aware of how corny she thought the phrase sounded in Spanish. ‘We are the romantic ones, not you Spanish.’ He reached down and kissed her. ‘We gave the world the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.’

‘I know the script,’ she interrupted, ‘and we gave it General Franco and the Inquisition. You’ve told me a hundred times,’ she pushed her hands inside his trousers. ‘Stop playing and do something.’

And so he fell on the bed and buried himself inside her. He felt himself digging in, looking for cover. He forgot about everything when he was inside her. Later he woke up and felt the same anxiety. He pushed it down. They stayed in the house for most of the day fucking and eating and listening to music. He felt like a teenager. And there was nothing to worry about. Toy hardly ever walked anywhere. She never
came down this road. By the time she was settled in a different place and with a
different man he would be with Julia and Toy would’ve forgotten all about him.
This, according to the twit, was what Borderlines typically did. They moved on
quickly. Well, anyway. He wasn’t the one with a problem. Perhaps one day they’d
meet in the street and she’d be with the new person in her life and he’d be with Julia
and they could all smile and perhaps be friends. He would just have to keep giving
her a helping hand in the right direction whenever she needed it. All really would be
for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

Except it wasn’t— because in the middle of the night he was awoken from the
dream reverie of a sunlit courtyard full of orange trees. If McKay hadn’t expected the
evening with the man from Dewson Tubes to be an unmitigated success, he was
equally unprepared for the phone call in the middle of the night. Julia was lying next
to him. She had her head on his chest. Very gently he lifted it off. It was a doctor
from the local hospital. McKay could feel a great wave of exhaustion pass over. He
was just glad that he didn’t have to work the next day.
Julia murmured in her sleep. ‘What is it?’

He was already tugging on his trousers. He was glad there was a moon. He didn’t
want the snap of a switch and all that harsh light.

‘An emergency,’ he tried to sound confident. ‘I need to go out. One of our
operatives is in the hospital.’

She was sitting up. She was rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

‘What? What are you talking about? Which hospital?’

‘No, no. It’s nothing. Please go back to sleep, really its nothing. I’ll be back in a
few hours I promise. Everything is alright, really.’

She was starting to get out of bed but he pushed her back in.
‘Christie what is going on? Tell me what’s happening?’

The only thing he could repeat like a mantra was ‘nothing’ and ‘it’s alright.’

It made everything worse.

‘Just tell me what the hell is going on. I just need you to tell me the truth.’

‘I told you, one of our operatives is injured.’ He was pushing his feet into his shoes not bothering to undo the laces. ‘I need to go and see what the problem is.’

‘Why you?’ She was sitting up in bed. ‘Why can’t they send somebody else? Why is it always you?’

‘I don’t know. There doesn’t seem to be anybody else. I don’t think anybody else will come.’

She fell back under the duvet.

‘I don’t want this type of life,’ she said. ‘I didn’t come over here to have this type of life. You told me you’d quit. And now you are back doing that horrible job! I’m pregnant and you keep leaving in the middle of the night.’

McKay looked at her sad, frightened face. He pulled on his shoes and thought about the horrors that lay ahead. That cunt Nigel was supposed to have introduced some levity into the proceedings! What had happened?

‘I’ll be back as soon as I can,’ he said. ‘I’ll phone you later.’ If it carried on like this he would loose everything. Julia pulled the covers over her head. She refused to say goodbye.

When he eventually got to the hospital he found Toy in a room with five other women. She lay propped up in the bed. A tiny, doll like figure swaddled in white. She seemed to be asleep. There was a drip in her arm. Her hair was straggled across the pillows. The room was hot and her forehead looked sweaty. Why were these places always too hot? One of the nurses told him that as well as cutting her wrist she
had also taken pills. The nurse said that she would be moved tomorrow and would have to go home. There were numbers he had to ring. A neighbour had called the cops. There were forms. The nurse, he noticed, was also a Filipino. She was looking at him.

McKay felt that the hospital revealed the same depressing lack of knowledge about self-harmers that he had encountered before. *These attention seekers had done it themselves. They really shouldn’t be here. There are other people here, people who have fallen off building sites and walked under ladders: the deserving sick.*

McKay sat down next to the bed. He muted the phone. In the bed Toy stirred and seemed to register his presence. She held out a tiny hand. She smiled. Both arms were wrapped in bandages. She looked at him. She was speaking. She was beckoning him to put his head closer. He rubbed her hand and felt hot, silent tears moving down his face.

‘I knew you’d come,’ she said. Her voice was weak. ‘I knew you’d come. I want us to be together again like a proper couple. I only went out with Nigel to make you jealous. I don’t care about Nigel. I want us to have a child like a proper couple. I won’t do this again if we can get back together. I want to have a child. I went to the doctor the other week. He said that despite my Endo I could still conceive. It might be possible. You never know. I want to have a child with you.’

He put his face in his hands and closed his eyes. He couldn’t think. All he could see was this tiny person in a large bed. He could see where the blood had seeped through on the bandages. Her nails had blood on them. He could feel his body quietly heaving. He had to hug himself.

‘You’ve got to promise me that you’ll never, ever do anything like this again.’

How many times had he said this? ‘And that you’ll go to the therapy like we agreed.’
Toy was smiling. She clearly thought it was part of a deal.

‘I promise,’ she said. ‘Will you stay for a while?’

He nodded his head. She turned around and closed her eyes.

It was six o’clock in the morning when he rang Julia. He’d received two missed calls from her. Her voice, when he got through, was anxious.

‘Are you okay? I’ve been worried to death about you.’ Her voice was breaking and crying.

‘I’m so sorry,’ he said. ‘I’m really sorry.’
16: Late Call

THINGS COULDN’T GET any worse. That’s what he’d been thinking. He had been marking, late into the night, papers from students who had absolutely no interest in what he was trying to teach, and who gave off unconscious written ‘yawns’ whenever they wrote. He was in the middle of this semi-conscious slush pile and he’d been thinking about Julia and the baby and the fact that he was a father and that this should have been a source of comfort and a joy but somehow simply wasn’t, and he’d been thinking about the awful hospital and the eye-frying white tiles and how he could, now, never leave Toy and yet somehow had to be with Julia and would it be possible, somehow, to live two distinct lives at the same time rather than deal with the tragic fallout which was inevitable anyway and why the fuck did everybody want to make life so complicated and tragic—when Bill rang.

It was nearly twelve. He could hear Julia softly snoring next to him. She was snuggled up and warm and safe. He wasn’t going out, no way was he going out.

‘I have some ideas for my character.’

‘What?’

‘Some ideas.’

‘Bill it’s gone twelve, can we discuss this tomorrow?’

‘No,’ petulant. ‘We can’t, it’s really important. I need to tell you something.’

McKay took a deep breath. ‘What?’

Bill paused and then said: ‘Playing that role gave me a new lease of life. And I don’t think you need to be so worried that what you’re doing is wrong. The truth is only a lie that hasn’t been found out.’

McKay felt an intense weariness flow over his body. He didn’t want to talk to Bill he just wanted to sleep.
‘Where did you get that–Nietzsche?’

‘On a bus somewhere. It’s unimportant but what does matter is that the role has given me a new lease of life. It’s like a fucking miracle! I haven’t drank anything for a month. All I’ve been thinking about is my character.’

‘Your what?’ he yawned.

‘Mentally ill Bill! The way I played that fucked up Spy? It’s really helped me.’

‘Bill it’s…’

‘Laurence Olivier,’ Bill continued, ‘said that he’d played so many parts that he didn’t know who he was anymore.’

‘So?’

‘So that’s the exact opposite of my problem.’

He knew what was coming.

‘I haven’t played enough. And now I get this part and this character, it’s like I can’t stop thinking about him. How he would behave, how he would reconstitute his life?’

‘Look Bill, the great thing about your role,’ he persevered, ‘is that it was one of those great iconic walk on, walk off parts that always leaves the viewer wanting more but…’

‘And that’s exactly it.’

‘Exactly what?’

‘If the viewer wants more why deny him?’

‘I suppose,’ McKay floundered, ‘you can have too much of a good thing?’

Bill ignored this.
‘I’ve always felt,’ he said, ‘that there were so many scenes from movies that I would have liked to have seen developed. You know, the ones that never made it off the cutting room floor, or whatever they use these days. It’s all digital.’

‘But don’t you think they were cut for a reason?’

‘Like the scene’, Bill rambled on, ‘in Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid– when they go to Bolivia? They get off the train and there’s nothing there. Redford walks a bit and steps in a hog’s turd. There’s a guy in the background, a stationmaster. Haven’t you always wondered about his life?’

‘No.’

Bill wasn’t listening, he was ranting. McKay was beginning to abandon his liberal pieties. He was starting to think Bill’s soubriquet ‘Mentally ill Bill’ was there for a reason. He desperately needed to put the phone down, but he couldn’t. He tried, briefly, to think like an American. An American would see the whole thing as a challenge instead of a bag of shit. He tried to be an American and see light at the end of the tunnel. His hopeless and innate Britishness only manufactured more tunnel at the end of the light.

‘Look Bill,’ he said, ‘I’ll ring you tomorrow okay? Just don’t over-egg the pudding.’

He put the phone down. Bill was the drunken porter in Macbeth; that was the size of his ‘part’ and if McKay had anything to say about it, he’d stay the drunken porter.
17: Whale music

They were in the park next to Toy’s flat.

‘I should never have slashed my wrists,’ she said. ‘The food in that hospital was horrible. Shocking. Is that what you do Christie. Get people in hospital and then feed them gravel?’

‘Why did you do it?’ he asked. ‘Just to manipulate me I suppose. Well it worked.’

‘Everything is about you isn’t it,’ she said. ‘I felt like I had to let something out. I was going to explode! Nigel told me a lot of stuff about things I didn’t understand. He’s given me some books to read.’

‘What about?’

‘Getting clean or something. I don’t know. There’s going to be a time when all suffering will end.’

‘Great,’ McKay replied. ‘Keep me posted.’

‘I don’t expect you to believe that. You don’t believe in anything,’ She was perilously close to the truth.

‘Let’s feed the ducks,’ he changed the subject. It was only two weeks since she’d cut her wrists. He had a few hours before he had to go back to Julia. She was now telling him that her landlord had been breaking into her flat in order to masturbate with her underwear. The landlord was a fastidious gay male called Guy. McKay couldn’t imagine anything less likely. He started rubbing his head.

‘I have bought a special camera. I will catch him that way. I will catch him and then I will ring the Evening News and tell everybody that he has been harassing me!’

‘But he hasn’t. You just think he has.’

‘How do you know he hasn’t? I know he has. I just know.’
‘How?’

‘I just do. I can feel it. It’s my intuition.’

‘Right.’ He decided to ignore it. When he was with Toy all he could think about was being back with Julia. When he was with Julia he worried about Toy. They walked up to the shit-smeared iron railings around the pond. He broke off a piece of bread and handed it to her. She threw it at the birds. The grass around the pond was bald and a group of male mallards had upended themselves like floats. They were searching through the muck at the bottom. It didn’t look very deep.

‘He comes into my room, steals my panties and masturbates. I’m telling you!’ She was pulling at his coat and raising her voice. A woman passing with her child in a stroller turned around.

‘That’s simply not true,’ he said.

‘How so? You always side with him. You never side with me. I’m staying here. I’m not walking anymore, I’m tired. You’re not fucking him are you?’

He’d been accused over the years of fucking anything that moved. Her endometriosis and hormonal changes had made it worse. When he couldn’t stand it any longer he started feeling that fucking everybody might not be a bad solution. *I started sleeping around because she kept on endlessly accusing me of sleeping around.*

‘Yes,’ he was annoyed. ‘I am fucking him. I couldn’t resist. What do you fucking think?’

‘Don’t swear. You don’t have to swear. Not in front of the children.’ Toy pointed to a Pakistani mother and her three children. The woman was modestly attired and partially veiled. He could feel his own rage welling up. He had told Julia that he was ‘meeting a friend.’ He held his breath. ‘I’m going to have a walk around the lake.
Why don’t you wait for me here? You can watch the boats or feed the ducks. Look at that kid playing with that model boat.’

She was sitting on a bench sulking. ‘I’m not a fucking child,’ she said and then mimicked his voice. ‘Look at that kid playing with the model boat.’

‘I’ll be back in a minute. Just relax here.’

‘Just relax here! Are you going to ring your girlfriend on your trip around the lake Christie?’

Yes, he was.

‘Don’t be silly,’ he said. ‘The only girlfriend I have is you. You know that.’

He left her sitting on the metal bench and started off on his walk. It was probably about half a mile around the small, horseshoe-shaped lake. There was an artificial island in the middle of the water. When the island was directly between them he’d ring Julia. He needed to ring her. It was only as the distance between him and Toy increased that he started to relax and breathe. It was stupid, getting all worked up like this. He noticed that he was walking too fast and willed himself to slow down. His breathing became more regular. The island in the middle of the lake had now eclipsed Toy, and provided he was quick, he would be able to make a call.

He was about to phone when he saw a small group of people gathered around a part of the pond surrounded by rhododendrons and weeping willow. Probably some kid had fallen in the water and they were pulling him out. He quickened his pace. What were they doing just standing there? Why wasn’t anybody doing anything? He started jogging and then he started running. What was going on? Surely Toy was not in the pond. What was happening? What was going on? As he got closer he could hear a flapping. There was a honking. He saw now that there were three swans. He had seen a male and a female earlier when they had been giving bread to the ducks
and now this same pair had been joined by a larger, more aggressive male. The large male was mounting the smaller female and the smaller male was looking on helplessly. The larger male had nearly submerged the female. It had grasped her neck with its beak. The smaller male was unable to do anything. It was looking on.

McKay pushed himself through the crowd and felt the lump of stone in his pocket. He pulled it out and threw it as hard as he could at the larger bird. There was a cacophony of noise from the disappointed spectators and the birds were briefly scattered. He could see a park keeper coming towards him.

‘What the fuck mate? What the fuck’s wrong with you?’ Somebody was grabbing at his arm. A shove in the back. ‘You’re fucking crazy dickhead. That’s nature. You should just leave the birds alone.’ He started walking away. His eyes brimming. People were pointing at him. The park keeper was probably going to fine him. He could feel everything welling up. He could remember the beach. He could remember the tattoo of the church with the onion dome. The man standing over him with a bottle of vodka. He remembered the bottle smashing into his face. He heard Toy screaming as they dragged her behind the dunes. His chest was tight and he needed to breathe.

Looking around the park he couldn’t see her. He wiped the tears from his eyes. Take deep breaths. Calm. Had she gone home? Perhaps she had fallen into the lake and couldn’t swim. Well she could swim, but perhaps the mud had sucked her down. Perhaps her tiny…

‘What the fuck is the matter with you?’

She was behind him. She was smiling. She was laughing.

‘I’ve been hiding behind that tree. I was watching you. You looked like a silly old git. Didn’t you see me?’
He went over and held her.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ she asked

‘Are you alright?’

‘Of course I’m alright,’ she was back to her other self, ‘what the hell is wrong with you?’
18: Going Home

WEEKENDS WERE MORE dangerous than weekdays. At weekends Julia wanted to wander around. She wanted to walk and look at old shops. She liked sitting on pavements in full view of everybody. Toy would only have to walk past once.

Safer, then, to use this particular weekend to take her on a little trip to his home town of Southbridge: a Shropshire market town that he hardly visited anymore and which felt full of ghosts. His mother’s old house, which he rented out, was managed by an estate agent called Doolittle and Dally. The name irritated him immensely. It was simply impossible to explain to a global soul like Julia, who had grown up in Madrid, and whose parents had passed through the Franco years and who had herself experienced Almodovar and the Madrid Madrilena, what it had been like growing up in a beautiful market town dump like Southbridge. Southbridge was in a river valley surrounded by sandstone cliffs. The town was a black and white half-timbered trip into nostalgia. People Morris Danced at festivals. They made coracles and spun them down the river. There were hanging baskets and Britain in Bloom prizes for all the gardens. McKay had hated it.

They’d wandered over the town. She had told him about La Serpienta and the Parque de Atracciones in Madrid and how she had always loved going there as a child. He tried to dampen her enthusiasm for Southbridge. He told her about ‘Mogs Marvels.’ Mog was an old paedophile with a puppet show. ‘He tried to get me in the public toilet with him once. I was a tousled haired little boy. He had wee stains down his trousers. They were brown and filthy.’

She only laughed and frowned and shook her head. Seemingly nothing could dent the charm of the manure.
‘You have led an interesting life. I want to know everything about you. Come on tell me! What was your mother like?’

McKay looked away. All the years and he still felt it. All the years and he still found it difficult to talk about.

‘She was called Edwina,’ he finally said. ‘Edwina Myfanwy. It’s a Welsh name. Myfanwy means “my little lovely one.”’ He swallowed and felt his eyes water. He felt the warmth of her hand in his own.

She whispered, ‘Did your mother die in that house?’

‘She did,’ he replied. ‘It took a long time. I was the only carer because I was the only child.’

They walked in silence and McKay pointed out the local library. ‘I used to come here a lot when she was ill. It was comforting. I’d have a break and a Macmillan nurse would pop round. The books helped.’ He didn’t go on to tell her that his addiction to prostitutes had started back then and that that had helped even more. He didn’t tell her that he had driven out to a large city and picked up street whores. ‘My father deserted my mother when I was seven,’ he continued. ‘Since you want to know “everything” he was a Vet. We used to drive out to deserted truck stops to meet him. I used to think he was a Spy. I told other children he was.’

‘So that was when it all started.’

He felt a brief flash of worry but then smiled. She made sense where none existed. He couldn’t keep lying. He needed to tell her. She was pregnant with his child. She was the mother of his child. She didn’t deserve any of it and neither did Toy.

‘Sort of,’ he hedged.

He turned himself into a local historian and mixed up the personal with the political. He showed her when he had once, as a child, fallen over and cratered his
knee. ‘Look at the hole you’ve made falling’ said an old woman who was called Miss Arthur. He’d gone on falling. He told her how the old Firehouse had once been a sports shop called ‘Ken Hardwick and Sons: Sports and Games.’ He told her how, as a child, he had painted out the ‘w’ in wick and replaced it with a ‘d’ in dick. He’d been caught by the local cop who’d told him he’d turn out to be a drug addict with green eyes. She looked at him, smiled and shook her head. When she went on about the ‘romantic’ English countryside he told her how he had lost his virginity in a field, in the middle of winter and next to an iron-hard cowpat. That didn’t dampen the pastoral either.

They then went on a pub crawl. They went to The Carpenters Arms, The Bricklayers Arms, The Miners Arms and The Farmers Arms. They went to The Goat, The Bull and The Holly Bush. They went to The Kings Head, The Queens Head and The Shakespeare. Then they did The Black Boy with its newly painted, politically correct, chimney sweep. Apart from drink what did people do here she wanted to know? He didn’t tell her that as far as he knew, and to the citizens of Southbridge, it was the examined life that wasn’t worth living. He did tell her that William Cobbett had mentioned Southbridge in his celebrated Rural Rides. He didn’t tell her that he had gone on to call it a ‘corrupt and villainous hole.’ He told her that after buying fish and chips it was traditional to stroll around the Castle walk and chuck the half-eaten chip packets into the gardens of the houses on the precipitous ledges beneath the walk. They did exactly that. He smiled. He felt happy. It was a warm day and he was walking around with this glamorous Spanish woman who, even when she was casually attired as she now was in blue denim and cowboy boots, looked like she’d fallen off the pages of a fashion magazine. The sun was definitely shining down.
Later they found themselves inside the cosy old fire of The Black Boy. The landlord clearly hadn’t quite understood the spirit of the original decision. Was changing the sign to a chimney sweep really acceptable? The dancing flames, the single malt and a beautiful woman who was hanging on his every word stirred him into feelings long forgotten. He actually felt happy. He was in love with this woman, he was really in love, and it was only when he was about to start another boyhood yarn about the glory days that he suddenly became aware that a short barrel of a man was staring at him. He stared back and then, with something approaching a sickening lurch, realized who it was. Fucking hicks and ignorant bigots! He should have stayed at home.

‘Oh my God,’ he said and made an overly theatrical gesture of lifting his hand to his mouth. ‘My God Peter! How the hell are you?’ He feigned warmth and ecstatic remembrance. He went over to the other side of the pub and took Julia with him. ‘How long have you been here? I mean, I didn’t even see you.’ That was a lie.

‘Not too bad,’ replied a man called Peter Barlow. And if ‘not too bad’ meant looking as straggly as a goat and with ravaged skin, blood-curdled eyes and significant hair loss, then Peter really was ‘not too bad.’ He looked as broke as he always did and his voice sounded like it had just swallowed a moraine. What the hell had the man been doing since they had last met? The same fuck-all as always.

‘This is my partner Julia,’ McKay smiled. ‘Julia, Peter. We went to school together.’

‘Please to meet you,’ the man replied in exaggerated courtesy and extended a ragged claw covered in eczema. ‘You’re looking well,’ Peter Barlow observed and winked. McKay had been going to the gym. In his mid-forties, still in good shape. He also had a full head of hair rather than the shiny pate and the brown Hula skirt.
that Peter sported. Compared to Barlow he did look well. He excused himself and
went in search of the toilet and when he returned found Barlow already talking to
Julia. Disturbingly, he then remembered the last time they had met. Years ago and
with Toy. It was during the Southbridge summer festival. He had taken her to the
raft race on the river. BM. Before millennium.

‘I guess you must have split up with Toy then?’

The man remembered everything.

‘Yes, quite a while back. It’s been a glorious day hasn’t it? Julia’s from Madrid.
I’ve been worried all day it was going to rain. You know what this place is like.’

‘That’s a shame about Toy,’ Barlow replied, completely ignoring him. ‘She was
such a beautiful girl.’ The man was musing and smiling and rubbing his chin. ‘And I
thought you were finally going to get married. You seemed so in love at the time.
Mind you that’s modern life for you isn’t it? People come, people go. Marriages
don’t last, nothing does.’

This conversation was lasting McKay reflected. He could feel every slow minute
of it burning down to eternity. Julia went to the bar to collect the drinks.

‘Lovely bit of stuff,’ said Barlow and as if they were still old friends, ‘You are
doing well!’

‘How’s your wife? How’s Julie?’ he kicked it back. *Bit of stuff! Fucking hayseed.*

‘Left me for another bloke,’ said Peter, without pausing. ‘Took all the kids. Best
thing that ever happened.’

‘Yes,’ said McKay, trying desperately trying to find common ground. ‘I
understand.’

‘I’m very friendly with the other bloke,’ Peter continued. ‘He owns a Safari park.
He gives me free tickets to all the new attractions.’
‘Oh well,’ McKay smiled. ‘That’s nice of him isn’t it?’

‘He lives in his own castle with Julie.’ He turned to Julia, who had returned and said, ‘but I get to see all the new attractions.’

Peter Barlow had obviously had some kind of terrible car accident and was now waiting to die in Southbridge.

‘I read your last book,’ the man said. ‘A number of years ago wasn’t it? I didn’t like it much to be honest. Well, there you go, I suppose you can’t like everything.’

‘No, you can’t,’ said McKay, surprised at actually having met a reader and in such an unlikely outpost.

‘I went and lost it,’ Barlow continued. ‘I tried to buy it for my son but the bookshops don’t stock it. Is it out of print?’

‘Yes,’ said McKay gritting his teeth. ‘You could probably get a second hand copy off the web pretty easily.’

‘Oh I don’t think I’ll bother. As I said I didn’t like it that much. It’s about a guy,’ the man turned to Julia, ‘who is looking after this dying woman. The dying woman is his mother. She has cancer. When the nurse comes around he goes out to a red light district and fucks a load of whores. What kind of dirty bloke would do that while his own mother was dying of cancer?’

McKay felt the aggression in the question. Perhaps they’d never been friends.

‘Probably somebody who was having a difficult time of it,’ Julia answered forcefully. ‘Probably somebody who wanted some flesh.’ She was looking at the man with steel in her face. McKay felt his heart melting. He was so used to having to stick up for himself that he found it genuinely shocking to see somebody else weighing in on his behalf. He had already formed an image of a lone man in a safari
park with baboons shitting all over his car. He wouldn’t have to use it. As they were leaving Peter Barlow tried to blow some life into the dying embers.

‘Christ the drugs we used to do in those days eh Christie? Before you went off to Oxford. Before you became respectable and left us all behind! Do you remember that time in the field when you tried to fuck a goat? And your old man. What was it that everybody called him? Old piss pants wasn’t it?’

So much for the embers. McKay ignored the taunts and shepherded Julia out of the pub. God knows what he had done, probably something.

‘Give my regards to Toy,’ said Peter, raising his glass and smiling at them both. Of all the bars in all the world Peter Barlow had had to walk into his. Peter had told him, McKay now remembered, that he had been planning to leave Southbridge. He had been saying this for half his life.

‘So who is Toy?’ said a professionally disinterested Julia when he was later driving around the remains of a sad thumb of rock which optimistically billed itself ‘Southbridge Castle.’ It was the remains of a lump obliterated by Oliver Cromwell.

‘So who was she?’ She was still looking at him.

He couldn’t bring himself to say, ‘Nobody.’ She hadn’t been nobody and she still wasn’t.

‘She was my ex-girlfriend,’ he finally replied. ‘All over now.’

This clearly wasn’t good enough.

‘I’m amazed that you never talked about her before,’ Julia said, and in that forensic female way of practised nonchalance which reveals to the alert male that there will be a whole posse of questions soon jostling themselves for first place.

‘Why didn’t you?’
‘Didn’t think I needed to begin a total archaeology of my life,’ he replied, a little defensively.

‘Well if you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t want to talk about it,’ she smiled and looked away.

‘It would be lovely to live here,’ she changed tack. She was now looking around.

He guessed that she had finally learned there was something seriously wrong, but didn’t know what. And neither did she want to confront it right away. Erratic behaviour generates suspicion.

‘Why don’t we try to live in your old house?’ she now said. ‘You never seemed relaxed in Merlin. You are always on edge back there. You can write and finish your book here. You can teach part time for a year and finish it here. What do you think?’ McKay gently smiled. He was happy that she had changed the subject but the idea appalled him. As a child he’d suffered long summers of stultifying boredom growing up in Southbridge. Hanging around. That’s what you did in small towns. Until you could get the hell out. There was a town in Spain called Albacete. It too was in the middle of nowhere. The Spanish had a fixed expression for it, ‘Albecete, caga y vete’ which literally meant: ‘Albecete: shit and go away.’ Well, he had shat and he had gone away. Permanently. Peter Barlow would never leave Southbridge and they’d always meet. He’d always be wondering what he had done to offend Peter and he’d never be able to remember. ‘Perhaps we could spend a summer here,’ he compromised, ‘before I sell the place.’ She just looked at him and smiled.

‘Perhaps,’ she replied.
HE HAD BEEN sitting in the Senior Common Room reading a questionnaire. Seemingly therapists were everywhere. And if work made you ill, couldn’t it also make you better? The questionnaire was from a company that promoted ‘life and relationship skills,’ and which claimed to change the ‘scripts’ that ‘limit our productivity at work.’ In answer to the question: ‘What are your major life issues? How can we help you to be more productive?’—he wrote, ‘I would like to be less productive. I have two women in my life. One is pregnant with my child and hates lies and deceit of any kind. Eighty percent of my communication with this woman, whom I love, is based on them. She thinks I’m a Spy. Sometimes I pretend to go out on dangerous missions in order to comfort the other woman who claims not to be able to live without me. This necessitates leaving the first woman. I don’t know if the woman whom I love believes this Spy crap, but I hired a mentally ill, underemployed former actor to pretend to be a Spy friend in order to further the illusion. He now wants to continue playing the part. My friends all think I’m mad. The two women live within spitting distance and I commute like a pinball between them, ricocheting around all over the place and being supportive of the second woman who has self-harmed, because she was once raped on a beach near the Straits of Hormuz. I introduced this girl to a man called Nigel who belongs to a weird cult and who may only be after her money. She doesn’t have any. This has made me even more concerned for her. The other woman whom I am now living with is pregnant with my child. I am not sure how I feel about this. How can I get the actor to date the cult job and in so doing get rid of them both? How can I make sure my old girlfriend is
alright? How can I stop pretending I am a Spy? How can I make sure my new girlfriend will never find out about any of this? I believe I am not being productive at work— frankly I don’t even like work. Yours, a confused, frightened and befuddled, middle-aged loser.

When he had finished writing, McKay put down the pen. He had been feeling momentarily relaxed but then became aware that a little old lady was staring at him. He was sitting down and she was moving over to his table having obviously decided that there was nothing worth eating in the senior doofus room. The Granny had bristly hair like a badger with a black and white stripe. As she approached, it was apparent that there was a mole with a couple of hairs on her right cheek. A podgy body and skinny arms and legs. A pearl necklace and a flowery dress completed the ensemble.

‘Professor McKay, I don’t believe we’ve met’ the woman said, approaching and sitting down uninvited. ‘My name is Janet McKinley. I’m Bill’s art therapist. I’m up here on a Conference. He mentioned that you worked here. I hope I’m not bothering you?’

It was impossible. Somebody up there was just taking the piss. How could Bill’s art therapist be at a Conference in Merlin? On the Conference circuit, it wasn’t even in the back of beyond. It was past the fucking Event Horizon. What kind of Conference was she attending? He was reassured when he saw that she was smiling. And it was more than smiling. She was looking at him as if he were a miracle of modern science. A pure embodiment of wholesomeness and Christian virtue.

Beaming at him like a dopey advert for good old-fashioned bread.

‘I have to say Janet that I don’t really know what this is about.’
‘Professor McKay,’ the woman continued. ‘Professor McKay. Professor McKay.
Professor McKay.’ She smiled again. McKay started to wonder if she was
Alzheimic.

‘If you only knew, if you only knew.’

‘Knew what Janet?’

‘About Bill. About what a tonic you have been for him. About all the things you
have achieved. It’s truly a miracle.’

McKay had been about to cut into a particularly gruesome slice of stringy beef.

He looked up.

‘What miracle?’ He put the knife down. His appetite had gone.

‘Do you know,’ Janet said. ‘I’ve been involved with Bill for nearly ten years.’

She stopped and reflected. McKay wanted to ask her if this was why she looked
so old and haggard. He kept quiet.

‘And I’ve never seen him so happy. Never before has he stayed sober for so long.
You’ve turned his life around. Finally he can begin to live, finally he can begin to
grow.’ The woman looked at him with bright, adoring eyes.

‘What is your secret Professor McKay?’

‘Secret? I don’t have a secret.’

‘Of course you do. And you know what happened to Bill don’t you?’

McKay lowered his head. For some reason he felt ashamed.

‘I sort of do.’

‘Three children all burnt to death. Terrible tragedy. He couldn’t save them.
Blames himself. Wife whom he adored just upped and gone. And that left poor Bill
with nothing,’ the woman paused, ‘except you. Do you know he’s been drawing the
same picture for twelve years?’
‘Really?’

‘Yes, when he gets drunk. A farm house all falling apart. I can’t even describe his drawings Professor. They are like Guernica or something. Truly horrible.’

You should see mine, McKay thought, and finally cut the beef. He didn’t know what to say.

‘And guess what?’

‘What?’

‘He’s stopped drawing them now. He said he’s finally found work in your amateur theatre company. And I just think it’s wonderful that you’ve given him the main part.’

‘Well I…do you really think it’s wise for him to give up art like that?’

Janet McKinley pressed on. She had grabbed hold of McKay’s hands and she was squeezing them. ‘Too many people these days think that people like Bill are just invisible. They press the delete button, or sort of put them on hold permanently. But you know what I say?’

He could guess.

‘There but for the grace of God go I, or you, or anybody else for that matter! You probably don’t know this professor, but you are only one step away from a horrible life of degradation and shame.’ He did know it.

‘That’s very interesting Janet but I don’t see…’

‘I’m just saying thank you for being one of the people who cares, one of the people who isn’t just grubbing about for money or their own ends. Bill’s recovery is nothing short of miraculous! There’s no other word for it! God bless you Professor McKay! And the woman had reached out and kissed him on both cheeks before standing up and waving goodbye.
After Janet McKinley had left, McKay looked down at the gravy that was solidifying on his plate. He looked at the beef and the chips. He looked at the dollops of nursery food and the apple pie floating in a pond of lukewarm custard. He could feel a dry heave coming on. Why did God have such a disagreeable sense of humour? He retreated to his office and closed and locked the door. He opened the locker and took out the half-finished bottle of Macallan. He didn’t bother pouring it into the plastic cup but swigged it straight. When he put the Inhaler to his nose he was disappointed to find that it was empty.
‘I WANT TO TALK about this Toy,’ Julia said. He knew this was coming because she had just made him a fruit salad. Whenever she wanted to ask something awkward she came on with the fruit salad. Plus she was on the sofa and they had happily just watched Cheats, an American reality show. It was Monday evening. He was back at work and surrounded by a new system for submitting student’s grades which he didn’t understand. The last thing he wanted to do was talk about Toy whom, as far as he could tell, was now loved up with Nigel. So what if the man was part of some wacky cult, he was at least finally keeping her amused. And she had also finally been granted leave to remain in the UK. The last thing he wanted to do was revisit all that.

Even so. The episode of ‘Cheats’ featured a man who had been involved with two women. The programme brought out the extensive lies the man had told but not the motivation behind them. The motivation was simply thought to be greed. There was an engineered confrontation involving all parties. A car park scene and a salutary conclusion. Lying was bad.

‘I thought it was interesting,’ Julia now said. ‘And I just started thinking about her.’ She was sitting on the sofa in her black leggings and pink top. She had been adapting fairly well to life in the UK. Yes, thought McKay, she was doing pretty well. Nevertheless, he knew what was coming.

‘Her name wasn’t Toy,’ he said, turning away from his editing of a final version of a paper he was planning to give on Don Quixote. ‘It’s Loi. Toy’s only a nickname.’

‘And she was from the Philippines?’

‘Yes. We were together in Dubai.’
‘And you split up with her?’
‘Yes,’ he smiled, ‘back in Dubai.’
‘And where does she live now?’
‘I’m not sure,’ he pretended to reflect. To be a successful liar you had to convince yourself you were telling the truth. This wasn’t always easy.
‘I think she may be in the Philippines.’
‘So you haven’t seen her for a while then?’
‘No,’ he attempted a smile. ‘She came once to the UK on a visit. That’s when Barlow met her. It’s all so long ago.’ He tried to give off a reassuring air of domestic normalcy. The expression was meant to be indicative of supreme indifference, to reflect a charmed surprise that she was even interested.
‘You must have been pretty serious about her to bring her back to England.’
‘Well you know. Times change, people change’ Not according to his ex-wife who claimed he would ‘never change.’
‘So what happened?’
He held up his hands. Another open-handed, emotionally detached gesture. ‘We simply fell out of love. We weren’t meant for one another.’
‘Why? Do you still love her?’ She was looking at him. She was deadly serious. Julia used glasses to read and they made her look like a secretary in a porn film. It had been one of their kinks. Now, however, she’d taken off the glasses and was chewing on the end.
He decided to bluster it out.
‘Of course not! ’ He stood up, went over to her and embraced her.
‘What’s got into you?’ he said and she wiped a tear away from her cheek.
‘Oh nothing,’ she replied embracing him. ‘I’m sorry. My ex told me a lot of lies. He had another woman. I guess I have what the Americans call trust issues, fear of abandonment. I don’t know. I’m in a new city, away from my family for the first time in ages and I’m pregnant. I’m feeling a little isolated to be honest.’

He stopped her from apologising and immediately went on the offensive. He couldn’t lose her. And especially since Toy now had somebody else. He told her that he was sorry he had neglected her and that he had something to tell her. It was something important.

‘What?’ she said looking up at him.

It was time to stop lying.

‘I’m thinking or getting out from the service,’ he managed. ‘It’s taken me away from you for too many times. I don’t like having to get up in the middle of the night and all this crap. And I can teach full time if I want.’

‘That would be wonderful,’ she said smiling and as if unwilling to believe it. Can you do that?’

‘Why not? Plenty of people do. I’ve been thinking about it for some time.’

It must be next to impossible, he could here McGrath talking. To get out of something you were never in. How do you do that? He cradled her head on his lap and brushed her golden hair from her forehead. He kissed the dimple she had just above her left eye. Things were working out but she still looked troubled.

‘If you really think so,’ she said doubtfully.

He kissed her again and talked about a wedding. He made jokes about having her in a white dress and pregnant. She did not want a white wedding, finding them, at her age ‘ridiculous.’ He stood up from the sofa and went into the bedroom and that was when he heard the trill from his mobile. He had forgotten to mute it.
‘I see,’ he suddenly heard himself saying. A blast of cold air.

‘Well, you’ll have to do what you see fit.’

‘No, no, that’s fine. Okay see you soon.’ He turned the phone off and hid it in his shoe rack. He went back to the living room.

She smiled at him but he didn’t say anything. He amplified the domestic noise.

‘My editor,’ he said, before returning to the computer.

‘I think I’ll go to bed,’ Julia said and came over and kissed him. ‘We have a check-up tomorrow. You haven’t forgotten have you?’

‘No,’ he smiled, ‘I haven’t forgotten.’

When she had gone into the other room he put his head in his hands. He then rubbed his right hand up and down his mouth and straightened his posture. ‘I know you have another woman,’ the voice had screamed. ‘I know you went to Southbridge. I know where you live!’

He had cut her off.

That fucker Barlow! He was simply stunned. It was probably the Internet, some social network. And he still couldn’t remember how he had offended the man.

Later in the evening he woke Julia who had gone to bed early. He was loathe to do it, but there was no other way.

‘Get dressed,’ he said, ‘you need to get dressed.’

She rubbed her eyes and he turned on the light.

‘Something’s come up,’ he continued. ‘We really need to leave.’

‘What? What’s going on?’ she was frightened.

‘It’s nothing,’ he repeated. ‘Honestly.’ She was asking questions and slowly rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Surprise soon gave way to anger and irritation. She wanted to know what the fucking hell was going on. When he saw that she was at
least up and putting clothes into a bag he went through the hall and into the living room. He quickly pinched a curtain and peeked into the gloom of the street. He had been right to wake her up. The voice was now screaming and a lonely figure was flailing her arms in the middle of the street. Lights were snapping on, neighbours were opening windows and starting to rumble. Turning around he could see that Julia had entered the room. This was it. All of the lies would be shattered. Everything was coming to an end.

‘Another drunk,’ she said. ‘God, don’t they get tired of it. I know I do!’

‘Me too,’ he replied, feeling like a small miracle had just occurred. ‘We can get out the back way.’

‘I need you to tell me what this is all about Christie. I’m serious.’

‘I will,’ he replied. ‘Just one thing, did you tell Peter Barlow where we lived?’

‘I did,’ she replied, looking scared. ‘I thought it was weird after the way he acted. Why ask for a person’s address if you are going to…’

‘Well, it doesn’t matter now,’ he said, hurrying her along.

They were half inside the car when Toy eventually saw them. She had started to run when a flashing blue light appeared and another vehicle swerved up, cutting her off. The policewoman must have felt that she was running away, for she gave chase and Toy was tackled to the ground in a sickening crunch. God, what did they think she was, a fucking terrorist? McKay wanted to run to her but he also desperately wanted to get away. She was screaming his name repeatedly and pointing. Julia was looking at Toy and trying to hear what was being said. She could probably hear the word ‘Christie,’ and then the cops helpfully muffled the noise by shoving her into the back of the car. The car drove away and Toy’s angry, accusing face, flashed past; a face shouting insults and pointed at them both.
'What the hell was that? Who the hell was that? What the hell is going on?' Julia was staring at him. The bags that she had packed had fallen to the ground. She looked bewildered. He felt himself crumpling. It wasn’t something exploding inside but a gradual collapse of will power. He couldn’t go on torturing her. The more he tortured her, the more he tortured himself. She was pregnant and she was scared. She could lose the baby. He would have to tell her. There simply was no other way out. The truth would have to come out.

‘I think we’re going nowhere,’ he said. ‘I think it’s probably too late.’ He lifted her bags out of the car and felt a great, dreary weight of defeat.

‘Let’s go back inside the house,’ he said.

It had taken him a while to settle Julia back down. He had been meaning to tell her the truth but when he opened his mouth he found himself talking about a former disgruntled employee who had been harassing him. He could tell that she didn’t believe a word of it. She would get some rest and then pursue the matter in the morning. When she was finally asleep he went round to Toy’s.

The house hadn’t actually detonated. True she had thrown things around, mostly her own things. She had smashed his picture on the wall and ripped up photographs. Some of his old CDs had been trampled into the floor and were lying around like jagged shards of glass. Two old jackets that had been hanging in the closet were now hanging in shreds. He never wore them anyway. The good thing was that she hadn’t cut herself. He had got off lightly. Having found out, she was still in a state of high rage, but it was seemingly coupled with a sense of resignation. The worst had happened—and now that it had, it wasn’t actually that bad. She was looking at herself in the hall mirror.
‘I’m still sexy. Lots of people would find me sexy,’ she observed.
‘Of course you are.’

He had his eyes closed. Perhaps if he just kept his eyes closed.
‘You know you have grey hair. You look like an old dog. Distinguished Professor? Why do they use that? Extinguished I would say.’

‘That’s great,’ he said moving towards the door. ‘I think I should go now. You now know the truth.’

‘That’s it?’ she was following him out of the house and into the cool night air.

‘Is that all you can fucking say? What are you gonna do now? Go back to licking the puki of your stinking Spanish girlfriend? How pathetic Christie that you choose somebody older than me. You can’t even get that right!’

He was trying to get out of the front door and she was holding on to him. They walked out of the narrow alley between the garage and the house and then they were in the middle of the street and she was screaming, enumerating all his faults for the whole world to hear. He was dragging her around like an anchor.

‘That’s all you care about. Your stinking reputation! Always pushing me to take courses so I could be like that stupid whore of an ex-wife. Always telling me I’m stupid. Always making me feel inadequate.’

He managed to disentangle himself from her and started running. She started chasing. He ran faster. He heard her screaming behind him. He looked down at his feet. The tarmac was ending, and he was suddenly running on sand. His feet were splashing through dark tide pools. He could hear her shouting. He kept running. He heard crying. He kept moving, speeding through the night. He ran down several streets and back tracked to make sure she wasn’t following. He felt like an animal running from a hunt. He finally pulled up at a large pub that had been a regular
watering hole. There was noise and people and light and he needed a drink. A drink
wouldn’t hurt. The Inhaler would have been a whole lot better but he didn’t have it.

At the counter he ordered a large Malbec. He threw it back and ordered another.
The room was nice and fuzzy. Warm fun, life filled people who bobbed up and down
like corks in a stream. Individual conversations started to merge into a shapeless
noise. He started to rehearse. The voice of artificial calm. He would explain
everything. He had another Malbec and his voice continued. ‘You’re both getting
overexcited. I know I should have told you but anyway, Toy you have Nigel and… ’
After the fourth Malbec he was dizzy. ‘Yes, I’m not actually James Bond, yes love. It
sort of snowballed. No, I do love you. No, I wasn’t “seeing Toy” as you put it and we
had broken up anyway.’ The rehearsing went on for nearly an hour. He had several
more drinks. Everything sounded false and wrong. He walked out of the pub. There
was a taxi outside and people moving around. There were packs of young men
strutted about, all wearing the same clothes. You moved in and out of things at that
age with such light-souled nonchalance: relationships not curdled and clinging and
desperate and sad.

He groped his way out of the pub and started walking. The walk back to Julia’s
felt so long and heavy. Finally he saw lights and turned into the small street where
they lived. The packrat on the corner had his lights on. McKay could briefly see
inside his fortified domain. Tunnels and stuffing. McKay wanted to crawl inside the
packrat’s house and never come out. They would just stay there together like a
couple of old pearls and gradually produce a defensive shell all around them. When
she answered the door he held her. He buried himself in her. He pushed his nose into
her hair.

‘Jogging.’
‘In your normal clothes?’

‘Impromptu.’ He wasn’t listening. He pushed himself into his apartment and flung himself onto the sofa. He buried his face in the pillow. He pushed his eyes into the pillow. He wanted darkness and oblivion.

He woke up in a nightmare, only it seemed to be real. It was early morning. Toy and Julia were sitting at the table looking at him sprawled on the sofa. Cold, hard light. He had just come round but everything was woozy and the room was still swimming.

‘He’s not a Spy,’ said Toy, looking at Julia. What had happened? Toy was sitting next to Julia. They were drinking tea and getting chatty and they were both looking at him with remote and resigned distaste. It was the remoteness of that distaste that frightened him the most. All he could remember was going to the pub and having a drink and then another drink and then another. He shouldn’t drink. He should never drink. Always stick to coke. Always stick to coke.

He had gone to Toy’s that was the only other thing. She must have followed him home.

‘He can’t find anything,’ Toy said. ‘He’s disorganized. Couldn’t put up a curtain. He’s totally cack-handed.’

He pushed himself up and felt a wet patch on the back of his head.

‘You hit me,’ he said accusingly to Toy.

‘I wish I had,’ she replied. ‘Unfortunately you slipped and knocked yourself out on the edge of the bathroom cupboard. That’s not James Bond Christie. He doesn’t do that. I don’t think the ambulance is coming. We called it about four hours ago.’

Four hours! They had been together for four hours!

‘I can’t believe this,’ Julia was saying. ‘I just can’t believe it.’
‘You’d better start believing it,’ said Toy. ‘This is what he does all the time, makes up shit. He’s a writer. That’s what they do. He hasn’t been able to do it for a while. That’s probably what he was doing. Making it up as he went along.’

‘Jesus,’ said Julia, ‘You are a monster.’

‘Listen, darling,’ he started pedalling furiously. He sat up. ‘I love you. Please believe me. I didn’t want to hurt either of you.’

‘Listen, darling,’ Toy mimicked him and it sounded wheedling and pathetic. It was wheedling and pathetic. They were both sitting together comforting themselves and looking at him as if he were impossibly alien.

‘Why didn’t you just tell me?’ Toy interrupted. ‘I got it from Peter Barlow. You fucked his wife Christie? In your twenties? You had a themed party called “Farmyard.” You thought it would be fun to have sex with Peter’s wife while she was dressed up as a sheep. He came in on you while you were “tupping” her. Is that the word, “tupping”?

‘My God I am with crazy people,’ Julia said, ‘Crazy people.’

‘I didn’t do anything,’ Toy helpfully reminded her. Julia was shaking her head. McKay couldn’t believe that Toy was putting her arms around her. Something was wrong with his whole perception. He tried to reach out but was soundly rebuffed by both women who were comforting each other.

‘I just want to go home,’ Julia said. ‘This is a nightmare.’

‘Of course you do,’ said Toy, who was being all grown-up for once. ‘Let me get your coat.’

‘Why didn’t you just tell me?’ Julia was looking at him. ‘I just can’t understand why you didn’t tell me. Why didn’t you just tell Toy that you wanted to be with me?'
Simple. Instead of seeing both of us and having your cake and eat it. Is that the expression? You were having your cake and fucking eat it at the same time!’

‘No, no, no, no, we were on a beach and…’ he found himself stumbling. It was difficult to get the words out. ‘Something bad happened to us on a beach. I should have. They. I should have dealt with it! These Russians. They were gangsters. They attacked us and…’ He burbled some more sounds but they were badly mangled.

‘What nonsense are you trying to talk now?’ Julia was staring at him, her angry, hard eyes made it impossible to continue.

‘So you were on a beach with Russian gangsters? What is this? More Bond? I don’t understand. You couldn’t leave Toy because of gangsters? What are you talking about all the time! I know about Russians. We have them in Madrid too. How come you managed to get away? How come you are still here?’

‘They tied my hands I managed…’ his voice had collapsed.

‘Oh you mean like Bill?’

‘No, not like Bill! I’m telling you the…’

‘You’re telling me more lies, that’s what you’re telling me! I want to leave. I don’t want to stay here anymore. Christie we need to talk.

McKay turned. He was going to appeal to Toy who was silent and looking away. He just couldn’t do it.

‘Is this all true?’ said Julia, turning to Toy, ‘is any of it true?’

Toy was looking at the floor.

‘Thought not,’ said Julia. ‘Your silence says it all.’
IT HAD TAKEN her a week to get a flight sorted. She had stayed in a city centre hotel. It was now all or nothing. Do or Die. He was going to lose the woman he loved. She would soon be at the departure gate. They would hug and say goodbye forever. The plastic chairs outside the deli where they had sat down for breakfast were hard and unwelcoming. There was a man in front pushing around an industrial vacuum cleaner. Making circles on the floor. There was an old couple sitting across from them, looking exhausted. McKay squeezed his eyes shut and tried to make everything disappear. They were not at the airport. They were not sitting here. She was not about to leave. He didn’t want to be here, at this time, saying goodbye to her forever. He wanted to be back in bed with her, in clean sheets, not having to get up and with the whole day stretching out in front of them. How had it come to this?

The only way out seemed to be more lies. How could she possibly believe the truth? If you were digging a hole you would, eventually, fall out the other side.

‘I have to tell you something before you leave.’

Julia gave him a wry smile. She had just started her toast and marmalade. She liked sweet things in the morning.

‘You are related to Tsar Nicolas,’ a smile that would break your heart.

‘Not quite.’

‘You have just finished the construction of a time machine which will take us back to the time before you started lying, and everything will be alright again?’

Something, some all encompassing explanation that explained everything that put this topsy-turvy reality back in place again.
'They made me convince you I was a fake.' He just couldn’t stop. She wouldn’t believe the truth, perhaps another lie.

‘Oh my God.’ She was looking at him and shaking her head sadly.

‘I know,’ said McKay. ‘It’s terrible isn’t it?’

‘Oh-my-God,’ she repeated.

‘They told me that I should never have told you anything about the life. That giving myself away like that was breaking a whole raft of legislation. That unless I convinced you that I was mentally ill, I would be spending long years in prison.’

More head nodding. She was just eating the remains of the toast and nodding.

‘They made me convince you I was a fake,’ he continued, ‘but I just couldn’t go through with it. They said that if you didn’t believe that I was mentally ill and a pathological liar they would ruin me.’

‘My God is it never going to end? Can’t you just STOP!’

‘They made me convince you I was a fake.’ He went on and on. He couldn’t stop.

‘Christie!’ she had put down the last of the toast. She was holding up a finger.

‘You ARE a fake! You ARE a pathological liar! You ARE mentally ill! This is the only thing that gives you something redeeming in my eyes. Can’t you see that? You have been lying all this time, about everything. You need help, a lot of it.’

‘I can see that I’m very good at my job. I can see that.’

Julia had raised her hand.

‘I don’t want to hear this. I don’t, not now, not ever. NEVER! Is that clear?’

‘Oh yes,’ he continued. He could feel the desperation. Everything was slipping away. ‘I can see I’ve done too good a job here,’ he pressed on. ‘The way it was all orchestrated. The way you think I’m some kind of loser just because…’
‘I’ve never thought you were a loser. Don’t put words in my mouth. You seem to think that all by yourself!’

‘But I’m telling you the TRUTH now!’ He was nuts. He sounded nuts to himself. She was looking at him. Peering at him. Something from a diorama that had yet to adapt to the new lighting schedule.

‘You know on some level I think that you really believe it. It’s what makes you seem so plausible.’

‘Look,’ he was emboldened. ‘Don’t get on the flight. I wasn’t lying about that beach. You can ask Toy when she’s better.’

More sighing. Sighing and now a tear coming down her face.

‘I really feel,’ she was looking at him, ‘sorry for you. You know that? You really could be a nice person but you have such terrible problems. And you hurt and mangle people. You don’t mean to do it, but you do. It’s impossible to have a relationship with a person under such circumstance. You know that don’t you?’

‘But I’ve just told you,’ he suddenly went quiet. She had said, ‘under such circumstances.’ That meant that circumstances could change. That meant there could be other circumstances. Other ones than these.

‘I know what you’ve just told me,’ she was shaking her head. ‘And we both know that it’s ALL Lies. Let’s not ruin our last moments together. Let’s at least try to have some truth. Let’s be revealed to each other, a little bit, before I get on the plane. I need to go home. I need to think. Why did you invent all this? What has it all been about?’

He needed an answer. He didn’t have one. A fact is a fact. Un hecho es un hecho. A lie is a lie. Una mentira es una mentira. The truth is the truth. La verdad es la verdad.
‘Let’s be revealed to each other,’ she continued. He could feel panic rising in his throat. He thought of the beach. He thought of a great sullen rock looming out of silent black water. He could feel his grip on himself departing.

‘It’s boarding,’ she said looking up. ‘Gate 43. I better get going. There’s nothing you could tell me that would make any difference anyway. There really is no excuse for all the lies you’ve told me. No excuse.’ She smiled the sad and deadly smile again.

He could feel a panic attack coming on. He stifled it.

‘What about the baby?’ he asked. ‘What about our child?’

‘I see. So now you think about this. So now you are the responsible one?’

She stood up. He didn’t say anything. He was unable to move. Something inside was closed down, sealed off. He couldn’t open the doors. Two feet away, separated by an unbridgeable divide. He pushed himself off the chair, dredged himself up. He could feel an incredible tiredness descending. This really was it. If there were any words to be said, if there was anything left to say, if anything could save the day, now was the time to say it. Now was the time for the magic reversal of fortune. Now was the time for her to see him as he really was.

He looked at her. His mind was a blank. Nothing would come, nothing would flow. He could see that she actually saw him as he really was. He didn’t like what she saw. A person-shaped hole in the world. How had this happened? He could feel his feet walking alongside her as if in a dream. He was sure that he was going to fall over.

‘I just want to say,’ he couldn’t stop the tears. They were just sliding down his face. He just wanted to tell her the truth. The one truth that wasn’t enough. Well, he’d say it anyway.
‘That I really do love you. You know? It’s true. I was sleepwalking through life, half-dead.’

‘Oh come on,’ she said. ‘Don’t exaggerate everything. Stop crying.’

She was comforting him. What generosity of spirit. ‘I’m not exaggerating. It’s the way I feel. I guess I just had relationships with people without even choosing them. I just sort of drifted up to people and we fell in together. I never thought about the type of person who would really be good for me.’

‘And what am I supposed to feel about all this? Where does that leave me?’

‘Nowhere,’ he admitted.

They moved to the Gates and he felt like he was sleeping, as if life was just rolling past. The body that he was sloshing around in belonged to a ghost called Christopher Archibald McKay. Who was he? He could feel himself moving through streams of rushing people. People standing in queues; others watching planes, others watching others watching others.

The last image he committed to memory was of her purposefully striding forward. She knew what she had to do. She had to get away, at all costs, from this mad old man. Her long raincoat was flapping around her legs and she was wearing her knee-length black boots and jeans, a pink jumper. He committed the image to memory. Before she disappeared totally, she looked around and their eyes locked.

She smiled. One of those, ‘you are dead to me forever,’ smiles.

He smiled back and she disappeared.
THE COMPOSURE THAT Julia felt in the airport disappeared when she was inside the plane. She had been the victim of the most outrageous con! A man who was living a double life! Somebody who had two partners: a greedy, grasping man who clearly didn’t care about either of them and had perpetrated the most outrageous con! She wasn’t able to clearly process the contours of her feelings. Everything was so mixed up. She had wanted to stay and she had wanted to leave. She felt something and she felt nothing. She felt numb and she was also on fire. The staggering nature of the con made her doubt her own sanity. What the hell had happened to her brains? All that crap about spying. He was a crazy man! A lunatic! And she had believed it! She was furious with herself. She had believed in a load of garbage. What did this say about her mind?

The flight was not full and her mind was racing. It took her a while to realize that the flight attendant was asking if she was okay. She had been crying. She hadn’t known that she had been crying. Some of the other passengers were looking around. She was hot and the seat belt cramped her stomach. She had the baby inside her and she felt sick. The baby: her baby, his baby, whose baby? She felt sick again. The plane was now preparing for take off. Thank God there was nobody sitting next to her. She was alone. Her mind would not stop whirring. Why had he done these things? Who really was that woman? Was it all a joke? Why hadn’t he told her earlier? He had seemed to love her. He had seemed to care for her. Jesus. What was going on? Would she soon wake up? Would she soon have to pinch herself? She felt a spasm of rage. He had been sneaking out in the night and fucking that bitch! Why make it all so complicated? It was simple. He had had two women and was living a
life of paradise! Bouncing backwards and forwards between the two of them like a rubber ball! Men did it all the time. They had double lives of paradise. They had mistresses and wives.

She worried herself some more. Sometimes and if it went on for long enough the wife ended up becoming the mistress and the mistress became the wife. What was that all about! Boredom, nothing but fucking boredom! The ebb and flow of their sexual well-being. The discarded wife, on finding out about the other woman, then went out and found another cock and suddenly became attractive again. Suddenly the man wanted to possess her again. And then the mistress was fucked because she had thought all along that the dribbling idiot had wanted another wife and that she was going to be that wife and…and…

‘Would you like anything to drink?’ Another concerned face looking down at her. The atmosphere inside the plane felt increasingly claustrophobic and stuffy.

‘No.’

She undid the seatbelt. She had to calm down. She could feel panic grabbing at her and a raw pain. A really raw pain. She wanted to turn back and listen. Oh, but what would be the point of all that? Listen to what? Where was the truth in all that? What had gone on? What had been going on? Listen to more lies? Hadn’t she listened enough! But why had he done it? What had been the point of it? He couldn’t have been enjoying it since he was worried and stressed most of the time. Was that an act too? How could he have enjoyed it? How could he really have felt it was a jolly game? That would have been too simple. She must think it through. She must make it cohere, but it was hard. It didn’t. She could feel a cramp in her stomach and her legs were jittery. And now she was pregnant with his child. The thought felt…There weren’t words for how the thought felt. She was pregnant with his child. With
whose child? Who was he? He was a stranger. She was pregnant with the child of a
total stranger! Dios mío it was like rape! Her stomach was now cramping up even
more. She had to get up out of her seat and go to the bathroom. She stood up and felt
dizzy. She held on to her seat and pushed herself forward. Walking slowly down the
aisle she could see men and women with their families. She felt sick. A man was
holding a balloon away from a child and the child was trying to grab it. When she
made the door of the toilet she desperately yanked the handle. She closed the door
and looked at the sucking hole. She rushed her head over the bowl and purged
herself. Perhaps if she sat down and put her head between her legs. She pulled down
her trousers and sat on the toilet seat. She could feel something warm and wet
flowing down her legs. With horror she realized that it was blood.
HE RETURNED FROM the airport to a screamingly silent house. Silence was not golden. It was eerie and like death. One thing he knew was that he wouldn’t be staying. Moving to the bedroom he opened the door and saw the accusing empty wardrobe that had contained her clothes. He closed it. He went into the kitchen and saw an image of her chopping food. He sat on the sofa and saw her staring back at him. He rang Toy. He wanted her to be okay anyway.

‘I just wanted to see if you were alright.’

‘Me, I’m fine,’ she replied automatically. ‘Why wouldn’t I be? I suppose you want to crawl back now she’s left you.’

‘I don’t,’ he said. And it was true. ‘I was just worried about you that’s all. I guess I should have stopped worrying about you a long time ago.’

‘You’ve never given a fuck about me,’ she replied. ‘Don’t kid yourself.’

‘Okay,’ he paused. ‘I need to say something.’

‘What?’

‘I hope it works out with you and Nigel. I really do.’

‘So do I,’ said Toy and put down the phone.

Later that day he met Nigel. The man was leaving Toy’s. Like a happy little terrier he had walked up to McKay.

‘She’s decided to come into the church. People do occasionally see the truth you know.’ Nigel was looking at him. Nigel had bad skin.

‘I suppose you just happened to be walking around here?’

‘The truth,’ said McKay staring back, ‘about what? Space monsters?’
‘Scepticism is expected,’ said Nigel. ‘I was sceptical at first. The truth isn’t something that you, of all people, can know much about.’ That was true at least.

‘And she’s selling her flat and is going to donate all the money to the church. Is that it?’

‘It’s her choice,’ said Nigel. ‘She sees how empty her life has become. We have talked about it. We will get married and she will be happy.’

‘You seem awfully sure. So this is what you do is it?’ said McKay. ‘Go round looking for vulnerable women on dating sites in order to steal their money.’

‘I recall that it was you that actually introduced us. I recall that it was you who was desperate to get Toy off with somebody else. She actually read some old diary you had written. Some scrap paper. My, my, you writers are a careless bunch. What was it now? Oh yes. “Operation Offload Toy onto willing sap.” She was very hurt by that.’

McKay just stared straight back. Had he really written that? Shit. What he wrote and what he actually felt were two different things. Nevertheless, he had fucked up bad. He had fucked up really bad.

‘Well,’ Nigel smiled. ‘I really would love to stop and chat but I have to get on. I know how you feel about me and your anger is, from a weird point of view, probably understandable. What you have to understand though is that people do experience sudden conversions. They do start to believe and they do give things up.’

‘I expect you’ll be giving up that Merc then,’ mouthed McKay. ‘The one parked outside. New is it?’

The little shit smirked, he actually smirked.
‘I have to get around,’ Nigel replied. ‘I do a lot of work in the community and I have to drive about. You do know the world is going to end? No, I suppose you don’t. Not many people do.’

‘As I said, you won’t need the Merc then. Can I have it?’

‘Humouring me, what do you want McKay?’ Another supercilious smile.

‘Are you really serious? Do you really think the world is going to end?’

‘Of course,’ said Nigel. ‘In five years to be precise.’

‘Jesus,’ said McKay, conniving around. ‘We really are fucked.’

‘Five years,’ said Nigel, ‘that’s why we need to get on with the Ark.’

‘I bet it’ll be a select little group who’re saved won’t it?’ said McKay. ‘It always is. Just you and your mates?’

‘We have tried,’ said Nigel, ‘to tell people. It’s the horse and water problem McKay. That’s the way it is. Rest assured,’ the man continued, ‘the world will end.’

‘But not you though eh? You’ll go on while the rest of us get fucked.’

‘I’m afraid to say that’s true. You could save yourself.’

‘What for? I’d have to spend eternity floating around in an interstellar yoghurt pot with the likes of you.’ McKay had suddenly had enough. He’d call Bill and he’d call McGrath. Nigel’s world would be coming to an end and sooner than he thought. He walked off and left the man smiling.
24: Home comforts

JULIA MONTORO WOULD never get up. She was lying in bed feeling ill. It had been
her last chance, she knew it had been her last chance. There was no point getting up.
There was no point doing anything. From where she lay, looking out of her bed she
could make out a small square of sunlight. Every so often a bird passed through that
square. She had counted birds for two hours. Yesterday she had walked along Gran
Via. She brushed past people and felt like a grey ghost. She wondered if she had
perhaps died. Did she really want to be alive? What was the point? Everything hurt
more than it should and her life seemed fractured and pointless. She pulled the covers
over her head. She closed her eyes. She wanted to block out the world.

Hours later she was still in bed. It was past midday and the temperature had risen.
She had just been thinking about pulling down the blinds when she heard the heavy
front door to the flat swing open. Some of the outside noise rushed inside. Her
mother had a spare key. She had probably seen her Polo parked outside the building.

‘Are you in bed?’ she heard her mother saying. ‘You didn’t answer your phone.
I’m coming in. What’s going on?’

It was one of the problems of living close to your family that they felt they had
this right to traipse around. Retired people like her mama were the worst. They were
as indomitable as little tanks, wondering around the neighbourhood and complaining
when the gardens weren’t being looked after properly. They noticed everything.
Only last week Carmen had reported the Vigilante, for stopping his car in the
communal park and smoking a cigarette with a gang of teenage girls. Julia
remembered how the word had amused Christie. In English Vigilante meant
something connected to Charles Bronson, in Spanish it was simply a private security
guard driving around a fixed route in a shitty little car. And the route taken by the Vigilante did not cover her mother’s or Julia’s own apartment. Carmen had asked the Vigilante what he would do if he saw an apartment not covered by the route being burgled. ‘Nothing,’ the man had replied.

‘He’s at it again,’ she now heard her mother twittering on. ‘I have seen those girls sitting next to that wall with the graffiti on.’

‘Mama,’ said Julia from under the blankets. ‘What are you doing here?’ She heard the door to her bedroom open.

‘Have you had breakfast yet? Shall I make you something?’

Julia supposed her mother had been in a state of high anxiety ever since the trip to the hospital. She hadn’t the strength to tell her mother that everything was alright. It wasn’t alright. She gritted her teeth and told her to go away. This had the opposite effect. You don’t back down if you are a tank. A tank of a certain vintage can only go forward. It is set in its ways. She felt the covers being pulled away and light rushing in. It reminded her of being a small child. Of the tested methods of getting you up in the morning, pulling back the covers was probably the best. Her mother was still doing it twenty years later.

‘Now come on darling,’ her mother’s voice was crooning. ‘Everything is going to be alright. You don’t need to feel so bad. I am going to make Gaspacho and a Spanish omelette. You will feel better after that.’ Her mother talked about family and the importance of family. It was good at such times to have a family.

Her mother couldn’t help it. She felt like crying, but she had cried through the night and her eyes were dry. She thought about the baby’s heart. She had seen the baby’s heart. ‘I’m going back to bed mama,’ she said, pulling the covers over herself.
‘Leave me alone. I don’t want to see you this week or the next, so just leave me alone.’

She knew that her mother had silently left the bedroom and was probably trying not to cry herself. She hadn’t the energy for her mother’s grief, she felt smothered by her own.
IT WAS THE end of summer and still boiling hot. McGrath had put a sticker on the side of McKay’s car. Something he had copied from the London Underground. In England it had been funny. In Castilla La Mancha, in sweltering heat, it was something else. And when you did ‘pull down window for ventilation’ all you got was a hot blast of air that roasted you alive. On the left he had scrawled the word, ‘Rocinante.’ Somebody else had underlined the words in flame thrower. And now, and after nearly two weeks of moving around on the Quixote trail McKay was reasonably close to Madrid. He had been visiting places on the way. He was too frightened to go directly to the city. He’d got drunk on a cheap Denominación de La Mancha in Campo De Criptana. Pootered around the Sierra De Los Molinos, tried and failed to see the windmills as giants and being Knighted in Puerto Lápice by some drunken Spaniard who had promised him he really was an Innkeeper. And in Alcalá de Henares, the small town north-east of Madrid, he’d wanted to see the birthplace of Miguel de Cervantes. It was being cleaned.

He’d been pulling closer to seeing Julia and then pulling away. Driving towards her and driving away. The problem, of course, is what he would do if she said ‘no.’ If she categorically refused to meet him. He had read somewhere that most women were not programmed to ‘reject pathetic crying messes in the middle of the night.’ She, however, might be one of the ones who did. And with every reason in the world. And this would mean terrible pain and heartache. And he would deserve it. Nevertheless.

To add to it all, his own Rocinante was now fuming on the roadside, surrounded by fields of wild poppies and refusing to move. Even the car had had enough. He would leave her in this desiccated plain and she would be reclaimed by the stony
fields and wild flowers. He’d started off liking the wild emptiness of La Mancha but had now grown tired of its monotony. Unsurprising that the old Don wanted to leave. There wasn’t another car in sight. Everywhere deserted and out of all this emptiness, a farmer approaching from a field. He needed help. The Robin was dying. It had given good service but it was dying. He’d probably have to bus or hitch it to Madrid.

‘Hay algún mecánico por aquí?’ he asked, as the approaching farmer said hello.

‘I’m sorry Señor I don’t speak English.’

Jesus, was his accent that bad. Empty blue sky for miles. Fields. If he didn’t get help he would be screwed.

The man, who was as course and brown as any field hand, seemed, eventually, to understand and smiled. He started talking. His name was Paco. He had retired from the city and was now living in the country. He didn’t understand that McKay had first spoken in Spanish. He had just thought he was a foreigner. But now that they had spoken and the man could see that he could speak, everything would be alright. Would McKay like to buy some olive oil? The man had an olive farm. Alternatively he might like to spend a night or two at his rural Casa? He had just turned it into a Spa. Princess Leiticia had once stayed. McKay could, if he so wished, sleep in the same bed. Prices were very reasonable and if it was good enough for Princess Leticia it was certainly good enough for most people, including foreigners. Another piccaro, thought McKay, bullshitting away.

‘No,’ he replied. ‘I don’t want any oil. I don’t need a Spa. I need a mechanic. Somebody to fix Rocinante.’ He gestured to the car. It was pinging in the heat. The man wiped the sweat from his brow and looked at McKay. He said that McKay should have said that he knew Don Quixote. That made all the difference. The house
that he stayed in, the very house that he lived in, had once been slept in by Don Quixote. In fact, he had probably fucked Rocinante in there.

‘You mean Dulcinea?’ McKay asked, not bothering to get into the fictional aspects of either story.

‘Both,’ the man smiled, looking happy, but confused.

McKay reflected that he would probably have to spend a night with this farmer and pay room and board, if he was going to get any help at all. Reluctantly, he agreed. The mechanic, whom Paco knew, was the finest in the village. McKay was lucky, because the same man, who just happened to be the finest in the village, and probably the finest in the world, was also his brother. McKay wiped the dirt from his hands and stared glumly at the man. The world mocks you and you deserve it, he thought.

Paco’s bed was soft and comforting. Sparsely furnished and with a simple copy of a painting by Julio Romero de Torres. A girl, who was probably a prostitute, sadly sitting with an empty coal scuttle. She had a resigned and tragic face. After a while McKay took her off the wall so he didn’t have to be accused by the forlorn eyes. And then, after a cool shower where he tried to wash off the accumulated grime and sweat from the journey, he lay down on the bed looking up at the slowly whirring fan and tried to calm some of the panic he was starting to feel. He wasn’t going to think about how many times Julia had put the phone down when she had heard his voice. In a way it didn’t mean anything. He had rung her so many times that she would have been able to guess it was him. And if she could guess it was him why bother to pick up? She must have picked up only to put down. And this revealed something. It showed that she wanted to show him that she was putting the phone down on him.
And this meant that she felt something and that there was still a remote chance. All was not lost.
THE FIST THAT had crashed into his face had been large and lumpy. A great thudding thing that had knocked him to the floor. He didn’t have the anger or inclination to fight back. The fist had come from Julia’s brother. McKay had been waiting in a nearby park outside her apartment. Julia had finally pulled up in her Polo and McKay was dimly aware that he had walked over and hailed her and that now she was pushing her brother away and he was on the floor. McKay had been planning and waiting and carefully calibrating and now everything had gone wrong before it had even started.

‘You are to stay away from my sister!’ the voice was screaming from somewhere in the clouds. ‘She never wants to see you again. You are not to come back to this area. You are never to step foot inside this space again. If you do we are going to kill you. You are a crazy man! A crazy man!’

McKay was suddenly dizzy and felt sick. It was late evening. He wasn’t entirely sure how he’d got into his present predicament of lying in the street with blood gushing out of his nose. He had spent a night in an uncomfortable bed and eaten a heavy breakfast. He had had a lift with Paco, taken a train, and finally got inside a cab. Now he felt his mouth filling with blood. He had the jittery legs of a foal and couldn’t stand up. Julia was screaming at her brother. McKay floundered and collapsed. He heard Ignacio asking him if he was alright and then the word shit and then a pair of arms dragging him and balancing him against the building. Julia was cursing and swearing at her brother and talking about internal bleeding and saying you never think, you just fucking act you stupid fucking Gilipollas! And then McKay closed his eyes, coughed and spat out more blood. And then he heard the voice of
Julia’s mother fussing and shouting at her son. Asking him what the hell he’d done and Ignathio saying he hadn’t done anything and he’d hardly hit McKay with any power at all and then McKay realized he should have been an actor. In the moments since he’d been propped up against the side of the building he was actually feeling a whole lot better and considerably less dizzy. He’d been hit hard, but he’d also been hit a lot harder in the past and now he could flop and flounder his way into their house. He’d do it, if it was the last thing he ever did. He’d moan and groan and howl like a sick dog. Anything to see her again.

‘I think,’ Julia’s mother was saying, ‘that we need to take him inside the house and get him cleaned up.’

He felt arms lifting him up and then realized the reason they were worried was because of a slight head wound. McKay felt just above his forehead. Head wounds bled and scared people. Well, that was all to the good. They wouldn’t kick him out immediately. He’d be able to curry a thimble’s worth of sympathy before she dumped him forever.

She’d changed since he had last seen her. She was thin and gaunt. She had dyed her hair black and had grown it long and straight. Her clothes hung about her. She looked frail. He had done this. He was desperate to reach out and touch her but knew he could not. When they were finally seated in a room and on their own she had reassured her brother that no, McKay was probably not dangerous, and yes, everything would be alright. He could feel her looking at him like a stranger. His head was cut and blood had flowed. She didn’t seem to be listening. She got lost and drifted off. Perhaps he looked like somebody who sold shoes in the street. He wanted to hold her. To tell her ‘it’s me,’ but who was me? His mouth was moving, but he couldn’t find the words. Everything sounded false and inadequate. He talked
about love and confusion and how he should have done things that he hadn’t done. How he had done things he shouldn’t have done. How it was all a mess. He then said the same thing in a kind of artless Spanish that sounded like a child talking. And then he had gone over to her and put his arms around her and was giving her a hug. He should have said things he said, between sobs, yes he should have said things. He should have done things, he said, yes he should have done things. He had got wrapped up in a story and he had sort of ended up believing it himself. He’d believed it and he hadn’t believed it and all at the same time. Who could believe that? He had been frightened to leave a woman, to be with another woman and even though the second woman was the woman he really wanted to be with and he hadn’t had a relationship with the first woman, at least not a proper relationship, for years. He started to talk some more about the same stuff and he found her angrily pushing his arms away. She was suddenly slapping and screaming at him and he took the blows, grateful for them.

What about the baby? He heard her screaming. The brother was looking at the floor and the strange man was looking at the brother strangely and saying well, what about the baby? They would bring him up. He would be the best possible father he could possibly be and he would support her and he would come and visit if she could stand the thought of seeing him but of course his ultimate goal would be to get back with her eventually and so what about the baby? It was something they had always wanted. And then the strange man stopped talking because he saw that something inside her had crumpled and through the broken sobs she could hear the man talking to her brother and then her mother came and was saying that everything would be alright.
The man who had been talking stopped talking and the scene was briefly suspended. Julia looked at him. The man was allowing his new found knowledge to slowly enter. ‘I see’ she heard him mumble to her brother and then he sat back down on the sofa. ‘I see,’ he said. There was nothing else to say.

McKay was sitting in a café with Ignathio. Ignathio had apologised for punching him but really what could the man expect. ‘Nothing,’ McKay said, looking at Ignathio who was a tall, muscular man in his mid thirties. McKay vaguely remembered that he had not been able to meet him over Christmas since he had been away.

‘Please stay away and not keep pestering her. Please do that. And please don’t send her any more texts or anything else for that matter. Do you think you can do that?’

‘Of course,’ said McKay despondently. ‘I know that’s what she wants.’

He looked at Ignathio. ‘So you weren’t with her when she had the miscarriage?’

‘No,’ replied the man. ‘It was my mother and my sister. She started to bleed and my sister took her to the hospital.’

The man suddenly stood up. ‘I won’t shake your hand,’ he said. ‘You have probably done a great deal of damage to my sister. I know you have explained to me how it all happened but even so.’

‘Of course,’ McKay repeated dully. ‘I pray she will be alright.’

‘With the love and support of her family she will be,’ Ignathio said, not looking too sure. ‘Goodbye.’

‘Goodbye,’ said McKay. ‘Thank you for driving me to the airport. I didn’t deserve it.’
‘I wish I could say it’s been a pleasure,’ said Ignathio and nodded briefly before walking away.

McKay watched the man go. He looked at Ignathio’s jacket. It was a brown suede jacket. He tried to focus on details, anything in the airport, but they were blocked. She had had a miscarriage because of him. It was because of him. When the man had disappeared McKay finished the last of his coffee and picked up his case.
MONDAY MORNING. RAIN pouring down the outside window. Something was going on with McKay. The Pigs had said that work would help. Routine. And so he had volunteered to teach on the summer programme. There was a noise coming from another classroom, a man hammering. The hammering seemed to be punctuating his class. He was teaching an academic writing class for second language students. Most of them were Chinese. They were doing narrative and he was finding that he really should have stayed with the suggested material, ‘nine stages in the life of a cheese.’ Instead he was using an activity which he called ‘The meaning of life,’ which had been a terrible mistake, really, and he was now moving round the class mechanically handing out a picture. It was of a rich and successful business man. A modern master of the universe who had obviously achieved something, although apart from money, it wasn’t clear what. The picture showed an ebullient man wearing a chunky and probably expensive watch as well as expensive sunglasses and a designer suit. The man had his head thrown back and was drinking in the sunlight from surrounding glass towers. The towers were reflected in the glasses. He was laughing. The picture said: ‘I am a modern master of the Universe with a powerful lifestyle, a beautiful wife and probably several mistresses on the side. I am to be envied.’

McKay started off asking questions about the man and getting students to take notes.

‘What’s his name, yes Esteban?’

‘David,’ said a long-haired Spaniard.

‘Where does he live Belen?’
The girl smiled.

‘He live in Manchester.’

‘What’s his job Pepa?’

‘He’s a businessman.’

‘What kind of business er– Esther?’

‘Import and the export.’

‘Okay import export.’

‘Cheng–is he married?’ Giggles.

‘Yes, he is married.’

‘To whom?’

‘To a girl called Julie.’

Julie, Julia, it was a little close. None of them knew anything, so he shouldn’t panic.

‘How long have they been married for— Dong?’

‘Fourth months.’

‘Four months okay.’ He went on to elicit details about the wife ‘Julie.’ It turned out she was a teacher. Once again he pushed down the coincidence. Nobody, at least not any of these students, was trying to tell him anything.

‘Are they happy?’ he asked, moving around the class.

‘Gloriously,’ said an older man called Pedro. More laughter.

‘Why?’

‘Because he has a mistress,’ said a Chinese guy called Wei.

‘Couldn’t that mean he’s unhappy? Why does he have a mistress?’ McKay asked

‘Because he’s greedy.’ This from a covered woman at the back of the class. He couldn’t remember her name. More laughter.
‘So everything is great at the start of our story,’ he continued, ‘however into every life some rain must fall. What rain is falling in his?’ There was a silence. After a few moments a girl called Chong-Ling looked up.

‘The mistress is pregnant,’ she said and he doesn’t know how to choose between them.

More laughter. It would be easy to get suspicious, to grant the thing significance. That, however, would be stupid.

‘What is the other woman called?’ he asked. He was suddenly scared of the answer.

‘Roberta,’ said a young Chinese guy who wanted to be called Dan.

‘Okay Dan,’ he felt relieved.

‘And why can’t he be with her?’

‘Because he can’t leave his wife.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because he love her. He love them both.’

More laughter, they seemed to find it hilarious. McKay elicited more details about the man, including where he lived, how many cars he owned and what sort of business he had. He put down the picture and picked up another. It was of the same man, or it looked like the same man. Only this time, instead of being a modern master of the universe, he was a scruffy old bum eating out of a garbage can. ‘Three years later,’ he explained. He really shouldn’t be doing this story. It was called ‘Riches to rags,’ he should have started the proper way round or at least added ‘and back again’ to the title.

‘What’s he doing?’ he asked.
‘He eat garbage,’ said the student who was sitting next to Wei and whose name McKay had also forgotten.

Everybody laughed again. Eating garbage was funny.

‘Yes,’ said McKay. ‘It’s the same man a few years later. You told me he had a nice house and a nice wife and a nice life. You told me his mistress was pregnant. And now it’s all gone. I want you to tell me what happened to his beautiful wife, what happened to his stunning mistress. What happened to the baby?’ McKay paused again. He could feel his voice starting to break. He really should have redirected the story. Students started to call out ideas.

‘She leave him when she find out.’

‘Who leaves him?’ He was talking to a Thai woman, early thirties. Once again the name escaped him. He was starting to lose it.

‘Why is he eating out of the garbage?’

‘Because he go crazy. He find he does not love his wife. He try to get his mistress back but she not want him.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because he lie.’

‘Why did he lie?’

More laughter.

‘Because he want to have a cake and eat it.’

‘Yes,’ thanks Dong. ‘That’s a very typical idiom.’

‘He want to ride two horses with the same ass,’ said the older man called Pedro.

‘Very good Pedro. I get your meaning. So why is he eating garbage?’

‘Well I think this man,’ Pedro continued, looking at the picture, ‘love his mistress
and he got fed up with his wife, but he er... Well, he doesn’t have any.’ Pedro
stopped and whispered under his breath. He knew McKay spoke Spanish.

‘Balls,’ McKay supplied. ‘Don’t be afraid of that word Pedro. It’s quite alright.
He didn’t have any balls. Yes, I can go along with that.’ He looked down at the
picture.

‘Yes, he lacked balls. So what’s he going to do? He’s a gutless wonder.’
The students were looking at him. ‘How can he get his mistress back?’

‘Doesn’t he love his wife?’ asked a girl called Antonia.

‘Well, I’m not sure she is his wife,’ said McKay. ‘Let’s say she’s his partner.’

‘Okay,’ said another girl, ‘his partner. Doesn’t he love his partner?’

‘I think not,’ McKay heard himself saying.

‘Why not?’ asked another student.

‘I think they were just wrong for each other.’

‘Oh, but I think this guy is pathetic,’ said another girl from the back. ‘If this is
true, he’s a typical man.’

‘Oh yes?’ McKay heard his voice emerging somewhere behind his left ear. He
tried to smile. ‘Develop that idea Isabella.’

‘Why did he stay with somebody he didn’t love?’

‘Is it not possible,’ McKay inquired, ‘that there might be different types of love?’

‘Not really,’ she replied ‘I think there is only one.’ And that’s as it should be,
McKay wanted to say, at your age.

‘And why did he stay with this woman if he didn’t love her?’ Pedro chiming in.

‘That’s an interesting question,’ replied McKay. ‘Perhaps he felt sorry for her.
Perhaps he had an overwhelming sense of pity.’

Pedro was screwing up his face.
‘Pity?’ he said. ‘What’s that? That’s not love.’

‘I guess not,’ replied McKay feeling utterly defeated. ‘Is it the next best thing?’ If he had no chance of convincing these students what hope would he have with Julia? He had to keep reminding himself that this story was not about him. He was in a university class. It was the beginning of the first semester and he was teaching a module on narrative. It had nothing to do with him. Let’s not make this some kind of high stakes thing. Seemingly though, he couldn’t stop talking about it.

‘Let’s say,’ he continued, ‘to make it more interesting, that this guy is not just interested in, as you put it Pedro, “riding two horses with one ass.” Let’s say he really loved his mistress but for whatever reason couldn’t leave his partner, even though he wanted to. Let’s say something terrible happened to her and he felt responsible. And then the two women find out about each other. His partner leaves him, which is what he has wanted all along, and his mistress departs which is something he hasn’t wanted. Let’s say hmm. She goes back to Spain?’

Pedro was laughing, the whole class was laughing at all the wonderful outrageousness.

‘So she’s Spanish?’ Pedro asked

McKay smiled back.

‘Well, we’re just playing here. How can he convince his mistress that because he had feelings for his partner, it didn’t invalidate the feelings that he had for her?’

‘He should have told her from the start,’ replied Isabella. No sympathy from this one. ‘He should have laid it out from the start. He should have told her that he was with this other person from pity or whatever it was from.’ She spat out the word pity with disgust.
‘But he didn’t,’ replied McKay, walking up and down the room in what he hoped was a purely speculative looking manner. ‘He lied to her, let’s say, and then the lie got bigger and bigger like a snowball.’

Somebody in the class said something. McKay heard the Spanish for snowball.

‘It snowballed,’ he continued, ‘And let’s say he couldn’t reverse the lie. It just kept getting bigger and bigger. And psychologically the guy got caught up in it. And the snowball tumbled down the hill and smashed into the fence and…’

He stopped himself. The students were all looking at him. He hadn’t spoken out of turn. He was composed. What was wrong with them?

Pedro again, more gently.

‘If this is true then this guy is in trouble. Big trouble. He will not be able to get the mistress back.’

‘Why?’

‘Well he has lied to her for– how long?’

‘Let’s say,’ McKay paused and swallowed. ‘About two years.’

‘Jesus, me caga en su puta madre’ said Isabella. ‘This woman doesn’t know who he is. He knows who he is, she knows his feelings were real, but she doesn’t. He’s a total stranger to her.’

McKay tried to explain the expression between a rock and a hard place. It didn’t seem to resonate. He tried asking her if she’d ever being in a situation that was ‘difficult.’ She looked back at him. Yes, she had, but she had always known what to do.

‘Let’s make it even more tragic,’ he said. Something was pushing him, digging and pushing. ‘Let’s say that the mistress, the one he really loves and wants to be with, finds out, before he can tell her, about the other woman. Let’s say he was really
going to tell her but he’s been postponing it and postponing it and it’s all too late. Suddenly she finds out and the shock is so much that’–he looked up at the ceiling, as if he was grasping to put the pieces of the story together, ‘she has a miscarriage. She blames him for this. Will he ever get the mistress back? Will he ever get her to forgive him?’

Pause and then Isabella again. Always passionate at that age. ‘If she was the great love of his life. He won’t cope. He knows he has lost her and he knows there is no way back. He is fucked.’ She put her hand to her mouth. More laughter. ‘Excuse please what I just said. He will have to go away and you know. She made a motion with her neck. She stuck her tongue out.

‘Hang himself,’ McKay supplied, ‘Thank you Isabella.’

Wonderful laughter.

Pedro slapped his hand on the desk in front of him. He was talking about buses and women. There was no point in all this misery. Pedro was talking about a happy ending. Apparently everything was too fucking bleak.

‘Is there no way he can get her back Isabella?’ McKay was smiling, digging around for any tiny crumb of comfort. The smile was fixed on his face, shining out like an unmanned lighthouse that was gradually burning itself out.

The girl stopped and scratched her head. She was thinking.

‘I don’t know. What you call a grand gesture? This man has to show he loves her. He can’t keep telling her. Like the distinction you made in our fiction class. He has to show her he loves her. Not just saying it. Not just, what did you say earlier– drunken dialling? Not just telling, but showing.’

‘A gesture,’ Pedro was talking again. They liked the idea of a gesture. ‘He will have to make some grand gesture to get her back.’ The man looked blank.
‘The question is what.’

The class was over. There was no more time. The students filed out and McKay stayed behind and pretended to pack his things away. He sat down at the front desk and looked out to the darkening skies over the city of Merlin. He had already made the gesture and it hadn’t worked. He had gone over and it hadn’t worked. Perhaps whatever he did would make no difference. It was about her now not him, but there had to be an extension to the folk narrative, ‘Boy gets girl. Boy loses girl.’ How about, ‘Boy gets girl back after mounting insupportable emotional odds, which only makes the meet sweet at the end all the more compelling?’ He stared out at the grey skies through the classroom window. Who the fuck was he kidding?

He had murdered his own child. From now on he would tell the truth. About whatever. To whoever. Whenever.
ON A SUNDAY night he went to the beastly hole. It would be good to throw yourself into work. Work could help you overcome most things. The campus seemed deserted but then it was summer. Other people were away on holidays with their families. Well, what did they know? Kids screaming and all that noise. He had the opportunity to be like St Erasmus in his study. He could throw himself into work and start doing all the things that he should have been doing all along. Crossing the campus he saw Bill talking to some of the other security staff and he moved away. He wasn’t in the mood to talk to Bill. Using his swipe card he let himself into the Botril building and turned off the main alarm. A striplight corridor full of old flies, the buzz of vending machines. He went to his office and punched in the keypad number.

He turned on the lights and looked at the mass of papers. He started shuffling them around and turned on his computer. Automatically he reached down to the bottom drawer of his desk and his hand groped around for the bottle. He felt the reassuring hardness of cold glass. There was an Inhaler rolling around but it was empty.

McKay’s book on Quixote, which all the students would, of course, eventually be forced to read, was called, ‘The Art of Immaturity’ and he’d been working on this and the novel about McGrath for the last seven years. The essential problem was that he’d recently started thinking that immaturity was probably a whole lot less of an art and more a reductive condition of the human species, something that had to be overcome through a measure of restraint and dignity. Being ‘mature’ was the

28: The Hole.
transgression today. Feeling something, as opposed to feeling nothing. This thought came to him as he started to review the conversations he had had with Julia and Toy. They were passing over him like a solar wind. There was no way he could revise or amend them. Swigging from the bottle and staring at his own reflection in the window, he made a dreary tally.

# 1 Julia to Christie.

‘Why didn’t you go for me? When you had the chance? Why didn’t you?’

‘I did.’

‘No you didn’t. You never did.’

He had told her about time running out. How they could still go forward. They had to, however, do it now.

‘I know I’m an old chicken. You don’t need to tell me.’

‘I never said that.’

‘Your point is made.’

‘Christ that’s not my point. My point is I love you. You’re my soul mate!’

‘Your hole mate. You just want the mucous to come out. That’s all you want Christie. Like your friend Marcus Aurelius. “A friction of a piece of gut and, following a sort of convulsion, the expulsion of some mucous.” That’s what you think of sex and love and everything.

#2 Julia to Christie

‘I sent a question out, do you know that?’

‘What?’

‘Is it normal.com?’

He was asleep. He rolled over. It was three o’clock in the morning. He was suddenly wide awake. Julia had that effect.
‘It’s a website.’

‘Yes?’ He clutched the phone. Her words twisting into him. Far away and distant. So small a voice. He let her speak. He was hanging on with his nails. Teetering. The beauty of hearing her voice after weeks.

‘They deal with inquiries. You know the sort. Perhaps the boyfriend wants to try anal for the first time and the girl is frightened it will hurt. Well I asked them if it was normal to have a boyfriend who pretended to be James Bond whilst screwing two women. I asked them if it was normal that such a person would go out and buy a plastic water pistol and hide it in the boot of his car at an airport in a place deliberately concealed where the girl would find it. I asked if it was normal that that person would then go on late night Missions in order to continue fucking two women.’ She was silent. He breathed a very slow, gentle question.

‘What did they say darling?’

She screamed down the phone.

‘They told me nobody would be fucking stupid enough to believe such crap. That’s what!’

#3 Julia to Christie.

‘I want to know what’s wrong with you.’

Two o’clock in the morning. Rubbing the sleep from his lids. He had to keep her on the line, he had to keep her talking.

‘You. You’re what’s wrong with me. Julia Syndrome. It gets into your blood and breaks your heart.’

‘Your heart’s not broken. You don’t have a heart; you’re a Tin Man. Nothing’s wrong with you. So why didn’t you go for me? Why didn’t you leave her?’

‘I did.’
‘Why did you prefer her to me? Yeah you felt sorry for her. You felt nothing for me. Yeah I know. You “loved us both”– don’t you ever get tired of saying that?’

#4 Toy to Christie.

‘It’s me. Do you remember me? The person you knew for ten years and now pretend is dead. I just thought you should know. Adam died. He dropped down dead. You always neglected him. Steve is heartbroken. Not that you care. Anyway. I thought I’d let you know we’re having a ceremony.’

‘What are you on about?’

‘All those years and you have forgotten that I have two budgerigars whose names you now can’t even remember. The ceremony will be like Sunset Boulevard and I expect that…’

He put the phone down.

She rang back.

‘I’m letting Steve go. Do you even fucking care? I bet you don’t mister.’

‘You’ve decided to free him?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Even though he can’t fly?’

‘He’s dying on his own. Do you know that? He’s DYING! Not that you care. You are like your father! Neglectful. You’ll go to hell Christie, do you know that? God will punish you. You’re going straight to…’

He put the phone down.

#5 Christie to Julia.

‘I just want to say…’

‘That you are a deadly double agent. You were hired to spy on an English teacher in Madrid because she was at the forefront of some deadly subversive activity. You
even had to sleep with her, but then, tragically, your feelings got involved. Too bad for your feelings.’

She put the phone down.

#6 Christie to Julia.

‘Why don’t you read books on Monsters?’ he said, ‘Doesn’t the monster deserve a day off? Can’t the monster have a point of view?’

‘No,’ she said, ‘The monster needs to pay for the pain given.’

‘And how does he do that? I’m only speaking in my official capacity as Lawyer to the Monster.’

‘You’re worse than Fritzel. Even Fritzel took a Xmas tree into the basement. You never showed me who you were.’

#7 Julia to Christie.

‘You need to grow up do you know that? This is not funny. I have tried hard to move on and I am now seeing a therapist.’ She had told him to grow up at least fifteen times. He loved her, he was in the wrong, but he just couldn’t stand been told to grow up anymore.

‘I am too!’ he said, ‘I am growing up too! Why don’t we let my therapist speak to your therapist and we’ll bunk off and go grab a coffee?’

‘Everything is a joke to you,’ she said. ‘Irmgard has made me see the folly of being with a man like you. A man who is so immature that he fabricates a whole reality instead of telling the truth to some stupid and weak woman whom he can’t leave. You need to grow up.’

#8 Christie to Toy.
‘You never did commit suicide. You threatened to all the time. You even slashed your wrists. You put me through hell. And now you are with Nigel, have your permanent visa and are all loved up. I have to say I’m disappointed.’

‘Fuck you. I’m never touching myself again.’

‘I really am happy to finally hear that.’

‘Nigel has shown me a new way of looking at the world. I will never do anything like that again. You made me do it. It was all your fault. You never helped me on the beach. Where the fuck were you?’

‘Unconscious.’

‘Same old excuse. You need to take a good long look at yourself in the mirror.’

#9 Julia to Christie.

‘I just thought that I should let you know what other people think. I told my therapist what you said about her.’

One word was all it took. This time it was ‘therapist.’

‘Irmgard Moller?’

‘It’s not Moller. I told you. Why do you keep saying this? It’s Irmgard Smith. She married an English man in Madrid. I told her how you think she is trying to cheat me by overcharging. She thinks you are a very manipulative man and it would be best if I didn’t talk to you again. I told her that I wasn’t ready to do that yet. She said she understood but thought that if I am going to have the stress of seeing you, then it might be a good idea to see her a bit more and so that she can help me counteract your toxicity.’

There had been many other conversations. They had all been futile. The only thing left was to reiterate how badly he had fucked up and get down on his knees and beg. But he had already done that.
YOU COULD ALWAYS fall back on your male friends, thought McKay. They would always be there for you. And Jerry had promised him salvation. Jerry had promised him solutions. He was sitting in his office with Jerry. The man was listening.

‘And now because I’m “insane”’, he heard himself saying, ‘She can no longer be with me. I am too “painful” and don’t want to live in the “real” world. The tyranny of the real. But do you know why this is, fundamentally? Because a person can only be loved for themselves alone. If you love me you don’t love anybody else!’

‘That’s one way of looking at it,’ said Jerry, who was looking out of the window and frowning.

‘You were right all along,’ said McKay, ‘about the impossibility of long-term relationships between men and women. About the futile vanity of it all.’

Jerry was smiling.

‘There’s no easy way of saying this,’ he said.

‘What?’ asked McKay.

‘I’ll just come right out with it.’

‘Do.’

‘I’m getting married.’

‘Great. Ignore everything I said.’

‘I will,’ said Jerry. ‘I always did.’

McKay frowned.

‘What you are telling me is a joke right?’

‘No,’ said Jerry.
‘Thought not,’ said McKay. ‘You really are getting married. Do you want me to
do the same speech as last time?’

‘Do you think you could change it? All that stuff about institutions.’

‘It’s getting old, I admit,’ said McKay. ‘It’s Morag right?’

‘Yes,’ said The Pigs. ‘You’ve been busy.’

‘This is the Morag who has a son you call “The cadge” and who is over fifty
thousand pounds in the hole? This is the Morag we are talking about? The
“emotional fuck-pit?”’

‘That’s the one,’ said Jerry.

‘Do you really need all that again?’ McKay was faintly scandalised.

‘She seems to.’

McKay was too tired to argue or formulate reasonable objections. What did he
know about being reasonable?

‘Okay. Then we’ll do it all over again,’ he relented, ‘however many times it
takes.’

Inside, however, he was worried. He was losing all his male friends. He would
soon be Kafka’s ridiculous old bachelor having to be ‘taken in’ for an evening’s
entertainment.

‘Thanks,’ said Jerry who looked a bit relieved. ‘Sorry about the pilgrimage. So
she wasn’t having it?’

‘No,’ said McKay and wondered how he would cope with the loss of Jerry.

‘I thought I’d better tell you that I had an email from Toy,’ Jerry changed tack,
‘asking for a donation for the Church of the Holy Saved. Did you know she was
involved with those freaks? She’s also doing some kind of law course. Says she
doesn’t blame you. Asked about you.’
‘Yes to the first part. I introduced her to the freak in question. His name’s Nigel. No I didn’t know she was doing law.’

‘Did you go on that internet date I sorted?’ Jerry asked.

‘Yes,’ said McKay. ‘Big mistake. I can only think of Julia right now. It was stupid. Defeatist too.’

‘What happened?’ said Jerry.

‘Nothing,’ McKay replied.

‘What do you mean nothing?’

McKay sighed.

‘If you’re asking me if I “fucked” her Jerry, the answer is “no”.

‘Of course I’m not asking that! Jeez. It’s not the same old Jerry you know! Not since I met Morag.’

‘Your life has changed. We’ve done that.’

‘Well, what happened? She said you were weird and that she never wanted to see you again.’

‘She could be right.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I didn’t say anything. I was pissed and stoned and whatever.’

‘You must have said something.’

‘Look,’ McKay felt himself getting annoyed. ‘I think she may be a bit oversensitive that’s all. She was talking about a friend of hers, a woman who died in a car crash and whose ghost had visited her in various states of decomposition. She told me at great, suppurating length.’

‘That’s awful,’ said Jerry ‘How sad for her.’
‘No doubt,’ said McKay, ‘and I simply said, “It sounds like a scene from American Werewolf in London.”’ It was just a comment. A purely objective comment. And then the big screaming scene. Asked if I thought her whole life was a fucking joke. That’s what I always get. As I said, oversensitive.’

‘Clearly,’ said Jerry. ‘Clearly oversensitive. Do you think she may have some form of Aspergers?’

‘Possibly,’ said McKay. ‘How the hell would I know?’

‘Well that’s true,’ said Jerry. ‘You wouldn’t.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Nothing,’ Jerry reached inside his pocket. ‘This is the number you wanted. I’m surprised. You never had any time for Business Studies and now you want to know all about empowerment and making things happen. The guy I’m giving you is the best McKay. He’s the reason I managed to corral Morag. She’s six-feet tall McKay. On our first date she felt like a giraffe stepping out with a warthog.’

‘She said that, did she?’

Jerry reached over and gave McKay a little card. ‘It’s all you’ll ever need,’ he whispered.

‘I somehow doubt that,’ said McKay.

‘Get your life back,’ insisted Jerry, ‘what have you got to lose?’
WHAT HAD HE got to lose? Apart from his life, nothing, and it was true that Pete Zigler packed out stadiums. He was an old friend of Jerry’s who kept in touch because the latter had, and in a fit of unreality, once saved the life of his only daughter who had been happily barfing and overdosing on a toxic cocktail of white poison at an awards ceremony for her devoted father. In book shops everywhere there was always a great wall of Zigler. The books were mustard yellow and sold by the Intermodal Container. The man had messianic, packable secrets to impart whose planetary force had to remain secret until the were prised open by anybody with the price of a softback. In some of the more outlandish tales, Zigler was portrayed as a cross between Fu Manchu and Rasputin. People groped for rapture wherever he spoke. The Twitter Feed alone captured half the planet and served up the kind of glop that held out hope for the most abject and irredeemable fuckup.

Instead of books for the toilet, Zigler had actually sold quotes, printed thoughts on squares of hard, scratchy, non-absorbent tracing paper. Everybody had thought it was a huge joke. Everybody was in on the joke. Zigler was known for helping people ‘turn things around.’ If he couldn’t help, you might wonder who could. The twit, alternatively, expressed himself in downmarket terms. Stuff about examining and slowly healing your life, reconnecting with your core values. Zigler promised more of a zap. And the zeitgeist was zap.

McKay finally met Zigler in the Glasgow office. The Zigler Foundation was octopused all over the world and this one was located in a former Episcopal church. Zigler was visiting the faithful for the Zig 12 and it had been difficult for McKay to
book a hotel. ‘We’ve got them hanging from the rafters,’ smiled a mad Scottish hotelier, obviously glad for the trade. McKay finally managed to find a place in a Youth Hostel just outside the city and in the middle of a Scottish field. The place where he was staying was filled with children, daisies, and decent but obvious losers. He wasn’t a loser but had lost both women in his life and was now staying in a Youth Hostel in the middle of a Scottish field.

Zigler’s office was large and intimidating. McKay had reached the inner citadel after walking down a gloomy tunnel. Two searches along the way. There was a vaulted ceiling and an iron-sculpted staircase which led to the first floor. There was a huge mural which was lit through the type of skylight you might find in a hamam. The mural showed Zigler wearing flowing robes and pointing to a light. There was an adoring entourage.

McKay had been made to wait for two hours and when the man finally did emerge from a side door he looked flustered and hot and immediately poured McKay a drink. He asked about Jerry. He did look like the film actor Charlton Heston. He was tall and commanding. No discernible difference between the public presentation and the private reality. McKay then got the story of Jerry’s heroic rescue of his daughter and how Zigler would always be grateful for ‘what that man did.’ Not grateful enough thought McKay. Jerry was still working at Merlin. Ten minutes later, Zigler had McKay’s whole story. ‘Great,’ he finally said and smiled. McKay frowned. Was the man even listening? He persevered and told Zigler that Julia had sent him a video of Kaa the Snake, singing ‘Trust in Me.’ She had also said that she considered the child abuser Joseph Fritzl to be higher up morally than he was himself.
‘That gives us a firm basis from which to work,’ said Zigler. ‘At least we know where we are.’ McKay frowned again. He spoke some more about Julia. She had had a miscarriage and it was his fault. Zigler reeled off some statistics. It probably wasn’t his fault.

‘What progress have you made so far? Zigler asked. ‘Is there anything in the ether which convinces you that you should carry on in this way, trying to get her back?’

McKay reflected. In a hotel room at a Conference in Preston he had seen the words ‘Do not throw in the towel,’ written on one of the towels.

‘Anything else,’ asked Zigler.

‘No,’ replied McKay.

‘Do you think we might focus on things closer to hand? Some actual concrete steps?’ Had McKay read any of his books? McKay admitted that he hadn’t. Zigler asked why and then showed him a list that he could perhaps ‘dip into.’ *Living The Dream* was followed by *The Eight Steps you need to take in order to be the person you were born to be.* McKay paused. The thought occurred that he’d been born to be a hopeless, useless fuck up.

The words and the titles were also giving him a headache. He smiled at Zigler. It occurred to him that the man was already approaching the problem of getting Julia back in the manner of an assistant at a local Jobs Centre who checked what you had ‘done’ each month to look for work.

‘What have you written?’ asked Zigler, changing tack.

‘Three novels,’ said McKay, brightening. *The Preying Ground* about a prostitute who has a relationship with a professor and then gets killed by a load of religious bigots. The man’s mother is dying of cancer and the only relief he gets from it, is
spending time with the hookers rather than reading the Bible which is something that the people in his street keep pestering him about.’

Zigler frowned.

‘What else?’ he said.

‘The TB Pavilion?’ said McKay.

‘Afraid not,’ said Zigler.

‘It’s about two Filipino children,’ said McKay. ‘One lives on Clark Air Base and the other is in a TB Sanatorium. They set off for the sea when Mount Pinatubo explodes. One of them dies.’ He paused. ‘Unheard Cries?’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘It’s about the murder of the Shropshire Heiress Leslie Whittle, by the serial Killer Donald Knappy. I fictionalised it.’

‘Do any of your novels?’ asked Zigler, ‘have a happy ending?’

‘No,’ said McKay and felt the sudden weight of a crushing disappointment. It was the phrase ‘happy ending’ that had plunged him. And he had promised himself to try everything. To do the most outrageous things in his pursuit of Julia. The phrase, ‘a happy ending,’ however, bothered him immensely. The expansiveness and the glow and the desperate desire to believe were already starting to fizzle out. Was Zigler just another ACME Rocket? McKay suddenly felt like Wylie Coyote with frazzled whiskers and bulging eyes. Had Zigler just detonated?

‘Where are we right now?’ the man suddenly asked.

‘In your office.’

‘I mean in your emotional life.’

‘You tell me.’
‘I think I need you to tell me.’ The man’s smile was large, expansive. It was a big, hearty, ‘hail fellow well met,’ born of living in a country that had once had expansive dreams about itself. ‘Help me to help you,’ it said.

‘Look at it this way Christie,’ Zigler continued, ‘When we take away all the judgement and all the emotions and all the trauma and heartache, it’s really very simple. We have a woman called ‘Julia’ and we need to get her from point ‘A’ to point ‘B.’ It’s all a matter of logistics.’

The Job Centre reared its ugly head.

‘So where is point A?’ Zigler repeated. ‘Can you describe it for me? Tell me about the way she currently sees you. You’ve told me about Toy and all that absurd fantasy.’

McKay looked at Zigler and started to arrange the colossal number of fixed chunks that Julia had heaved in his direction. He would let this walking monument to self-assertion deal with them. He would see how much that buffed American optimism held out against his dreary Anglo pessimism.

‘She compares me,’ he hedged, ‘a little unfavourably with the monster Joseph Fritzl. “Even Fritzl took a Xmas tree into the basement.” She says. I think that was the lawyer’s defence to show that Fritzl wasn’t a total monster. She’s saying it, I suppose, because there was a whole reality out there she never knew about.’

‘So she compares you with Joseph Fritzel,’ said Zigler. ‘Good, good. Carry on.’

‘Well,’ said McKay feeling annoyed. ‘I thought you might ask something like this so I bought a scroll of all the things that she said. I’ve written them down and I’ll go through them.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Translated from the Spanish, of course.’

‘Of course.’
“Vas a ir al infierno, lo sabes, no?” You’re going to hell do you realize this?’ McKay reflected. ‘I’ve already been there so that’s alright.’

“Pronto encontraráis a otra víctima.” You will soon meet another victim, don’t worry. “No te tomas mi vida en serio.” You think my life is a joke. You only love eating, drinking and fucking. “Solo piensas en comer, beber y follar.” That simply is not true. I like other things as well.’

McKay looked at Zigler. The man was serene. No sign of discernible piss take at all. “Es todo mentira,” he continued, ‘It’s all bullshit or lies.’ The sound of that one didn’t set a good precedent. The nitpicking defence that it hadn’t all been bullshit and lies hadn’t washed either.

“Es incredible,” he added. ‘This, I fear, doesn’t mean that her experience was incredible in a good sense, but that it is was unbelievable in a bad. Spanish is like English in this respect.’

“Vives una operetta.” “Tu vida es una telenovela.” These are both similar phrases. They mean something like, “You live in a Soap Opera.” They’re also not good because she thinks she’s been nothing but a character. That everything has been unreal. I tried to use stuff from Dali. I tried to say, for example, that reality was a nice place to visit but who wants to live there? “Me,” she responded. “I want to live there!” I thought about Aristotle on lies here?’

Pete Zigler was just staring.

“Eres un monstruo.” You are a monster. That’s not as bad as it first seems. I could, perhaps, write something ‘from the monster’s point of view?’ – literature has given us many examples. It’s difficult though. She doesn’t think I have one. How about you?’ McKay looked at Zigler. ‘Do I have a point of view?’ He waited. ‘That’s not a rhetorical question Mr Zigler.’
‘You tell me?’ the man smiled and McKay got an uneasy feeling. Perhaps Zigler’s face had been pumped full of formaldehyde. The smile was fixed, the eyes were fixed. In some ways he looked like he was about to explode.

‘“You are evil,”’ McKay continued, ‘which comes out in Spanish with the word diabolical. It seems to have retained its metaphysical connotations. “Por qué has destrozado mi vida?” Why did you ruin my life? “Me has destrozado la vida” My life is ruined. I guess that’s the same. “Nunca te has preocupado por mi.” You never cared for me. This isn’t true. I just cared for somebody else at the same time. “Nunca me quisiste” You never loved me. The same issue. I just loved somebody else at the same time.’

When he had finished McKay put down the scroll in front of his American Saviour. The man who would make everything right. There was a very long pause.

‘You know Christie,’ the man finally stood up and started pacing, ‘a lot of people would think yours a lost cause. I’m happy to tell you that I’m not one of them! No sir, I am not!’ He turned suddenly and fixed McKay with an engulfing attention.

‘Now it’s gonna take a lotta work and a lotta commitment on our part, but I am sure we can make progress. I am CONVINCED that we can make progress here! That we can get Julia back and that you can have that wonderful life you’ve always deserved!’

‘Really?’ said McKay and felt the first stirrings of the faintest hope. There was another huge pause.

‘No,’ said Zigler sinking in on himself like wet cardboard. He had his head in his hands and sighed deeply. Slowly the man pulled his face out of his hands and allowed his fingers to stretch out the flesh under his eyeballs and pull them downwards. The effect was disconcerting.
‘Son? Do you believe a single word of the horse shit I’m selling you?’

McKay reflected. For some reason he was shocked. ‘No,’ he said.

‘Sure, I know what you’re thinking. Some blowhard yank just spouting stuff from his asshole. Here’s the thing son.’ Zigler leaned his great bronze head over towards McKay and whispered.

‘You’re absolutely right.’

He then had a fit of hysterical giggles.

McKay leant back in his chair. He had never read a Pete Zigler book, but after this little display he’d be reading them all.

‘Know why I decided to see you?’

The man was leaning aggressively forward. Gorilla walking on his knuckles which he’d planted on the desk in front of him.

‘Cancer son. Cancer everywhere. And they can’t do a damned thing. Do you think I agree to see every piss-ant that ever breathed? I only saw you because of Jerry. I’m trying to do good things in my life for a change. Perhaps this is one of them. You came to me by chance. This, really, is all you’ll ever need. Otherwise you’ll still be looking up your own asshole after everybody else has given up.’ Zigler scribbled a number. He passed it to McKay.

‘I’d take it if I were you,’ he nodded to McKay who slowly reached out and took the scrap of paper. A number and a name.

‘Know the best story ever written?’ asked Zigler. ‘You being a real writer and all.’ Zigler managed to make the words ‘real writer’ sound like ‘old paedophile’.

McKay shook his head. He was mute in Zigler’s presence.

‘The Death of Ivan Ilyich, by Count Leo Tolstoy. ‘Ever read it?’

McKay nodded miserably.
‘Well, you’re looking at him son,’ Zigler popped a blue pill and washed it down with a whisky. ‘Looking straight at old Ivan Ilyich. Three sons. One a total drug addict, never see him anymore. Last time he stole all my pain killers. “These are great dad,” he said, when I woke up one day desperately needing them. Daughter in jail. She doesn’t give a shit either.’

Zigler looked at McKay, paused and then continued.

‘When I was a kid my daddy gave me one of the worst pieces of advice I have ever received. Wanna know what it was?’

McKay nodded.

‘It was a poem son, a poem. Wanna know how it went?’

More nodding.

Zigler stood up and looked at the ceiling. He cleared his throat.

‘If you wanna be rich you son of a bitch I’ll tell you what to do. Never sit down with a tear or a frown and paddle your own canoe!’

Zigler paused again, as if waiting for it to sink in, then he said:

‘Three wives who hate my guts! A son who refuses to speak and this,’ Zigler looked around. ‘This Kubla Khan of fucking swag!’ He smashed the table with his fist and a squash ball rolled past a vase of operatic flowers and scampered down a marble corridor. McKay had not expected the fluency. He was listening and he was listening hard.

‘You fucked those women up!’ said Zigler. ‘And you’re an asshole! You do all sorts of horrible shit but guess what, that’s not really you right? Newsflash!’ Zigler screamed and stood up.

‘Apparently it is!’

McKay leant back in his chair.
It was worth every penny.

‘You need to clean your life son! No more fuck-ups, no more lies. Try to reconnect with what you once were. You know what a tap root does? If you plant it the wrong way? It still starts burrowing down just as the rest of the plant ends up reaching for the sky. You probably find that facile but I find it kinda encouraging, especially at this stage in my life.’

Zigler stood up. He was now a mighty old man in a white beard and flowing robes and his voice was booming.

‘Are you burrowing up or burrowing down son?’

And then McKay was scrambling out of the presence chamber and the audience was over. If he’d stayed any longer Zigler would have scorched him like a dragon.
31: Alone

‘ALONE, ALONE, ALL all alone. Alone on a wide, wide sea.’ And that’s not going to be me, McKay thought, slamming down an ill-conceived poetry anthology on ‘Being Alive.’ Sunday morning, all alone, surrounded by books. Chimney stacks of books up against the living room window. Flies kept tumbling between the stacks and the window and dying in a heap at the bottom. Quiet Sundays were alright. It didn’t matter because Sundays were meant to be quiet. Three Pigs was busy with Morag and McGrath was busy with his children and everybody was busy with everybody else. And that was fine. No point getting depressed. He had Facebook. Somebody had just, ‘Had a dump.’ Somebody else had ‘jerked off, but couldn’t get to sleep.’ The messages flashed up but the house was still silent. He needed to get out and be around people. He briefly considered the local church but had been there before and viewed a power point presentation on evil. Some writer had written, ‘beware the oasis defence against rage and sorrow.’ Another writer, McKay thought it might have been William Gaddis, had written somewhere that lust was better than gluttony. Lust at least seeks another, it is primarily sociable and surely better than sitting in the house like a sick cow wondering how you managed to make your life fall apart. And ‘Pert,’ was better than misery. At least that was the theory. Reality was increasingly presenting another picture.

The receptionist at ‘Karma Sutra Girl Delivery Service: We deliver on all your dreams’ was seated behind a wooden vestibule and everything was glass and chrome and high-spec. There was a laminated sign on the corner. It had a wavy-blue border. McKay had been hoping for brocade and green shade. Dark-eyed houris. This border ring-fenced the sort of notice that outlined acceptable swimming pool behaviour
circa 1976. This notice outlined the rules. In the waiting room there were men. None of them spoke to each other. There were glass tables and magazines you could peruse. Somebody would call your name. As well as the breezy décor there was a breezy receptionist who smiled at you in a breezy way; the smile flipping on and off as the front door chimed and a new customer arrived, or left the building.

McKay thought that ‘Karma Sutra’ cleverly combined the aesthetics of a betting shop with the low grade fear of a dentists’ waiting room. The coffee table magazines didn’t, however, feature pictures of comely country houses or recipes or debates about home schooling. They didn’t have pictures of women with Bounty white teeth and slobbering dogs. There were no exotic cars on lawns. At the start of the 21st Century the British had managed to convert sex into something resembling the smiley, high-minded discussions that no doubt accompanied an appendectomy. Now that they were liberated they were permitted to be serious about their pleasure. In the magazines men processed tits and arses. They multitasked and employed an assembly line approach with two or sometimes three workers slapping the woman together with monster-sized log cocks. On the wall, a large glass case displayed the profiles of all the girls and there was a spreadsheet which showed their specialities. There were ticks and crosses next to all the things they did and didn’t do. There were more ticks than crosses. Times were tough.

He’d had to wait ten minutes and then he was standing in a room in his socks. An airless, basement room painted in red. He was thinking about a Japanese Gokiburi Hoi-Hoi: a cardboard cockroach house that trapped the roaches on a sticky patch of paper that gave off an unfathomable odour. On the inside of the miniature cardboard house all the roaches were dying and on the outside they were smiling and had kerchiefs around their mandibles as they cleaned the windows. Girlfriend
experience. He didn’t want that. He could now hear himself talking to the girl. She was in her early twenties and McKay was rapidly realizing that he didn’t want to be here. He didn’t want the girl to be here. Who had cooked up the whole shitty scenario? Only he’d bought the dress. The one she’d liked by Adolfo Dominguez. Do you know him? he asked, as if in a dream. The blue and silver one that used to slip, so easily over her shoulders. Yes, he’s a famous Spanish designer. Would you mind putting it on? No, I don’t want to do anything. Just look at you in that dress. No, no sex. No, really. Yes, that’s all. No, nothing more. Really. Just wear the dress. The girl didn’t know which category to file it under. Was it domination he was after? Just wearing a dress sounded weird. She’d check. She went out and came back. Yes, she could wear the dress but he wouldn’t be charged any less just because he didn’t want any more. ‘The thing is,’ he said. ‘I don’t want any more.’ She looked at him and asked a question. The relief? He looked at her standing there in the dress, in the Gokiburi Hoi-Hoi, looking tragic and sad and pathetic and young. He put the money on the table, said that he hoped the girl would be alright and walked out of the room. Outside he sucked in air. Zigler had been right. He had been burrowing down for far too long.
HE DIDN’T NOTICE THE changes at first but felt that the room was somehow larger. There was a space where the bookcase in the hallway should have been and when he moved into the living room he saw that the Arabic Majlis had gone and so had the tiny inlaid Syrian table that he had bought in Dubai. The silver Omani dagger on the wall was missing. She was in the kitchen making tea and telling him about ‘Shetans.’

‘This is really serious,’ she said, and he solemnly nodded his head to indicate that he recognised the precariousness of the situation.

He imagined her in a room somewhere. Hours of fist pounding prayer. She was a pain in the ass but he had to get her away from these freaks.

The Scientific Church of the Holy Saved had a number of what it called ‘core’ beliefs. These beliefs had been passed on to its founder, a massively popular science fiction writer called Norbert Elias who had written the Zeno chronicles back in the 1950s. They had been made into an awful film and an equally awful miniseries. According to Norbert Elias, Zeno was an heroic figure who had been intercepted and prevented from informing the human race that a tribe of Arkotrons, from a distant galaxy, had planned to colonize the entire planet through mind control and then have everybody self-destruct so that they could take over and pillage the human backyard.

This was the core, and it was laurel-leafed with a lot of baloney about ‘getting clean’ and ridding yourself of all the ‘false conditioning’ that the everyday unthinking human, and those who had not received the little yellow book, ‘The trials of Zeno,’ typically exhibited. Toy was on ‘Level 1. Initial Shedding.’ The tasks set involved staring for hours at a picture of Elias whilst chanting and droning on about how he was the true Messiah. It wasn’t uncommon, she now told him, for initiates to
spend up to nine hours a day doing this, until they experienced a kind of ‘breakthrough.’

McKay looked at a picture of a fat, jowly white man with thinning, straw-coloured hair. It reminded him of Colonel Saunders. He didn’t say anything. He looked at her and listened to how zealous she’d become. All the stuff about Julia’s baby. She’d really wanted to have a child. He’d given that child to another woman who’d miscarried and also suffered because of him. He’d fucked everything and everybody. Toy didn’t trust him anymore and all that inner turbulence had had to be contained. Contained within the super coherent dreams of Norbert Elias. If it hadn’t been Elias it would have been something else.

‘Would you like to come along to our next meeting?’ she asked this with the same weird glow.

‘I’d love to,’ he said. He smiled sweetly whilst imagining some serene type in saffron robes. ‘I was thinking,’ he added, ‘that perhaps the two of us could go out together. For a meal or something?’ Her mouth seemed to twitch slightly on hearing this. He could feel the adamantine carapace and all its cracks. She’d obviously had a complete breakdown about the same time as Julia, and he was the author of everything. ‘How about tomorrow?’ he asked. ‘I’ll take you to that new Filipino restaurant you were talking about and we can eat Balot? You haven’t had that for a long time I bet.’

More unease.

‘Tomorrow is the day of the Zeno’s ascension,’ she said. ‘It is a very important event in the calendar of the church. I’m not sure I could miss it.’

‘It’ll come round again next year won’t it?’ he asked, in as gentle a manner as he could. ‘And the year after that, come to think of it.’
‘I’m going to change my name,’ she said.

‘Really,’ he smiled again. ‘To what?’ he asked.

‘Mysterion,’ she replied solemnly. ‘Mysterion Galactus.’

‘I see,’ he said, once again pretending to be thoughtfully solemn. It was cruel but he had had to bite his lips on that one. ‘That is quite a name isn’t it?’ Toy had problems reading so McKay doubted that she’d ever touched a Marvel comic.

‘It was chosen for me by a special council of the Elders of the Inner circle,’ she intoned. ‘We had a special ceremony.’

She noticed him looking around.

‘The furniture’s not important,’ she said. ‘I have to be rid of selfish selfhood and craving.’

‘So did they come and collect it for you?’ he said. ‘How thoughtful of them.’

It would probably be safer to fire bomb the church.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘They have helped me.’

‘Where is it?’ he said.

‘It’s gone.’

‘Gone where?’ he asked.

‘It’s for a defence fund,’ she announced. ‘They have a special storage space.’

‘Defence against what?’

‘When the Arkotrons invade? They’ve been planning. Money is needed for the completion of the Ark.’

Reverse Engineering? Reprogramming? Would those do the trick?

‘What?’

‘The Ark. It is being built in a special cave under a mountain in North America. The location must remain secret. It’s invisible and has been covered with a special
paint. It’s a mountain of miracles and power and is covered with a special paint. Even the Elders of the Inner circle don’t know exactly where it is. Only a few followers know the exact location and we who are chosen will be teleported before the world is destroyed.’

This seemed reasonable, but McKay had objections.

‘What about your cat Mr Yeltsin? It doesn’t seem right, somehow, that he should be left behind?’

A flicker of doubt. A very fast flicker zapping its way across her face and McKay knew he had found a chink.

‘And if the Ark is invisible,’ he banged his fist on the remaining table. ‘How will Mr Yeltsin ever find it? You’ve seen that film ‘The Incredible Journey.’ You even cried during it. That would be Mr Yeltsin, crying for his mommy when she abandons him! A place,’ he added, ‘must be made available for Mr Yeltsin and Miss Sophie. And what about Mr Grey and the Black and White bastard and all the other cats you feed? You can’t just leave them! If you did you’d be no better than that woman who put a cat in the bin and the man who abandoned his dog on CCTV. You remember, right? You wanted the woman’s head cut off and the man castrated?’

She seemed to be nodding.

‘Well then,’ McKay pressed on. ‘We must establish the exact procedure for Animal Shredding. How can an animal shred its false consciousness and realize that it has been falsely conditioned into being a slave of Arkatron? How can it remove its Shetan?’

‘I don’t know if an animal has a Shetan,’ she admitted. There was something wrong with her. Why the hell wasn’t she telling him to fuck off? He longed for her to call him a stupid bastard and tell him to go jump in a frozen pond.
‘Oh I’m sure it does,’ he said. He looked at her in an imploring manner. ‘It must do! Haven’t you asked?’

She admitted she hadn’t and he was happy. That was just like her. To get the big picture but fall down on all the details. He would create a wedge with Mr Yeltsin and broaden it with Miss Sophie. If need be he’d picket their offices with pictures of animals and the caption, ‘A cat is for life and not just the second coming of Zeno, Prince of the Universe.’

The phone rang. While she was moving to its tiny docking station McKay noticed that the fuckers had even removed the metal Jeepney with the Makati and Buendia insignia. He suddenly felt the sort of overpowering rage that Zeno must have felt on being intercepted, only light years away, from the planet earth. When she had finished talking to her friend he got her to agree to a little trip into Wales. She’d agreed but only on the condition that they’d be back for ‘ascension day.’ ‘Of course, of course,’ he had said, thinking about how he was going to borrow McGrath’s cottage in the middle of nowhere and have the car break down irretrievably.
33: Metamorphosis

If TOY WAS building a stairway to heaven then so would he. Zigler had suggested drugs. Zigler had said some of them, a select few, ‘broke the concrete in your soul.’ McKay had sighed. He hadn’t expected Zigler to turn out to be such a silly old hippy. Not those type of drugs, said Zigler. Something that makes me clever? McKay had asked. Smart drugs? Something that would perhaps help me with my new fucking start-up? Golden Brain pills? Not those type of drugs, Zigler reassured. I get it, said McKay; something from the makers of Wild Planet, penis fucking gourds and grass skirts. He was disappointed. Up to you, said Zigler. If that’s how you want to stereotype them.

And now. Courtesy of Zigler. They had driven him to a remote farm in the Scottish Highlands. They had said that it was best to take the drug in a natural environment. Two of them had come from a Santo Daime Church in Amsterdam and another man from Brazil. They were all staying on the Zigler payroll at a five-star hotel in Edinburgh. McKay had wondered how they would get the ingredients for what they needed. He was told not to worry. His initiation brothers had said that to get to the deep places they would need both the ayahuasca and the peyote. One of them looked like fucking Hiawatha, the other a sentient rock. Had they been on the wrong end of their own product? It worried him. They told him that there was always a risk that the brew, at this level of concentration could kill or permanently injure.
‘Will I learn anything?’ he had asked. ‘If you come back,’ they had answered. He had signed the forms. No matter how metaphysical you wanted to get, there were always pink forms to be completed.

It had taken time for the vile, nausea inducing liquid to take effect. They had been with him. One person massaging his back, another giving him the stuff from a plastic cup. And all on a grouse moor in the middle of nowhere. And nothing had happened, at least not for a while. He had been drinking the vile muck and puking and then suddenly, and as if a slide had been pushed down from the sky, he found himself in a different place. In front of a huge, white wall. A spongy wall which he was moving through. Passing through a wall of concrete. The ground was flowing. His magic carpet of heather was moving. He knew it was not possible, but he had just passed through a wall, seen the steel mesh in the concrete and passed right through it. And then he was lying on the beach and a horribly poisonous cone shell was crawling over his face and sticking its spear-like proboscis into his eye. He seemed to jump and stagger and then he was floating in and out of brothels. He heard himself saying to some poor Kenyan prostitute that he was from a ‘modelling agency’ and the reason he wanted her to wear all these clothes and take pictures was so that he could ‘send them off’ to London. And so that she might become a model. He ‘saw’ the girl’s spirit being briefly levitated by these remarks. And then in a kaleidoscope of images, and much later on, saw the same girl being raped by a gang of Arabs in the desert, saw her chained and beaten, drugged and tied to a bed; saw her escape and start a new life in a new city. Later the same life, lying in a sweat reeking bed with dirty sheets and being fucked by hundreds of men. The horrible bark of a man coming. He saw himself in this gory carnival, offering the smallest, shallowest glimmer of a false hope. He saw the girl at a tipping point. He saw her spirit sink.
with the slow awareness that the modelling assignment had been just one more piece of crap in a whole lifetime’s worth of crap. He saw himself as a little chirping rat man, mouthing words that were never true. He saw her running a bath in some filthy apartment with a mattress on the floor and a hole punched in a wall for air-conditioning. It wasn’t working. He saw her relaxing and sliding into the warm water. He saw a shroud of red dye seeping out into the tub. He felt the deep cuts on both his wrists, felt his own veins sever, the stinging water enveloping the cuts, felt himself flowing away.

The images receded and there was an ebb and flow. A warm light. He saw himself as a child riding on top of his mother’s back, pretending she was a pony. He could feel, once again, a pure, unaffected happiness. The sort of spontaneous happiness that bubbles up in a child and is slowly crushed as you age. He saw the lives of his friends in coupledom; was shot inside their bedrooms and lives. Some were aiming murderous, yapping mouths at each other and the mouths had become unhinged and were just moving and aiming and unable to stop. He saw some in the throes of passion and others slowly cooling and looking past each other, all frozen in bitterness and sterility. He saw people whose lives were full of laughter and sunlight and others who had completely given themselves over to petty rancour and hate.

He woke up.

He was on a deserted hillside and his shirt was covered in vomit. He was lying in a small indentation in the ground, something offering protection from the cooling breeze. He had a scratchy old grey blanket around him. He was violently shivering. It was late in the evening. The sun was sinking. There were midges and gnats racing in the air, tying themselves into knots, jerking about. In front he could see swathes of purple heather and bees assaulting the flowers. Everything was not at normal speed.
Everything was slow. In front of him was a clump of gnarled Scots pine, a drover’s mark in a glacial landscape. Looking around he could see Neolithic people; there were mouflon and aurochs and then cracked highways, sprouting grass. Two Neolithic men were talking about what they should draw. He could understand what they were saying and laughed. One wanted to draw a man with a cock and the other was offended. The offended one was saying they’d draw a horse instead. He could feel that everything was controlled and connected by some vast magnet at the centre of the universe. Everything was interconnected and the life of a gnat or a dragonfly might be more body joyful and meaningful than the life of a human being. That it might be a pure ecstasy to be a gnat, caught up in a frenzy of fucking and warm light.

And here he was taking in the oneness of the world, being part of everything and everything part of him. To even be here. To just sit still and breathe. It was wondrous. And then he was aware that something had granted him what was only a brief chemical reprieve and that he hadn’t finished his journey. He could feel himself being sucked into the ground, pulled away. There was a hole and he was sucked through it. The ground was eating him alive. He could feel it rising over to cover him up. The dirt and the clods and the roots. He felt like he was inside a huge Kettledrum and somebody was beating it. He wasn’t scared, he was connected to everything, even the burrowing insects tunnelling in the soil. And then he went into the burrow and came out in a purple haze. The drumming lessened and the sky became pink and orange and blue and then settled on the colour of a blood orange. And then it began to bleed and seep and he started to feel rising waves of panic and fear. And then he was upended and turned around in the sky and was floating over the sea until finally he was back on the beach. The beach with the Dhow and the eye. And there were drunken, roaring men and his head looked like it had been dipped in
a bucket of blood. He saw himself strangling a man in seawater. The cold waves
washing over him. He saw himself struggling to stay on top of the man as the waves
crashed about. He saw the man’s hands raking at his forearms and his face. He felt
himself grimly determined. He saw a small camping axe crashing into a coconut.
The coconut had brown hair and sat on top of a human body that was crawling to the
water’s edge like a turtle; a body that couldn’t stand up, but somehow knew that it
had to make it to the sea and was pulling itself there on its elbows. This body was
leaving a trail of smeary blood, the blood washed around tiny rock pools, and in one
of the pools he saw a monstrous red cloud envelope the world of a twitching shrimp.
There were three other bodies lying on that beach and they were all dead. He could
see himself with a rock. Holding a terribly heavy rock above a human face. The face
was languorous and laughing. It didn’t know what was going to happen. He could
see his hands dropping the rock. As it slipped through his fingers he could feel its
rough texture scouring his skin. He saw a vein of white quartzite in the middle of this
rock and saw it splashed with blood. He heard the abominable noise of an egg
cracking. He could feel himself staggering, falling over, weak. He saw Toy on the
beach. She was sitting, not moving, looking out to sea. Her mouth was a cake of
blood and she was trembling. He was putting a blanket over her. He was looking
around. He was wild and ragged.

The scene changed. Mercifully it changed. He was sucked out of the sky and he
saw Julia in her mother’s flat. She was joyful and laughing. She was pregnant. Later
he saw her in the hospital. Some small secret part deep inside her had begun to bleed.
Later gaunt and pale and shrunken in a hospital gown wondering what was
happening. He could feel her pain flowing through him and he gratefully accepted it.
The scene seemed to ignite and burn like a film. It reconstituted itself slowly. McKay was lifted away and now there were older scenes and feelings that had been lost to time. As a child he had always thought his father was a Spy. There they were, his mother, his father and a tiny car. Parked in a lay-by. Miles from anywhere. His father wouldn’t be seen with them, unless they were out of town and parked in truck stops. Single, unmarried mothers. The years when they were not the norm. The years when you had to scuttle about and look ashamed. He was playing, and his legs in grey shorts were cold and trembling and goose fleshed; he was beating puddles with a stick and seemed to vaguely understand that the man and the woman in the car were talking about him. His father seemed to be shouting and his mother was crying. He could feel the pain of realizing that his coming into the world was somehow a problem and that he was, in many ways, unwanted. He could feel a deep, abiding sense of shame that had somehow crippled him and he could feel how he had survived through invention and lies. And all the time there was a warm cloud of lambent light that seemed to be comforting and washing around and cleansing everything. ‘So what?’ the light seemed to be smiling. ‘So what?’

And then the light started to tickle and make him laugh. It seemed to be showing him the good things. It was coaxing his glum spirit to mirth. Playing cars in the dirt with his childhood friends, and then he remembered a Janitor in the local sports centre. The memory triggered a visual image. A man in brown overalls whom they’d called ‘Flapper’ because of his ears. He felt his limbs being sucked back into the flowing body of a ten-year-old boy. He was surrounded by other boys. The grubby naughty faces from his childhood were running next to him and laughing in slow motion and Flapper was out the door and chasing them and they were scarpering and he was laughing so much with his tiny friends and the pain in his chest was so much
he thought he would burst. And then an early girlfriend and smoking weed and opium in Thailand. He felt himself coming. He was coming and the orgasm was expressing something like love. He remembered what it felt like to have sex and be in love with another person. Years later the pinched face of his ex-wife. ‘You use sex to express every emotion except love.’ And then another realization.

People started off as one thing and they became something else, but that didn’t mean you couldn’t get back. The journey would be long and hard, but it wasn’t impossible. A simple unchanging truth: people became things. They were endlessly changing. And evil was an absence of feeling rather than some huge, tectonic imponderable. And then another change.

He could see himself with a Russian prostitute in Dubai. A warm afternoon in his tower block apartment. He had his pants around his ankles and was pressing her against the smooth glass of the building. She was laughing. He was pointing her towards Mecca as he fucked her and swigging from a bottle of whisky at the same time. ‘Are you enjoying yourself, you silly person?’ the light seemed to be asking. It wasn’t judging, it wasn’t disappointed. It was amused. It was saying, ‘How small do you think I am?’ And then his mother. He could feel her pride. The first boy in the street to go to university. She went up and down the road informing people. He could feel inside her, could feel her happiness and pride and felt that he was responsible for it. He also felt her guilt. Guilt at her early feelings. He felt forgiveness and understanding. People can’t always be the people you want them to be. That’s just the way it is. And then later the sadness of her lengthy decline from cancer. He was taken back to his early childhood home. He was hovering above himself late at night in her bedroom. She was coughing endlessly in the night. He saw himself crying and praying that she would sleep. He saw himself propping her up with pillows and
emptying a clear plastic bowl which contained blood and spittle and her lungs, into the toilet. And he remembered having to ask her, ‘Do you want to be buried or cremated mum?’ He felt a terrible guilt at having asked that question. Why had he even asked? He felt a terrible guilt about everything. He hadn’t been enough, he hadn’t done enough. He should have done more. And the light was saying that it was alright, that it didn’t matter. That everybody failed. And his body was ridding itself of layers of coldness and concrete and repression. Everything was thawing. And then the scene changed. And then he was back on the beach with the monsters and the ghouls and the vampires. Only they weren’t. Not anymore.

He no longer felt fear, or dread, or panic; just sadness. The light had wrapped itself around him and was holding him up. Looking through the light he could see a child growing up in a slum of St. Petersburg. The child had the face of the man on the beach. The one he had killed with the axe. He saw the same man as a boy, being beaten with a wire coat hanger. Later another man was screaming over the body of the man’s dead mother. She had been bludgeoned to death with a hammer. The man child was sitting in a spreading pool of blood and his face was morphing and sliding and filling and turning into the face of the man who had raped Toy. The light ‘presented’ these things. It didn’t seem to comment, or judge, or comfort. It was a strangely quiet and supporting light. Hours later he woke up.

The drug was still changing his perception, but he was no longer getting the visions. He was still lying in the shallow indentation, only it was dark. He could see the stars burning. There were sheep on the silent hillside. Far away they looked like tiny maggots. The stars didn’t feel ‘cold’ anymore. They were no longer remote or pitiless or indifferent. They simply were. Nothing was designed to last. Even the stars. He could somehow feel them ‘slow burning’ everything away. He tried to
stand but his legs were jittery and they would not offer support. He sat down. He was trying to process what he had been through. He was shaking his head. He felt happy and horrified. He couldn’t process it. It was impossible. For the first time in years he remembered what happiness felt like. He had really forgotten. He was feeling his feelings, not thinking about them or analyzing them or talking about them when they didn’t exist. And he felt differently. The happiness with Julia had been the happiness borne of desperation. A frantic fucking in oblivion. Things needed to be faced. That’s all there was to it. You couldn’t drink, you couldn’t whore, you couldn’t drug yourself to death. That was the drug talking. A drug of sobriety. And what was next, he could feel himself smiling, some kind of horrible, raggedy ghost telling him to change? He didn’t need the ghost, he got the message. The light was out there. He didn’t know if it was God, but something was there and you had to keep moving towards it. Using other people was wrong. They were all you had. Everything else was a fucking irrelevance.

He noticed for the first time that he was wearing a nappy. He had shat himself. Vomit was everywhere. The mother of all purges. He smiled again. A man in a nappy. He was a man standing up in the middle of the Scottish Highlands wearing a nappy. He’d probably derive kidney damage and liver failure from this little ‘experiment.’ It didn’t matter. There was great truth to the images that had been given to him. People would say ‘yes but you took a drug.’ It didn’t matter. He knew that those images were real.

He stripped off his clothes and put them into the plastic bags provided. His stomach felt sore. Like it had been rubbed with sandpaper. His throat was parched. He could hardly swallow the water in the plastic bottle and the water felt oily and sugary. It felt like he was pouring fire into his mouth. He looked around. In the
distance he could see a car park and a blue van by the side of a dirt track. A hand seemed to be waving him towards the van. He wrapped himself in the blanket picked up the plastic bags and started to move towards it.
‘I’M GONNA GET married to Nigel and everything will be fine.’

He was in Toy’s flat. She had a wedding dress stuck on a headless tailor’s dummy.

‘It changes things if you get married,’ she informed him wisely, ‘that was the mistake we made. We never got married and we never had any kids. If we had got married and had had kids everything would have been fine.’

McKay believed she said things to see what they sounded like. He had no idea if she believed any of them.

‘Right,’ he contented himself. She was fussing around with something.

‘I was given a load of crystals,’ she said. ‘I’m going to put some on the dress to make it sparkle. I have an electric wand to do it.’

‘Right.’

‘They’ll be other people there,’ she continued. ‘It’s some kind of mass wedding. I guess it’s cheaper. We have to all be in the hall at the same time for the blessing. Are you going to come?’

He pictured himself in an arena with a pair of binoculars trying to spot her.

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Up to you, but you’ll be missing a great day out.’

He stood up and looked at the magazines that had been scattered around. One of the texts she had been reading had been heavily annotated. There were a lot of red arrows and heavy underlining. The title of it was, ‘The Evil in the world.’ He could
see that the evil in the world had been entirely blamed on supra-human, malign
influence. Something grand and scheming and requiring a lifetime’s worth of
pamphlets. Was he really going to leave her like this? In this straitjacket? He
guessed that he was.

‘Well,’ he said, feeling more small and inadequate every second, ‘I think I’d
better get going.’

‘You could come to some of our meetings,’ she said, looking hopeful.

‘I could, but I probably won’t,’ he said. ‘Are you going to go to the therapist like
we agreed?’ It was worth one last attempt.

‘I don’t need to,’ she was now fretting with the dress and pulling it. ‘I told you,’
she turned around and snapped on a smile. ‘There’s nothing wrong with me. Nigel
agrees. Nigel thinks it’s you who has the problem. I was perfectly fine until I met
you and I will be fine without you.’ The smile snapped off.

‘Yes,’ he stood by the door. ‘I guess that’s true. Well, I hope it all works out for
you.’

She smiled the same brittle smile and he walked out the door. He kept thinking of
the electric wand and the way she was absorbed in gluing the crystals to the dress.
Fairy Godmother. Princess stuff. A doll’s house. She had all this and he had drugs
and sex and massage parlours and depression. He thought about a picture of Toy
when she was a little kid. He had once seen her in a sailor suit. Her dad had worked
at the American airbase in Angeles. Some faded picture of a little guy surrounded by
brawny American sailors and Toy in her suit. The weight of that picture.

‘I’ve tried Column Dresses, A-lines, Empires, Mermaids, long or three-quarter
sleeves, spaghetti straps, Halters, and finally I came up with this.’

‘What are you on about?’
‘My dress. Of course you wouldn’t know. I’m wearing the Ballerina. It’s called the Ball gown or the Fairytale. The full look for the full story.’

‘Right.’

McKay permitted himself to look at the dress. Toy was too small for it. All they would see would be a tiny head poking out of a huge white shuttlecock.

‘Are you sure this is what you want?’

‘I didn’t like the last one,’ she ignored him, ‘too much underbust detailing.’ She looked at him. ‘Yes it is, and you’re just jealous because you’ll never get married and I will.’ She was humming now and looking at herself in the mirror.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that must be it. Well, good luck.’ He would miss her. He’d been trying to split up with her and now she was really going. ‘It was probably for the best.

‘Where will you go?’ she suddenly asked.

‘I’ll be around,’ he smiled. ‘Probably be at Merlin for the rest of my life.’

The thought horrified him.
35: Velvet Squirrel

‘SO WHAT WE DO is this,’ Bill had said. ‘McGrath is going to dig a hole in his field with a mechanical digger. There will be a dry ice machine at the bottom of that hole and I will emerge, on a rising platform, dressed as a foetal headed alien. We will have slipped him a tab first, obviously. Then in my alien’s voice I will tell him to return everything and to leave Toy alone. Then we’ll recover the furniture.’ Bill had wanted to create ‘an interstellar igloo’ made out of old hubcaps.

Thank God it wasn’t needed. The phone call from Nigel was expected even though it had taken longer than expected. They were parked in the old Gala Bingo car park. McKay had chosen the spot. It seemed suitably absurd. Now there was just him and Nigel, both sitting in Nigel’s car, in an empty space. It suited McKay’s mood.

‘She went mad,’ said the man who believed in the Arkotrons. McKay nodded serenely.

‘She started flinging things around,’ Nigel continued. ‘You know, cutlery and the like?’

McKay nodded. ‘Cutlery,’ he responded, dully.

‘She said you were a monster,’ he added, in an obvious bid for sympathy.

‘Well,’ McKay yawned. ‘Some people would no doubt agree with that.’

‘She chased me around the car,’ Nigel continued. ‘With a carving knife for fuck sake!’

McKay did wide-eyed. He tried to imagine something other than the speeded up, black and white comedy that he was currently picturing but the images segued into the brick and plastic housing estate where Nigel lived. The image of the proud
conservatory appended to the house like a toadstool on a tree. In the end he felt sorrier for Toy. He always did. ‘What brought this on?’ he asked. ‘Or was it just a change of temperature?’

‘I have an affliction,’ Nigel said, looking straight ahead. ‘Although I’m told it’s quite normal and is shared by a lot of people.’

For the first time since they’d met McKay snapped to attention. Ideas for novels came from the most unpromising beginnings.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked, trying not to peer and leer and dribble. He had perfected the heartfelt, sorrier-than-thou, through countless hours of performing his emotions. It was great always having a phone with a Qwerty and an electronic pad. Anything interesting in the slipstream of speech could be more or less immediately written down. And while you pretended to text.

‘Occasionally, and I mean occasionally,’ Nigel said, and the effort nearly toppled him, ‘I like dressing up in women’s clothing. There I’ve said it. It’s out now.’

He was staring in front and refusing to look at McKay. Arkotrons, perfectly fine, silky drawers a no-no. McKay tried to hide what was becoming a bitter sense of disappointment. The fucker couldn’t even do pervy! He shrugged his shoulders. Completely mundane. No wonder Toy wanted out.

‘I like dressing up as a squirrel’ he finally replied. ‘I have these unzippable velvet pouches.’

‘She seemed to be fairly accepting,’ Nigel continued, not giving any indication that he’d been listening. ‘Understanding even. But then one day we went to see a film. It was one of those black and white classics. You know, the horror one about the bloke who owns the hotel? I forget the name.’
McKay was biting his lips. Was Nigel really this thick? How had he conned her into believing all the stuff about foetal headed aliens? No wonder they’d had problems. A man who wasn’t into film would not last long with Toy.

McKay obliged with the sorry face.

‘And it was in the middle of the night,’ Nigel continued. ‘I thought I’d surprise her. I’d dressed up for her. She started screaming and flinging all the clothes around. She said she didn’t want to marry a man who looked like Norman Bates, who sounded like Norman Bates, who dressed like Norman Bates, and who would probably one day try to stab her like Norman Bates. I now know about Norman Bates.’

‘She believes in ghosts,’ McKay tried to explain. ‘You talk to Arkotrons. Seems pretty even to me.’

‘Has she ever done anything like this before? Nigel ignored him. ‘I mean with knives and stuff?’

‘Oh sure,’ McKay drawled the words in the manner of a large hearted Texan, trying to reassure. ‘All the time. She told my ex that she had killed our baby with Magbabarang. Those are Filipino shamans who blow insects into your body to kill you. She used to threaten to castrate me in my sleep. Sometimes she’d pretend to be a zombie. In fact, I remember, she enlisted a friend for one of her finest performances in Dubai. Her friend pretended that she had jumped from our balcony and committed suicide. I looked down from the fifth floor and saw the outline of a prostrate figure with blood under its head. When I’d raced down I found that the blood was fake and from a joke shop. She just got up and laughed.’

‘Jesus Christ,’ said Nigel. ‘Jesus Christ. She’s a right fucking bitch. These Asians come over here eh, and think they can lord it over the rest of us.’
The man shook his head. McKay rubbed his forehead and closed his eyes. He had known Toy for ten years and suddenly didn’t like this podgy Brit with flat feet and bad breath. He was equally appalled at the tentative bracketing of their respective conditions. He’d always hated being British. That’s why he’d spent half his life in Asia.

‘Look old sport,’ he did the gentle but insistent, consciousness raising tone. The tone that insisted there was something delicate that needed to be imparted, something that only a sensitive friend could tiptoe around. He did it only so that he could throw a grenade into Nigel’s face and have it explode in the conversation.

‘Katoi in Thailand and ‘Bakla’ in the Philippines take care about their appearance. You really shouldn’t dress up as Norman Bates if you have an Adam’s Apple like a fucking bullock’s kneecap!’

Nigel pushed him out of the car and departed in a plume of angry blue smoke.

Arkotrons 0. McKay 1.
Steve’s telescope was being repaired and the man had shaved his head. There was no longer a tree line around the vast white dome. McKay felt that he’d had a positive effect. And he’d also reached the end of the line. There was no more scholarly asides about deserts or facetious comments about psychologists. There was, instead, an awful clarity. A bottom of the bottle recognition of the nature of reality.

‘I’m not sorry I killed those men,’ McKay said to the man who was wearing the most sombre expression he had ever seen. ‘Raskolnikov’s guilt simply never kicked in. They beat the crap out of me, they raped Toy. They would probably have raped me but after the beating I was covered in blood and wasn’t a particularly appetising morsel. They thought I was dead. I should have been dead. All my ribs were broken, my skull was cracked. I have axe nightmares with a face that stares up at me and laughs. It makes it difficult to relate to so called ‘normal’ people.’

‘Did you bury them?’

Why was Steve even asking? What was he going to do—call the cops? For a brief moment McKay entertained a moment of doubt.

‘We did. Well, I did. She could hardly move. I went back there four years ago. The whole place is now a golf and beach resort called ‘Funland.’ They must have found the bodies during construction, but whoever owns it clearly didn’t inform the police. A local worthy not wanting a story about some dead, no account Russians to ruin the grand, ribbon cutting initiative he must have planned.’

‘Jesus.’
‘He wasn’t much in evidence that night. Although if something hadn’t given me that camping axe I wouldn’t be here and neither would Toy. We’d both be buried under Funland.’

‘Do you want a cup of tea? Julie is making tea?’

Steve was looking at him with an expression of simple human kindness. McKay felt himself tearing up. Life could be terrible, but the phrase “Julie is making tea” contained within it worlds of sympathy.

He shook his head and continued.

‘I think the worst thing was knowing that we couldn’t go to the police. It was the Millennium and it was Ramadan. There were vodka bottles all over the beach. I was with a woman who was no relation to me and she had just had sex with three men ‘outside marriage’. She would have been raped by their ‘legal’ process too. It took me years before I could walk past a mosque without wanting to vomit. Years, before I stopped seeing ‘them’ as a vast, ugly conglomerate of weird behaviour. Years, before I stopped superimposing the digital image of the Epcot centre over the Kaaba.’

‘So what are you going to do now?’

‘I’m not sure. Julia, quite understandably never wants to see me again. I think I invented this whole Spy thing as a way of re-describing myself. It seems, implausibly enough, to have worked. The problem, of course, is that I’ve fucked up other people in the process.’

‘Have you told Julia all of this?’

‘I have. Why should she believe it? I realize I don’t understand that world she comes from. I understand Toy’s world but not hers. My mother died of cancer. She died slowly. I remember telling Julia how the biggest comfort I got was from the
prostitutes in the red light area by my old university. Originally she sympathized but then couldn’t handle it. I remember her saying, “So you were out fucking hookers when your mother was dying?” It was an accusation. I think I should have been out planting Tulips.’

‘Do you feel that the therapy has helped you?’

‘You’ve helped me a lot,’ McKay conceded. ‘I guess I won’t be seeing you again.’

‘No you probably won’t, unless you want to,’ the man was smiling.

McKay picked himself up and they briefly shook hands. The Twit gave him a manly hug. When he was outside he left a message for Pete Zigler.

‘I just want to say Mr Zigler that you helped saved my life. I don’t think you’re going to die the death of Ivan Ilych, I really don’t.’ Perhaps, however, he shouldn’t have spoken. You could reach some pretty unexalted conclusions about yourself when everything was stripped back.
37: Trash the Dress

She had gone to a beach just north of Merlin, famous for its cast iron figures which stared blindly out to sea like ancient Moai. The neighbour had told him that she had been wearing a white wedding dress.

McKay had never liked the place. It was an empty expanse where the sea went out for miles and then rushed in at phenomenal speed and smothered the barnacled men. He had been walking the sands for nearly an hour and found nothing. He had kept himself under control but the shrieks of the gulls were now making him increasingly nervous and he was now going through his exercises trying to remain calm. He finally lost it when he climbed over a slippery wooden groyne and saw a slowly swirling dress, a ghostlike garment slowly circling in a whirlpool. It was then that he started to run, crashing along with his feet, fighting the sand and feeling the slap of shallow water on his shoes.

Where was she? She’d always been a lousy swimmer. He looked out to the white tops and the grey miserable ocean. So much water. She would simply disappear forever. The thought of this crushed him. He started to call but his voice was snatched away by the rumble of the surf and the vast grinding of the ocean. His heart was a knot and tight and beating. The beach was empty. No people, nothing. He could feel his legs weakening as he stumbled and sprawled on the sand and then he saw the axe entering the head of the man. The images starting to flood. He remembered being kicked and booted and then he was unconscious. He saw himself crawling off to his car only to find that they had slashed the tyres. He had been planning to run them over. He had crawled over to their car and could not get inside, and it was then, when he was losing all hope that he saw the axe lying in the sand by
the rear tyre. It was the one that he had taken to split wood for the camp fire. He realized that whenever these men, whose drunken shouts he could hear through a haze of blood and confusion, returned from their stupors they would kill both Toy and himself. If they hadn’t already killed her. The axe was the only hope.

He saw the face of a man smashing and breaking. And he could feel himself raising the axe and bringing it down and the feel of it as it passed through real bone and tissue. And then he could hear Toy screaming and the cake of blood on her mouth and the body on top of her that was now trembling and heaving. And then he felt the ocean roaring and he was down on his knees and the water had stretched out to meet him and he could feel it rushing to envelope him and his shirt was wet and clinging round his waist. And then his eyes closed and he could here a distant thunder and the rush of an approaching wave. And then the voice of Toy, and then the voice of Toy asking:

‘What the bloody fucking hell do you think you’re doing?’

He opened his eyes.

She was standing at the water’s edge in her jeans and brown jacket and he had fallen down in the surf. There was a man with her, a man wearing a red coat and he had a tripod and camera. He seemed to be a photographer.

‘You’ll get all wet,’ she was saying, quickly running into the water in all her clothes. ‘Come on, get up. Come on, get out.’ He could feel her hands anxiously pulling and tugging and insisting. He had wanted to just float there like a damp loaf but she wasn’t having it. He felt her tiny arms around him, lifting him up. The photographer was just staring.
‘We’ve been doing a Trash the Dress shoot,’ she said, pulling him out of the surf and back onto the beach. ‘God your trousers are all wet. Max this is my partner Christie. He’s mad.’

‘Trash the Dress’ He was just repeating things. ‘Trash the Dress?’

‘Yes, well. Nigel went all funny and Norman Bates and he was always telling me to read those fucking chronicles and the words were jumping all over the page as usual and I was tired and I just lost it.’

‘He said you tried to stab him to death.’ McKay spluttered. He had swallowed seawater.

‘That’s not true. Jesus you believe anything! I tried to stab him to death with the cat’s nail clippers! I am guilty of this Christie. I am guilty of trying to stab him to death with the cat’s nail clippers!’

McKay sat on the beach and started to cough. His whole body had been under water. A wave must have knocked him over. He had nearly drowned in four feet of water.

‘How much damage can the cats nail clippers do?’ he heard her saying. ‘They can’t even cut the cat’s nails you know that!’

‘I thought you’d finally killed yourself,’ he sat down on a small rise in the sand. The photographer was keeping his distance.

‘You know what they do with old wedding dresses now?’ she said. ‘It’s a new idea. The person trashes the dress and wears it and runs through a ditch or walks through a field of mud in Wellingtons and a wedding dress. And with it all getting splattered and ruined with mud.’

He tried not to ponder what any of this might mean.
‘I’ve tried trashing this dress before. After I had tried to commit murder by nail clipper. I was wearing the dress. All the way back to town. I didn’t have enough for the fare. I got lost and ended up having to walk three miles home. All these men passing in their cars were saying, “are you alright love, has he given you the something?” And finally I got a lift from a cop car.’

‘What did you tell them?’

‘I said I knew I shouldn’t have been out walking on the side of the highway but I’d just found out my future husband had been sleeping with my best friend. On my wedding day! The policewoman was very sympathetic. She’d just split with her boyfriend of seven years and knew how painful these things could be. I said he was my childhood sweet heart and that I’d been planning to throw myself off a motorway bridge but could appreciate how messy it would be for people like them. The policeman said that was very considerate, considering. Anyway, all the lies I told. You would have been proud.’

‘Did they believe it?’

‘Yes.’

He started rubbing his hands over his head and putting them over his ears and massaging his chest with his hand. He felt like he was going to faint. Toy looked down.

‘Are you alright?’ She was bending down and putting her arms around him.

‘What is it with you Christie? Why are you always beating yourself up?’ Her voice was sweet and soft and genuinely worried. ‘Don’t you know I still love you? Don’t you know all I’ve ever wanted was to be with you? How many times do I have to tell you that?’
‘I guess I do,’ McKay could feel himself trembling. The beach was making him tremble. He still could not control it, after all these years.

‘Come on get up, get up.’ She was kissing his forehead and pushing him up. The photographer approached.

‘Are you alright?’

‘I will be,’ he said, wiping away some of the salt and grime from his face.

‘I’ll have to show you my puffin pictures,’ the man continued. ‘That’ll cheer you up.’

McKay felt the flash of old irritation. The continual flare up that kept him moving forward. The endless crap that could not be predicted, or written down, or legislated against.

‘Were you really worried about me? Toy said, looking happy. ‘That must mean you still love me.’

He didn’t know anything anymore. All he knew was that he was happy she was still alive.

‘Did you go to some Shaman to try and kill my baby?’ He stared at her.

She started back. She looked horrified.

‘Don’t be so stupid,’ she shook her head sadly. ‘Of course I didn’t. I just said that when she was screaming at me. What kind of person do you think I am?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, looking at her. He didn’t know what kind of person anybody was anymore.

‘What were you going to marry him for?’ He felt incredulous. ‘You hardly knew him!’

‘You introduced us! It was a church sponsored event. They were going to marry a lot of couples in the church. It wasn’t like a conventional wedding. It was going to be
in a football stadium or something. A whole lot of us at the same time. It’s not like a normal wedding.’

He didn’t bother pursuing it. The destiny of a person was, as Zigler had suggested, about repeatedly falling in and out of holes and pulling yourself out. Until they finally tipped you into that last hole and you never came out.

They started to walk along the beach and he became aware that Toy was talking. She said that she had started to ask questions to the Elders of the Church of the Holy Saved, questions about Shetans and cat souls. They hadn’t been able to answer any of them. She’d requested a study group and then a seminar and then the tabling of a question. She was now shaking her head regretfully.

‘They thought I was mad,’ she said. ‘I said I was bored with reading the same stuff. Reading in English is not fun for me! Why are we always reading the same book?’ I asked. ‘Why don’t we ever go anywhere nice? Why are we always talking about the same old crap?’ And then they started talking about the cinema as an instrument of conditioning. They said I had been conditioned. Nigel was furious and I didn’t understand why. That’s all they yapped on about. My “core.”’ I work out! All they do is sit on their arses yapping! And you can’t drink, or smoke a joint. They don’t even have nice food or wear nice clothes! And I finally told them, “We never GO anywhere! We never DO anything! There’s a dancing on ice event at the Metropole!” She lowered her voice so that Max, who was busy taking a picture of a lugworm, wouldn’t be disturbed.

‘Yes and you are always thinking I am the one who is mad! And, of course, you are the one who pretends to be James Bond. You are the one who gets a house for two women and moves one next to the other and scuttles between them like a roach
and I am the one that is mad? I am the one who has a problem right? I am the one who has problems adjusting to reality, is that it mister?"

He knew what was coming and tried hard not to laugh. She continued in a bitter manner.

‘Anyway and after a while they didn’t want to see me. I knew they were in there. They were in that church hiding! I knocked on the door. The main door of the Church of the Holy Saved. That temple they have in the expensive part of town. I shouted, “Come out, come out, wherever you are” And I could see the curtains twitching. I knew they were in there, just pretending to be out! And then some old vagrant passed outside their offices while I was shouting up and said, “Quite an achievement that. Quite an achievement!”

‘And so,’ she continued and when he had finally stopped laughing, ‘they eventually called the police. I had split with Nigel by then so it didn’t matter, but all I wanted to know was what was going to happen to all those animals. They talk about saving the human race but not about anything else. I telephoned. I wrote letters and sent emails. I stood outside with a signpost and then finally this cop came up to me and said that unless I desisted they were going to charge me with a campaign of bullying and harassment.’

‘You’re mad,’ he said. ‘Do you know that you are completely mad?’

‘Yes 007,’ she replied. ‘How is Blowfield?’

‘It’s Blofeld.’

‘Who’s mad?’ she persisted. ‘Me, or you, or the devil woman?’

He stopped talking. The photographer was coming over.

‘Do you want to take any other shots because my car is upfront?’ he looked at Toy.
‘No thanks Max. I have enough now. Max is a fan of your work,’ she added. ‘I
didn’t think anybody ever read them but apparently there’s a core.’ She was smiling
at him now. ‘A small cultic following. Not very big I’d imagine eh Max?’ She
winked at the man and he smiled back.

‘It’s big enough,’ said McKay. ‘And more interesting than bloody Zeno.’

‘You see Max. That’s the problem with Christie. He is always taking everything
so seriously. You know he has a novel right now? About this lunatic who is involved
in a love triangle with two women.’

‘It sounds interesting,’ said Max, staring happily at another lugworm.

‘Not really,’ said Toy. ‘I’m looking forward to the sequel, though’

‘What’s that about?’ asked McKay.

‘One of the women suing him. He didn’t write the book. They did!’

‘Sounds interesting,’ said Max, peering over the cast.

‘I have the feeling,’ McKay turned to her, ‘that you play games with people all
the time. That I don’t ever know who you really are.’

‘You’d get bored Christie, knowing who anybody ‘really’ was. You just want an
opponent to knock the ball back.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘I’m heading off in this direction,’ said Max, standing up and pointing to a silver
car whose top was only just visible behind the sea wall.

‘It was nice to meet you,’ he said to McKay and reached out with his hand.

‘What are you talking about?’ McKay said when the man had disappeared. ‘You
didn’t write anything. I did!’

‘I don’t think so,’ Toy snorted. ‘Anyway’ she asked. ‘Have you finished it yet?’

‘In my mind,’ he replied, a little sheepishly.
'Does it have a happy ending?'

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘The man goes off with his Spanish girlfriend and they live on an orange farm in the southern part of Spain.’ He reached down and grabbed her around the waist and held her close. He was feeling weak again.

‘I learned a new word in Scrabble the other day’ she whispered in his ear. ‘Do you want to know what it was?’

‘I can’t wait,’ he said.

‘Codswallop,’ she smiled and turned sharply. ‘And that ending sounds like a load of codswallop to me.’

‘I couldn’t do anything,’ he said, holding her and changing the subject. He touched her long black hair and rubbed her head. ‘On that day,’ he whispered urgently, ‘I couldn’t do anything.’

She smiled sadly and touched her small hand up against his cheek.

‘I’ve forgotten about that now. It’s past. I did the therapy and I feel better. I’m never going to be the same, but then neither are you.’ She reached out her hand and he took it.

‘Why don’t we just try to take each day as it comes? Did you know there is a Fair and a Pier around here. Further up. Shall we go? Would you like to?’

‘I believe,’ he said, ‘that there is a very good second hand bookshop around here somewhere. You wouldn’t rather go there would you?’

She just looked at him and pulled a face.

‘No I suppose not.’ He steeled himself for an afternoon playing on a retro-styled Space Invaders.

‘If you were with that Spanish woman,’ Toy said happily. ‘You’d never do anything except sit around being miserable.’
‘Maybe,’ McKay smiled. ‘Maybe not.’

‘Oh you would. She’d have you running around the house all the time like a slave which is what you secretly crave. You’d probably wear a frock like a big girl. I’ve been reading up about your perversions. A story you wrote.’

‘You are confusing me with your ex. Can you shut up? We’re approaching the high street’

‘Oh shut up yourself! I now know about M and M’ she continued. ‘Or S and M, or whatever it is.’

‘S and M,’ he supplied.

Toy looked at him and smirked. ‘What’s wrong with your brain? Don’t you recognize a joke?’

‘I don’t think it was a joke.’

‘Yes it was.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Why don’t we go to the coffee shop over there?’ he pointed.

‘What about the one over there?’ she said. ‘You’re not going to boss me around anymore. I’ve started this law course. So far I got all A grades you know? What do you think about that?’

‘I’m sure you’ll be really good at cross-examination.’

‘I’ve had enough practice.’

‘Anyway I have a bone to pick with you.’ he said. ‘My TB Pavilion?’

‘Yes,’ said Toy

‘You told me the name of a male character I could use.’

‘Yes.’

‘You did it deliberately.’
‘What?’ she was looking at him all faux-naïf.

‘Mang Tomas?’

‘Who?’ she said.

‘It’s the name of a fucking condiment,’ he snapped. ‘I found out. And you knew it. A sticky, ketchup like condiment that every Filipino family has on the table.’

‘I don’t know what you’re on about’

‘You are evil,’ he said. ‘Most of the population of the Philippines are laughing at me.’

‘They won’t have read it,’ said Toy. ‘I guarantee you. They like things that are interesting, not things that are boring.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Anyway,’ she said. ‘All the lies you told me. Saying you had a pile of work. “Oh I’ve got piles.” Don’t you feel ashamed of yourself, all the lies you told?’

‘I do, sort of.’

‘Do you have a pile now Christie. Do you have piles?’

He looked at her.

‘Are you saying I’m old?’

She smiled. ‘I’m just saying I know writers have piles. In the future Christie we may have to sit you on a rubber ring. Would that be alright? Would you be alright sitting on a rubber ring?’

She pushed him. ‘You know’ she said. ‘I was talking to Three Pigs on the phone. He said I was very good for you. He said that I “puncture your heroic attempts to take yourself seriously.” And then he said, “the heroic attempts made by that poor fellow.” I’m not sure I really understand.’

He looked at her again. She understood perfectly.
He was staring at a screen as big as a field. After finishing her degree, Toy had obtained a job with what he had taken to calling, ‘Smurf and Smegma,’ one of the larger law firms in the city. She was doing, as his friends never failed to point out, ‘rather well.’ McKay had lost his job, his whole department had closed and he was now writing full-time. Toy was supporting him. When friends asked where exactly he was working, he told them that it wasn’t really worth talking about. ‘I think of myself as a poet of the night,’ he had said mysteriously. ‘How much does a plate cost these days?’ The Pigs had wanted to know.

The singing competition he was currently watching, however, was cheering. It had tragic news to impart to its young aspirants. ‘I’m gutted,’ said an adolescent who looked about twelve. ‘My whole life is over.’ Good. ‘My whole life is ruined,’ said another eleven year old and McKay masticated the phrase that he knew must, inevitably follow. ‘I feel absolutely gutted,’ he beat them to it and threw a roll at the screen. Toy sat down next to him and gave him a kiss. She kissed him on the forehead which was worrying. How old did she think he was? The auditorium for the singing competition was now like the insides of a goose house. Honking and booing.

‘How do you think it went?’ asked an off stage presenter. ‘Never give up on your dream,’ said a block of fat, irreducible narcissism. ‘They can and do come true.’ Boo. Honk. Goose. McKay couldn’t stand it any longer and turned over to see a man dressed up as an onion lolling about in a kids’ paddling pool. He switched again to see a man grabbing a woman by the throat in a café. ‘You’ll never get your hands on this café!’ the man was screaming. He flicked to a wilderness channel hoping to
catch some ‘elephant on elephant’ action, but there was only a different man nearly
drowning in some very shallow water. The man then said to the crew that it was easy
to die in such freezing and isolated conditions. Later the man went swimming and
having ‘learned some lessons from a beaver,’ proceeded to build a dam across a
muddy stream. This seemed to involve hours of pointless drudgery. At the end, the
man caught a tiny spratt. ‘And I’ll feast on that tonight,’ the man said, looking
terribly pleased with himself.

McKay turned over and heard the word ‘amazing’ again. The girl who was saying
it was being asked about how she felt on winning the singing competition. ‘Pretty
amazing,’ she said. ‘It’s really, like pretty amazing.’

He flicked over again and this time another woman was talking to a scrofulous
individual who was aggressively slouched in a chair. The presenter turned to the
audience. She had a clipboard that looked like it had come out of a cracker and wore
a white coat obviously purchased from a specialized fetish shop.

‘DNA analysis reveals.’ She paused. She said it another three times before
saying it again. Finally, and after a really long pause, she said: ‘DNA ANALYSIS
REVEALS THAT THE FATHER OF THIS CHILD IS…’

McKay switched over. ‘A Cane Toad,’ he said.

‘When did you first start sleeping together,’ the interviewer on the next
programme asked. McKay checked the title of the programme. ‘Savage Love’
 purported to explore the sexuality of individuals who thought humanity guilty of a
gross form of sexual species-ism.

‘We were just lying together on the bed,’ a middle-aged Canadian woman was
saying, stroking what appeared to be a fat, slobbery dog. ‘And it just seemed so
natural somehow.’
McKay flicked over and froze. He stopped flicking and snapped to attention. His attention zoomed.

‘Why does your main character have such problems with reality?’

It was the Review Programme. Books.

The spots had gone and the chubby baby face had been replaced by a leaner, adult countenance. All the Goth gear was out the window and his weight had fallen. He no longer looked like a sodden clump. Fucking Donald! It was a while since he had last seen his old student.

‘There have been suggestions,’ the interviewer was saying, ‘that the pathological liar character, the professor in your book, was based on a real person?’

McKay, who had just swallowed a mouthful of tea, splurted it over his lap.

‘Oh no,’ said Donald. ‘The character that I wrote about wasn’t real at all. Not to himself, or anybody else. He didn’t care about anything really. He used to just float around all weightless and airy and with a permanently distracted manner. To be preoccupied. It’s one of the worst things you can be. We can learn that from the classics. Plato, for example. I had the feeling that other people were like shadows on a wall to him. As long as they didn’t impinge, he didn’t really mind.’

‘So it wasn’t based on a real person?’

‘He is a Quixotic character and the absurd fantasies that he gets himself involved in are all part of an elaborate ruse to hide his central trauma.’

‘How did you get involved with the psychologist Julia Montoro and how did that lead to the film with Almodovar?’

‘Turn it off,’ said McKay, reaching for the remote. He could feel five years work slipping away.
‘No,’ said Toy, snatching it away. ‘I want to see this.’ They were both staring at the screen.

‘I met Julia at university a number of years ago. She had had a very painful relationship with a man and contacted me because, at the time, she was obsessed with understanding this person. She contacted me, among many others, and we sort of hit it off.’

‘Your main character is a bit of a bumbling incompetent. He’s a professor of Creative Writing and when you have your young student writer asking him what he likes about the work he is supposed to have marked, he says, “all of it.” It’s pretty obvious he hasn’t read it. “What did you like about it?” the student asks. “The middle,” the professor replies. “Which part of the middle?” “The middle of the middle” “Which part of the end?” “The beginning of the end.” And so on.’

There was polite Studio laughter.

‘I did read his fucking book,’ said McKay. ‘It was nearly eight hundred pages of shite. He rewrote it three times. I’m not Superman and now this sour grapes!’

‘How does it feel?’ said Toy, shaking her head.

‘My character,’ said Donald, ‘has a modest, early success, but then starts writing what are, more or less, artless confections of tripe. One novel that gets rejected is about a bunch of Islamists who bomb Nebraska, creating a cloud of radioactive pop corn. Nobody knows whether it’s a comedy or an action thriller. I don’t think he knows. That’s one of his problems, he doesn’t know the difference between jokes and sincerely held beliefs. He nods at the former and laughs out loud at the latter. There’s probably a name for such a condition, but I don’t know what it is.’
‘Wanker condition! Spotty little wanker condition! That was a bloody good idea,’ said McKay, throwing another roll at the television. ‘And it was meant as a fucking comedy and he knew it.’

‘Your novel,’ the presenter continued, ‘was inspired by the Spanish psychologist Julia Montoro’s study of Dissociative Identity Disorder. Was that a landmark for you?’

‘It was a jumping off point certainly,’ Donald replied.

‘That’s Irmgard Moller,’ said McKay, looking at the picture of a book cover which was suddenly splashed on screen. ‘I just know it.’

‘What?’ asked Toy.

‘Nothing,’ replied McKay. He was already seeing himself inside the book. Some kind of expository textbook image: a naked man standing next to a height chart and with a black bar covering his eyes.

There was some more well-mannered conversation before the programme showed a clip from the upcoming film. It was of a middle-aged, Mr Nobody lecturing at some down-at-heel, pootering college. Well, they certainly got that right. The film showed the man going to the car park at the end of an obviously long day and spilling his lecture notes all over the floor before picking them up and being confronted by a white knight on a donkey holding a lance. The man introduces himself as ‘Knight errant Senor Don Quixote.’ A person setting out to right a load of wrongs. He asks the professor to come along.

‘Jesus,’ said Toy. ‘Is that you?’

‘I think I’m the ineffectual fatso by his side.’

‘I wonder how they are going to do the beach scene,’ said Toy.

‘Don’t,’ said McKay. ‘Let’s not even think about it.’
She came over to him. Later clips from the film briefly showed the man with a brilliant therapist. A woman who was not standing for any nonsense.

‘It wasn’t therapy that helped me,’ said McKay, ‘but a load of drugs recommended by the crassest capitalist you can imagine.’

After the clips, a voice read some passages from Donald’s ‘latest.’ The fucker was only twenty-seven and they were already talking about his ‘latest.’ It was called, ‘The Murder of Reality.’

‘I’m sure he’s stolen that title,’ said McKay. ‘I’m sure that’s not his title.’

‘Calm down,’ said Toy.

‘Will you stop stroking my scalp,’ McKay removed her hand. He wasn’t that bald. Toy looked at him.

‘Don’t worry, I’m sure your next novel will get published,’ she was smiling.

He didn’t bother telling her. She moved away and he briefly considered going up to the roof and becoming a probationary angel. In the end he decided not to. It was easier to change channels and forage around in the peanut bowl. Also McGrath and Bill were bringing some weed around and Three Pigs would explain why he was getting divorced for the fourth time. He might be able to make something of it.
The Trials of Philip Roth: Writing as Ordeal and Punishment
List of Abbreviations of Works by Philip Roth


AP  American Pastoral (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997)


EG  Exit Ghost (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007)

EV  Everyman (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006)

GC  Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories (New York: The Modern Library 1966)


HS  The Human Stain (London: Jonathan Cape 2000)

IMC  I Married a Communist (London: Random House, 2005)

RMO  Reading Myself and Others (New York: Farrar, Straus&Giroux 1975)


Introduciton: Philip Roth on Trial

Philip Roth’s writing career has been lengthy and productive and his voluminous output, as Shechner has observed, poses special challenges to the researcher.¹ Most critics introducing his work inevitably produce working taxonomies which attempt to divide and segment the critical response. In his introduction to Roth’s work Brauner, for example, notes the early critical confusion between the teller and the tale.² Is Roth’s fiction autobiographical fiction or fictional autobiography? Another stage, Brauner argues, can be mapped by the question: is Roth a Jewish American or an American Jew? Alternatively, in the later period of what has come to be called the American Trilogy, the production of work including I Married a Communist (1998), American Pastoral (1997) and The Human Stain (2000) has produced questions around Roth’s political allegiances. Is Roth, for example, a conservative radical or a radical conservative?³

Roth’s dialectical indeterminacy means that such polarising heuristics, while useful as a way of managing such a vast oeuvre, also risk oversimplifying his work. More sophisticated criticism has examined Roth’s complex ambiguities and the way his texts talk to and illuminate each other. Shostak’s Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives (2004)⁴ is typical of this vein, seeing Roth’s work as being crucially connected to the problems of subjectivity and if, as Brauner claims, Shostak is sometimes guilty of paying insufficient attention to the way Roth’s texts ‘read’ other

¹ Shechner writes, ‘You can drown in Roth criticism. By 2003 the sheer tsunami of it stupefies. If by the mid-1970s we might have spoken of a Roth industry, what about the 1990s? A Rothmart? A Roth outlet mall?’ Mark Shechner, Up Society’s Ass Copper: Rereading Philip Roth (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), p. 245.
² David Brauner, Philip Roth (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007).
³ Most of this debate, as Brauner notes, revolves around Roth’s novel American Pastoral (1997).
⁴ Debra B Shostak, Philip Roth Countertexts, Counterlives (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004).
texts, then Catherine Morley’s *The Quest for Epic in American Fiction* (2009) is a useful corrective. If the issue of subjectivity is central for Shostak, Elaine Safer suggests that comedy is the unifying concern in Roth’s work. David Goobler, on the other hand, in mapping the shifts of Roth’s writing trajectory, makes use of Roth’s own distinction derived from Philip Rahv’s 1939 essay ‘Paleface and Redskin’ which conceptualized two distinct and polarized types of American writer. Goobler argues that Roth alternates between inward and outward perspectives, between ‘the willed extreme of a noble profession and the willed extreme of a sordid one, between paleface and redskin’.

The focus of the current research makes use of Posnock’s insight that the ‘sharp point’ that most of Roth’s fiction turns on is provocation. Roth has made a similar point in an interview with Hermione Lee. I further suggest that this antipathy can be partially explained by the hostility that marked the early reception to Roth’s work. I argue that ‘provocation’ is a career length response to this early hostility and, following Brauner, suggest that Roth quickly developed an early body of work

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5 Morley places the chimera of the cultural phenomenon which is ‘The Great American Novel’ within the context of the prose epic and tries to establish an alternative genealogy that questions the idea of an exclusive national literature. The transnational literary heritage that Morley identifies in the work of Roth, Updike and DeLillo argues that their historical roots go deeper than the American Renaissance texts used by critics like Posnock in developing Roth’s ideas on what the writer has called, ‘the genealogy that isn’t genetic’. Catherine Morley, *The Quest for Epic in American Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009).


7 Quoted in David Goobler, *The Major Phases of Philip Roth* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), p. 3. Rahv originally argued that Paleface writers like T.S. Elliot and Henry James were educated, East Coast mandarins. Redskins like Walt Whitman and Mark Twain were both frontier writers and writers of the city. Vernacular and vital they exhibited an explorer’s spirit.

8 As Posnock observes by mid-career Roth had started calling this force ‘counterlife’ or ‘counterliving’ and considered it as a way in which history and individuals defied the expected conventions. Ross Posnock, *Philip Roth’s Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

9 In response to Lee’s question about whether Roth has a reader in mind when he writes, Roth replied: ‘I occasionally have an anti-Roth reader in mind. I think, “How he is going to hate this!” That can be just the encouragement I need’. Hermione Lee, Philip Roth, The Art of Fiction No.84, in *Paris Review* <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2957/the-art-of-fiction-no-84-philip-roth> [accessed 19 February 2012]
marked mainly by the sense of an individual on trial, initially in the Zuckerman Bound volume of novels.¹⁰

Where the thesis departs from Brauner is in arguing that the trial motif is far wider than he has potentially allowed and that the trial concept can also be usefully employed to understand the later works, and that while the scenery and the courthouse and its location frequently changes, the basic fact of a person ‘on trial’ remains the same. In his chapter on ‘The Trials of Nathan Zuckerman’ Brauner develops the concept of trial in relation to the early Zuckerman novels but offers little explicit guidance concerning the precise meaning of the term ‘trial’. He notes that ‘in one sense or another’ Roth has found himself on trial ever since he started writing and goes on to describe this trial process as initially being concerned with ‘tests’ or ‘ordeal’ and as helping to produce a fiction of ‘self-accusation’. I argue that we need a more rigorous definition and unpacking of trial than the slightly glossed version provided by Brauner and that this can help to more clearly establish how Roth’s writing has changed. A simple, dictionary definition of a legal trial would be of a process where different parties involved in a dispute come together to review information in the form of evidence and to present this evidence before a formal tribunal in order to adjudicate various claims or disputes. A court is one type of tribunal. This tribunal may be in front of a judge, jury, or some other ‘weigher’ of fact, and aims to achieve a resolution to their dispute. A common law system utilizes an adversarial or accusatory approach with a series of arguments presented by the prosecutor and the defence. An inquisitorial approach involves detailed investigations by a judge. Thus, when the legal concept of a trial is broken down into its constituent parts it is possible to expand upon Brauner’s initial thoughts.

¹⁰ Zuckerman Bound is a single volume (1985) which contains The Ghost Writer (1979), Zuckerman Unbound (1981), The Anatomy Lesson (1984) and The Prague Orgy (1985). In-text references to the page numbers of these novels are based on the page numbering of this volume.
Specifically, the type and location of the courtroom can be examined. The type of ‘appeal’ being made and to whom that ‘appeal’ seems to be directed can be explored. Who are the parties involved in the dispute and what does the dispute seem to be about? It is also possible to investigate the kinds of judgements that are made as well as who or what is being judged and who or what they are being judged against.

Unlike Brauner, I argue that this formal and legal sense of trial is present in most of Roth’s work.

The word trial can also mean a testing ordeal. In Roth this ordeal is a process that results in the physical and emotional disintegration of the person under examination. This is not literally a process of walking over coals or being ducked in water in order to determine innocence, but a slow stripping away of all the beliefs and identity props that the person once valued. I argue that this form of trial is also present in both the early Zuckerman books and the later American Trilogy. The connection between the two forms is simply that the legal trial sends the main protagonist into a Jobian spiral of despair and self-renunciation. In the early books the source of the ordeal was the family and the local community; in the American Trilogy it is both the family and the state.

In Roth, I suggest that the trial ‘narrative’ follows a three-stage working heuristic: ‘Working In’, ‘Working On’, and ‘Working Out’. At its broadest, ‘Working In’ is primarily defined by what I call the delivery of the charges; ‘Working On’, by the response of the immediate individual and his family. ‘Working Out’, by the final catharsis and verdict. As well as observing the structure of the trial, I note how this structure has evolved to form a comment not only on communities and identities within society but on the idea of America itself. I also observe crucial turning points
in Roth’s fiction where this widening focus seems to operate, as well as noting how this is revealed in the work.

In contrast to Brauner, who abandons the trial motif when discussing the later works, I argue that it still represents the dominant means through which Roth experiences and depicts reality. I argue that in the later American Trilogy Roth broadens the focus of the trial and seems also to change the nature of the appeal. I further argue that the possibility of receiving final and authoritative, rather than arbitrary ‘judgement’ seems to grow increasingly remote in the American Trilogy.

I have chosen to firstly examine the Zuckerman Bound trilogy of novels because in the entire Roth oeuvre they establish, most clearly, his response to the early charges of anti-Semitism. As Brauner suggests, this response also starts the development of a body of work in which the motif of an individual, in this case the writer on trial, is of crucial importance.

In these early novels Zuckerman firstly attempts to rebut the charges produced by both the local Jewish Community and one of its most respected literary critics. In *The Anatomy Lesson* accusations are made that Zuckerman’s novel is anti-Semitic. Zuckerman is physically incapacitated by the furore. I focus on Zuckerman’s exploration of the meanings attributed to his sickness and suggest that his outright rejection of psychoanalytical explanations connected to guilt and awareness of wrong doing is problematical given his actual behaviour which suggests that psychoanalysis may have more explanatory power than Zuckerman is prepared to admit. While Brauner does not evaluate Zuckerman’s defence, I argue that it is essentially more concerned with establishing the causes of his own condition rather than offering a sustained rebuttal of the charges. The writing process itself is also acknowledged as something that may be potentially corrupting rather than liberating. In *The Ghost*
Writer this concern with answering questions from fathers and judges concerning anti-Semitism is still prevalent, as well as a growing desire to imagine a fiction even more transgressive as a riposte to the criticisms.

_Zuckerman Unbound_ and _The Prague Orgy_ mark an alteration in the use of the trial motif from what had become a restricted focus on answering questions about Jews and Jewishness. In _Zuckerman Unbound_ there is a wider series of accusations about the accuracy of Zuckerman’s depiction of life in Newark. Zuckerman’s new celebrity status is also a source of vexation. In _The Prague Orgy_ there is the first burgeoning concern with writers oppressed, not simply by their own community, but by the state. This focus on an individual unjustly accused is expanded in the American Trilogy.

While Brauner discusses the American Trilogy in terms of utopian dreams and rituals of purification, I argue that the trial structure in these later works is still as prevalent but that its form has changed. 11 Zuckerman is no longer the one on trial and there is a wider critique of the state. The rituals of purification which Brauner identifies in these later works are still expressed through very real trials. Murray Ringold is literally put on trial by the McCarthy tribunals. Ira Ringold hides out to avoid a trial. Coleman Silk is dragged before a university committee and found guilty of racism. Swede Levov, although not literally occupying a court room, still endures a relentless, self-generated internal inquisition of everything he once thought sacred. He experiences seemingly endless reprimands from his own daughter about the way he has chosen to live. He endlessly questions the choices he has made. Inside these self-flagellating internal monologues a wider debate concerning the claims of

11 Using Roth’s terminology borrowed from Sophocles, Brauner suggests that the ‘purifying ritual’ is a moralistic form of banishment. Brauner argues that in the American Trilogy this desire to be ‘uncontaminated’ comes from different manifestations of American Puritanism with its dream of an ideal state.
liberalism versus the demands of a radical politics are appraised. In these later novels the focus and forces of persecution change. Zuckerman is no longer the direct victim but a witness to the sufferings of others. In American Pastoral the traumatic upheavals of the Vietnam War mean that a daughter accuses her father of being complacent and part of a corrupt system. The increasingly meta-fictive nature of the later novels, with Zuckerman having to largely imagine the life of Swede Levov and Coleman Silk, also makes it difficult for the reader to form a final opinion about what has actually occurred. Any kind of ultimate judgement about the accuracy of depiction and the nature of the offence is impossible. This postmodern departure from the earlier work means that the readers ‘judgment’ or sympathies are also rendered suspect since a final opinion has to be formed based mostly on Zuckerman’s presentation of a life.

The thesis, then, will explore the importance of the trial trope in Roth and offer, in comparison to Brauner, a more detailed breakdown of its constituent parts as well as developing an understanding of how the many different senses of the word trial have been developed by Roth. Roth’s significant body of work, plus a voluminous number of secondary sources, necessitates a selective approach to the primary texts. The early Zuckerman Bound series of novels will be compared to the much later American Trilogy of I Married a Communist (1998), American Pastoral (1997) and The Human Stain (2000) in order to examine the changing nature of the trial motif.

Origins of the Trial Trope.

The sense of being ‘on trial’ in the Roth oeuvre, according to Brauner, was significantly heightened by the critical reception to Roth’s early work and because of the unusually emotive nature of that response. As Brauner has suggested, in his
chapter on the ‘trials’ of Nathan Zuckerman, the ‘Zuckerman Bound’ novels of Philip Roth share:

a sensibility informed by the trope of the Jewish writer on trial both as a writer and as a Jew…Cumulatively, these books construct an extraordinary, sustained metaphor of the process of writing as a trial in all the different senses of that word. 12

While this is undoubtedly true, it is not simply the ‘process of writing’ that is being rendered metaphorically through the trial motif but the process of life itself, the very experience of being alive during tumultuous moments of personal and wider social history. These moments force all of Roth’s protagonists into an acute sense of crisis from which they then begin a judicious examination of their own value systems. Also, Zuckerman is not simply on trial as a writer and a Jew. In The Anatomy lesson he is on trial as an ungrateful and potentially hateful son; in Zuckerman Unbound for everything that the media writes about him. His newly won celebrity status, for example, means that he cannot control the information that is printed about him. This misinformation, often grossly distorted, means that he can be judged on the basis of hearsay, judged for all the things he has done, as well as the things he hasn’t. As chief bard of Newark, Alvin Pepler accuses him of being an inaccurate chronicler, a person who grew up in relative prosperity who ‘steals’ lives for fiction. The charges become increasingly preposterous as ‘Zuckerman’ becomes a free floating media spectacle.

The initial frosty reception to Roth’s work was largely created by Roth’s first volume of short stories ‘Goodbye Columbus’ (1960) and his bestseller ‘Portnoy’s Complaint,’ (1969). I need to sketch this reaction in order to understand its significant and, I will argue, lasting impact on Roth the writer. I also need to

12 Brauner, p. 43.
delineate periods during Roth’s writing career where he has been publicly pilloried for his work and, although we cannot argue for any simple elective affinity between the writer’s immediate biography and his work, especially with a writer like Roth who has deliberately blurred the boundaries between fiction and autobiography, I do suggest that Roth’s fiction feeds on the experience of being ‘on trial’ and the antagonism contained inside that reality.

Irving Howe and the New York reaction to Goodbye Columbus and Portnoy’s Complaint.

The influential literary critic Irving Howe offered one of the most damning early indictments of Portnoy’s. An early admirer of the short stories contained in Roth’s first work Goodbye Columbus, Howe then penned an extraordinarily vicious ad hominem attack on the writer which Roth spent considerable fictional and non-fictional time rebutting.\(^\text{13}\) As Spargo suggests:

> Most formidable of all the criticisms of Philip Roth’s early works was Irving Howe’s 1972 essay published in Commentary, in which the great critic judged Roth to be a mean-spirited satirist (most dramatically in Portnoy’s Complaint) who lacked a viable literary tradition and any sympathetic engagement with the ennobling dimension of human community—specifically, the contemporary American Jewish community—and had an inclination toward monologic schtick that was altogether “vulgar”.\(^\text{14}\)

The reasons for the attack have been speculated on at length. Much Roth criticism connects the outpouring of indignation towards both Portnoy’s Complaint (1969) and Goodbye Columbus (1959) to the historical situation of Jews after the Second World War and the heightened sensitivities towards any portrayal of the Jewish

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\(^\text{13}\) The original attack was in the December 1972 edition of Commentary. Roth took a writerly revenge by portraying Howe as the thinly disguised pornographer ‘Milton Appel’ in The Anatomy Lesson. In the essays contained in Roth’s Reading Myself and Others, Roth develops his response to Howe.

community that could potentially feed anti-Semitic prejudice. What is especially interesting about the stories in *Goodbye Columbus* is that they seem to partially prefigure the overarching structure of the trial and the reality of the individual set against the demands of his community and family. In the title story, Neil Klugman, the inner city Jew, does not fit with the new middle class and the materialistic aspirations of the rich Jewish suburbanites, the Patimkins. In ‘Defender of the Faith’, a story that enraged many readers, Roth portrays a Jewish army recruit called Sheldon Grossbart as conniving and greedy, a man who attempts to manipulate a superior, a Sergeant called Nathan Marx, also Jewish, into granting special favours. Marx refuses. ‘Eli the Fanatic’, portrays a small town Jewish lawyer who gets into trouble with the Jewish Community he is supposed to support when a Yeshiva moves into their neighbourhood. The modern suburban Jews do not like the ‘look’ of the Orthodox and the ‘primitive’ clothes they wear. ‘Epstein,’ portrays the life of an unhappily married Jewish man having an affair and getting a ‘rash’ as a result. All of these ‘unflattering’ portraits of Jews were thought, at the time, to be potentially supportive of various anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Roth developed his defence to the initial accusations mainly in the essay ‘Writing about Jews’ collected in *Reading Myself and Others* (1975) and in this defence included excerpts from the many letters he had received after the publication of *Goodbye Columbus*. Many of them make grim and frightening reading. ‘What is being done to silence this man?’ demands one, from the Anti-Defamation League,
which continues: ‘Medieval Jews would have known what to do with him’. Later, in the essay *Imagining Jews*, Roth quotes an even more sinister reaction, this time to Portnoy’s Complaint and from a ‘well-known American Zionist leader,’ Marie Syrkin, comparing him absurdly to Joseph Goebbels and Julius Streicher. Where the earlier accusations said that Roth had written about ‘greedy’ and ‘grasping’ Jews, the new ones suggested that Roth wrote about the Jew as ‘sexual defiler’ another stereotype apparently emerging straight from Nazi Germany. Roth writes: ‘Hitler, Goebbels, Streicher. Had she not been constrained by limitations of space, Syrkin might eventually have had me in the dock with the entire roster of Nuremberg defendants’.

In his other ‘writing on writing’ book *The Facts*, Roth recalls an earlier, harrowing evening in 1962 spent with the Faculty of Yeshiva University as a part of a symposium discussing the ‘Crisis of Conscience’ in minority writers. Roth recalls again being taken to task for his story ‘Defender of the Faith’ and having Ralph Ellison ‘defend’ him when he flagged. He mentions how ‘the trial in every sense’ at Yeshiva began after short introductory statements, and how the ‘inquisitorial pressure’ was relieved by Ellison and how he had ‘envisioned a finale that would find me either stoned to death or fast asleep’. A strong sense of being on trial, then, was established in the young writer through the hostile reaction to his early work and this is reflected in the way Roth writes about this period. The comedic aspect of the response, ‘stoned to death or fast asleep’, is also apparent.

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18 *RMO*, p. 160.
19 *RMO*, pp. 215–246 (p. 244).
20 Although retrospectively almost comical in their seeming absurdity, it is easy to imagine how awful they must have been for the writer at the time.
Another influential critic who responded poorly to *Portnoy’s* was the critic Diana Trilling. In formulating a response to her in *The Facts*, Roth decides that the literary conventions governing the right of reply need, for once, to be updated, so that the critic does not find himself in ‘the comfortable position of a prosecution witness who, having given his testimony, need not face cross-examination by the defence’. The legalese used in this quotation and the concomitant multi-page rebuttal of Trilling’s review suggest the early onset of a siege mentality. Roth addresses Trilling directly and says that he would ‘like to distinguish for you, between myself and “Mr Roth” the character in your review who is identified as the “author of Portnoy’s Complaint.”’ Roth then goes on to delineate the limited way in which Trilling had read and understood the book as well as her reductive positioning of him and his ideas.

I would argue, then, that early responses to both *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *Goodbye Columbus* put the writer increasingly ‘on trial’. I also observe a developing awareness on the part of the writer of just how unreal or fiction like ‘the character Mr Roth’, as an ultimately unknowable public figure, has become. In a wider sense, reaction to Roth’s work has frequently been negative and/or damning with faint praise. This has been a further source of aggravation. The fact that he sometimes writes ‘comically’ about ‘serious’ subjects has often meant that the engaged nature of his writing has not always been appreciated. A scurrilous and sniggering schoolyard reaction has often been the response. Indeed, as Cooper says, apropos the mixed and sometimes hostile reviews:

Consider the titles: “Son Stroke,” “Waking the dead,” “Rothballs,” “Schlongmeister,” “Deja Jew,” “Sermons and Celery Tonic,” “The suburbs of

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23 *RMO*, p. 24.
24 *RMO*, p. 24.
Babylon” “Coriolanus in New Jersey,” “Alexander the Great,” “Tropic of Conversation,” “A sort of Moby Dick” “Philip Roth: Days of Whine and Moses,” “Reading Philip Roth Reading Philip Roth”.  

This vituperation has run throughout Roth’s career, the other side to the adulation that he also receives. Philip Hensher labelled Operation Shylock ‘a dishonest and wicked book’ while Joseph Cohen dismissed The Anatomy Lesson as ‘merely a spewing forth of venom’. Roth is a writer who seems to have been tagged with incredibly lazy and indelible shorthand. This has seen a seemingly endless recycling of the same ‘charges’. 

As well as the accusations of anti-Semitism Roth has frequently angered feminists in the popular press and being accused of a rampant misogyny. The publication of his ex-wife’s book (1996) led, once again, to terse correctives. Here, for example, is Roth responding to John Updike’s review of Claire Bloom’s ‘Leaving a Doll’s House’. The comment is worth reproducing in its entirety for the discourse of legalese in which Roth is now enmeshed:

In your February 4, 1999, issue, John Updike, commenting on Claire Bloom’s 1996 memoir Leaving the Doll’s House, writes: “Claire Bloom, as the wronged ex-wife of Philip Roth, shows him to have been, as their marriage rapidly unravelled, neurasthenic to the point of hospitalization, adulterous, callously selfish, and financially vindictive.” Allow me to imagine a slight revision of this sentence: “Claire Bloom, presenting herself as the wronged ex-wife of Philip Roth, alleges him to have been neurasthenic to the point of hospitalization, adulterous, callously selfish, and financially vindictive.” Written thus, the sentence would have had the neutral tone that Mr. Updike is careful to maintain elsewhere in his essay on literary biography when he is addressing Paul Theroux’s characterization of V.S. Naipaul and Joyce Maynard’s characterization of J.D. Salinger. Would that he had maintained that neutral tone in my case as well. Over the past three years I have become accustomed to finding Miss Bloom’s characterization of me taken at face value. One Sara Nelson, reviewing my novel American Pastoral, digressed

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28 Fifty-three years after Goodbye Columbus, for example, and in interviewing Roth for The Review Show 2011 upon his receipt of the International Man Booker, Kirsty Wark could still ask the usual question, ‘Philip Roth are you a self-hating Jew?’
long enough to write: “In her memoir, *Leaving the Doll’s House*, Roth’s ex, Claire Bloom, outed the author as a verbally abusive neurotic, a womanizer, a venal nutcase. Do we believe her? Pretty much: Roth is, after all, the guy who glamorized sex-with-liver in *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Mr. Updike offers the same bill of particulars (“neurasthenic…, adulterous, callously selfish, and financially vindictive”) as does Ms. Nelson (“neurotic, a womanizer, a venal nutcase”). Like her, he adduces no evidence other than Miss Bloom’s book. But while I might ignore her in an obscure review on the World Wide Web, I cannot ignore him in a lead essay in *The New York Review of Books*.  

No ‘evidence’ other than Miss Bloom’s book.

Roth’s *I Married a Communist* (1998) is popularly perceived to be a not so thinly veiled ‘fictional’ retort to Bloom’s book. It is, of course, much more than this and it is only surprising that the reviews of Claire Bloom’s book did not occasion more rebuttals. Linda Grant, for example, in reviewing *I Married a Communist* for the *Guardian* betrays the same prejudice as Updike. Talking of the ‘fictional’ actress Eve Frame, very obviously based on Bloom, she says:

> Frame is a Jewish actress, so is Bloom. Frame’s second husband is a financier, so was Bloom’s. Eve Frame has a daughter who is a harpist, Bloom’s girl is an opera singer. Ira tells the daughter to move out, Roth did the same. Ira has an affair with the daughter’s best friend: Roth, Bloom alleged, came on to her own daughter’s best friend.  

Despite the hedging word ‘alleged,’ Grant goes on to make the damning existential statement that *Communist*, is ‘an angry, bitter, resentful mess by a man who might have taken another course: behaved like the hero he was too young to become, taken what was coming to him on the chin. Kept his mouth shut. Pledged the fifth’. It is the assumption that Roth, as a writer, ‘should take what is coming to him’ and ‘keep his mouth shut’ that has paradoxically acted as a crucible for much of his work. And the lazy assumption of perfect knowledge garnered from a single version of truth, in this case the idea that there is an uncomplicated correspondence

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between what Claire Bloom wrote and the actual reality of life with Philip Roth has, I argue, led the writer into many narrative strategies which reveal the multi-faceted complexity of life and the difficulty of judgement.

Roth’s preoccupation with the idea of trial carries over into his critical essays as a way of writing about and rendering experience. For example, in *Reading Myself and Others* there is a chapter entitled ‘Our Trial’ about the pardoning of Richard Nixon. Roth says that, ‘It has just occurred to me that at least for the moment, and perhaps for some years to come, we are in something like the world of Kafka’s Castle’. 32 Writing on the political realities surrounding the Nixon era, Roth goes on to argue that the American public have become the persecuted petitioners of American history:

> It is as though the American Public, having for a decade been cast in one painful or degrading role after another— Kennedy’s orphans, Johnson’s patriots, Nixon’s patsies— has now been assigned to play the part of the Land Surveyor K. in Kaka’s *Castle*. 33

In *Reading Myself and Others* and in an aside about Kafka, Roth writes about a particular paragraph towards the end of *The Trial* where K looks at a priest delivering a sermon and speculates that if the priest would only quit the pulpit he too might find a ‘mode of living completely outside the jurisdiction of the court’. Roth goes on to note that this is even more difficult when the ‘court is of one’s own devising’. 34 This ‘jurisdiction of the court’, usually wrapped up in the authority of some community or norm and which holds sway over a person’s self is integral to Roth’s fiction and the idea that life itself can be a kind of ‘sentence’ occurs

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32 *RMO*, p. 191.
33 *RMO*, p. 193.
34 *RMO*, p. 108. In this respect it is interesting to note that in the early Zuckerman novels Roth has Zuckerman create a ‘court of his own devising’ to persecute himself because of the guilt over the writing of the fictional ‘Carnovsky’.

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repeatedly throughout his work. Writing about his early adolescence in ‘Writing and the Powers that Be’, for example, Roth states that:

   I obediently served my time in what was, after all, only a minimum security institution and enjoyed the latitude and privileges awarded to the inmates who make no trouble for the guards.  

And, years later, here is David Kapesh in *The Dying Animal* talking about his son Kenny’s future marriage:

   Oh boy the little prison that is his current marriage he is about to trade in for a maximum-security facility. Headed once again straight for the slammer.  

These quotations seem to capture some Rothian perennials: the male heterosexual fear that intimacy with a woman may end up being both a calamity and a potential restriction on freedom, marriage itself emerging as a punishment. The earlier youthful desire to escape the tyranny of an oppressive family is another recurring feature.

Having briefly established something of the context of the trial I can now outline the way in which I will proceed. Firstly, I will examine the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy of novels broadly noting how the main focus of the trial in these books seems crucially connected to Roth’s attempts, as a writer, to define the domain of fiction in relation to the initial reaction to his work. Here the main focus of the trial is connected to the charge from the local Jewish community that Roth is anti-Semitic in his writings and has portrayed the Jewish community and specifically the American Jewish community in ways that would likely reinforce anti-Semitic prejudice. In *The Anatomy Lesson*, Roth articulates his defence against his chief prosecutor Irving Howe, rendered in the book as the hapless pornographer Milton Appel, and the trial

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35 *RMO*, p. 4.
emerges as a way of questioning various assumptions about what it means to write, as well as examining the nature of literary influence. The trial of the body as well as the mind is very present in *The Anatomy Lesson* and this is a perennial Rothian concern made all the more manifest in the later works.

In *The Ghost Writer* this concern with literary paternity is developed through the figure of Emmanuel Lonoff, and the process of writing emerges as a type of incarceration: a penance and a ‘sentence’ for the person and their loved ones. *Zuckerman Unbound* looks at the trial in terms of the loss of a homeland and writing subject connected to both the death of the writer’s parents, the alienation of his immediate family and the physical destruction of Newark. Here, and as the writer becomes a celebrity, the story of his own subjectivity is increasingly challenged by a legion of both admiring fans and deadly stalkers. He becomes a cipher in a public space increasingly fraught with danger. The concern with fathers and sons and trial and judgment broadens in Roth’s epilogue to the early Zuckerman books, *The Prague Orgy*. Here Roth widens his concerns and develops his early interest in writers from Eastern Europe like Milan Kundera and Ivan Klima. Here the ‘trials’ of the western writer and the Samizdat reality of the former Eastern bloc are contrasted.

The second part of the thesis looks at what has come to be bracketed as the American Trilogy. These books move the focus of Roth’s work away from questions about the depiction of Jewishness and the writing process and the ‘sentenced’ writer, and turn Roth’s relentlessly critical eye to the broader canvas of America. The crushing influence of turbulent American history on individual lives is explored as is the idea of America. The very real trials of McCarthyism are examined in *I Married a Communist*. The claims of a well-intentioned liberalism are judiciously appraised in *American Pastoral*. The question of fate and the amount of freedom an individual
can morally exercise in choosing their own life emerges against the disgrace of a college Dean and his subsequent removal from a small community college in *The Human Stain*. In all these latter works the trial emerges through the specific mores of the times and reflects those times.

Finally, I comment on Roth’s most recent work and note the continuation of ‘trial-like’ narratives which increasingly focus on the ageing body in pain. I finish, as is fitting given the nature of this thesis, with an attempt at a ‘summing up’ and a final ‘verdict’ on Roth’s oeuvre as a whole.
1: The Anatomy Lesson

*The Anatomy Lesson* (1984) can be viewed as a type of quest novel. The problem contained inside is laid out in the initial epigraph. *The chief obstacle to correct diagnosis in painful conditions is the fact that the symptom is often felt at a distance from its source.* The book starts with the writer Nathan Zuckerman hopelessly immobilized in an Orthopaedic Collar. We do not know exactly what is wrong except that he is experiencing chronic pain. To uncover the source of Zuckerman’s besetting pain is the driving narrative force and it is an early example of Zuckerman, as literary detective, delivering a quest type narrative and in the process exploring the meaning of pain and loss. From the very first sentence we are given an initial clue as to what the catalyzing incident that has caused this physical infirmity might be. We are told that Zuckerman’s brother Henry has accused Zuckerman of precipitating their father’s fatal coronary by writing ‘that book’ *Carnovsky*, which features an unflattering and comical portrait of a Jewish family, presumably based on their own. The ‘fictional’ book, like the ‘real’ *Portnoy’s Complaint* has been a bestseller.¹ These accusations of an unseemly portrayal of Jews are also levelled at Zuckerman by the wider Jewish community and by the Jewish critic Milton Appel, obviously based on the real critic Irving Howe.

At the start we find Zuckerman physically incapacitated and unable to write. It appears, then, that the charges have, in some way, already insinuated themselves inside the body and mind of the writer. Zuckerman has a number of women who are looking after him, for as the first sentence states: *When he is sick, every man wants*

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¹ The reaction to the fictional ‘*Carnovsky*’ and its ‘fictional’ portrayal of Jews is identical to the ‘real’ reaction to ‘*Portnoy’s*’ and ‘*Goodbye Columbus*’. 
his mother; if she’s not around other women must do. We learn that Zuckerman’s mother is not simply ‘not around’ but dead. His father died a year before. There have been major personal changes in the writer’s life. The rest of the novel explores the potential relationship between what Zuckerman has or hasn’t written and his physical and emotional state. Is the one responsible for the other? The other related charge in the novel comes from Zuckerman’s surrogate literary father, the critic ‘Milton Appel’. Appel makes essentially the same charges as Irving Howe and most of the novel is taken up with thoughts on how the Jewish community should and shouldn’t be portrayed as well as the relationship between the writer and that community. The Anatomy Lesson is the first novel in which Roth fully focuses on the psychological and physical ordeal that a writer experiences after being unfairly accused of anti-Semitism.

Working On: The meaning of pain in The Anatomy Lesson

One of the biggest conundrums for Zuckerman is whether or not his physical illness is linked psychologically to the book that he wrote. Is the pain a form of penance? In The Anatomy Lesson Zuckerman tells us that it is not enough that you have to suffer pain. You also have to suffer its meaning and doctors, poets and religions are all ‘getting in on the act’. This is the first thing that is examined: the meaning of the pain. There is the meaning that the sufferer attributes to his predicament and the meaning that is given to it by others. This latter meaning can be a further source of vexation.

Zuckerman starts examining the meaning of his condition by exploring both literary and Freudian explanations. The easiest and most immediate response is that it is a psychosomatic punishment visited on the writer, by himself, and for having

2 AL, p. 199.
written *Carnovsky*. This would mean then that he had unconsciously put himself on trial for writing the book and pronounced the guilty verdict in accordance with the wider community. This idea is not, at least on the surface, accepted by Zuckerman and it is clear why. To acknowledge it would validate the charges. And Zuckerman does not, apparently, accept them. We are told this in point/counterpoint form. As the narrator says:

His comforters agreed with the psychoanalyst that the pain was self-inflicted: penance for the popularity of *Carnovsky*, comeuppance for the financial bonanza—the enviable, comfortable American success story wrecked by the wrathful cells. Zuckerman was taking “pain” back to its root in poena, the latin word for punishment: poena for the family portrait the whole country had assumed to be his, for the tastelessness that had affronted millions and the shamelessness that had enraged his tribe…Unconsciously Zuckerman was frightened by everything.  

This is rejected by Zuckerman:

Nobody could make believe that he’d had this pain for a year and a half because he believed he deserved it. What made him so resentful was that he didn’t. He wasn’t relieving guilt feelings—he didn’t have guilt feelings. If he agreed with the Appels and their admonitions, he wouldn’t have written those books in the first place. He wouldn’t have been able to. He wouldn’t have wanted to. Sure he was weary of the fight but it didn’t follow that his illness represented capitulation to their verdict.

Zuckerman insists that, as a writer, he is actually on pretty good terms with his unconscious and so the conventional catharsis is ruled out. As Berman suggests in a paper on Roth’s relationship with psychoanalysis, however, the writer’s own problematical relationship with his analyst may have resulted in the straw man skewering of the theory that we typically find in many of his books. One physician

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3 *AL*, p. 265.
4 *AL*, p. 201.
5 Jeffrey Berman, ‘Revisiting Roth’s Psychoanalysts,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, ed. by Timothy Parrish (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 94–110. Berman exposes a real life connection between Roth’s own psychoanalysis and his portrayal of the suffering of both Portnoy and the writer Peter Tarnopal in *My Life as a Man*. He locates a real paper published by a real analyst about a famous writer and discovers that Roth is the patient that it was based upon. Roth never forgave the analyst for publishing the paper and the same thing happens with Peter Tarnopal.
for example, tells Zuckerman that ‘the Freudian personalization of every ache and pain is the crudest weapon to have been bequeathed to these guys since the leech pot’ (p.24). In *The Anatomy Lesson*, however, an immediate contradiction is apparent between the apparent blanket rejection of conventional psychoanalytic insights and the seeming utility they possess for explaining Zuckerman’s lifestyle. For example, Zuckerman has a number of women who look after him. These ‘Nightingales’ are the women who visit the supine writer, flat on his back, and apparently unable to feed himself. Zuckerman, we may note, lies on a ‘playmat’ that he has bought in a children’s furniture store. The women ‘feed’ him, they ‘read’ to him and they ‘lower their orifices’ onto him and generally minister to him. One of them says that ‘when a child is sick’ you ‘bring toys’. The picture created is very much of a man in a state of infantile regression, very much in need of a mother and this further complicates Zuckerman’s apparent assertion that psychoanalysis has nothing to offer as a diagnostic tool since he actually seems, on one level, to be the living exemplar of the concept of regression.

In addition to this, the sheer amount of text in *The Anatomy Lesson* devoted to rejecting ‘the charges’ may hint at the exorcism of both a ‘real’ Rothian and a ‘fictional’ Zuckerman guilty conscience. Roth has, however, always rejected a simplistic correspondence between teller and tale. As Berman states:

Roth’s rejection of psychoanalysis is part of his rejection of a simple relationship between autobiography and fiction. As Pepler observes in *Zuckerman Unbound*, “Fiction is not autobiography, yet all fiction, I am convinced is in some sense rooted in autobiography, though the connection to actual events may be tenuous indeed, even nonexistent. We are, after all, the total of our experiences, and experience includes not only what we in fact do but what we privately imagine.”

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6 *AL*, p. 12.
7 *AL*, p. 119.
8 Berman, p. 108.
The connection to ‘actual events’ may be tenuous, but many of Roth’s novels do imply the presence of a Freudian murk in their characters’ motivation. This makes it difficult for the reader to assess the real reasons for the protagonists’ defensive posturing. It also actually undermines their stated ostensible ‘defence’ by suggesting a basic lack of self awareness as to why they do the things they do and how they truly view the things they’ve done. This may be related, as Berman suggests, to Roth’s more overarching rejection of humanistic ideas about the potential for self-knowledge.

Paradoxically then, and despite the Zuckerman disavowals of psychoanalytical explanations for his pain, *The Anatomy Lesson* does not allow us to reject the explanations outright. As Gooblar says in discussing the ‘demystifying hermeneutics of Freud’ and in his examination of Roth’s shifting conceptions of psychoanalysis:

> According to Freud, we must not delude ourselves into thinking we are the authors of our selves or that we can ever escape our selves. All we can hope for is a better understanding of our selves and a sober consciousness with which to interact with the world. As Rieff argues, for Freud, man is tied to the weight of his own past, and even by a great therapeutic labor little more can be accomplished than a shifting of the burden.⁹

In the working on stage Zuckerman does not truly believe this. He also possesses neither a ‘sober’ (he is either raving or on pain killers) conscience nor apparently the belief that he *is* tied to the claims of the past. This is ironic given the fact that Zuckerman has been unable to write anything and that this period of writer’s block coincides with the loss of his mother and father, his alienation from his brother and the loss of his homeland Newark to the race riots in the late sixties. Being creatively blocked is exactly what one might expect from somebody who *is* tied to the past and who has now lost that past and has yet to find a new subject.

⁹ David Gooblar, “‘Oh Freud, do I know!’ Philip Roth, Freud, and Narrative Therapy’, *Philip Roth Studies*, 1 (2005), 67–81 (p. 74).
During the working on stage a much broader sense of the back story of Zuckerman’s pain is being developed and adjudicated upon. What is the correct story for Zuckerman’s self? Can it be explicated through psychoanalytic or metaphysical/literary means? When psychoanalysis apparently yields nothing in the way of an explanation for his physical pain, Zuckerman turns, as a writer, to literary offerings. Somewhat comically he turns to *The Collar* by George Herbert – for as well as various psychological ‘collars’, Zuckerman is also wearing a very literal collar around his neck.

Despite Zuckerman’s rejection of the insights in the poem, if we think of it as representing externally enforced and internally reinforced restrictions on freedom then the choice of it is apposite. Zuckerman is trying to break free from the normative restrictions placed on his writing by his family and the wider community as well as their judgments on how he should behave as a Jew. In *The Collar* Herbert moves from a venting of spleen against the timid life of devotion that the poet is supposed to lead, getting ‘more fierce and wild/At every word’ until he hears God’s voice and suddenly knows his place. Zuckerman is following the same trajectory, getting ‘more fierce and wild’ yet unlike Herbert initially refusing to submit to ‘higher’ authorities as he hurls the book across the room. Suffering is not transporting him from the trivial to the sublime. And he refuses to see it as something imposed by a higher power:

> He refused to make of his collar or the affliction it was designed to assuage, a metaphor for anything grandiose. Metaphysical poets may pass easily from the trivial to sublime, but on the strength of the experience of the past eighteen months, Zuckerman’s impression was of proceeding, if at all, in the opposite direction.10

Later Zuckerman picks up *The Magic Mountain*:

10 *AL*, p. 6.
It had seemed the appropriate great tome for the occasion, but strapped inert upon his narrow bed, Zuckerman grew increasingly irritated by Hans Castorp and the dynamic opportunities for growth provided him by TB. 11

To an aesthete and isolate like Zuckerman the ‘patient’s tale’ genre of literature may seem like the ideal choice for providing a perspective on his condition but it is again comically rejected. Zuckerman’s suffering is made to seem trivial and comical in comparison to Castorp. Life in New York’s hospital room 611 does not ‘measure up to the deluxe splendours of a Swiss sanatorium before the First World War’ (p.255). Zuckerman is unable to write because of the pain and it has not, to use Mann’s phrase ‘initiated’ him into anything more than pain itself while also narrowing his artistic vision. As the following quote makes clear:

Life smaller and smaller and smaller. Wake up thinking about my neck. Only thought which doctors to turn to when this doesn’t help the neck. There to get well and knew I was getting worse. Hans Castorp better at all this than I am…Nothing in that bed but me. Nothing but a neck thinking neck-thoughts. No Settembrini, no Naphta, no snow. No glamorous intellectual voyage. 12

The idea, then, that pain has arrived to teach Zuckerman something is rejected. And so is the thesis contained inside this idea that he is thus guilty of some crime against the Jews. The pain involved, however, does not make the literary speculation disappear and Zuckerman continues to ‘work on’ what it means, this time using the idea that it makes the ideas of Art irrelevant and may be a license for hedonism:

Suppose pain had come, then, not to cut him down to size like Herbert’s ‘Lord’ or to teach him civility like Tom Sawyer’s Aunt Polly, or to make him into a Jew like Job, but to rescue Zuckerman from the wrong calling. What if pain was offering Zuckerman escape from the wrong calling? What if pain was offering Zuckerman the best deal he’d ever had, a way out of what he should never have got into? The right to be stupid. The right to be lazy. The right to be no one and nothing. Instead of solitude, company: instead of silence, voices; instead of projects, escapades: instead of twenty, thirty, forty

11 AL, p. 16.
12 AL, p. 22.
years more of relentless doubt-ridden concentration, a future of diversity, of idleness and abandon. To leave what is given untransformed.  

Zuckerman’s idea of writing being an almost priestly ‘calling’ invoking solitude and silence and ‘relentless doubt-ridden concentration’ (a prayer?) is certainly strange giving his earlier disavowal of metaphysics. Here he seems to be very much following in the footsteps of his earlier hero E.I. Lonoff who, in *The Ghost Writer* has renounced life for art and lives very much in solitude and silence. Zuckerman clearly sees writing as a devotional activity and as itself a kind of punishment since it seems to be conceptualized as involving substantial solitary confinement, and physical pain may actually be a ‘way out’ of it. Here the paradox explored seems to suggest that the pain he is experiencing is not a punishment at all but a potential *relief* from the pre-existing ‘sentence’ of writing. This conception then would make the pain a *reward* for writing *Carnovsky* which would also cast doubt on the idea that Zuckerman has morally transgressed and been suitably punished by either himself or divine will. These manoeuvrings by Zuckerman are essentially attempts to work on and through and re-describe the most obvious meanings that have been attributed to the pain. How successful they are in terms of a defence against the main charges is open to interpretation.

I have argued, then, that Zuckerman’s trial is a physical ordeal and that ultimately the meaning of his pain is unclear. Zuckerman’s infantile regression, however, seems to suggest that psychoanalytical insights are not completely irrelevant. The connection between writing and pain and identity is further explored when Zuckerman goes to an osteopath. We are told that although from the outside he, Zuckerman, might seem

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13 *AL*, p. 37.
'decently proportioned', within he was as misshapen as Richard III and there is a tongue-in-cheek exploration of what the writing process may produce:

According to the osteopath, he’d been warping at a steady rate since he was seven. Began with his homework. Began with the first of his reports on life in New Jersey. “In 1666 Governor Carteret provided an interpreter for Robert Treat and also a guide up the Hackensack River to meet with a representative of Oraton… Began at ten with Newark’s Robert Treat and the euphonious elegance of interpreter and representative, ended with Newark’s Gilbert Carnovsky and the blunt monosyllables cock and cunt. Such was the Hackensack up which the writer had paddled, only to dock at the port of pain.14

The idea of Zuckerman ‘warping’ suggests both a physical and psychological twisting of all that he once was. The general question, however, seems to be ‘What has writing wrought?’ And contained within that question is perhaps the buried admission that it may not be as innocent as Zuckerman would like it to appear: both for the person who engages in it and the people who receive it. If we take warping to mean negative psychological change then we need to consider the relationship between writing and the self. What has writing Carnovsky cost Zuckerman internally?

I have suggested that Zuckerman’s trial in the ‘working on’ stage of The Anatomy Lesson is a relentless psychological and physical ordeal. It involves an examination of his own pain and the rejection of the idea that he has punished himself because of his own guilt for writing Carnovsky. I have also noted that the surrounding text makes the wholesale rejection of psychoanalysis problematical. Literary insights into the meaning of pain have also at this stage been rejected by Zuckerman. The trial is essentially about who or what seems to be having dominion over the writer’s self. Is it himself? Is it the past? Is it the censure from the past? I will now argue that the appeal against ‘conviction’ seems largely directed at fathers and surrogate fathers.

14 AL, p. 250.
Working on: The genealogy that isn’t genetic and the verdicts of parents on sons

It is a staple of Roth criticism that most of Roth’s work deals with the way sons attempt to escape the impinging presence of their fathers. As Morley suggests:

Roth’s fiction articulates the weight of literary and genetic fathers: almost all of his characters struggle with fathers portrayed as overbearing and potentially stronger than the individual protagonist at the core of the narrative. 15

In *The Anatomy Lesson* the struggle of the artist is with both literary and real parents. Zuckerman has to bury his mother and then finally confront the critic Milton Appel over the latter’s charges about his work. These silencing authorities and their judgements seem to have forced the writer into the constraining cage of an endless deposition. And such is the wordage, in *The Anatomy Lesson*, devoted to rebutting the criticisms and concepts of early responses, from feminists, from anti-defamation people and from Rabbis, that the alert reader sometimes wishes that the early Roth had followed the ‘for God’s sake forget it’ advice apparently passed on by friends and mentioned by the writer in *Reading Myself and Others*. 16

Ironically ‘Zuckerman’ seems aware of the childishness of his own position. Here he is listening to a tape he has made rehearsing his arguments against Appel who was a surrogate literary father:

He lay there listening till the reel ended. Anybody who says “Would this not seem to contradict” should be shot. You said. I said. He said you said. She said I said he said you said. All in this syrupy, pedantic ghostly drone. 17

Part of the trial that the writer goes through in *The Anatomy Lesson* is to convince himself that his fiction is valid, that the opinions of the ‘unassailable Appel’ are

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15 Morley, p. 87.
16 *RMO*, p. 23.
17 *AL*, p. 331.
simply the opinions of one man.\textsuperscript{18} This obsessive hand wringing is commented upon by other characters in the novel. Ivan Felt, another writer, expresses surprise that Zuckerman can possibly care what Appel writes. Diana Rutherford, a student who has been enlisted to help the ill Zuckerman type, suggests that his quarrel with Appel is ‘a petty little ghetto quarrel of no interest to anyone’.\textsuperscript{19}

One of the factors that particularly annoys Zuckerman about Appel’s critique is that the man had been a ‘leading wunderkind of the Jewish generation’ of intellectuals coming immediately before his own.\textsuperscript{20} And Zuckerman had been impressed by Appel’s turning to Yiddish literature. As Posnock suggests:

Rather than flee, in his brooding alienation, to the Anglophilic precincts of high culture and never look back, Appel translated Yiddish stories and published them in an anthology, a book, in Zuckerman’s admiring words that “took a stand against the secret shame of the assimilationists…against the snobbish condescension of those famous departments of English literature from whose impeccable Christian ranks” Jews had been excluded.\textsuperscript{21}

The problem for Zuckerman now, however, is that he thinks that Appel has become one of those selfsame mandarin moralists addicted to ‘scolding’ and having a narrow vision of literary possibility. And just as Appel has been defined by the past so has Zuckerman. Initially, and in refuting Appel’s charges of alienation, Zuckerman says:

Without Generations of American Forebears to bind you to American life, or blind you by your loyalty to its deformities, you could read whatever you wanted and write however and whatever you pleased. Alienated? Just another way to say “Set Free!”\textsuperscript{22}

Zuckerman also acknowledges, however, that his writing life may have been

\textsuperscript{18} Part of Howe’s criticism of Roth as Posnock reflects was that Roth was “an exceedingly joyless writer,” seething with “ressentiment,” debilities stemming above all from a “thin personal culture,” bereft of nourishing literary tradition.’ Posnock goes on to say that, ‘This judgement is strangely perverse given that from the start Roth has been a deeply literary, even bookish writer.’ Posnock, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{19} AL, p. 304.
\textsuperscript{20} AL, p. 476.
\textsuperscript{21} Posnock, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{22} AL, p. 289.
impossible without his father. ‘A first-generation American father possessed by the Jewish demons, a second-generation American son possessed by their exorcism: that was his whole story’. 23 This problem of influence and literary tradition and how to escape and at the same time be nourished by both, is another dimension of the particular ‘trial’ found in The Anatomy Lesson. In the chapter ‘Gone’, Zuckerman comments on the race riots and the destruction of Newark:

No new Newark was going to spring up again for Zuckerman, not like the first one: no fathers like those pioneering Jewish fathers bursting with taboos, no sons like their sons boiling with temptations, no loyalties, no ambitions, no rebellions, no capitulations, no clashes quite so convulsive again. Never again to feel such tender emotion and such a desire to escape. Without a father and a mother and a homeland, he was no longer a novelist. No longer a son, no longer a writer. Everything that galvanized him had been extinguished, leaving nothing unmistakably his and nobody else’s to claim, exploit, enlarge, and reconstruct. 24

This seems to illustrate Zuckerman’s paradox. There is both the desire to escape from and yet the memorializing of the past which suggests its vivid and fructive dimension and its role in creating a fiction produced by restriction, the loss of which actually renders Zuckerman unable to write.

At his mother’s funeral Zuckerman seems willing to partially admit his guilt for the portrait of the Jewish family contained in Carnovsky. Zuckerman’s brother speaks about his dead mother, seemingly intent on undoing some of the damage that may have resulted from Zuckerman’s presumably unflattering portrait of her as ‘Mrs Carnovsky’. Zuckerman is recorded making the following verdict on his brother’s limited portrayal:

By the time Henry had finished, they all wished they’d had such a son, and not only because of his height, posture, profile and lucrative practice: it was the depth of the filial devotion. Zuckerman thought, If sons were like that, I’d

23 AL, p. 269.
24 AL, p. 268.
have had one myself. Not that Henry was out to put something over on them; it was by no means a ludicrously idealized portrait—the virtues were all hers. Yet they were the virtues that made life happy for a little boy.25

The eulogy and the funeral is a ubiquitous feature in all of Roth’s books and the question ‘Who are you supposed to be?’ is focused in *The Anatomy Lesson* around the nature of fiction and the claims made by the writing process. This question looms large in *Anatomy* because of the loss of the father and the mother and Roth’s home city Newark. Kartiganer relates this, rather tenuously, to the Holocaust:

Shadowing all, darkest in *The Anatomy Lesson* remain the trilogy’s constant threat of silence: from the condemning critic, the ancestors, the writers fear that he has nothing more to say, climaxed by the inevitable prospect of the body in pain and eventual death. Again that silence grounds itself in a specific Jewish history. 26

While I suggest that the link established between Newark and the Holocaust is tenuous at best and something that Roth would himself dispute, it is certainly the case that the destruction of all Zuckerman’s identity props, be they mothers or fathers or brothers or homelands, constitute the main part of the trial as a psychological ordeal faced by the writer. Zuckerman knew who he was but does not yet know who, as a writer and a person, he is becoming. In this confused state Zuckerman finally phones his nemesis, the critic Milton Appel and confronts him about the terrible review. Appel understands why Zuckerman is angry, but is only surprised that he does not have more to say about the Israeli situation after Yom Kippur. This comment seems to prefigure Zuckerman’s growing awareness that his fiction needs to turn outwards towards wider concerns.

The judgements passed by the father on the son and the silencing or expansion that they seem to call for are reflected in all of the male relationships in *The Anatomy*

25 *AL*, p. 278.
Lesson. Later Zuckerman, thinking he wants to become a doctor, visits his former college friend Bobby Freytag. He argues with Bobby’s father and chases the old man around a cemetery smashing his own teeth in the process. Zuckerman persecutes himself from an imaginary bench for attacking ‘Poppa Freytag,’ just one more surrogate father whom he has misrepresented. He does this in a parody of a prosecutor summing up:

One of the manoeuvres he adopted to get from one minute to the next was to try calling himself Mr Zuckerman, as though from the bench. Chasing that old man around those tombstones, Mr Zuckerman, is the dumbest thing you have ever done. You have opened the wrong windows, closed the wrong doors, you have given jurisdiction over to your conscience to the wrong court: you have been in hiding half your life and a son far too long—you, Mr Zuckerman, have been the most improbable slave to embarrassment and shame, yet for sheer pointless inexcusable stupidity, nothing comes close to chasing across a cemetery, through a snowstorm, a retired handbag salesman understandably horrified to discover grafted upon his own family tree the goy who spoils everything. To fix all this pain and repression and exhaustion on this Katzenjammer Karamazov, this bush-league Pontifex, to smash him, like some false divinity into smithereens…but of course there were Gregory’s inalienable rights to defend, the liberties of a repellent, mindless little shit, whom you, Mr Zuckerman, would loathe on sight. It appears Mr Zuckerman that you may have lost your way since Thomas Mann looked down from the altar and charged you to become a real man. I hereby sentence you to a mouth clamped shut.27

Here, then, Zuckerman puts himself in the dock and sentences himself. This seems to be a partial admission of guilt. The young Gregory has no respect for his father and in some ways resembles Zuckerman’s younger self which the writer can now review with detachment. The remark a ‘Katzenjammer Karamazov’ seems to be indicative of the adult Zuckerman’s newly emerging perception of his father’s real size.28 A ‘son far too long’ acknowledges the waning of both his father’s influence and the influence

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27 *AL*, p. 276.
28 The Katzenjammer Kids was an American Comic strip created by the German immigrant Rudolph Dirks. It was drawn by Harold H. Knerr.
of his surrogate literary father Milton Appel. All of these self-appointed Judges must now be pushed aside.

The Anatomy Lesson is a highly personal novel for Roth and not simply something about the settling of personal scores. The stymied writer, who was nearly silenced by paternalistic authority, is seemingly unable to find a subject to write about without the experience of censure. As Zuckerman states:

The last of the old-fashioned fathers. And we, thought Zuckerman, the last of the old-fashioned sons. Who that follows after us will understand how midway through the twentieth century, in this huge, lax, disjointed democracy, a father—and not even a father of learning or eminence or demonstrable power—could still assume the stature of a father in a Kafka story? No, the good old days are just about over, when half the time, without even knowing it, a father could sentence a son to punishment for his crimes, and the love and hatred of authority could be such a painful, tangled mess. 29

Although Zuckerman has a bizarre fantasy of changing his life and becoming a doctor, in the end we realize its impossibility. We are told that he could not ‘unchain himself from a future as a man apart (i.e. a writer) and escape the corpus that was his’ (p.420). The corpus is his own body as well as the body of work he has yet to complete.

In the theatre of trial and retribution that is the Rothian oeuvre, The Anatomy Lesson emerges as a novel of loss. The trial is the emotional ordeal experienced as the old makes way for the new which is yet to be properly conceived. It is about the loss of self and identity connected to family and friends and the destruction of our earlier childhood self and its embodiment in a particular time and place.

29 AL, p. 279.
2: The Ghost Writer

*The Ghost Writer* maps the young Zuckerman’s search for a surrogate literary father. He has upset his own by writing a short story that could be thought to reinforce stereotypes about Jews.\(^{30}\) His father recoils from this depiction and Zuckerman tells us that:

> He was so bewildered by what I had written that he had gone running to his moral mentor, a certain Judge called Leopold Wapter, to get the judge to get his son to see the light. As a result, after two decades of a more or less unbroken amiable conversation, we had not been speaking for nearly five weeks now, and I was off and away seeking patriarchal validation elsewhere.\(^{31}\)

This validation comes in the figure of reclusive writer Emmanuel Isidore Lonoff. Zuckerman goes to visit the reclusive Lonoff, a Jewish short story writer who is a Salinger-type figure who lives in rural seclusion with his wife and an adoring and much younger woman who is possibly his lover. The charges reflect the real ones explored in *The Anatomy Lesson*. They reflect the real feelings of outrage that accompanied the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus*. In *The Ghost Writer* Zuckerman’s father contacts the Judge and the Judge sends Zuckerman a letter asking for a judicious reappraisal of the stories Zuckerman intends to publish. The Judge then writes a long letter asking that Zuckerman consider ten questions about his story which he believes is too focussed on the way some of the Jewish characters are adulterous and greedy. Why, the Judge demands, would this portrayal not ‘warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels?’\(^{32}\) For Zuckerman’s father,

\(^{30}\) These are essentially the same accusations of betrayal that we find in *The Anatomy Lesson* and *Zuckerman Unbound*.

\(^{31}\) *GW*, p. 7.

\(^{32}\) *GW*, p. 62.
Zuckerman’s story will simply reinforce stereotypes about Jews and the story will simply only be ‘about Kikes. Kikes and their love of money’. 33

Roth has answered the real life criticisms of Goodbye, Columbus in Reading Myself and Others. In The Ghost Writer his paradoxical answer is to go for more provocation. Hence he imagines Amy Bellete, the young woman whom he meets at Lonoff’s house, as the real life Anne Frank. He then imagines marrying her as a shield against the accusations:

To be wed somehow to you, I thought, my unassailable advocate, my invulnerable ally, my shield against their charges of defection and betrayal and reckless, heinous informing! Oh, marry me, Anne Frank, exonerate me before my outraged elders of this idiotic indictment! Heedless of Jewish feeling? Indifferent to Jewish survival? Brutish about their well-being? Who dares to accuse of such unthinking crimes the husband of Anne Frank! 34

Humour and a refusal to retreat has always been a vehicle that Roth has driven through many sacred shibboleths. He has repeatedly used it as a way of guiding his fiction. Towards the end of Roth’s real Yeshiva University ‘trial’, for example, and mentioned in The Facts, Roth states that the censure over his ever again writing about Jews paradoxically acted as a sign for the future direction of his fiction:

After an experience like mine at Yeshiva, a writer would have had to be no writer at all to go looking elsewhere for something to write about. My humiliation before the Yeshiva belligerents—indeed, the angry Jewish resistance that I aroused virtually from the start—was the luckiest break I could have had. I was branded. 35

The idea of re-writing the life of Anne Frank partially emerges against the sentimentalized and potentially kitsch adaptation of the Broadway production of The Diary of Anne Frank, something the Wapters have seen. This is an early example,

33 GW, p. 57.
34 GW, p. 102.
35 TF, p. 128.
along with his essay *Looking at Kafka* of Roth developing a counter life and a counter story for a ‘real’ person. 36

In writing this counter life for Anne Frank, Roth seems to be doing a number of things. Firstly, I suggest that the unimpeachable Jewish icon represents a hallowed subject and a purity that Roth sets out to re-describe.37 It is both a symbolic attempt, as Roth indicates, to escape the ‘seriousness’ of his calling, as well as an attempt at giving Anne Frank a ‘real’ life beyond the narrow boundaries of ideological representation. It is also part of his defence against the earlier charges of malicious depiction and raises questions about the complexity of description. This is a similar ambition to the depiction of the ‘warts and all’ characters that Roth writes about in *Goodbye, Columbus* and to the portrayal of the greedy Jews that his father takes exception to in *Ghost*. As Loomis argues about the fictional Anne Frank:

For both Roth and Zuckerman, the romanticized, Broadway version of Frank’s life story not only disrespects Anne Frank and the Jewish community, but also provides another way for the “genteel” to sympathize with Jewish suffering without facing actual traumatic events. In order to preserve a more practical notion of Jewishness, Roth, through Zuckerman, must first dismantle the pervasive and destructive Jewish identity presented by these false and romanticized readings. By sexualizing and degrading Frank, Zuckerman turns her into something un-mournable, destroying the basis of their falsehoods. It is

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36 Talking about his problems of writing Amy Bellete as Anne Frank Roth says that ‘When I began in the third person, I was somehow revering the material. I was taking a high elegiac tone in telling the story of Anne Frank surviving and coming to America…It was the tone appropriate to hagiography…The difficulties of telling a Jewish story—how should it be told? In what tone? To whom should it be told? To what end? Should it be told at all—was finally to become *The Ghost Writer*’s theme. Roth goes on to say: ‘Zuckerman Bound opens with a pilgrimage to the patron saint of seriousness, E.I. Lonoff; it ends…at the shrine of suffering, Kafka’s occupied Prague. Imagining himself married to Anne Frank is the earliest escape that he attempts to contrive from the seriousness that first challenges his youthful illusions about a dignified role in the world. Judge Leopold Wapter, Alvin Pepler, the Czech secret police, a crippling, unexplained pain in the neck—all are representatives of impious life encroaching upon that seriousness he had once believed to be inherent to his calling. But what most successfully subverts the calling’s esteem is his sizeable talent for depicting impious life: it’s Zuckerman who gives his dignity the most trouble.’ *RMO*, p. 50.

37 As Gooblar notes in his summary of the industry surrounding Anne Frank, many references to Jews and Jewishness were deleted when the adaptation of the book was taken out of the hands of the original adaptation by Meyer Levin, a Jewish-American novelist living in Paris and then placed in the hands of Albert Hackett and Frances Goodrich Hackett, the husband and wife screen writing team behind ‘*It’s a Wonderful Life*’ and ‘*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*’. The ‘ending’ is more hopeful and Jewishness is played down in order to create a false universalism. It is this sentimentality that Zuckerman rebels against. Gooblar, p. 77.
only through this apparent “destruction” of the ideal Jewish identity that Roth qua Zuckerman is able to surmount the stagnant, sterile Jewish identity…

The trial in *The Ghost Writer* then, as well as being connected to the early charges, is also about what the writer can imagine and what the writer dares to imagine. In his early critical writings Roth describes himself as writing ‘American’ fiction rather than ‘Jewish’ American fiction. This was to get away from the restrictions that were very much evident at the time. The problem, however, with writing a life of Anne Frank is that, as Zuckerman realizes, he will merely compound the charges:

The rest was so much fiction, the unchallengeable answer to their questionnaire that I proposed to offer the Wapters. And far from being unchallengeable, far from acquitting me of their charges and restoring to me my cherished blamelessness, a fiction that of course would seem to them a desecration even more vile than the one they had read.

In *The Ghost Writer*, then, Zuckerman does not directly answer the charges that are brought against him, but collapses the distinction between fiction and autobiography and insists that the American suburban Jewish community’s self-presentation is just as fictitious as the stories he has written.

A second strand of the trial then moves on to examine the shackles placed on the writer by his own imagination and explores the process of writing as almost a form of penance or a punishment; particularly through the examination of Zuckerman’s surrogate literary father E.I Lonoff. In contrast to the young Zuckerman’s idealization of the writing process, the much older Lonoff is considerably more sanguine about his work, saying:

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39 *GW*, p. 103. The sensitive atmosphere that pervaded how Jews were portrayed during Roth’s early years has, he argues in an interview in *Reading Myself and Others* now mostly disappeared. ‘American Jews are less intimidated by Gentiles than they were when I began publishing in the 1950s, they are more sophisticated about anti-Semitism and its causes and they are less hedged in by suffocating concepts of normalcy’, *RMO*, p. 88.
I turn sentences around. That’s my life. I write a sentence and then I turn it around. Then I look at it and I turn it around again. Then I have lunch. Then I come back in and write another sentence. Then I read the two sentences over and turn them both around…And if I knock off from this routine for as long as a day, I’m frantic with boredom and a sense of waste.\(^{40}\)

The paradox is that Lonoff has ‘sentenced’ himself to an anchorite room and a lack of life. This renunciation emerges later when it is revealed that Lonoff may be having a relationship with the young woman who is staying with him and that his wife ‘Hope’, who paradoxically is ground down and has almost given up, knows all about it. As she shouts out to Zuckerman and Amy:

“There is his religion of art, my young successor: rejecting life! Not living is what he makes his beautiful fiction out of! And you will be the person he is not living with!”\(^{41}\)

The writing life in *The Ghost Writer* seems to be anything but pure, serene or simple. Zuckerman’s behaviour is itself a living refutation of what is called in *I Married a Communist* ‘the palliative of the primitive hut’ and what Roth deconstructs in the American Trilogy as the myth of purity. At Lonoff’s house Zuckerman cannot keep up the noble pretence for too long and, asked to stay, duly masturbates in Lonoff’s study:

Virtuous reader, if you think that after intercourse all animals are sad, try masturbating on the daybed in E.I. Lonoff’s study and see how you feel when its over. To expiate my sense of utter shabbiness, I immediately took to the high road and drew from Lonoff’s bookshelves the volume of Henry James stories containing ‘The Middle Years’.\(^{42}\)

Later Zuckerman finds out that the very young Amy and the much older Lonoff seem to have had some kind of relationship. Judging by what we hear we are not so sure how healthy this is. She calls him ‘Dad-da’ and asks that he kiss her breasts. For Zuckerman this is evidence, finally, only of the paucity of his own imagination, of all

\(^{40}\) GW. p. 11.
\(^{41}\) GW. p. 105.
\(^{42}\) GW. p. 68.
the things he hasn’t dared to imagine. He is as shocked as the Jewish community he has apparently reviled:

My astonishment at what I’d overheard, my shame at the unpardonable breach of his trust, my relief at having escaped undiscovered—all that turned out to be nothing, really, beside the frustration I soon began to feel over the thinness of my imagination and what that promised for the future. Dad-da, Florence, the great Durante; her babyishness and desire, his mad, heroic restraint—Oh, if only I could have imagined the scene I’d overheard! If only I could invent as presumptuously as real life! If one day I could just approach the originality and excitement of what actually goes on! But if I ever did, what then would they think of me, my father and his Judge? How would my elders hold up against that? And if they couldn’t, if the blow to their sentiments was finally too wounding, just how well would I hold up against being hated and reviled and disowned? 

The last question is, of course, the one that seems to have the most relevance to Roth’s real life.

At the end of the book both Lonoff’s lover Amy and his wife suddenly seem to realize the imprisonment that being the wife of a writer may involve. Both try to escape, Amy Ballete trying to drive away in the car and Hope Lonoff running away in the snow. The writing process itself is revealed to be an impure and hybridised form having little connection with the pastoral of ‘the big dark maple trees and fields of driven snow’. As Lonoff observes Zuckerman observing his predicament, especially the loss of both his wife and his lover, he cynically realizes that this is all simply more grist to Zuckerman’s writing mill. Lonoff rejects Zuckerman’s final offer of help, saying, as he tries to go after his disappearing wife:

“No, no I can use the exercise after that egg…And you must have things to write down. There’s paper on my desk.”
“Paper for what?”
“Your feverish notes… I’ll be curious to see how we all come out someday. It could be an interesting story. You’re not so nice and polite in your fiction,” he said. 

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43 GW, p. 73.
44 GW, p. 108. It is worth nothing that Roth again takes up the story of Amy Ballete, Hope and Lonoff in *Exist Ghost* (2007). Zuckerman is now an old man who sees Amy in a hospital. We learn that Hope left Lonoff and that the latter took up life with Amy. A biographer, Richard Kliman, wants to write a book about Lonoff suggesting that he had an incestuous relationship. This, according to Kliman, would
The Ghost Writer, then, puts on trial the life of the artist. Two lives are examined and comically re-described—there is the popular representation of the life of the ‘unimpeachable’ Jewish Icon Anne Frank and the equally austere and unimpeachable’ writer Emanuel Lonoff. As Safer argues, Roth’s ‘comedy’ emerges from incongruity and the incongruity here is between what Nathan imagines concerning the life of Lonoff and the actual lived reality. And more comedy when we fully realize the central irony of the novel. This is that Zuckerman, who went in search of ‘patriarchal validation’ after writing stories which featured tawdry details of his own father’s life is now busily engaged in reproducing the same tawdry stuff and with his surrogate literary father Lonoff, as the central character.

This writing about fathers, then, extends to an examination of how people and in this case Jews should be portrayed. In exploring these ideas we may note that Zuckerman, in addition to writing a counter life for Lonoff also creates an alternative history for Anne Frank, imagining Amy Ballete as her reincarnation. Zuckerman’s defence in writing this history is simply to make the ‘untouchable’ ‘real’ in an act of empathic imagination which attempts to move beyond the current portrayal of Anne that serves as untouchable fact. And this asks us to move on to a deeper question of how we view writers and why we give such status to a particular variety of written word, in this case the representation of Anne Frank in popular culture. What is it about Roth’s new version that is potentially offensive? To what? To whom? These are the questions that The Ghost Writer examines. Why, for example, does she need to be explain many things. Zuckerman baulks at the crudity of this simplistic reductionism and so the novel is set once again to explore the difference between representation and life.

45 As Safer says, ‘Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator of The Ghost Writer thinks of himself as the hero of a Bildungsroman. It does not take the reader long to realize that it would be more accurate to call Nathan the hero of a comic novel of an artist’s education’. Safer, p. 21.
remembered through sentimentalized Broadway kitsch instead of as a fallible human-being? This sentimentalized version of Anne Frank, Roth’s defence of his own version argues, simply shows us at our complacent worst. As Roth writes in *Reading Myself and Others* and in trying to move beyond the pre-existing cliché of Anne Frank, ‘no one who later complained that in *The Ghost Writer* I had abused the memory of Anne Frank would have batted an eye had I let those banalities out into the world’ (p.146). Roth’s defence argues that truly respecting the legacy of a person like Anne, whatever it may be, means trying to imagine who she was rather than simply reproducing and succumbing to the blanket of kitsch that now surrounds her. Finally, of course, and as if to dramatise the above, Zuckerman’s version of Anne is revealed to be simply another Zuckerman ‘fantasy’. *The Ghost Writer* suggests that people may remain forever beyond our understanding and that although fictional truth may suggest something of a more complex reality, it may be equally partial.

In terms of the trial motif, *The Ghost Writer* contains similar charges to the ones outlined in *The Anatomy Lesson*: the young Zuckerman upsets his father by writing about Jews in a manner which the older man thinks may encourage anti-Semitism. As well as the similarities there are, however, also departures. In *The Human Stain* Roth introduces a concept called the ‘conventionalised’ narrative which is often a final summing up on a life. *The Ghost Writer* gives us an earlier glimpse of this through the way in which Zuckerman tries to write an alternative history of the life of Anne Frank. Roth developed this strategy more fully in *The Counterlife* (1987) and *The Plot*.

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46 Ways of writing and thinking about the Holocaust is something that Roth has been engaged with, perhaps more overtly in his critical writings. Most notably in his conversations with writers like Primo Levi and Ivan Klíma in his book *Shop Talk*.

47 Roth has done something similar with his essay ‘Looking at Kafka’ in *RMO*. Here Kafka escapes the Nazis and ends up teaching Roth at his local Hebrew school. Here Kafka becomes another fatherly teaching figure for Roth, but once again, however, he is comically pushed off his pedestal. He is called Dr Kiska by the school boys and ends up getting rejected by Roth’s ‘Aunt Dora.’ The sacred mingle with the profane.
Against America (2004). I have argued that this strategy allows Zuckerman to dramatise both the difficulty of depiction as well as insisting on the constructed nature, or fictionality, of large parts of the many conventionalised narratives that we take for granted. In terms of the trial motif, this makes totalising and final judgements improbable.

Instead of directly engaging with the charges, Roth uses the incongruity of comedy to cut them down to size. Hence there is a radical disconnection between how the young Zuckerman imagines the life of the older Lonoff and the actual reality. The writing life also emerges as itself an ordeal, a kind of punishment or ‘sentence’.
3: Zuckerman Unbound and The Prague Orgy

Zuckerman Unbound written two years after The Ghost Writer and three years before The Anatomy Lesson seems to bridge the gap between the unknown neophyte Zuckerman, struggling to become a successful writer and the hugely successful writer of the fictional Carnovsky portrayed in The Anatomy Lesson. Zuckerman Unbound seems, in many ways, to be almost a preliminary sketch for many of the themes developed at much greater length in The Anatomy Lesson. The former book, written three years earlier, examines the ordeals of being a celebrity and a public figure rather than the specific self-hating and anti-Semitic charges laid out by Irving Howe.\(^48\) In Zuckerman Unbound the main persecutory forces that put the writer on trial are an unknown fan called Alvin Pepler, Zuckerman’s own brother Henry, who accuses Zuckerman of hastening his father’s death through the writing of Carnovsky and Zuckerman himself, briefly wondering if these charges are true. This toxic background is enveloped by a media culture that forensically scrutinises every aspect of Zuckerman’s life. I will now examine these persecutory forces in greater depth.

Trial by Media

In his early critical work Reading Myself and Others, Roth, sets out to explore the difficulties facing the writer of ‘American’ Fiction. In the celebrated critical piece ‘Writing American Fiction’ he mentions the real-life murders of the Grimes sisters, Pattie and Babs, and notes how their grisly murders are bent out of all recognition by an American media with little respect for veracity and hungry only for sensationalism. The moral of this confabulation of media tripe seems, for Roth, to be that whatever the writer can imagine the culture can get up to something bigger, or at least more

\(^{48}\) This is suggested by the epigraph at the start of the book, supposedly written by Zuckerman’s literary hero E.I Lonoff of The Ghost Writer. ‘Let Nathan see what it is to be lifted from obscurity. Let him not come hammering at our door to tell us that he wasn’t warned’.
outrageous. He then moves on to quote an essay in *Commentary* developing this point and saying that:

> Recently in *Commentary*, Benjamin DeMott wrote that the “deeply lodged suspicion of the times is namely that events and individuals are unreal, and that power to alter the course of the age, of my life and your life, is actually vested nowhere”. There seems to be, said DeMott, a kind of “universal descent into unreality.”

Part of the trial in *Zuckerman Unbound* is that the story of Zuckerman’s self, as a person and a writer is no longer, because of his new celebrity status, strictly under his control. I do not mean that Zuckerman’s portrayal in the media influences a real legal trial, but that the endless speculation about the author’s moral character, based supposedly on the pornographic nature of the book he has written, essentially defames him. Things become distorted and increasingly unreal. Roth’s early concern with the ‘unreal’ shows the inadequacy of much critical commentary on his work which represents it as straightforwardly realistic. Roth’s comments on the media also reflect an early awareness of the problematical and complex nature of reality. As Nicol argues, commenting upon the relationship between American history in the 1960s and its relationship to a growing postmodernism in literature:

> Similarly, the pervasiveness of corruption, violence, scandal, and cover-up in American politics, exemplified by the assassinations of John Kennedy, and his brother Robert and the civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King, and the Watergate scandal…convinced cultural figures in America that reality, even history, was not transparent, but a kind of ‘front’ for the real story which was unfolding behind the scenes. The determination to explore fictionality in the

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49 *RMO*, p. 121. In *ZU* this descent into unreality is revealed by the reactions of Zuckerman’s new ‘fans’. ‘A smiling middle-aged woman came up to tell him that from reading about his sexual liberation in Carnovsky, she was less “uptight” now herself. In the bank at Rockefeller Plaza where he went to cash a check, the long-haired guard asked in a whisper if he could touch Mr. Zuckerman’s coat: he wanted to tell his wife about it when he got home that night. While he was walking through the park, a nicely dressed young East Side mother out with her baby and her dog stepped into his path and said, “You need love, and you need it all the time. I feel sorry for you”, p. 7.

50 Reality has been problematised through the successive work of various theorists and novelists who can be broadly grouped under the postmodern mantle. Roth is not typically one of them. Whether it is Guy Dubord’s work on the society of the spectacle or Jean Baudrillard’s development of the concept of the simulation and hyperreal, or Jameson and the crisis in historicity, reality has become complex and so has its ‘fictional’ depiction.
1960s, then, was motivated by a sense that everyday reality was always already fictionalized, either because of its sheer absurdity, or by the power of the media in shaping it…

Roth’s work has reflected and continues to reflect this open-jawed incredulity at the media spectacle. As he goes on to point out with regards to the Nixon/Kennedy debates:

Perhaps as a satiric literary creation, he might have seemed “believable,” but I myself found that on the TV Screen, as a real public figure, a political fact, my mind balked at taking him in. Whatever else the television debates produced in me, I should point out, as a literary curiosity, they also produced professional envy. All the machinations over make-up and rebuttal time, all the business over whether Mr. Nixon should look at Mr. Kennedy when he replied, or should look away—all of it was so beside the point, so fantastic, so weird and astonishing, that I found myself beginning to wish I had invented it. But then, of course, one need not have been a fiction writer to wish that someone had invented it, and that it was not real and with us.

These short critical pieces written by Roth are useful for understanding the trial by media that seems to emerge in Zuckerman Unbound. There is the same level of unreality as the ‘story’ of Zuckerman’s self, is distorted by the media. As we are told:

And just the previous Sunday he had watched three therapists sitting in lounge chairs on Channel 5 analyzing his castration complex with the program host. They all agreed that Zuckerman had a Lulu. The following morning Andre’s lawyer had gently to tell him that he couldn’t sue for slander. “Your nuts, Nathan, are now in the public domain”.

As well as the ‘social construction’ of Zuckerman the man there is the conflation of Zuckerman the writer and Carnovsky the character. People recognise Zuckerman on the bus. All of the initial meetings seem rather innocuous, but then, in a weird

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52 RMO, p. 121.
53 ZU, p. 126.
54 ‘They had mistaken impersonation for confession and were calling out to a character who lived in a book’ ZU, p. 115.
55 “Hey. Hey.” Zuckerman’s excited neighbour was trying to distract the man in the aisle from his *Times*. “See this guy next to me?” “I do now,” came the stern, affronted reply…Upon hearing that a
and distorted funhouse mirror, Zuckerman gets stalked by a fan called Alvin Pepler. A man, who was apparently on a 1950s Quiz show, grew up in Newark and was ‘robbed’ when the Quiz show prize was given to another contestant. Pepler is equally deluded about Zuckerman, calling him Newark’s Marcel Proust and in a very similar way to the Coleman Silk of *The Human Stain* approaches him to bear witness to his grievances.

At first Pepler follows Zuckerman around inventing an absurd concoction about his own life. We learn, for example, that he is a writer and that he has written a musical about Israel. He has an option on the Six-Day War and Yul Brynner will play Dayan! At first Zuckerman indulges Pepler, but when he later criticizes Pepler for a piece of critical literature that the former sheepishly reveals the man becomes nasty and abrasive accusing him of ‘misrepresenting’ Newark. The charge of misrepresentation is similar to the way Roth was accused of misrepresenting Jews. Pepler seems an early stand-in for the forces explored in *The Anatomy Lesson*. As Pepler says:

“What do you know about Newark, Mama’s Boy! I read that fucking book! To you it’s Sunday chop suey downtown at the Chink’s! To you it’s being Leni-Lenape Indians at school in the play! To you it’s Uncle Max in his undershirt, watering the radishes at night...Moron! Moron! Newark is a nigger with a knife! Newark is a whore with the syph! Newark is junkies shitting in your hallway and everything burned to the ground!”

Pepler’s charge is that Zuckerman has essentially written a pastoral portrait of Newark. This seems difficult to rebut since we never get to read much of the fictional *Carnovsky*. The charges also reflect an assumption that ‘reality’ is out there and that it

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56 ZU, p. 203.
can be depicted in some kind of ‘accurate’ manner. Soon, however, things become much more serious and Pepler’s accusations become hostile and pointed, aiming directly at Zuckerman.

What I have been arguing then is that in Zuckerman Unbound one aspect of the trial for Zuckerman is that he has become a free floating signifier. He can be everything and anything to anybody. To Pepler he is a source of potential salvation who later proves disappointing. To his wife’s friend Rosemary he has become a seducer of innocent women and a serial philanderer. To his long suffering agent he is simply a paranoid and long suffering Diva. In this unreal world the self itself, so often thought in the Rothian world to be connected to the psychoanalytic unity of the private individual, reveals itself to be something fluid and in flux and under constant negotiation with other people. Zuckerman the person and the concept can be freighted with personal meanings that people bring to him. He can be accused of stealing a life. In Pepler’s frightening formulation, for example, the novelist becomes a sort of ventriloquists Dummy somehow ‘channelling’ the lives of his characters and then presumably not acknowledging the debt:

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57 Zuckerman Unbound argues against this. However, the charge seems to crop up repeatedly. In American Pastoral, Roth imagines Zuckerman having a fictional conversation with the character Jerry Levov, having just written a book about the latter’s family. Jerry accuses the writer of totally inaccurate depiction; of both his father and his brother Seymour.

58 Zuckerman’s fear of Pepler is set against the backdrop to the Jewish reaction to Carnovsky which is hinted at but only fully developed and answered in The Anatomy Lesson. In Zuckerman Unbound we are only told that, ‘You see, not everybody was delighted by this book that was making Zuckerman a fortune. Plenty of people had already written to tell him off. “For depicting Jews in a peep-show atmosphere of total perversion, for depicting Jews in acts of adultery, exhibitionism, masturbation, sodomy, fetishism, and whoremongery,” somebody with letterhead stationary as impressive as the President’s had even suggested that he “ought to be shot.” (p. 113)

59 Rosemary, the friend of Zuckerman’s wife, accuses him of using the latter as the model for Carnovsky’s girlfriend. Later she shows Zuckerman purple prose press clippings about his romance with the movie star Caesura O’Shea and seems to believe everything she reads. The verdict on Zuckerman is already out.

60 Trying to reassure Zuckerman the Agent says: ‘But paranoia is something else. And my point for you, my question to you, is how far are you going to let paranoia take you before it takes you where it goes?’ “The question is how far the abrasive little book is going to take them.” “Nathan, who are ‘they’? Nathan, you must do me a favour and stop going nuts.” (p. 117)
“The truth unbiased that’s what I want! Unbiased by the fact that you only wrote that book because you could! Because of having every break in life there is! While the ones who didn’t obviously couldn’t! Unbiased by the fact that those hang-ups you wrote about happen to be mine and that you knew it—that you stole it!” “I did what? Stole What?” “From what my Aunt Lottie told your cousin Essie that she told to your mother that she told to you. About me. About my past.” Oh, was it time to go.

The charges that Pepler brings against Zuckerman are obviously absurd, but Zuckerman’s new fluid public self whose ‘nuts are in the public domain’ means that he can be on trial for what he has done and for what he hasn’t. For what he is and what he isn’t. For whatever people may wish to bring to him. The media circus and the stories that are sent out about him seem to suggest that control over the story of who and what you are is not simply vested in the individual and that there is no control over this barrage.

After a while the public space that Zuckerman had once commanded as a nobody, riding in a bus and being recognised by the public, seems increasingly hostile and unfriendly. Zuckerman moves from travelling by bus to travelling by armoured limousine. If America is a writers’ territory it is increasingly one best perceived through low-flying raids. Increasingly celebrity status means that he has to ration access to himself. Zuckerman receives a smorgasbord of demands: calls from the ‘Roll Mops’ King who wants him to advertise fish and also other, darker calls, threatening his life and family. An anonymous caller threatening Zuckerman may be Pepler but we remain unsure. This declining civic space is represented through a largely negative postmodernity. This reveals itself in the cartoonish portrait of Zuckerman’s new ‘reality’ and its ‘medicalisation’. In this respect Nicol, for example,

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61 ZU, p. 153.
62 This is probably why retreat and withdrawal figure so heavily in the later works. In American Pastoral, for example, Zuckerman tells Jerry Levov that he has retreated to a remote cabin because of ‘the shit’ which is, ‘The picture we have of one another. Layers and layers of misunderstanding. The picture we have of ourselves. Useless. Presumptuous. Completely cocked-up. Only we go ahead and we live by these pictures. ‘That’s what she is, that’s what he is, this is what I am…’ AP, p. 64.
has noted how postmodern theorists use medical tropes to indicate a loss of reality. Zuckerman’s problems also induce a schizophrenic-like reading experience. Is Zuckerman really paranoid, for example, or is there a realistic threat? Was he a heartless bastard, as his brother insists, or a dutiful son? Increasingly, for Zuckerman, reality is something that has to be managed and fought off.

I have argued that the persecutory forces in Zuckerman Unbound are much more widespread than in The Anatomy Lesson or The Ghost Writer. The forces of persecution and harassment now include both the wider media and deranged fans unhappy about the way they have been depicted. This public sense of betrayal is linked, as always in Roth, to more personal charges. In Zuckerman Unbound the final accusations come from Zuckerman’s dying father.

Family Accusations

Family accusations emerge after the father’s funeral and reflect the title of the book: Zuckerman Unbound. This ‘unbinding’ is most profitably conceptualized as being connected to the loss of Zuckerman’s father, his alienation from his brother and the destruction of his former ‘writing space’ Newark. At his death bed Zuckerman absurdly tries to comfort the dying man by explaining to him the theory of the Big Bang and how this may relate to the death of an individual. Zuckerman talks about this to his father saying:

63 As Nicol states, ‘Indeed a loss of reality is a symptom of a range of psychic disorders, from mild depression to full-blown psychosis. This seems to explain a peculiar tendency amongst theorists of the postmodern to employ the language of mental disorder to describe its effects. Postmodernity has been described as ‘schizophrenic’ (Jameson, 1991), ‘multiphrenic’ (Gergen, 1992), ‘telephrenic’ (Gottschalk, 200), depressive and nihilistic (Levin, 1987), paranoid (Burgin, 1990; Frank, 1992; Brennan, 2004), and liable to induce in those who live in it ‘low-level fear’ (Massumi, 1993), or ‘panic’ (Kroker and Cook, 1988)’ Nicol, p. 9. Many characters reveal these states in Zuckerman Unbound.
“There’s now a theory that when the fifty billion years are up, instead of everything coming to an end, instead of all the light going out because of all the energy fizzling away, gravity will take over. The force of gravity.”

Later and the dying father whispers a word which sounds like ‘bastard’. Zuckerman is confused about this and asks his brother Henry what he though the word actually was. Henry is furious and says that the word was in fact ‘bastard’ and that Zuckerman has betrayed his whole family through the writing of Carnovsky which ridiculed a Jewish family so obviously based on their own. During his dying days the father apparently made a well-meaning neighbour read him sections of the novel. Henry tells Nathan this and then says:

“Poor Mother! Begging us all not to tell you! Our mother, taking the shit she’s taking down there because of you—and smiling through it! And still protecting you from the truth of what you’ve done! You and your superiority! You and your hijinks! You and your ‘liberating’ book...The origin of the universe! When all he was waiting to hear was ‘I love you!’ ‘Dad, I love you’—that was all that was required!”

Henry calls Nathan a heartless bastard without a moral conscience. These charges are difficult to evaluate but it is certainly the case that there seems to be a lack of ‘gravity’ in the way Zuckerman processes his father’s death. He seems to ‘evaluate’ it almost as if it were a work of fiction. The comfort he provides his father is drawn from a book and the eulogy is evaluated in dramaturgic terms. Zuckerman says that:

Strange. It was supposed to be just the opposite. But never had he contemplated his father’s life with less sentiment. It was as though they were burying the father of some other sons. As for the character being depicted by the rabbi, well, nobody had ever gotten Dr. Zuckerman quite so wrong. Maybe the rabbi was only trying to distance him from the father in Carnovsky, but from the portrait he painted you would have thought Dr.Zuckerman was Schweitzer. All that was missing was the organ and the lepers. But why not? Whom did it harm? It was a funeral, not a novel, let alone the Last judgement.

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64 ZU, p. 188.
65 ZU, p. 216.
66 ZU, p. 194. A similar scene takes place in The Anatomy Lesson. Zuckerman’s brother Henry reads the eulogy when their mother dies. In this case Zuckerman voices the thought that the portrayal of the mother by his brother is essentially an idealised and little boy’s portrait.
Despite the fact that it was a funeral and not a novel, Zuckerman seems to experience a considerable amount of ‘reality’ as if it were a novel. There seems to be a story world to everything for the writer. He doesn’t say ‘I love you’ to his father but relates a story about the origins of the Universe. He tells us that the rabbi has painted a ‘portrait’ of his father and that this ‘character’ is quite inaccurate. This dramaturgic attitude towards life repeatedly occurs. In analyzing, for example, his father’s unclear dying words, he opines that hearing the word ‘bastard’ ‘was the writer’s wishful thinking, if not quite the son’s. Better scene, stronger medicine, a final repudiation by father. Still, when Zuckerman wasn’t writing he was also only human, and he’d just as soon the scene wasn’t so wonderful’.  

Zuckerman seems to be participating in the postmodern blurring of fact and fiction. This aesthetically preoccupied way of relating to everything dramaturgically and through literature Zuckerman continues when he later sees his brother making a call. He says, ‘So another love affair. That torment too. The Crisis, thought Zuckerman, in the life of a Husband. In Miami beach, Zuckerman had refrained from bringing up the deathbed scene with his brother’. If Zuckerman is guilty, like his brother insists, of being a heartless bastard this ‘distancing’, through an aloof and Olympian type of ‘species-interest’ in others, may be the cause. In this respect it is possible to argue that Zuckerman resembles the cynical literary critic Anders in the Tobias Wolff short story ‘Bullet in the Brain’.  

The charge that the writer has betrayed his family is set against the confused relationship that Zuckerman perceives between the claims of family and the claims of art. Henry’s accusation is that Zuckerman has betrayed the one for the other, and that he has turned his family into a species of grotesque. Pepler also accuses the writer of...

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67 ZU, p. 197.  
68 In the story the critic has become so sensitive to cliché and so dulled to real life that he does not recognise the danger he is in when caught up in a robbery. He laughs when one of the robbers uses the Italian phrase ‘Capiche’ and says ‘Straight out of The Killers’ when he hears another line. This results in his murder.
somehow ‘stealing his life’ for material. Zuckerman’s attitude is straightforwardly dismissive of the deranged Pepler but much more equivocating when rebutting family charges. We are told, for example, that Zuckerman had guessed that his ill father would somehow end up seeing his book. This sounds like a partial acknowledgement of guilt:

But he knew, he knew, he knew, he’d known it all along. He’d known it when Essie, over their midnight snack, had told him, “If I were you, I wouldn’t listen to one goddamn thing they say.” He’d known during the rabbi’s eulogy. And he’d known before that. He’d known when he was writing the book. But he’d written it anyway. Then, like a blessing, his father had the stroke that sent him into the nursing home, and by the time Carnovsky appeared he was too far gone to read it. Zuckerman thought he had beaten the risk. And beaten the rap. He hadn’t.  

Zuckerman’s heartlessness may be partially explained by his lack of closeness to his father. We are told:

The strain of feeling no grief. The surprise. The shame…But all the grieving over his father’s body had taken place when Nathan was twelve and fifteen and twenty-one: the grief over all his father had been dead to while living. From that grief the death was a release.

Zuckerman’s literary education has alienated him from his working class father. Some of the disdain that he feels for his father’s taste comes across in many of his remarks. When Henry says that he thought the father’s last word was ‘batter,’ Zuckerman replies, mixing high and low sources, ‘As in “Batter my heart three-person’d God,” or “Batter up!”? “You sure?”’

While Zuckerman seems dismissive of family life sometimes the claims of a traditional family seem more real than the appeal of art. After having conversations

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69 ZU, p. 215. The idea of the stroke being a blessing is strange. The idea of beating the rap seems to imply getting away with something and that you are guilty. We also do not know what Zuckerman appears to know. That writing the book would kill his father? That it would be impossible to prevent his father from reading it? There is acknowledgement here, but it is vague and unfocussed.

70 ZU, p. 194.

71 It seems unlikely that the father, given his background, interests and class, will have read the Donne poem. ‘Batter Up!’ is a baseball directive. Both seem to be suggestive of the increasingly polarized relationship between the father and son.
with a person threatening to kidnap his mother we learn that instead of doing something practical Zuckerman merely transcribes his conversations:

But instead he sat back down at his desk and for another hour recorded in his composition book everything the kidnapper had said. In spite of his worries, he was smiling to himself as he saw on paper what he’d heard the night before on the phone. He was reminded of a story about Flaubert coming out of his study one day and seeing a cousin of his, a young married woman, tending to her children, and Flaubert saying, ruefully, ‘*Ils sont dans le vrai*’.  

While wanting to be part of conventional life, Zuckerman also experiences it as constraining. His agent claims that this is what he had to escape from:

“But if you recall, Nathan dear, being really you was what was driving you crazy only a few short years ago. You told me so yourself. You felt stultified writing ‘proper, responsible’ novels. You felt stultified living behind your ‘drearily virtuous face.’ You felt stultified sitting in your chair every night making notes for your files on another Great Book”.

*Zuckerman Unbound* examines the claims of family and community versus the desire to be an independent artist. It explores the changing nature of American public space as Zuckerman becomes a newly minted celebrity and his relationship to the public changes. Zuckerman’s ‘story’ is no longer his own. His ‘nuts are in the public domain’. In *Zuckerman Unbound*, Zuckerman’s father dies, in *The Anatomy Lesson* his mother. Both books are about the loss of identity caused by the destruction of family ties and also the loss of Zuckerman’s childhood home Newark.

Towards the end of *Zuckerman Unbound*, Zuckerman visits Newark and notes how it has changed out of all recognition compared to the idealized childhood portrait contained in *Carnovsky*. The fact that he is driven there in a limousine which boasts an armed chauffeur clearly indicates that Pepler’s initial charge that Zuckerman actually knows very little about Newark as it is now, carries some weight. The small

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72 *ZU*, p. 129. Flaubert, like Zuckerman, was a ruthless destroyer of bourgeois pieties.

73 *ZU*, p. 122.
shops have vanished, the Jews have all gone and the area has become dangerous and despondent. Musing on this destruction, Zuckerman says:

Just what he wanted to see. “Over” he thought. All his lyrical feeling for the neighbourhood had gone into Carnovsky. It had to—there was no other place for it. “Over. Over. Over. Over. I’ve served my time.”

This seems to perfectly express Zuckerman’s paradoxical attitude. Growing up in Newark was both confining, almost like a prison sentence and at the same time a source of inspiration. This may mirror the situation of Roth who appears to need conflict in order to write even if the writing seems to be an attempt to escape or refute the charges. The loss of home and family, however, means that Zuckerman has actually become depersonalized and does not have a writing subject or much of an identity. When Zuckerman has the driver stop outside a house in the street in which he grew up a young black man appears:

“Who you supposed to be?” he said
“No one,” replied Zuckerman, and that was the end of that. You are no longer any man’s son, you are no longer some good woman’s husband, you are no longer your brother’s brother, and you don’t come from anywhere anymore, either.

Zuckerman Unbound, then, with its loss of a homeland and a family hints at both the emotional and artistic difficulties that the writer will face in the future. Here the trial emerges as both an artistic and emotional ordeal. The changing nature of America means that Zuckerman can now only observe it through the prism of an armoured car. These hinted at changes will be fully explored in the American Trilogy.

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74 ZU, p. 221.
75 ZU, p. 222. Brauner suggests that Zuckerman Unbound is a more muted version of Anatomy noting how ‘If, at the end of Zuckerman Unbound, Zuckerman hopes that he has already been sufficiently punished for his crimes – which now apparently include parricide – then the third novel in the sequence, The Anatomy Lesson, brutally disillusiones him. Far from liberating him from the bonds of Jewish responsibilities, the death of his father binds Zuckerman ever more closely to them; instead of diminishing the trial tropes intensify and proliferate.’ Brauner, p. 34.
76 Alvin Pepler seems like an earlier version of the frothing rabbis and anti-defamation individuals encountered in The Anatomy Lesson and also addressed in Reading Myself. Zuckerman Unbound answers similar charges of malicious depiction.
"The Prague Orgy" (1985) acts as short epilogue to the Zuckerman books. Here Roth widens the focus of the trial and a new sense of the writer perpetually on trial emerges. Zuckerman visits Prague, just like Roth did repeatedly until 1977, and is tasked by an exiled writer called Sisovsky to find the book of his father. Gooblar, who in dividing Roth’s fiction into periods of ‘inward’ and ‘outward turning’, argues that the The Prague Orgy represents an outward movement:

What began as a rather straightforward literary appreciation of Franz Kafka becomes something more, and something more personal for Roth: the conscious use of a significant literary forebear to help define the particular writer Roth wants to be, or cannot help but be. Throughout this era, Roth’s use of Kafka is a reaching outward, expanding his fictional worlds to include a very different writer’s experience. But although that difference is never forgotten nor denied, Kafka’s presence serves to illuminate Roth’s characters’ particular predicaments—predicaments that seem rooted in Roth’s own experience…

In The Prague Orgy, Zuckerman finally leaves the former Czechoslovakia accused of being, ironically enough, a Zionist Agent. The absurd inverse nature of these charges—juxtaposed against the background of the New York reaction to Zuckerman’s books, creates a sense that we live in a world that is perpetually eager to persecute and take offence, especially against writers. We may also note that although Roth does indeed seem to be ‘turning outwards’ in his writerly concerns, the same obsession with fathers, especially censorious Jewish ones, is still evident. As Brauner suggests:

Sisovsky’s father represents a Jewish cultural patrimony for Zuckerman (a literary legacy that he can claim as his own), but his situation also mirrors Zuckerman’s, since his preoccupation with judging Jews has led to him falling out of favour with the authorities. The difference is that Zuckerman alienates the elders of his own community through what they see as his hostile judgements of Jews, whereas the fiction of Sisovsky’s father would be

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77 Gooblar, p. 63.
regarded as too sympathetic in its portrait of Jewish life by the pathologically anti-Zionist Communist regime. 78

Whereas *The Ghost Writer* looks at the ‘sentence’ an American writer *chooses* for himself, *The Prague Orgy* ends by examining the reality that is prescribed by the state and forced upon the artist. 79 The sentence of silence in the old Eastern bloc and the difficulty of finding a voice in America emerge from two radically different realities. In *Reading Myself and Others* Roth explores some of these contrasts: between writing under an oppressive regime and writing under a society where most things are allowed. He argues that in America:

The popular media have usurped literature’s scrutinizing function and trivialized it. The momentum of the American mass media is toward the trivialization of everything. The trivialization of everything is of no less importance for Americans than repression is for Europeans, and if the problem has not achieved the same notoriety at the PEN Club as political repression, it’s because it flows out of political *freedom*. The threat to a civilized America isn’t the censorship of this or that book in some atypical school district somewhere; it’s not the government’s attempt to suppress or falsify this or that piece of information. It’s the *superabundance* of information, the circuits burgeoning with information—it’s the censorship of *nothing*. 80

Roth’s verdict in *Reading Myself and Others*, however, is that even if in America your voice may be drowned out by the superabundance of everything, it is of course infinitely preferable than having your work minutely scrutinised and controlled by repressive agents of the State.

*The Prague Orgy* is a minor work in the Roth oeuvre, but I agree with Gooblar that it marks an important transition in his fiction. Roth was editor of the Penguin series

78 Brauner, p. 42.
79 Roth has talked about his visit to the former Czechoslovakia saying, ‘When I was first in Czechoslovakia, it occurred to me that I work in a society where as a writer everything goes and nothing matters, while for the Czech writers I met in Prague, nothing goes and everything matters. *Paris Review* interview reprinted in *RMO*, p. 156.
80 While we may dispute how genuinely ‘free’ the western media actually is, especially considering the recent ‘News Corp’ scandal and the cosy relationships revealed between press barons and politicians, as well as how the news media ‘positions’ or ‘frames’ its discourse, it is apparent that Roth has certainly anticipated a common complaint about the digital age and how people are drowning in information.
‘Writers from the Other Europe’ (1974-1989) and he selected titles and oversaw publication of Eastern European writers who were, at the time, relatively unknown to American readers. I would argue that this experience pushed his fiction into a much broader consideration of the relationship between the individual and the state. In the American Trilogy, the state is directly involved in the persecution of individuals and the trial motif reflects this.
Part Two: The American Trilogy
4: The Human Stain

*The Human Stain* (2000) explores similar issues of race and identity established by novels like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). It is crucially connected to what Roth calls the ‘Devil of the Little place—the gossip, the jealousy, the acrimony, the boredom, the lies’ (p. 290) — in this case tiny ‘Athena College’, as well as what we may call the ‘Devil of the Larger’, here the censorious body politic of American society. Two figures are persecuted in both environments: a teacher in the small Athena college community and shadowing this, the impeachment of President Clinton for his affair with Monica Lewinsky.

What Shechner calls ‘Roth’s martyr to himself’ is an academic—Coleman Silk, an African-American and former Dean of Athena college. Born before the emergence of the Civil Rights movement, Silk has followed in the footsteps of the real Anatole Broyard and tried to racially ‘pass’ as a white man. The novel is concerned with the moral implications of this choice as well as the effects on the man himself and his immediate family. In *The Human Stain* the inciting event moving us towards the inevitable trial is Silk’s inadvertent usage of a potentially derogatory racial epithet to ascertain whether or not students who have never attended his class are really present. ‘Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?’ (p.6). This

\[\text{81 As already mentioned Roth talks about Ellison in *RMO* and notes how the writer once defended him against a hostile audience. Both *The Human Stain* and *Invisible Man* explore fundamental issues of race and identity. Gooblar notes how what R.W.B Lewis conceptualized in 1955 as the ‘Adamic’ tradition expresses itself in the American literature of the 1950s, paying homage to Whitman, Hawthorne and Melville. Here ‘the hero is willing, with marvellously inadequate equipment, to take on as much of the world as is available to him without ever fully submitting to any of the world’s determining categories’. Lewis quoted in Gooblar, p. 24. In *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk is equally ‘determined’ not to be ‘determined’ by social forces.}\]


\[\text{83 The American writer, literary critic and former editor for the New York Times.}\]
unfortunate comment then issues in the first trial in the novel. I will now describe this as well as observing the wider debate that the novel invokes.

The Spooks Trial

Unfortunately for Silk the word ‘Spooks’, as well as carrying the primary meaning ghost, can also be a derogatory word for Africans and given that the novel is set in the politically correct campuses of 90s America and that the absent students are in fact African American, he is rapidly accused of racism. Given also that nobody practises what Murray Ringold in I Married a Communist calls ‘the ultimate transgression’ of critical thinking, in fact practises ‘the label is the explanation’ thinking, Silk is cast out of his small community and the novel becomes a Scarlet Letter type playground of denunciation, renunciation and retribution. Nathanial Hawthorne is invoked in several contexts and what Hawthorne calls the ‘persecuting spirit’ is the animating force which the censorious community uses in order to have Silk removed from academic office. The politically correct culture of the time and the impeachment of Clinton is evoked by Roth in the opening pages:

It was the summer in America when the nausea returned, when the joking didn’t stop, when the speculation and the theorizing and the hyperbole didn’t stop, when the moral obligation to explain to one’s children about adult life was abrogated in favour of maintaining in them every illusion about adult life,…when the smallness of people was simply crushing…when men and women…had dreamed of the brazenness of Bill Clinton. I myself dreamed of a mammoth banner, draped Dadaistically like a Christo wrapping from one end of the White House to the other and bearing the legend A HUMAN BEING LIVES HERE. (p. 3)
And the charges emerging from a self-righteous, priggish society are named by Roth in all their various historical disguises. The desire for Clinton’s Impeachment, for example, which shadows the trial of Silk, comes from:

Personal posturing, the persistence just about everywhere of this de-virilizing pulpit virtue mongering that H.L Mencken identified with Boobism, that Philip Wylie thought of as Momism, that the Europeans unhistorically call American Puritanism and the likes of Ronald Reagan call America’s core values. (p.153)

Coleman Silk’s trial can be understood in the context of the so called ‘Culture Wars’ of the 1990s. Political correctness is a capacious hydra-headed concept. For example, Hunter, in his influential study Culture Wars notes its appearance in law, education, and electoral politics and suggests that it represents a struggle to define the nature of American society.\(^8\)\(^4\) This struggle takes places between what he loosely glosses as the impulse towards Orthodoxy and the impulse towards Progressivism and manifests itself around issues like minority representation, gay rights, abortion and education. He then traces its historical roots through the expansion and realignment of American religious pluralism. In 1990 this concept of a ‘Culture War’ was evoked in the media by conservatives like Pat Buchanan who mounted a campaign for the Republican nomination for President of the United States against George Bush and used it in his speech at the 1992 Republican Convention. The ‘battleground issue’ in The Human Stain, in addition to race, is the nature of education and what should be on the curriculum. Coleman Silk, the Classics professor who is on trial, is portrayed as using a fossilized pedagogy made up of mostly dead white European males. Delphine Roux, the young French Marxist-feminist whom he initially hired and who is now

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Chair of his Department tells him, with regards to a student he is having problems with, that:

If you persist in teaching literature in the tedious way you are used to, if you insist on the so-called humanist approach to Greek tragedy you’ve been taking since the 1950s, conflicts like this are going to continually arise. (p.193)

The charges here about interpretation reflect an ongoing and wider debate at the time about the nature of the Western literary canon and the reasons for inclusion. Hunter in his chapter ‘Contending for the Ivory Tower’ sums up the argument:

The argument goes something like this: the existing curriculum is politicised by virtue of the fact that its principal works have been composed almost entirely by dead white European males. White male literary critics canonize white male novelists; elite white male historians document elite white male history… Thus, progressivists argue, only a small part of human experience has really been studied…The solution today is, therefore, to be more inclusive of different perspectives. 85(p.215)

In writing a species of campus novel Roth is mining similar territory to JM Coetzee’s Disgrace and David Mamet’s Oleanna. In The Human Stain, Delphine wants Coleman to seriously entertain his student Elena Mitnick’s ‘feminist perspective’ on Euripides, Coleman thinks it is ‘just the latest mouthwash’ (p.192). Later, memory of this bruising encounter allows Delphine to exploit Silk’s inadvertent usage of the ‘spooks’ epithet for political purposes. He then passes through an academic disciplinary ‘trial’ seemingly unaware of how Athena College has changed. He fails to grasp the kinds of regulations outlined by Hunter and produced by the real National Education Association with its stand against ‘ethnoviolence’ and ‘acts of insensitivity’. 86

The novel, then, partakes of the wider debate about both the nature of the Clinton Presidency and essentialist concerns with education and what should and shouldn’t

85 Hunter, p. 215.
86 These can be found in the Code of Ethics of the NEA.
be included in a literary ‘Great Books’ canon, as well as what are appropriate deictic
terms of address. These kinds of issues are reflected in the popular criticism of the
time by, for example, the writings of conservatives like Alan Bloom and his
bestselling *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) as well as Harold Bloom’s *The
Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994) and the conservative
punditry of then Secretary of Education William J. Bennett and his *The Death of
Outrage: Bill Clinton and the Assault on American Ideals* (1998). Alternatively the
idea of destabilizing a predominantly ‘white’ literary canon emerged from a rainbow
coalition of theorists including feminists, Marxists, postmodernists, poststructuralists
and critical theorists whom conservative critics like Harold Bloom clumped together
as constituting a ‘School of Resentment’, privileging overtly political readings over
the aesthetics of literary worth.  

Roth’s stand on this issue is actually ambiguous. On the one hand the lazy
stereotyping of Delphine Roux, lampooned by Shechner, clearly indicates initial
sympathy with Coleman and the Humanists, it is still the case, however, that
Zuckerman admits to knowing nothing about ‘black history month’ at the end of the
book and when talking to Coleman’s sister Ernestine. The wider debate about a
narrow and overly reductive political reading of texts is encapsulated by the student
Elena Mitnick’s refusal to see anything of value in the plays of Euripides because they
are ‘degrading to women’. After Mitnick, Delphine then uses student complaints
about Silk’s usage of the word ‘spooks’ to have him charged with racism. He is
unable to stand outside history and seems aware of it:

87 Bloom devised this term in response to various schools of Marxist literary criticism which, he
contended, were mainly concerned with addressing political and social concerns at the expense of
aesthetic value. He uses it in the introduction to his 1994 book, ‘The Western Canon: The Books and
School of the Ages’.

88 Shechner finds fault with Roth’s characterisation of Delphine Roux, ‘I mean, Delphine Roux as a 24-
year-old department chair! Gimme a break!’ (p. 156). Also Faunia, whom he sees as all ‘goatish
Who knows what repellent deficiency will be revealed with the next faintly antiquated locution, the next idiom almost charmingly out of time that comes flying from his mouth? How one is revealed or undone by the perfect word. (p.84)

This ‘undoing’ is highly ironic given that Silk’s original decision to pass was based on the idea that ‘passing’ would allow him to slip the historical lock and avoid the kinds of oppression that affected African-Americans before the Civil Rights movement. Silk’s sister Ernestine says that Coleman’s brother Walt thought of his passing as simple cowardice telling Zuckerman that ‘there was a fight to fight then, and Coleman didn’t want to fight it’ (pp. 326-327). Also, and when told of his ‘passing plans’, Silk’s mother seems eerily prescient when she says that, ‘Now I could tell you that there is no escape, that all your attempts to escape will only lead you back to where you began’ (p.139). It seems then that the original attempt to escape the ‘sentence’ of being black in pre-Civil Rights American now founders on a new intolerance.

Silk’s initial response, at least on the surface, is to reject the new charges and actively campaign against them. And as Medin has observed in relation to Kafka and in noting the similarities between the Coleman Silk of *The Human Stain* and the David Lurie of JM Coetzee’s *Disgrace*:

Lurie and Silk are offered the near equivalent of an “actual acquittal.” Each Professor rejects such absolution, unwilling to give the compromising lie that it entails—a public concession that his punishment is just. 89

Another reason for Silk to deny the charges, apart from their intrinsic absurdness, is that he thinks their reality is essentially politically motivated.

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These shenanigans were so much jockeying for power. To gain a bigger say in how the college is run. They were just exploiting a useful situation. It was a way to prod Haines and the administration into doing what they otherwise would never have done. More blacks on campus. More black students, more black professors. Representation—that was the issue. (p.17)

The novel partakes then of the wider debate already outlined and explores the polarizing effects of political correctness. One of the main questions in *The Human Stain* is to what extent can an individual belong to a community which offers a restricted space for human flourishing alongside swift punishment for transgressions against normative expectations. The questions raised are similar to the ones in the earlier Zuckerman books. The form of the trial, however, is different in that it is race rather than religion which seems to be the crucial variable and in *The Human Stain* Zuckerman acts as a mediating intelligence and observes the trial of another person rather than being the person who is himself centre of attention and in the dock. The trial is still a psychological ordeal. Because of ostracism and the purifying ritual of banishment, moral choices are made which often reflect a brutal short term pragmatism rather than a genuinely moral response. Hence the response of Herbert Keble recorded by Silk when the latter asks for support:

I can’t be with you on this, Coleman. I’m going to have to be with them. This is what he told me when I went to ask for his support. To my face. I’m going to have to be with them. Them! (p.16)

Creating an individual identity and having to belong to a community at the same time is both a source of vexation and potential freedom. And there is a generally censorious force that works on all the main protagonists and impresses upon them the importance of being one thing and not another. Ironically Coleman himself decides to be with ‘them’ in his early life when he embraces the dominant white ethnic group
and this is related to his decision to pass. He loses his girlfriend Steena because she cannot accept the colour of his skin. He also knows that if he does not pass he will have to endure the restricted life opportunities available to African Americans at the time. This strategy of escape founders when he is, much later, accused of the very thing that once oppressed him—racism.  

While his original decision to pass may be regarded as, in some ways, a pragmatic response to curtailed opportunities we may wonder about the rewards that Silk actually gains through passing. His passing ‘transgressions’ while seemingly subversive may be, as Posnock suggests, ‘a salient instance of self-imposed purification, a subjection of the core self to a disciplinary project of control and subtlety’. Posnock further argues that ‘The strain of upholding his purist project has left Coleman a “blotting out,” in short, the very “spook” whose mention unravels his life’. Silk’s acts of ‘self-shedding’, only enables him to live within ‘the walled city of convention’ (p.335) and never to leave it. The transgression and the pain his passing causes do not seem to match the ignoble ends and it ultimately appears mean and unimpressive. Silk loses his own family through it. It also results in a peculiar stasis. Society changes but Silk’s relationship to his remaining brother and sister remains one of denial. Passing also alienates him from his son Mark who rebels against both Silk’s strategic ambiguity and his fluid conception of identity. This ‘fluid conception’ has major implications for Silk’s identity, although unlike his father, Mark actually requires ‘ancestor worship’. 

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90 As Silk puts it, “Thrown out of a Norfolk whorehouse for being black, thrown out of Athena College for being white,” HS, p. 16.
91 Silk seems to use a hodgepodge of literary and Nietzschean sentiment in justifying to himself his decision to pass. ‘Neither the they of Woolworth’s nor the we of Howard. Instead the raw I with all its agility. Self-discovery—that was the punch to the labonz. Singularity. The passionate struggle for singularity’. HS, p. 108.
92 Posnock, p. 203.
93 Posnock, p. 208.
94 Although Roth has stringently denied Coleman Silk’s character was based on Anatole Broyard there are intriguing similarities. Some of these can be ascertained in Henry Louis Gate’s essay on ‘The Passing of Anatole Broyard’. Broyard’s wife Sandy, like Steena, is a Scandinavian blond. Broyard,
Markie wanted the knowledge of who they were and where they came from—all that his father could never give him. And that’s why he becomes the Orthodox Jew? That’s why he writes the biblical protest poems? (p. 176.)

Coleman’s relationship with his son is one of permanent estrangement and another part of his trial as psychological ordeal. The ‘verdict’ of the text seems to be that the long term costs of passing may have far outweighed the potential benefits.

Silk’s ‘spooks’ trial takes place inside the University and his main persecutor is a person whom he had initially hired, the young French feminist Delphine Roux. Silk rejects the charges outright and appeals to the context in which his remarks were made saying:

“Consider the context: Do they exist or are they spooks? The charge of racism is spurious. It is preposterous. My colleagues know it is preposterous and my students know it is preposterous. The issue, the only issue, is the non-attendance of these two students and their flagrant and inexcusable neglect of work. What’s galling is that the charge is not just false—it is spectacularly false.” (p.7)

This confident self-assertion reveals a hubristic lack of awareness. Silk, it turns out, has made many enemies through his ruthless culling and streamlining approach to new Faculty. People do not stand by him. The trial, alluded to rather than fully described then proceeds through

The punishing immersion in meetings, hearings, and interviews, the documents and letters submitted to college officials, to faculty committees, to a pro bono black lawyer representing the two students…the charges, denials, like Silk, was an athletic and graceful dancer. Both Silk and Broyard took advantage of the G.I bill to attend college. Broyard and Silk never told their children about their ancestry. In the Gate’s review Broyard’s wife talks about trying to get her husband to tell their children. ‘And then he would totally shut down and go into a rage. He’d say that at some point he would tell them, but he would not tell them now’. (p. 9) Gates suggests that Broyard ‘was the Scheherazade of racial imposture, seeking and securing one deferral after another…In the modern era, children are supposed to come out to their parents: it works better that way around. For children, we know, can judge their parents harshly above all, for what they understand as failures of candor. His children would see the world in terms of authenticity: he saw the world in terms of self-creation’. (p.15) Broyard’s ‘Portrait of the Inauthentic negro’ suggests that the ‘inauthentic negro’ can hardly know himself because his ‘self’ is mainly a ‘tension between an accusation and a denial’. These types of tension are revealed in the character of Silk. In Posnock’s idea, for example, that Silk is a ‘blotting out’ and a ‘spook’ himself. Henry Louis Gates Jr., ‘The Passing of Anatole Broyard’, in Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man (New York: Random House, 1997) <http://web.princeton.edu/sites/english/NEH/GATES1. [accessed 1 march 2012]
and countercharges, the obtuseness, ignorance, and cynicism, the gross and
deliberate misinterpretations, the laborious, repetitious explanations, the
prosecutorial questions—and always, perpetually, the pervasive sense of
unreality. (p.13)

It seems unlikely that Coleman would apologize. He is already an extremist in that
he is prepared to abandon his own family in pursuit of his goals. And the fact that
Silk does not, as Medin says, ‘take a yellow card’, means that he leaves the campus
community and then suffers a prolonged psychological ordeal that is frequently
signposted. His wife Iris dies while in the process of helping him fight the charges.

We do not know if this is a result of the associated stress, but it is suggested. We are
told that Silk ends up looking ‘bruised and ruined like a piece of fruit…kicked to and
fro along the ground by the passing shoppers’ (p.12). And Zuckerman informs us that
‘moral suffering’ is ‘more insidious even than what physical illness can do, because
there is no morphine drip or spinal block or radical surgery to alleviate it’ (p.12).

When asking for Zuckerman’s help, Silk looks like a headless chicken ‘the way he
careened around…spinning out of control’ (p.11). The focus on the body as a site of
psychological and mental pain is still as prominent then, as in the early works.

Like the early Zuckerman, in pain, Silk turns to literature in order to deal with the
charges. He has already been pronounced guilty but attempts to write a book to rebut
the allegations. And this is after Zuckerman has refused, as a ‘professional writer’, to
help him. What Silk produces is a book called Spooks which seems to have a
cathartic effect in that it at least gives him a perspective on how he is ‘spinning out of
control’ and we are told that:

“Well, there it is,” said Coleman, now this calm, unoppressed, entirely new
being. “That’s it. That’s Spooks. Finished a first draft yesterday, spent all day

95 He knows, for example, that he is ‘murdering’ his mother by abandoning the family. His early refusal
to be defined by his skin colour and his new sense of possibility is partially created by the loss of
Steena and the fact that his father dies and his brother is overseas. Silk lies about his age to get into the
Navy and ‘it didn’t immediately occur to him that, if he chose to, he could lie about his race as well. He
could play his skin however he wanted, color himself just as he chose’ HS, p. 109.
today reading it through, and every page of it made me sick. The violence in the handwriting was enough to make me despise the author. That I should spend a single quarter of an hour at this, let alone two years…Iris dies because of them? Who will believe it? I hardly believe it myself any longer.” (p.19)

Silk realizes that his writing reads like ‘a parody of the self-justifying memoir’ (p.19) and Zuckerman tells us that through Silk’s writing the man is no longer ‘embalmed in injustice’ (p.20). The idea of a book being a ‘parody of a self-justifying memoir’ is ironic when one recalls the amount of text in *The Anatomy Lesson* devoted to rebutting Irving Howe. Once again, then, there are intertextual echoes.

What I have called ‘The Spooks Trial’ ends with the death of Coleman’s wife and his attempt to move beyond his own Achilles-sized rage through the catharsis of both writing his experience and contextualizing it within a classical western canon. How effective this strategy really has been is debatable and the second strand of the trial, which I call ‘The Faunia Trial’ starts with Silk acknowledging to Zuckerman that he is having a relationship with an illiterate cleaner called Faunia Farley who now works at Athena, where he used to teach. This reveals that it is desire that has really moved Silk beyond the psychological malaise caused by his public pillorying. As Zuckerman says, ‘Yes I thought, it’s no longer writing *Spooks* that’s the defiant rebound from humiliation; it’s fucking Faunia’ (p. 32).

A man on trial, then, is one of the main themes of *The Human Stain*. This trial takes place within the context of a wider debate about political correctness and the phenomenon of racial passing. In the first part of the trial, the ‘battleground’ issue seems to be race. In the second, which I have called ‘The Faunia Trial’, sex, age and Jewish identity are the factors which lead to persecution.
The Faunia Trial

If difference is the engine of desire then Silk is, ostensibly, very different from Faunia whom we are initially led to believe cannot read and who works at a family dairy farm. Shechner\(^6\) has commented upon what she represents. Brauner also suggests:

Faunia in a sense embodies a pastoral ideal of womanhood: one of her jobs is to milk the cows at an organic farm and Coleman admires the way in which she seems entirely at home with these animals and the nature they represent.\(^7\)

Brauner goes onto note, however, how Zuckerman introduces a note of anti-pastoral satire which seems to be a warning against idealizing the work at the farm, observing how, in the local weekly, letters frequently appear from people who have moved from the city to the country and who are intent on eulogising the virtues of Organic Livestock milk. ‘Words like “goodness” and “soul” frequently crop up regularly in these published letters, as if drowning a glass of Organic Livestock Milk were no less a redemptive religious rite than a nutritional blessing’ (p. 46).

With a history of violent abuse and having inadvertently caused the death of her children Faunia is, however, no simple milkmaid. And work on the farm is hard. When Coleman tries to talk about world events it is soon clear that Faunia does not want to be taught:

Poor Monica might not get a good job in New York City? You know what I don’t care. Do you think Monica cares if my back hurts from milking those fucking cows after my day at college? Sweeping up people’s shit at the post office because they can’t bother to use the garbage can. (p. 237)

\(^6\) Shechner argues somewhat facetiously that ‘She’s the natural, and we’ve encountered her before: In Drenka Balich of Sabbath’s Theatre and Helgi Parn of I Married a Communist. She’s got the glands of her class. After the wrath of hurricane Delphine, Faunia Farley is the healing, lubricious earth mother…’ Shechner in Parrish, p. 155. While this may be partially true, Faunia’s identity is also crucially developed in relation to Coleman who is everything but natural. Her perceived ‘naturalness’ is one of the reasons for his attraction.

\(^7\) Brauner, p. 175.
Coleman, then, cannot help but turning his relationship into some kind of narrative. A love story. Faunia, however, wants all the social ways of thinking to be shut down. Nothing has to turn into anything else anymore. As she says ‘The fantasy of Coleman and Faunia. It’s the beginning of the indulgence of the fantasy of forever, the tritest fantasy in the world’ (p. 236).

The other factor that holds them together is that both Faunia and Coleman share a gruesome inner life. While Coleman has discovered how easily it is to be destroyed as an adult, Faunia has been abused as a child and has lost both her children in a house fire. As she says:

The fucking bastards who changed everything within the blink of an eye. Took your life and threw it away…They decide what is garbage, and they decided you’re garbage. Humiliated and humbled and destroyed a man over an issue everyone knew was bullshit. A pissy little word that meant nothing to them, absolutely nothing at all. (p. 233)

The academy, popularly supposed to be a place of reason and justice, shows itself to be completely unreasonable and hypocritical. Coleman’s trial is represented as a farce. He is not able to argue his case and has been summarily dismissed. Justice, at this point, has not prevailed. If it is desire, then, that moves Silk beyond the realm of the wounding contained in the first trial, meeting Faunia seems like a brief reprise. Once again, however, his relationship produces new charges. The trial, it seems, is not over. An anonymous person, probably Delphine Roux, sends Coleman a letter saying, ‘Everyone knows you’re sexually exploiting an abused, illiterate woman half your age’ (p.38). Now Silk is charged with patriarchal oppression and corrupting the young.

The relationship between Coleman and his accuser Delphine is complex and ironic. He is portrayed as a Classicist and an old school Humanist while Delphine is a poststructuralist French feminist. They are ciphers for the wider argument about
literature already noted. She views relationships between men and women largely in terms of dominance and submission and believes that Silk is exploiting Faunia. Despite their radical political differences, however, they are given similar back stories. And it is not only race that is a problematical variable; there is also class and nationality. When, during his youth, Silk goes to the black college Howard as his father has long desired and meets, for the first time, members of the black middle class, he clearly does not belong:

Where was Highland Beach? What were these kids talking about? He was among the very lightest of the light-skinned the freshman class, lighter even than his tea-coloured roommate, but he could have been the blackest, most benighted field hand for all they knew he didn’t. (p. 106)

A similar trajectory paradoxically happens with Delphine. She arrives in America from the French intellectual elite, and finds that her own sense of entitlement and position in society is nowhere recognized, especially when she first arrives in America:

And not everybody finds her that interesting. Expected to come to America and have everyone say, “Oh, my God, she’s a normalienne.” But in America no one appreciates the very special path she was on in France and its enormous prestige. (p. 189)

And later we learn that:

Delphine, to her astonishment, is all but isolated in America. Decountrified, isolated, estranged, confused about everything essential to a life, in a desperate state of bewildered longing and surrounded on all sides by admonishing forces defining her as the enemy. (p. 272)

This is also, essentially, a description of Coleman’s early life also growing up in pre Civil Rights America and deciding to racially ‘pass’ as white. Both characters then although appearing to each other like radically different people actually share many similarities.
Delphine, then, is another nobody in America and her desire to make herself over is remarkably similar to that of Coleman. She also has parental expectations that she wants to escape from and we are told that ‘The Walincourt children of Delphine’s generation either fell into absolute conformity or rebelled so gruesomely they were incomprehensible…from a background few ever escape from, Dephine had managed a unique escape’ (p. 275). While Coleman runs away from the ‘E pluribus unum’ of the racial ‘we’ and the demands of his family, Delphine runs way from her French Aristocratic background.98

The charges that Delphine produces in her anonymous letter are essentially the age old ones of corrupting the young. They suggest a ban on intimacy between the generations and are perhaps mirrored by the charges levelled against Clinton. Once again Silk rejects both the strictures of public opinion and the very idea that he is behaving inappropriately.99 In regards to the former, del Ama argues that:

The downfall of Coleman Silk…resembles the fate fallen upon the heroes of the ancient Greek tragedy…public opinion plays the role of a judging and condemning chorus. The omnipresent threat that flows from this chorus is perfectly expressed in the vague, but devastating “everyone knows”.100

Moral censure was of course applied to Roth in his early career and Silk’s impassioned pleas to himself resemble the early Zuckerman’s attempt to move beyond community strictures. Silk says with regards to his desire for Faunia that:

98 E Pluribus Unum ‘Out of many, one’ was a phrase on the seal of the United States. It was replaced by the official motto ‘In God we Trust’. The assimilated ideal, and claims to homogeneity are explicitly rejected by Coleman.

99 He rejects, for example, the ‘smug’ advice from his lawyer Nelson Primus who says that if people find out about Faunia ‘what you started out with is going to bear no resemblance to the malevolent Puritanism with which you will be tarred and feathered’ HS, p. 76.

It was time to yield. To let this simple craving be his guide. Beyond their accusation. Beyond their indictment. Beyond their judgement. Learn, he told himself, before you die, to live beyond the jurisdiction of their enraging, loathsome, stupid blame. (p. 64)

This is the same issue of personal sovereignty that plagued Zuckerman in the early novels. Silk, like the early Zuckerman, does not wish to behave appropriately. Appropriacy is:

The current code word for reining in most any deviation from the wholesome guidelines and therby making everybody “comfortable.” Doing not what he was being judged to be doing but doing instead, he thought, what was deemed suitable by God knows which of our moral philosophers. Barbara Walters? Joyce Brothers? William Bennet? Dateline NBC? (p. 153)

The moral philosophers in the media have replaced the virtue mongering of the Rabbis in the early books. I have argued, then, that the first part of the trial in The Human Stain is connected to race, ‘passing’ and education. The second part, which I have called ‘The Faunia Trial’, is joined to gender, sex and Jewish identity. The accusations about Coleman and Faunia, featuring a much older man apparently seducing and abusing a much younger woman, mirror the real media trial of President Clinton for his affair with Monica Lewinsky. Roth’s exploration of race, class and gender, through the workings of the trial, has moved far beyond his earlier concerns with Jews and Jewish identity. I will now argue that the triumph of what Roth calls the ‘conventionalised’ narrative, which is often a funeral eulogy, represents a summing up or verdict in the Rothian trial and is often something which both denies complexity and attempts to cover up the past.

Working Out: The ending of persecution and the triumph of the conventionalised narrative.
Funerals form the final working out stage for both Faunia and Coleman. The verdict of the trial seems to be a death sentence. Coleman has not escaped the oppressive social forces that originally motivated him to ‘pass’. Faunia has not escaped her murderous and jealous ex-husband. The speeches that attend the funerals, at least for Coleman, highlight the iniquity of the trial process. Here, for example, is Herbert Keble, an African American Dean who did not support Coleman Silk when he was accused of racism, and later trying, and after the man’s death, to purify Silk’s damaged reputation:

What he was forced to undergo— the accusations, the interviews, the inquiry—remains a blight on the integrity of this institution to this day, and on this day more than ever. Here, in the New England most identified, historically, with the American individual’s resistance to the coercions of a censorious community—Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau come to mind …

The novel begins and ends with different deaths. The death of Clinton’s political career through hounding and the real deaths of Coleman and Faunia through the persecution of a small community. These deaths produce totalising and conventionalised ‘narrative’ verdicts on real lives and, even though Zuckerman attempts to subvert them, they frequently gain the ascendancy. The conventionalised narrative is first defined early in the novel and is one of the constraints on identity as performance and something which limits the ability of the protagonists to become different people. It is first defined in the novel by two professors complaining about their lacklustre students:

The sincere performance is everything. Sincere and empty, totally empty. The sincerity that goes in all directions. The sincerity that is worse than falseness, and the innocence that is worst than corruption. All the rapacity hidden under

\[101\] HS, p. 310.
the sincerity. And under the lingo...They fix on the conventionalized narrative with its beginning, middle, and end—every experience, no matter how ambiguous, no matter how knotty or mysterious, must lend itself to this normalizing, conventionalizing anchorman cliché. 102

In the final working out stage of the Rothian trial a judgement is usually made about what could be called the discourse positioning of a person’s life. Who and what they were and how they lived. This judgement is an attempt to cap the life and cast it outside history. Faunia realizes the power of such positioning early in *The Human Stain* when Coleman, at the end of his career, is linguistically branded a ‘racist’ professor and when she says:

Publicly humiliated as a racist professor, and what’s a racist professor? It’s not that you’ve just become one. The story is you’ve been discovered, so it’s been your whole life. It’s not just that you did one thing wrong once. If you’re racist, then you’ve always been a racist. (p. 228)

Such reductive simplicity is repeatedly used for every ‘knotty’ problem. As Franco notes:

The anonymous blogger Clytemnestra (possibly Delphine) folds Coleman into a feminist agenda-pushing tale of rapine patriarchy, while Coleman’s children use his funeral as a podium for recuperative myth-making. At Coleman’s funeral Nathan observes a ceremony performed to redeem and recast the meaning of his life. 103

Funerals are scattered throughout all of Roth’s novels and in *The Human Stain* they present a conventionalised narrative that re-enacts a myth of purity which Roth attempts to re-describe and complicate. The conventionalised narrative represents officialdom and the standard line. In *I Married a Communist*, for example, we are told about the indignities to which the people at Nixon’s funeral descended ‘to purify that

102 *HS*, p. 147.
glaringly impure soul’ (p. 280) while the ultimate funeral in Roth’s entire oeuvre has to be Zuckerman writing his own, ‘kosherized’ eulogy in *The Counter Life*, and buried, as an unnamed mourner says, not ‘as an unregenerate defiler but as something akin to Neil Simon’ (p. 210). In the funerals of both Coleman and Faunia the whole community engages in the cover up of the conventionalised narrative. Accordingly, Coleman becomes, once again, a pillar of the community, and Faunia, a respectable member of the working poor. Here Roth presents a world where there can be no genuine working out to a more complex understanding of human relationships because of the risks of self-incrimination. Faunia Farley’s funeral, for example, is notable for all the things that are not said about her. Seemingly the only thing the community feels comfortable discussing are her duties as general drudge and her respect for ‘the institution of the family dairy farm’ (p. 286). When Smoky Hollenbeck, Faunia’s former lover and supervisor of the Athena plant, speaks about her at her funeral, it is only about her performance of superlative cleaning duties:

“In the mornings,” Smoky said, “she took care of North Hall and the administrative offices there. Though her routine changed slightly from day to day, there were some basic things to be done every single morning… Wastepaper baskets were emptied, the rest rooms were tidied…Damp mopping occurred wherever it was necessary.” (p. 287)

Zuckerman, of course, does not believe in the idea of Faunia as a Stakhanovite of cleaning and says:

Extremely brilliant performance by this tall, curly-haired, handsome young family man who had been Coleman’s predecessor as Faunia’s lover. Sensual contact with Smoky’s perfect custodial worker was no more imaginable, from what he was telling us, than with Sally’s storytelling pantheist. (p. 287)

At the Rothian funeral the conventionalized narrative prevents a complex ‘verdict’ on who the person really was. It is more about the living than the dead. In contrast to
her depiction at the funeral, the ‘real’ Faunia has worked beyond the myth of purity and realizes that in its various human disguises it is nothing but an impossible fantasy.

As she says when she goes to visit the pet crow Prince:

> We leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen—there’s no other way to be here…It’s in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before the mark…It’s why all the cleansing is a joke. A barbaric joke at that. The fantasy of purity is appalling. (p. 242)

Her husband Les, alternatively, believes himself to be a purifying agent, a vigilante who steps outside the law to right his own sense of grievance. Farley is a dangerous lunatic who also shares a similar back story to both Coleman and Faunia. Like them he is now an abject individual with minimal social capital. He ‘tends to isolate’ and starts to stalk them because of his anger over the death of his children and the fact that he believes Coleman is a Jew, a Jew, for Farley, being a generic Shylock:

> Now it was with a gray haired skin-and-bones old man, with a high-and-mighty Jew professor, his yellow Jew face contorted with pleasure and his trembling old hands gripping her head. Who else has a wife sucks off an old Jew? Who else! (p. 71)

The stalking and general lunacy that Farley exhibits is not new in Roth. Zuckerman is hounded by the ex-Quiz Show whiz kid Alvin Pepler in *Zuckerman Unbound.* Zuckerman is a successful writer, Pepler an autodidact who can make sense of nothing. And it is difference that is both the engine of desire and hatred, as illustrated by, respectively, the relationship between Faunia and Coleman and Coleman and Farley. And as Zuckerman says, apropos his own relationship with Alvin Pepler, in *Zuckerman Unbound:*

> You would think he actually was being stalked by an Oswald. That he was a Kennedy, or a Martin Luther King. But wasn’t he just that to Pepler? And what was Oswald, before he pulled the trigger and made it big in the papers…Any less affronted, or benighted, or aggrieved? Any less batty or
more impressive? Motivated any more “meaningfully”? No! Bang bang, you’re dead. There was all the meaning the act was ever meant to have. You’re you, I’m me, and for that and that alone you die. (p.203)

The accusations in *The Human Stain* between father and son like so many others, remain unresolved. Mark Silk seems to need the conventionalized narrative. And in his version of it, the transgressor commits a crime and is duly and properly punished. As Zuckerman says, commenting on Mark Silk’s wild lamentations at his father’s funeral:

Mark Silk apparently had imagined that he was going to have his father around to hate forever. To hate and hate and hate and hate, and then perhaps, in his own good time, after the scenes of accusation had reached their crescendo and he had flogged Coleman to within an inch of his life with his knot of filial grievance to forgive. He thought Coleman was going to stay there till the whole play could be performed...The Human desire for a beginning, a middle, and an end—and an end appropriate in magnitude to that beginning and middle—is realized nowhere so thoroughly as in the plays that Coleman taught...But outside the classical tragedy of the fifth century B.C., the expectation of completion...is a foolish illusion for an adult to hold. (p. 315)

Silks own narrative doesn’t change even when everything around him does and when it is actually no longer in his interest to pretend to be white, even, in fact, when it turns out to be disadvantageous. Other people stop Coleman from escaping from what he has himself created. His brother Walt ‘banishes’ him from the family home, in his own act of purification and as Ernestine says of this:

Walt froze everything in time and that is never a good idea. Coleman did this when he was still in his twenties, A firecracker of twenty-seven. But he wasn’t going to be twenty-seven forever. It wasn’t going to be 1953 forever. People age. Nations age. Problems age. Sometimes they age right out of existence. Yet Walt froze it. (p. 326)

Everything is frozen for many of the other protagonists too and the end scene reveals a frozen tableau of Les Farley sitting out on frozen lake, Ice fishing. Zuckerman joins him. Les has quite possibly murdered Coleman and Faunia and has become the
embodiment of Travis Bickle’s vigilante rain ‘washing all the scum off the streets’.

Despite the many claims made for therapy and its popular appeal to the idea of reclamation and redemption, Les has not been able to move beyond his PTSD and the conflicts of history and America’s involvement with Vietnam. Like all the others, he is trapped. His free floating misanthropy and hatred fixates on Coleman and Faunia and he clearly believes in the myth of purity, believes himself a purifying agent.

Explaining the hydrology of the lake to Zuckerman, for example, he says that:

> The water comes up from underneath, so the water constantly turns over. It cleans itself. And fish have to have clean water to survive and get big and healthy. And this place has all of those ingredients. And they’re all God-made. Nothing man had to do with. That’s why it’s clean and that’s why I come here. If man has to do with it, stay away from it. That’s my motto. (p. 360)

The irony for Farley is that he does not consider himself to be the unclean thing. As he makes clear in his encounter with Zuckerman:

> They live in cities. They live in the hustle and bustle of the work routine. The craziness goin’ to work. The craziness at work. The craziness comin’ home from work. The traffic. The congestion. They’re caught up in that. I’m out of it… I hadn’t to ask who “they” were. I might live far from the any city, I might not own a power auger, but I was they, we were all they… (p.348)

Despite Roth’s claims that ‘the sense of an ending is a foolish illusion for an adult to hold’ I argue that the Rothian trial aims at an ending in that it tends to reveal some essentialist truth about humanity. We are told, for example, that Faunia did the suicide cleaning job because, ‘She wanted to know what the worst is. Not the best, the worst. By which she meant the truth’ (p. 340). It is possible to argue that Roth often conflates ‘the worst’ with ‘the truth. In Roth there is frequently something shoddy and self-preserving behind what Erving Goffman once called the ‘presentation of self in

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104 Bickle was the vigilante Vietnam Veteran in the Martin Scorsese film ‘Taxi Driver’.
It is ironic, then, that a novel which devotes great time to decrying the Puritanism which is ‘the ecstasy of sanctimony’ and bemoaning both the ‘righteous grandstanding creeps’ and the ‘moralizing to beat the band’, should, in one way, confirm Puritan assumptions about the fallen state of humanity because of its seeming insistence on a prefiguring and very human stain. For Roth, however, it is not the stain that is the problem but the attempt to purify it. There can be no grandstanding in Roth if only because the person ‘standing’ will soon be as hubristically ‘fallen’ as everybody else. Roth’s world picture seems to be something which involves a quietist sense of resignation when it comes to human affairs and in this sense it is both radical in its critique of American ideas of ‘progress’, whether moral or otherwise and conservative because of its hopes, or rather absence of them, for the future.

If, as Hunter suggests, political correctness as a phenomenon was a struggle to define the meaning of America then this struggle in The Human Stain is extended to the meaning of language. Rather than the kind of impartial academic inquiry as outlined by Cardinal Newman and his Humanistic Community of Scholars, however, in the real Academy it is unreason and power that determines who or what gets defined as what. Words, it seems, can be made to mean anything at all, and to paraphrase Humpty Dumpty’s infamous retort to Alice, ‘The Question is which is to be master that’s all’. Humanistic and rational aspirations are crushed and for Medin Stain continues the wider ‘puncturing of hope’ developed in the America Trilogy:

The puncturing of hope begins with the destructive blacklisting of the fifties (I Married a Communist), continues through the domestic turmoil of the Vietnam years (American Pastoral), and concludes with Athena College’s crucible of propriety at the end of the century.\[106\]


\[106\] Medin, p. 91.
The final working out ‘verdict’ about the nature of human affairs does not appear very encouraging.

As Zuckerman says, commenting on Les:

> The icy white of the lake encircling a tiny spot that was a man, the only human marker in all of nature, like the X of an illiterate’s signature on a sheet of paper. There it was, if not the whole story, the whole picture. Only rarely, at the end of our century, does life offer up a vision as pure and peaceful as this one: a solitary man on a bucket, fishing through eighteen inches of ice in a lake that’s constantly turning over its water atop an arcadian mountain in America. (p.361)

And, of course, the reality beneath this ‘vision’ and the literal ‘blot on the landscape’ that is Les, makes it far from peaceful and anything but pure.

I have argued, then, that what Roth calls a ‘conventionalised narrative’ often forms a verdict, in the form of a summing up, on a particular life. This verdict is given in the many funerals that occur in Roth’s work and it is something which often attempts to recast or re-describe a life to make it palatable to the local community. Roth’s ‘verdict on the community’s verdict’ is not encouraging, often suggesting that it is something that the powerful use to whitewash and silence the inconvenient complexities of a life. In the final section, I will argue that various ‘acts of reading’ and ‘acts of writing’ help to create a trial-like atmosphere in addition to destabilizing what we think we know about the main characters and ultimately making any form of judgement difficult.

**Acts of Reading and Writing.**

The charges in The Faunia and The Spooks Trial are similar in that both revolve round the concept of appropriacy. A concern with words and text is revealed
throughout both trials. Posnock argues, for example, that Roth foregrounds the power of language to encourage the reader to engage in interpretation. Various scenes dramatize intense acts of reading and force us to examine both the documents that people produce and their motivations for producing them. I would argue that this contributes to a trial-like atmosphere and that the complexity of meaning revealed by this scrutiny adds to the general difficulty of understanding and judging others. It is thus difficult to apportion either guilt or blame. The close textual analysis that characters engage in puts everything ‘on trial’. The ‘Everyone Knows you’re sexually exploiting an abused, illiterate woman half your age’, anonymous letter, for example, is intensely examined. Zuckerman appraises ‘the choice of words and their linear deployment as if they’d been composed not by Delphine Roux but by Emily Dickinson’ (p.40).

Later Silk’s lawyer sends the letter to a certified documents examiner, a handwriting analyst who does forensic work for private corporations. In Silk’s earlier back story and when he receives his first poem from his white girlfriend Steena, who doesn’t know his real racial identity, he extensively examines it for illocutionary force and double meanings. He even initially misreads the word ‘negro’ for ‘neck’, the word that she has actually written. This concern with text and words is extended to other characters. Later in the novel, for example, friends and fellow veterans of the Vietnam War take Les Farley to the Vietnam Memorial Wall hoping that viewing the name of a fallen comrade will be a therapeutic event. Something capable of revelatory power. Reading the name does not, however, prove ephiphanic. In addition,

107 Posnock (pp. 193–235) suggests that this concept is connected to self-creation, play and artifice and that The Human Stain weighs the costs of conceiving self-identity as being synonymous with artifice. While it may be true that the novel explores these tensions it is also a fact that the ‘passing’ novel, as Rankine suggests, usually ends tragically and both the epigraph from Oedipus and the many intertextual references to Greek Tragedy give the text a fatalistic feel, even if Silk is determined to be ‘undetermined’. See, for example, Patrice D. Rankine, ‘Passing as Tragedy: Philip Roth’s The Human Stain, the Oedipus Myth, and the Self-Made Man’, Critique, 47 (2005), 101–113.
Faunia’s supposed illiteracy is highlighted throughout the novel. This is foregrounded in the chapter, ‘What do you do with the kid who can’t read?’ The kid who can’t read is actually the toddler Carmen, whom Silk’s daughter Lisa is teaching in a Remedial Reading Recovery Program. When Coleman comes to visit she tells him about Carmen saying: “What do you do with the kid who can’t read? …It’s the key to everything, so you have to do something” (p.161). Coleman then extends this ‘inability to read’ to Faunia’s apparently chaotic life:

> What do you do with the kid who can’t read? The kid who is sucking somebody off in a pick up in her driveway while, upstairs, in a tiny apartment over a garage, her small children are supposedly asleep with a space heater burning—two untended children, a kerosene fire, and she’s with this guy in his truck… (p. 164)

The paradox is, as we later find out, that Faunia can actually read as she has kept a diary. Coleman has possibly not known this. In The Human Stain then the act of ‘reading’ comes to be conflated and used to refer to the ability to understand other people. This inability to process and make sense of the other is a major source of psychological discomfort in the working on stage in both ‘The Faunia’ and ‘The Spooks’ trial. Delphine, her name suggesting oracular abilities, is as blind as the other characters. When she first meets Coleman Silk, at her interview, we learn that ‘It had been impossible to read his reading of her’ (p. 185). She also shares the same fear as Coleman and we are told that:

> Something about him always led her back to her childhood and the precocious child’s fear that she is being seen through. Afraid of being exposed, dying to be seen—there’s a dilemma for you. (p. 185)

If political correctness was as Hunter claims a battle to define the nature of America, the concern with text in both trials is about a battle over the definitions of words. The initial charges of racism are public and are processed as such. The result is
both ostracism and banishment. The second set in The Faunia trial are both anonymous, as reflected by the ‘Everyone Knows’ letter, and later personal, when the ex-husband of Faunia, Lester Farley conceives a vendetta against both Coleman and Faunia, believing her to be responsible for the neglect and murder of their children.

Sexual desire for the other moves Coleman beyond the ‘jurisdiction of their stupid blame’ in The Spooks trial, but only pitches him inside a new process of persecution involving Lester Farley. This ends in the death of both Faunia and Coleman and the possibility that Lester has aimed his car at them and pushed them off the road. Coleman who tried to escape racial persecution by adopting a white identity has now become a victim of Farley’s anti-Semitism. As Zuckerman finally observes, ‘Buried as a Jew, I thought, and, if I was speculating correctly, killed as a Jew. Another of the problems of impersonation’ (p. 325).

In The Anatomy Lesson Zuckerman was unable to escape ‘the corpus that was his’ and this corpus was his own personal history. In the American Trilogy it is wider social history that is inescapable. Zuckerman escapes from his aesthetic shack in the woods when Coleman Silk dances him back into life and the presentation of Silk’s story becomes his way of saying, like he initially does with Clinton, ‘A Human being lives here’. His imaginative retelling of Silk’s life brings his own back into focus and is an act or recovery both for himself and for Silk.

Zuckerman’s desire in the working out stage which finally becomes the entire novel that is The Human Stain is to present an alternative human history fraught with complexity and contradiction, something the conventionalised narrative cannot admit. And hence the real start of the novel, and the trial for Zuckerman, as a writer, is at the grave of Silk where:
Out there at his grave, where everything he ever was would appear to have been cancelled out by the weight and mass of all that dirt if by nothing else, I waited for him to speak… And that is how all this began: by my standing alone in a darkening graveyard and entering into professional competition with death. (p.338)

This entering into ‘professional competition with death’ means being unavoidably economical with the truth, especially where Zuckerman does not have complete knowledge of Coleman’s life. This means that the novel itself becomes an impure and hybrid entity. As Morley argues:

The Human Stain, a novel concerned with American identity, American lives, and American history, attests to the impossibility of literary purity…that illuminates the fusion of the created and “factual” elements of Coleman’s story, is Roth’s deliberate choice; it both bespeaks the tragedy of a man unable to escape “the history that he hadn’t quite counted on” and illuminates the impossibility of textual purity. 108

The focus on ‘reading’ in The Human Stain, I agree with Posnock, forces the reader to question the basic assumptions contained within these conventions and to examine the ‘evidence base’ for their assumptions about other people. This is expressed through a focus on the meaning of words and the phenomenon of ‘political correctness’ and how it relates to the University towards the end of the millennium.

Characters become frozen within narrative conventions and it is the trial itself that puts them back into history. Zuckerman can no longer be an isolate when Coleman becomes a ‘character’ to him and he has to create a more complex narrative that moves Coleman beyond the conventionalized one. In the act of creating a new narrative Zuckerman struggles with writing and reveals to the reader a more nuanced reality. This reality, however, is also a constructed one and it is important to remember, as Royal argues, that most of the early criticism of the book, focussing as

it did on the historical subjects in the text, neglected, ‘the overwhelming significance of Zuckerman’s role as the constructing force behind the narrative, for as in American Pastoral, all information in The Human Stain is filtered exclusively through this seemingly… deceptively-unobtrusive narrator’. \textsuperscript{109} As Royal suggests much early criticism assumed that the story of Silk, as narrated by Zuckerman, is actually true. Royal’s reading, however, points to the hedged claims of much of the discourse when Zuckerman is narrating. Examining the modality of Zuckerman’s narrative gambits Royal suggests:

Even the source of the crucial anonymous letter beginning "Everyone knows" is never substantiated. On the basis of his own comparisons as well as those of a handwriting expert, Silk is certain that the letter was written by Roux. But Zuckerman’s narrative never establishes Roux's complicity and employs tentative language in assigning the letter to Roux...Words such as "maybe," "perhaps," "seemed," "probably," "could have happened," and "might have been" recur throughout this passage, emphasizing the uncertainty of the narrator's knowledge.\textsuperscript{110}

This hedging, which draws the reader’s attention to the constructed nature of the narrative, is, however, not part of the way the main characters actually live their lives and Zuckerman’s idea that the sense of an ending is a ‘foolish illusion’ for an adult to pursue is not grasped by the main protagonists. Zuckerman may value indeterminacy over the ‘conventionalized narrative’ but the other characters seem to require not only the sense of an ending but also that of a beginning. And if, as Rodwan suggests, the trope of boxing serves as a metaphor for identity as performance, rather than identity as origin, it is still the case that most of the main characters are hardly fleet of foot.\textsuperscript{111} Mark Silk requires the ‘ancestor worship’ that Coleman rejects. He wants to know where he comes from. Even Coleman, once he has ‘achieved’ a new identity, lives

\textsuperscript{109} Derek Royal, ‘Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity: Identity, Death, and Narrative in Philip Roth’s The Human Stain’, Contemporary Literature, 47 (2006), 114–40 (p.116).
\textsuperscript{110} Royal, p. 120.
within the ‘walled city of convention’ as a small town academic. This would have been his ending and it is really only the charges that push him forward.

Les’s ending is murder and mayhem, caught as he is in a cycle of hatred and retribution and while he may not wish to be with Faunia he certainly does not want anybody else with her either. Les and Coleman are part of the same ‘bar room brawl’ alluded to at the start of the novel– the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles in *The Iliad* over a woman. Delphine, despite her superficial feminist upholstery, imagines the most puerile romantic endings–meeting a man like Kundera and having a romantic entanglement in the New York public library, like the scene from the film ‘Marathon Man’. Into these schlocky narratives the other is placed.

Despite the reductive certainties we bring to others, the constructed postmodern nature of *The Human Stain* suggests that the only truth we seem to be able to possess is the contingent one outlined by the hedging and half-imaginings of Zuckerman the narrator. And while Zuckerman’s narration acknowledges contingency, other characters clearly believe what Roth satirizes in *The Facts* when he has Zuckerman the character criticizing Roth the writer for granting a pseudo objective legalese– ‘The Facts’ to the writer’s autobiography. In *The Facts* Zuckerman claims, instead, that Roth’s ‘setting straight’ is really a dance of the seven veils and that truth is much harder to acquire and fictional truth may be more enduring than narrative autobiography with its evasions and sensitivities. In *The Human Stain* most of the characters also seem to believe that others can be understood with a lazy shorthand, in terms of what others say about them or what they say about themselves. These judgments and social scripts, derived largely from hearsay and stereotype, unfortunately construe much of the evidence base for the trial, which involves the public pillorying of an individual. And as Del Ama speculates, what Locke calls the
‘law of opinion or reputation’ or ‘law of fashion’, may paradoxically become increasingly repressive in a country with a liberal State and a constituted series of civil liberties, in order to hold the social body together.

One of the central ironies is that Zuckerman the writer is himself not immune to a reductive process. Critics like Shostak and Royal, for example, have investigated *The Human Stain* in terms of secrecy and what Zuckerman can and cannot ultimately know about the fragmented story he assembles. And even though the knowledge gaps are large and even though we cannot truly know that Delphine is really like the way Zuckerman presents her, or that Les killed Faunia and Coleman in the way outlined, by the end Zuckerman seems to believe his own version of things and a lot of the hedging outlined by Royal has disappeared. Les sits out on the Ice and the lake turns over and the novel has arrived at the sense of an ending despite its fragmented beginnings.
In *American Pastoral* (1997) Zuckerman relates the story of high school heart throb and star Jewish Athlete Seymour ‘The Swede’ Levov. The novel starts off with the ubiquitous Nathan Zuckerman speaking about a past that is inaccessible. This is the past life of the Weequahic community of Jews living in Newark, New Jersey, during the twilight years of the Second World War. An existence that is experienced, to some extent vicariously, through the ‘magical life’ of Seymour Levov, a Jewish ‘Rabbit Angstrom’ and sports star.  

In the first few pages of *American Pastoral* we learn that even though the ‘fate’ of sports stars did not matter to a community which venerated academic achievement, Swede Levov was an exception. The Swede is a ‘household Apollo’, (p. 4) a ‘symbol of hope’, and an ‘instrument of history’, (p. 5). Zuckerman’s initial rosy-tinted narration thus epically describes him, and through a scrim of nostalgia. The Swede’s life seems to serve as a magical corrective to the grimness of the war and is a conduit through which the dream of a better life might be channelled. It also parallels epic events. For example, he breaks the Weequahic basketball record, which would not have been noticed had it not been for the fact that it was on, ‘the sad, sad day in 1943 when fifty eight flying fortresses were shot down by Luftwaffe fighter planes’ (p. 5). Similarly, he finishes his boot training just as the marines were ‘to hit the Japanese beaches on March 1 1946’ (p. 14). He returns home in 1947 and marries someone who competes for ‘the 1949 Miss America title’ (p. 14).

As in *The Human Stain*, then, there are two ‘conventionalised’ narrative forms which will be examined: the idea of the epic and the pastoral. The pastoral is

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112 Harry ‘Rabbit’ Angstrom is the eponymous protagonist of John Updike’s ‘Rabbit’ novels. Like the Swede he is a star High School athlete.
contained in the Swede’s dream of living life behind a quaint and picket fenced rural fascia. The epic emerges through the young Zuckerman’s early heroic construction of the Swede and the nature of America. The Swede’s life, for example, is fettered to history and so is his body which seems to serve as a reflective device for wider social and political realities. Hobbs, for example, uses Butler’s work on gender and Baudrillard’s writings on American culture as a way of exploring the Swede’s physical appearance in *American Pastoral* and notes how his surface features make it easy, at least superficially, to assimilate. He argues that:

> The Swede’s appearance resembles that of another 1940s hero: Captain America. He is drawn with an exaggerated square-jaw and with blond hair and blue eyes. The Captain’s abilities recall those of the Swede, too, in that they are not beyond the human realm, but rather those of any human being, albeit magnified: he has agility, strength, speed, endurance and quick reactions.  

And Hogan suggests that:

> The Swede comes to inhabit America as a pastoral fantasy as a result of his Nordic good looks at a time when Jews in Europe were facing mass slaughter just for having Semitic features.  

According to Hobbs, the Swede can assimilate and be successful in America because he has the physical traits Americans value and he doesn’t ‘seem’ Jewish. This desire to assimilate is revealed in the way the Swede buys into the desire to live out a simplistic Virgilian pastoral by wanting to move to the colonial town of Waspish ‘Old Rimrock’ and having a farm. He is the shepherd and his future beauty queen wife, Dawn, the shepherdess. If he conceives of his family life in pastoral terms, work is equally ‘enamelled’ and the glove factory and the leather trade which he inherits from his father is described in an equally disproportionate way with lots of

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113 Alex Hobbs, ‘Reading the Body in Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral*, *Philip Roth Studies*, 6 (2010), 69–83 (p. 4).
superlatives and ‘skins spinning, drums spewing, pipes gushing’ adjectival (p.11). Even though Roth acknowledges the filth and danger in such work, it is still a kind of heroic and romantic drudgery that is being performed.

This initial paean to progress and assimilation is soon, however, turned upside down. What sets the trial in motion for the Swede is that his daughter becomes a terrorist who blows up the local post office in protest at American’s involvement in Vietnam. As Parker Royal argues, ‘Merry’s bomb awakens Swede to the turmoil of the 1960s, but in a more general sense, it illustrates the fictitiousness of any mythologized national Eden’.115

After the bombing, American Pastoral tells the story of the subsequent destruction of the Levov family. Zuckerman’s earlier narration, and the mythic presentation of America, is slowly pulled apart. The book offers various perspectives on why the lives of the daughter ‘Merry’ and the father ‘Seymour’ Levov fall apart. The names are almost parodic. ‘Seymour’ suggests perspicacity while ‘Merry’ suggests levity. These traits are strangely antithetical to the characters. Everything that the Swede has, including his Old Colonial House and what it symbolises, alongside his political affiliations, the state of his neighbours, the idea of home and family and the pastoral of sports, is systematically examined through the lens of what Roth calls the ‘demythologising decade’ of the Vietnam years and the 1960s.

The Swedian Trial: Merry Levov as Inciting Event and Counterforce

The Swede’s Pastoral cannot hold. His own daughter rebels against it. Merry Levov is the inciting incident or, to borrow from Leo Marx’s seminal study The Machine in

the Garden, the ‘Counterforce’ to the Swede’s naïve Locus Amoenus. In American Pastoral, it is Merry’s bomb that brings the verdant fascia, or what Raymond Williams calls the ‘enamelled world’, of the pastoral crashing down. If the book I Married a Communist detonates Ira Ringold’s life, Merry’s literal bomb explodes the Swede’s.

In American Pastoral it is not, of course, simply a life that is being detonated but also a particular idea of America and what it means to be assimilated. Pozorski, for example, has analyzed the way in which the Swede’s fantasies exhibit a naïve pastoral vision of America. One of the Swedes early self-conceptions, for example, is that of being like ‘Johnny Appleseed’ the American pioneer nurseryman who was responsible for introducing Apple trees to large parts of Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. And the Swede thinks that by moving out to the Waspish enclave of Old Rimrock, and as a Jew he is somehow pushing the boundaries and ‘settling’ America. Pozorski links the seed and conception trope to wider ideas of America and argues that:

The constant reference here to the seeds of Appleseed appears to be as much about planting literal apple seeds as it is about a father giving life—life to his daughter of course, but also it conveys the sense of spreading an ideological legacy about the American dream.

And that:

The unexpected trauma of the novel which disrupts our sense of American identity is not the Vietnam War, but rather the recognition, perhaps for Zuckerman, although never for Levov, that the very ideals upon which America was first founded have yet to see fruition. (p. 85)

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116 Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1941). In his conceptualization of the Pastoral, Marx defines the Counterforce as the intrusive blast from reality that interrupts the rural idyll. The machine in the garden for Marx was the psychic trauma resulting from the contradiction between the pastoral ideal of America and the massive technological and industrial upheavals produced by machine technology. In Literature this contradiction was apparent and ubiquitous. In, for example, the steamboat smashing the raft apart in Huckleberry Finn, or the locomotive whistle penetrating the woods in Walden.


It is clear, then, that Roth is painting on a much broader canvas than in his earlier novels. I have argued that Merry Levov is a counterforce to the Swede’s naïve pastoral dreams of America. Her bomb obliterates the fixed and gleaming world of the Swede’s pastoral. As we shall see it sets in motion a prolonged examination of both his life and the nature of America. In considering the trial of both the Swede and the idea of America I do not accept the notion postulated by conservative critics like Gordon that American Pastoral is an elegy for a lost time and that for Roth ‘once upon a time, in America and in Weequahic in the 1940s, things were better and life made sense’. Even before the Swede moves to Old Rimrock his father is warning him that the place is narrow and bigoted and a past home to the Klan. There is, then, a worm in the apple right from the start. Roth has never believed in American innocence as he made abundantly clear in an interview detailing his response to Americans who thought the terrorist attacks on New York meant that the country had finally lost her innocence:

What innocence? From 1668 to 1865 this country had slavery; and from 1865 to 1955 was a society existing under a brutal segregation. I really don’t know what these people are talking about.

And for Varvogli:

The novel suggests that, for an author writing at the end of the twentieth century, it is hard to imagine, let alone sustain, a discourse that imagines America as a prelapsarian Garden of Eden.

And for Sandra Kumamoto Stanley:

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Roth portrays the members of the ‘greatest generation’ who were baffled by the demythologising decade of the sixties with sympathy but he also critiques the myths by which they lived.122

The characters who are mostly involved in putting the Swede on trial for the myths about America are his brother Jerry, his daughter Merry and a girl called Rita Cohen who comes to the Swede’s glove-making factory. These charges essentially suggest that the Swede has lived a lifetime of bad faith and denial. I will now examine them in greater depth.

The Accusers: Rita, Merry and Jerry too.

For the Swede, the trial emerges as a prolonged psychological ordeal and the conceit is itself developed through a series of accusations directed against him by his brother Jerry, the Merry surrogate Rita Cohen, and Merry herself. Most of these charges question the morality of the Swede’s naïve liberalism and the violence and exploitation which underlies it. The Swede is a liberal who believes in free market enterprise and the virtues of the market system as it is. Religion for the Swede is something that is strictly privatised with probably little to offer: “I go into those synagogues and it’s all foreign to me. It always has been” (p. 314). The Swede is an individualist and a meliorist; political protest, for him, is something that takes place within the confines of the existing political system. Freedom of speech is important and he frequently tries to act as a moderator in the arguments between his daughter and his own father. He rarely, however, thinks beyond the dominant discourse. Private property is equally important to his sense of himself and so is work. Both the former and the latter act as props for his identity and as Powers argues, emerge as essentially two pastoral forms:

122 Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, ‘Mourning the Greatest Generation: Myth and History in Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral*, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 51 (2005), 1–24 (p. 3).
Dawn’s cattle farm, recalling the occupations of traditional literary herdsmen, but also the Newark Maid Glove Factory over which Seymour presides, which stands in for the pastoral economy, one based on the transmission of generational skills. ¹²³

The charges, then, are connected to the liberalism wrapped up in the values and aspirations of a particular consumerist lifestyle. Roth’s relentlessly dialectical writing means, however, that the charges themselves are held up to scrutiny and found problematical, and that despite the Swede’s complacency about the business world, as readers, we still retain a measure of respect and sympathy for him. The accusations, taken together, concern themselves with the limitations of liberalism, the idea of choice, the concept of tolerance, and the claims of identity and class. They constitute a radical critique of the way the Swede has chosen to live. I will now examine them.

Rita Cohen’s visit to the Swede’s glove making factory challenges the Swede’s self-presentation as a benevolent employer. According to Rita the Swede is nothing but a ‘shitty little capitalist who exploits the brown and yellow people of the world’ (p. 133). For the Swede Rita is nothing but a ‘loathsome kid with a head full of fantasies about “the working class” (p. 134). The Swede spiritualizes labour and seems to romanticize the glove making business. He represents it, originally, as an artisan craft, localised and skill driven and passed down the generations. Rita’s argument, however, is that the business is far from local and quirky. She says that it is global and dependent on the cheap labour of others. How the Swede actually treats the workers at the factory is difficult to evaluate, but when Rita meets the Master Glove Cutter ‘Harry’ the man hardly speaks and it is difficult to know whether he knows something is seriously wrong with Rita or is simply alienated from the Swede. The deixis of the encounter between Rita and the Swede is paternalistic, but given the

context and the loss of the daughter perhaps understandably so. Thus, when she starts
asking questions she is told that ‘you’ve settled on an interesting subject there young
lady’ (p. 120) and later the Swede ‘began calling her honey up in the cutting room
and could not stop’ (p. 129).

The charges of exploitation are not adequately rebutted by the Swede and his
potentially naïve and self-serving discourse of liberal choice. While admitting that
American firms make gloves all over the world, the Swede says that he has only two
factories and that ‘You saw how unhappy my employees were. That’s why they’ve
worked for us for nearly forty years, because they’re exploited so miserably’ (p. 134).
However, simply interpreting a worker’s decision to stay as evidence that they fully
endorse their situation is hardly adequate as a means of reading their motivation.
Staying in an abusive situation does not mean active endorsement of it. The Swede
claims that Rita knows nothing about what a factory is. Rita retorts that she knows
what a plantation is and calls the Swede Mr Legree.124 These viewpoints are
incommensurable.

The Swede’s defence that people freely choose to do what they do and hence can,
in some sense, presumably be half responsible for their choices is weak here and
interestingly not extended to his daughter’s choice to become a murderer. His very
human response of denial and his continual attempts to understand why Merry has
killed, mostly posit the idea of malign influence. If, and in terms of his own liberal
discourse, she hasn’t freely chosen to be a terrorist then she cannot be morally
culpable. As he desperately states at the final Thanksgiving Dinner, ‘Merry had been
used for somebody else’s evil purposes—that was the story to which it was crucial for
them all to remain anchored’ (p. 384). The idea of it being the ‘story’ to which they

124 Mr Legree was the plantation owner in Uncle Tom’s Cabin.
must remain ‘anchored’ raises the possibility that the Swede seems to psychologically require it, rather than genuinely believe it. The Swede is inconsistent here but in a very human way which reveals his vulnerability and invokes our sympathy.

In many ways Rita’s accusations about the life of the Swede mirror those of his brother Jerry. While the Swede is in love with his pastoral vision of America both Rita and Jerry suggest that he has somehow betrayed his class and lost his identity. Rita says that his wife pretended to be ‘Lady Dawn’ of the manor (p. 135) and Jerry fulminates how they were ‘Out there playing at being Wasps, a little Mick girl from the Elizabeth docks and a Jew boy from Weequahic High. The cows. Cow society. Colonial old America. And you thought all that façade was going to come without cost’ (p. 280). Both Jerry and Rita accuse the Swede of exhibiting a world of bad faith and false consciousness. Inhabiting the voice of Jerry, for example, and imagining him reacting to the writer’s fictional portrayal of the Swede, Zuckerman has him say, ‘No, nothing bears the slightest resemblance to…here, for instance, giving my brother a mind, awareness…my brother is a guy who had cognitive problems’ (p. 74). Much later in the novel Jerry says that the Swede has ‘a false image of everything’ and only knows what a ‘fucking glove is’ (p. 276) and when the Swede, in Zuckerman’s version of his life, goes to Jerry for help, the latter says that finally he is exhibiting ‘thinking’ that is becoming ‘just a little untranquilised’ (p. 278).

Rita makes similar claims to Jerry that the Swede is somehow false and complacent. She says that she has come to realize something about the ‘kindly rich Liberals’ who own the world. This is that ‘[n]othing is further from your understanding than the nature of the world’ (p. 139). Beyond nihilistic outbursts, however, we do not really know what Jerry thinks of America beyond the fact that it
is nightmarish. He seems to be similar to both Rita and Merry. He exists ‘on transmit’ and, commenting on Jerry’s labelling of the reunion party as nothing but ‘bullshit nostalgia’, Zuckerman tells us that, ‘These few sentences telling me what I was, what everything was would have accounted for not merely four wives, but for eight, ten, sixteen of them…he had the character of one big unified thing, coldly accustomed to being listened to’ (p. 61). The totalising nature of Rita, Jerry and Merry stands in contrast to the Swede who is diffident and who believes in the possibility of improvement within the existing system. The interactions between these characters are mainly argumentative dialogues which are meant to address the claims of a radical politics as opposed to an argument for improvement within the existing system. I would argue that this form of ‘dialogue as argumentation’ is a way in which Roth both maintains narrative tension and extends the ordeal of the Swede into a wider, and potentially more interesting debate about the nature of America. I will now sketch out the contours of this wider argument.

Rita and Merry are also ‘unified things’ and they all believe they have what the philosopher Isaiah Berlin called ‘final solutions’ to the nature of reality. Berlin made a famous distinction between negative and positive liberty—freedom from and freedom to, and went on to claim that many social theorists had abused the definition of the latter when they started to make claims that people would behave differently if they only knew what was in their best interests. This abuse of the concept suggests that a person’s best interests might best be discovered not by themselves but by expert knowledge, or by the application of some political creed. Hence new hierarchies of

\[125\] When learning, for example, of everything that the Swede’s daughter has suffered he can only say, ‘You think you know what this country is? You have no idea what this country is…This country is frightening. Of course she was raped’. \textit{AP}, p. 276. Later he says, ‘With the help of your daughter you’re as deep in the shit as a man can get, the real American crazy shit. America amok! America amuck!’ \textit{AP}, p. 277.

technical experts and various ‘engineers of human souls’. It reaches its apotheosis in the Rousseauian thought that people paradoxically might need to be ‘forced to be free’. The Swede is a living exemplar of the desire to maximise the type of freedom that Berlin developed. He wants freedom from the old constraints, freedom to form yourself in a manner of your own choosing. For example, Zuckerman speaks of ‘the desire to go the limit in America with your rights, forming yourself as an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-America insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals’ (p. 85). The Swede’s freedom to create himself anew is wrapped up in his conceit that he is somehow engaging in a revolutionary activity by settling in Old Rimrock despite the mismatch between its WASP background and his own.

Jerry, Merry and Rita, on the other hand, exhibit the streak of totalitarian thinking that worried Berlin. Jerry has final opinions and Merry and Rita final solutions. This type of thinking is possible only because, as Berlin suggests, a distinction develops between the ‘empirical’ self and the ‘real.’ Merry’s reading of The Communist Manifesto has presumably provided her with the large justifying lie that the world would be a different place under a different system and that people would be free to pursue who they ‘really’ were. This form of utopianism can result in a violent means-ends politics and the categorisation of people who do not agree with your opinion as merely the flotsam of history, to be presumably cancelled out by the inexorable laws of an infallible political, or, more recently, religious system. As the

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127 Rousseau develops this frightening idea in ‘The Social Contract’, specifically for individuals who do not recognize and who go against the ‘General Will’.
128 Roth is comic here, having the Swede note the paradoxical lack of freedom and contingency within The Communist Manifesto: ‘Reading this stuff is like deep sea diving. It’s like being in an Aqua-Lung with the window right up against your face and the air in your mouth and no place to go, no place to move’. AP, p. 159.
Swede says in his imaginary conversations with Angela Davis, ‘Everything is justified by her cause, Huey Newton’s cause, Bobby Seale’s cause, George Jackson’s cause, Merry Levov’s cause’ (p. 166). Merry is, to use Berlin’s term, a hedgehog, the Swede is a fox. 129

This type of thinking paradoxically makes the world worse in the hope of making it better. People need to be put right in the name of a higher cause. As the Swede ruefully says about the politics of his daughter’s bombing:

> Who gives a shit about a rural general store whose owner has been running it since 1921? We’re talking about humanity! When has there ever been progress for humanity without a few small mishaps and mistakes (p. 216).

If the Swede is complacent in his acceptance of the existing social order that so conveniently privileges him, however, Rita’s programme of radical action is hardly sympathetic and Roth gives her both a crass utilitarianism and telescopic philanthropy. When, for example, the Swede agonises about how his daughter is now wanted for murder, Rita merely responds to his anguished pleas by saying:

> Do you know how many Vietnamese have been killed in the few minutes we’ve had the luxury to talk about whether or not Dawnie loves her daughter? It’s all relative, Swede. Death is all relative (p. 139).

The same reductive approach is in operation when the Swede meets his daughter, much later in the novel, only to find that she has become a Jain. He asks about who she has killed. ‘People’, she replies. Jerry is equally violent and reductive when the Swede telephones him and says that he has finally met Merry. He tells Jerry that she has killed again and the latter simply retorts, ‘Fuck the four people. What’s the matter with you?’ (p. 273) Jerry is prepared to go into Merry’s room and use violence to bring her home. The accusers, then, are on shaky ground. The positions of Merry,

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129 According to Berlin, ‘hedgehogs’ have one unified vision while ‘foxes’ pursue many ends which are sometimes unrelated and contradictory. There is a huge gap between them. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953).
Jerry and Rita in terms of public politics and private morality are dubious. They offer no way of building dialogue or understanding and seem happy to use violence and power to get what they want. Jerry’s violence is underscored by the imagery of him as a surgeon who ‘wields a knife for a living’, and who ‘remedies what is ailing with a knife’ (p. 274). 130

Another set of charges that Jerry brings against the Swede concern the liberal idea of tolerance. The Swede is accused of being too ‘tolerant’ by Jerry. The suggestion seems to be that he didn’t provide firm boundaries and this may have helped to make Merry what she was:

- Refusing to give offence. Blaming yourself. Tolerant respect for every position. Sure, it’s ‘liberal’—I know, a liberal father. But what does that mean? What is at the centre of it? (p. 279)

The word occurs many times in the text. We are told that during the Vietnam War, certain families lost their kids and other didn’t and that the Seymour Levovs were ‘one of those families’, ‘families full of tolerance and kindly, well-intentioned liberal goodwill and theirs were the kids who went on the rampage’ (p. 88). Rita claims that the Swede’s wife ‘tolerated that stuttering girl, but you can’t tell the difference between affection and tolerance because you are too stupid yourself’ (p. 88). Later and when the Swede finally meets Merry and listens as she explains her Jainism we are told that ‘she addressed him as though he were the child and she were the parent, with nothing but…that loving tolerance that he had once so disastrously extended to her. And it galled him. The condescension of a lunatic’ (p. 244). Earlier we are told that Merry was ‘mad’ by the time she was fifteen and he had ‘tolerated that madness, crediting her with nothing worse than a point of view’ (p. 242). Also, and when, as a

130 While Jerry may be violent, we are never entirely sure of the Swede’s innocence and there is the buried assertion that he may have abused Merry. At the factory, Rita Cohen suggests that the size four glove is nearly as small as a ‘child’s cunt’. In the final Thanksgiving scene Sheila Salzman keeps suggesting that she thought something terrible had happened at home. This makes it harder to ascertain reasons for Merry’s behaviour.
teenager, she puts a Weathermen poster on her bedroom wall the Swede and ‘because he was a tolerant man… tolerated that too’ (p. 251).

The Swede is tolerant of his daughter’s initial opinions and tries to use reasoning and clarification to adjudicate and build dialogue between her and her grandfather. He acts ‘even-handedly as the moderator for these two dynamos, a role he preferred to being the adversary of either’ (p. 291). The problem here is that the liberal ideal of rational discussion does not seem to work. The enigma of reason, as Sperber has argued, is that it may not actually be used to get to the ‘truth’. Individuals may use it to rationalise what they already think. Psychologically people may exhibit confirmation bias and use reasoning to confirm their initial hunches rather than questioning them. If the sleep of reason, as the Goya etching suggests, produces monsters, the use of it may be equally futile.  

An equally serious charge is that the Swede and his wife merely ‘tolerated’ Merry. Here tolerance is not a virtue and many philosophers have questioned the supposed benign nature of the concept. For example Žižek building on the work of Wendy Brown, sees the idea of tolerance itself, especially when it is elevated to a political principle, being little more than an ideological category. Brown argues that tolerance can stand in the way of political projects aimed towards fairness and equality. And while we clearly need tolerance in our everyday dealings with people, the danger is that when it is elevated to a political principle it becomes about the management of some undesirable body taking up residence within the social body and is a substitute for real equality and justice. For Brown and Žižek then, tolerance can reflect a discourse of power and conditionality. It is about the management of some

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132 Žižek explores the limitations of tolerance in respect to radical Islam. ‘The other has become a real other, real in his hatred. Here is the paradox of tolerance at its purest: how far should tolerance for intolerance go’. Slavoj Žižek, Violence (London: Profile Books, 2008), p. 109.
object of aversion. A tolerated object may not be loved or even liked but is permitted to exist. In this context and if Jerry’s accusation is correct—then the Swede paradoxically may have helped to create the angriest kid in America by being ‘tolerant’ and not revealing what he thinks and hence remaining in some sense ‘unknowable’ to his daughter. This idea, however, is predicated on the idea that the fence sitter is unknowable. Fence sitters are, however, knowable as fence sitters. And as individuals without hard and fast opinions.

Jerry’s relative intolerance in contrast makes him unsympathetic to others. One of the things he desires is that the Swede renounce his fixed ideas on his daughter’s innocence, another pastoral myth about childhood. He tortures the Swede with this saying, ‘Admit that she’s a monster, Seymour. Even a monster has to be from somewhere—even a monster needs parents. But parents don’t need monsters’ (p. 280). The fact that the Swede cannot do this makes him far more human and sympathetic to the reader than his brother. Merry also tortures the Swede by admitting to her crimes:

“How strongly you still crave the idea,” she said, “of your innocent offspring.”
“Who was it? Don’t protect them. Who is responsible?”
“Daddy, you can detest me alone. It’s all right.”
“You are telling me you did it all on your own. Knowing that Hamlin’s would be destroyed too. That’s what you are saying.”
“Yes. I am the abomination. Abhor me.” (p. 248)

However, the Swede still cannot believe this, cannot do this and this human ‘failing’ and need to give unconditional love creates more sympathy for him. When

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133 Something of this comes across as a possible reason for the pathology of ‘Kevin’ in the novel by Lionel Shriver, ‘We Need to Talk about Kevin’. A possible reading of the mother is that she is ‘tolerant’ but not really engaged with her child on some deep level. She provides the care but withdraws the concern. While Žižek explores liberal tolerance in respect to Europe’s attitude to Islam, Brown writes about the Gay and Lesbian struggle in America. Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

134 This is what Jerry has in mind when he says that the Swede’s tolerance and near relativism keeps his identity hidden. ‘You don’t reveal yourself to people, Seymour. You keep yourself a secret. Nobody knows who you are. You certainly never let her know who you are. *AP*, p. 275.
the conversation finally becomes too much the Swede vomits on his own daughter.

There does seem, however, to be a moment of partial acceptance:

> Four people…This was his daughter and she was unknowable. This murderer is mine. His vomit was on her face, a face that, but for the eyes was now most unlike her mother’s or her father’s. The veil was off, but behind the veil there was another veil. Isn’t there always? (p. 266)

In *The Human Stain* the trope of reading was used as a way of referring to the unknowability of other people. In *Pastoral* this concept is replaced by that of the veil or mask. Masking and unmasking is a way in which Roth suggests the ultimate strangeness of the other. In a trial it also makes judgement difficult since we cannot finally know whom or what we are actually examining. Truth seems to be permanently obscured.

Despite the flimsy nature of Jerry, Merry and Rita’s accusation we do have to note that the Swede’s liberal tolerance does finally break down. He does use violence in trying to literally force Merry’s mouth open to get her to speak and he vomits on her face. His use of reasoning he now sees as a form of madness and he doubts the utility of reason: ‘Causes, clear answers, who there is to blame. Reasons. But there are no reasons. She is obliged to be as she is. We all are. Reasons are in books’ (p. 281). The Swede’s life is a clear example of a lack of moral luck. In rejecting liberal ideas and in saying that ‘she is obliged to be as she is. We all are’, the Swede moves into the realm of fate and tragedy and away from the idea that he is somehow and to borrow from Spinoza a ‘kingdom within a kingdom’, a person in control of everything who is the master of his own fate.

I have argued, then, that the trial motif in *American Pastoral* is developed through a series of accusations hurled at Swede Levov through members of his family. I have examined these accusations and noted how Roth uses them to ask larger questions
about the nature of liberalism versus the claims of a radical politics which argues that liberal democracies are based on systemic inequality. I will now show how these accusations help to create the Swede’s psychological ordeal which emerges as an endless, yet ultimately futile process of self-examination.

Self-examination’s grudging tears: The trial of the Swede and the Swedian idea of America

One of the dominant textual motifs of *American Pastoral* which produces the atmosphere of trial is the use of an interrogative mode. As Brauner suggests, ‘American Pastoral is the most interrogative of Roth’s novels: almost every page of the novel contains a question and on many the most frequent form of punctuation is the question mark’. This initial questioning on what went wrong in the life of the Levovs we initially encounter after the reunion party and when Roth moves from the voice of Zuckerman and into the voice of the Swede who is looking back and wondering why his daughter became a terrorist. While reading in *Stain* was a metaphor for both fluency and a lack of understanding, stuttering in *Pastoral* serves a similar function. As a child, Merry Levov stutters. When we first enter the Swede’s mind through the porthole of Zuckerman, he is wondering if an inappropriate kiss on a summer holiday caused his daughter to stutter. The questioning has already started. He then wonders if the stuttering, and the response to it, causes her to become a terrorist. The process of trial for the Swede is one of constant psychological self-examination and as he looks back at his life we are told:

> All the triumphs, when he probed them seemed superficial; even more astonishing, his very virtues came to seem vices. There was no longer any innocence in what he remembered of his past…The Swede as he had always known himself—well-meaning, well-behaved, well-ordered Seymour

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135 David Brauner, ‘What was not supposed to happen had happened and what was supposed to happen had not happened: Subverting History in *American Pastoral*, in Philip Roth, ed. by Shostak, pp. 19–32 (p. 28).
Levov—evaporated, leaving only self-examination in his place… He had been admitted into a mystery more bewildering even than Merry’s stuttering: there was no fluency anywhere. It was all stuttering…he envisioned his life as a stutterer’s thought, wildly out of control (p. 93).

For Glaser, American Pastoral functions as ‘an epistemological detective story with multiple levels of sleuthing’.\textsuperscript{136} The trial immediately starts with the questioning and various explanations are put forward for why Merry turns out the way she does. On talking to Zuckerman at the reunion, for example, The Swede’s brother Jerry, a cardiac surgeon, uses half serious genetic explanations for why Merry turned into a terrorist, seemingly unable to believe what happened:

That our own ridiculous father should have produced such a brilliant father—and that he should then produce her? Somebody tell me what caused it. The genetic need to separate? For that she has to run from Seymour Levov to Che Guevara? (p. 74)

This confusion about Merry points to a wider critique of teleological conceptions of History and the idea of progress. As the Swede says:

And then the loss of the daughter, the fourth American generation, a daughter on the Run who was to have been the perfected image of himself as he had been the Perfected image of his father, and his father the perfected image of his father’s father…(p. 86).

This failure of stuttering history to unfold ‘like a fluffy ball of yarn’ is part of the mystery for the Swede. His life has unravelled, but only in the sense that it has completely come apart. Passages like the above reflect the ‘rare occurrence of the expected’ epigraph from William Carlos Williams at the start of the novel. Right from the start, however, we are never entirely sure about the exact family dynamics in the family Levov. Have things failed to unfold or has something sinister merely come out in the grain? Was the Swede really such a perfect father? In trying, for example, to

find out a reason for his daughter’s stuttering, the Swede takes her to a psychiatrist who suggests that, in the context of life in ‘a highly perfectionist family’, where the father is a hero athlete and the mother a former beauty queen, stuttering may be a way for Merry to exercise power over her mother. The Swede, like so many of Roth’s characters, rejects psychiatric insights outright. This blanket rejection makes the reader pause. Is there some form of denial or projection going on? For the Swede, it is clearly the psychiatrist who has the problem:

It’s all because of the way I look. Hates me because of the way Dawn looks. He’s obsessed with our looks. That’s why he hates us—we’re not short and ugly like him...Superior bastard. Cold, heartless bastard. Stupid bastard. ...And all of it is because he looks the way he looks and I look the way I look and Dawn looks the way she looks... (pp. 96–97).

The questioning drives forward the narrative and the trial. While he once questioned nothing, the Swede now questions everything– about himself, his family, his daughter and his values, ‘Why must she always be enslaving herself to the handiest empty-headed idea?’ (p. 241). Thinking of the Lord’s Prayer and desperate to excuse his daughter he wonders about temptation, ‘If people were not led by others, why was that the famous prayer that it was?’ (p. 247). To his brother Jerry, ‘Why do you say I don’t love her? This is terrible, horrible’, (p. 278). On the choices in his life, ‘Why shouldn’t I be where I want to be? Why shouldn’t I be with who I want to be? Isn’t that what this country is all about? (p. 315) On Rita Cohen, ‘Why does she write me, phone, strike out at me—what does she have to do with my poor broken girl?’ (p. 371). The questions pile up but there are never any firm answers and finally they lead only to both absurdity and grim comedy in the Thanksgiving kitchen, as the Swede hears his wife saying ‘not here’ to her new lover, and thinks briefly that they are referring to ‘shucking corn’ – ‘And why was Dawn saying—if the Swede was
correctly reading her lips—"Not here, not here…"? Why not shuck the corn here? The kitchen was as good a place as any' (p. 335).

I have argued, then, that the accusations which accost the Swede create an ordeal that is marked by an endless series of questions. At the surface level of the text this is signalled by the frequent usage of the interrogative. I will now examine the final Thanksgiving dinner which I suggest offers a final comment on the Swede’s way of life and at the same time a larger critique of the past ideal of assimilation and the idea of the ‘melting pot’.

Carnival: The Thanksgiving Pastoral and Roth’s verdict on America

At the start of American Pastoral, Zuckerman was on a quest to discover if the Swede had lived the life of an Ivan Illych or some kind of assimilationist fantasy based on the most hackneyed ideas swirling around the ‘American dream.’ The ‘Boy’s Own ‘Book of Job’ aka The Kid from Tomkinsville, a baseball book which was Zuckerman’s childhood reading, is clearly followed by Zuckerman’s ‘Book of the Swede,’ which is a man–sized rendering of the same thing. The form of the trial is a psychological ordeal that unravels the Swede. The supposedly rational mind comes up against the irrational and is finished. The verdict on the Swede’s life seems to be largely Hobbesian. Overall it has been nasty, it will be cut short and it ends up in a brutish dinner party scene.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas on Carnival are especially helpful for analyzing the final ‘verdict’ on the life of the Levovs which takes place over a long stretch of narrative surrounding a Thanksgiving Dinner. This verdict seems to represent the idea that the

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137 After the torture of the bomb the Swede cannot, to use Richard Rorty’s ideas on physical and mental torture, weave a coherent story about himself. What the Swede cannot integrate into his self-belief and self-perception is that he is a father who has produced a murderer. Richard Rorty, Contingency Irony and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
many ‘conventionalised narratives’ that we live by are fragmented and illusory. The pastoral fantasies contained inside these stories we tell ourselves are all stripped away by Roth. According to Bakhtin, during ‘Carnival’ old notions of hierarchy are rearranged. The village idiot may become King; priests in priestly vestments will swear and blaspheme. It is a space and time ruled by what Bakhtin has called the ‘grotesque body’ a supposedly happy, eating and drinking, fornicating reminder of the realities of corporal existence. However, as Hollis has argued vis-à-vis the ‘other side’ of Carnival, ‘people are killed, maimed and raped during festival fun and freedom.’\textsuperscript{138} And there is a lot of mutual maiming going on during the final Thanksgiving dinner. In the final dinner scene everybody is masked and the Swede is still desperately clinging to the idea of having fathered an ‘innocent’ child:

Merry had been used for somebody else’s evil purposes—that was the story to which it was crucial for them all to remain anchored. (p.365)

In \textit{The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics} Bakhtin sees Raskolnikov as a kind of carnival King who is in the process of being decrowned. Scandal is important for Bakhtin because it is where:

the rotten cords of the official and personal lie are snapped…human souls are laid bare…and there opens up another more genuine sense of themselves and of their relationships to one another.\textsuperscript{139}

Bakhtin argues that the substitute for the public square is ‘usually the drawing room (the hall, the dining-room), where the catastrophe, the scandal take place’ (p.149). The decrowning of the Swede and his father takes place in a typically domestic equivalent to the public square and the final Thanksgiving dinner offers plenty of scandal but little insight for people, either into themselves or others. The conclusion


that Roth seems to be pushing us towards is that it is ultimately tawdry and disappointing, and that the other is forever locked away.

The dinner party slowly strips away the last vestiges of what the Swede has thought of as normality. He discovers, for example, that his wife is not the paragon he has imagined her to be and that she has actually betrayed him by having an affair with his WASP neighbour William Orcutt. Orcutt comes from an old WASP family whom Dawn has only pretended to despise and during the course of the evening the Swede inadvertently catches them in a moment of intimacy:

His daughter was an insane murderer hiding on the floor of a room in Newark, his wife had a lover who dry-humped her over the sink in their family kitchen. (p. 358)

The Swede didn’t know his daughter and he clearly doesn’t know his wife. She is masked. We are informed that this masking started with a face lift in Geneva:

The heroic renewal began with the face-lift at the Geneva clinic she’d read about in Vogue…until she was staring at a face that looked like the polished kernel of a face. (p.187)

The masking of Dawn Levov represents a refusal to acknowledge her own history and the Swede thinks that this masking will be complete when she marries Orcutt:

The cuckolded husband understands. Of course. Understands everything now. Who will get her back to the dream of where she has always wanted to go? Mr America. (p. 384)

While the Swede only ‘passed’ as Captain America, Orcutt’s genealogy is the real thing. With Orcutt, Dawn can have a moral makeover and start to lead an ‘uncontaminated life’. The failure of Dawn Levov to acknowledge or learn anything about the cost of an ‘uncontaminated life’ is made clear in the juxtaposition of the reporting of the Swede’s emotional unravelling next to her pastoral fantasies concerning her holidays. The inane dinner party gambits are underscored by the
Swede’s violent fantasies. He is now finally imagining, if only subconsciously, about letting what his brother Jerry calls ‘the beast out of the bag’. Imagining Orcutt, for example, the Swede knows that:

Once he got him on the floor of the terrace he would have no difficulty in slamming Orcutt’s head against the flagstones as many times as might be required to get him into that cemetery with his distinguished clan. (p. 381)

Imagining Orcutt with his wife in the kitchen he thinks:

He should have hit those two over the head with a skillet. (p. 383)

Imagining Rita Cohen:

I’ll pour gasoline all over that hair and set the little cunt on fire. (p.383)

Alternatively, Dawn’s escape from the Swede into another life and another marriage seems hopelessly compromised. Earlier in the novel we are told about the old stone house that the Swede had brought for her in Old Rimrock. Parker Royal, in exploring Levov’s pastoral dreams, finds the description of the old stone house particularly suggestive:

The jigsaw puzzle, the irregular stones, the construction of the many parts into a seemingly indestructible whole all suggest varying aspects of the American dream and the melting pot philosophy. (p. 189)

However, unlike the ostensibly robust house of stone, the new house that Orcutt has designed for Dawn is only a cardboard model, a simulacrum of the real thing. Dawn’s ‘cardboard dreaming’ (p.368) is very literally a dolls house with a detachable cardboard roof. Deconstructing this cardboard dream and after we are informed of Dawn’s infidelity we are told that, ‘The only thing missing from the bedroom was a cardboard cock with Orcutt’s name on it. Orcutt should have made a sixteenth-inch scale model of Dawn on her stomach, with her ass in the air and, from behind, his cock going in’ (p. 368). In addition to the lack of sanctuary in home and
hearth and as far as protection goes, friend and neighbour turn out to be about as staunch as the cardboard model. We discover, for example, that Merry had gone to Sheila Salzman her speech therapist after she had committed the bombing. We find out that the Swede has had a brief affair with Sheila and that both Sheila and her husband, Dr. Shelly Salzman, had hidden Merry and not informed the Swede that she was at their house. In her explanations for this, Sheila Salzman keeps hinting that something, perhaps sexual abuse, was happening at home:

Something very wrong had happened to that girl. She was talking as if she hated you so. I couldn’t imagine…but sometimes you start to believe the worst about people. (p. 375) I just thought something terrible had happened at home. (p. 376) I just thought that she was so fat and so angry that something very bad must have gone on at home. (p. 378)

The discovery that Sheila did not help the Swede leads us back into the problem of knowing other people and the problem of the mask:

What kind of mask is everyone wearing? I thought these people were on my side. But the mask is all that’s on my side—that’s it! For four months I wore the mask myself, with him, with my wife, and I could not stand it. I went there to tell him that. I went to tell him that I had betrayed him, and only didn’t so as not to compound the betrayal, and never once did he let on how cruelly he’d betrayed me. (p. 353)

Schur argues that the focus on masks are an aspect of the novel’s postmodernism and that they illustrate ‘the illusion of closure when it may merely be the bottom of one fantasy’. In contrast, for Brauner they provide a ‘symbolic link between the impenetrability of individual subjectivity and the opacity of history’.

The endless revelations and the removal of the masks destabilizes everything the reader thought they knew about the main characters. They also help to develop an argument about the complexity of knowing other people. In terms of the trial motif,

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141 Brauner, pp. 19–32 (p. 31).
they make any kind of judgement about the main characters ultimately impossible. If we look behind the mask there may only be another mask and a problem of infinite regress. This makes self-knowledge even more problematical.

History takes up much of the dinner table talk and continues the many debates developed earlier in the novel about what Roth once called the demythologizing decade of the sixties. Lou Levov, the Swede’s father seems only able to conceptualize the upheavals of the sixties in terms of what they meant for the glove industry and bathetically we are informed that:

But when they assassinated Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy left the White House, that, and the miniskirt was the end of the ladies fashion glove. The assassination of John F. Kennedy and the arrival of the miniskirt, and together that was the death knell for the ladies’ dress glove. (p. 349)

The dialogues between Levov Senior and the professor Marcia Umanoff, like the dialogues between Merry and Seymour, are also about the changing face of America and the hopeless and utopian dream of assimilation. As Marcia says, making a mockery of Levov Senior’s blustering reaction to the film Deep Throat and what it reveals about the shock of the new:

“IT means social conditions may have altered in America since you were taking the kids to eat at the Chinks and Al Haberman was cutting gloves in a shirt and tie.” (p. 354)

Thanksgiving then, represents the total collapse of the ‘House of Levov’. Everything that the Swede thought he could believe in is revealed to be illusory. The Swede’s early nickname which is ‘an old American nickname, proclaimed by a gym teacher, bequeathed in a gym’ (p. 207), is linked to the pastoral of sports and the idea
of fair play, something that the Swede has clearly used as a way of configuring his life and which now provides no comfort.\footnote{In trying to encourage the Swede to take on his daughter Jerry Levov says, for example, ‘Out on the field you did it. That’s how you scored, remember? You pitted your will against the other guy’s and you scored. Pretend it’s a game if that helps’. \textit{AP}, p. 280.}

By the end of the novel, however, the pastoral of sportsmanlike behaviour is revealed to be a hollow sham. In possession of the facts regarding Orcutt and his wife, the Swede recalls other memories of playing a ‘friendly’ game of Saturday touch football with Orcutt and his new neighbours only to find his new neighbour starting to use his hands, ‘In a way that the Swede considered cheap and irritating, for a pickup game the worst sort of behaviour’ (p.381). In retaliation, the Swede makes a move on the field and puts Orcutt on the floor so that he can see ‘Two hundred years of Morris County history flat on its ass’ (p.381).

Old class and ethnic resentments seem to creep into everything. The Swede’s reaction to Orcutt’s unsportsmanlike behaviour is instructive here. He, ‘pranced away and thought, of all things, “I don’t like being looked down on,” the words that Dawn had used to decline joining The Orcutt Family Cemetery Tour’ (p.381). However much he would like to, then, and having moved out to Old Rimrock, the Swede is unable to ignore the class and ethnic based differences in America.

In the Thanksgiving dinner these claims and counter claims about the nature of America find a correlate in the refusal to ‘eat’ of the value systems and the very food of the other.\footnote{Byland says, ‘Roth pits the Swede’s eager consumption of the assimilated, bourgeois lifestyle against Merry’s bulimic and later anorexic renunciation of this self-satisfied consumer centred existence. As a result food and the act of consumption become Merry’s (and Roth’s) potent means of destabilizing America’s post war era of seeming plenitude, wholesomeness and benevolence’. Sarah Bylund, ‘Merry Levov’s BLT: Food-Fuelled Revolt in Philip Roth’s \textit{American Pastoral}, \textit{Philip Roth Studies}, 6 (2010), 13–30 (p. 1).} Byland, for example, has written of Merry Levov’s ‘food fuelled revolt’ and how her eating disorders and final emaciated Jainism represent a very literal refusal to partake of the consumerist culture of America. While this may be
overly schematic there is certainly a significant amount of forced ‘feeding.’ In the final Thanksgiving scene the patriarch Lou Levov attempts to feed the alcoholic WASP Jessie Orcutt, who then tries to stab him in the face with a fork:

Because Mrs. Orcutt would not eat, the girl said, Mr. Levov had started to feed Mrs. Orcutt the pie himself, a bit at a time. He was explaining to her how much better it was for her to drink milk instead of Scotch whisky, how much better for herself, how much better for her husband, how much better for her children…With each bit she swallowed he said, “Yes, Jessie good girl, Jessie very good girl,” and told her how much better it would be for everybody in the world, even for Mr. Levov and his wife, if Jessie gave up drinking. After he had fed her almost all of one whole slice of the strawberry-rhubarb pie, she had said, “I feed Jessie,” and he was so happy, so pleased with her, he laughed and handed over the fork and she had gone right for his eye.” (p. 422)

The Swede’s father, is finally rendered mute:

His face was vacant of everything except the struggle not to weep. He appeared helpless to prevent even that. He could not prevent anything. He never could, though only now did he look prepared to believe that manufacturing a superb ladies’ dress glove in quarter sizes did not guarantee the making of a life that would fit to perfection everyone he loved. …All that was left was his fear and astonishment, but now concealed by nothing. (p. 421)

This stripping away of the much larger illusions of what American was, is, and has become, is presented through the opposing dialogues which seem to insist that it is not a melting pot or a mixed salad or any of the facile metaphors typically used for shorthand description. Genuine multiculturalism seems a forlorn hope and Thanksgiving itself a blighted event:

And it was never but once a year that they were bought together anyway, and that was on the neutral, de-religionized ground of Thanksgiving, when everybody gets to eat the same thing, nobody sneaking off to eat funny stuff—no kugel, no gefilte fish, no bitter herbs, just one colossal Turkey for two hundred and fifty million people—one colossal Turkey feeds all. A moratorium on funny foods and funny ways and religious exclusivity, a moratorium on the three-thousand-year-old nostalgia of the Jews…A moratorium on all the grievances and resentments, and not only for the Dwyers and the Levovs but for everyone in America who is suspicious of everyone else. It is the American Pastoral par excellence and it lasts twenty-four hours.  (p. 402)
At the end of the novel, after the destruction of ‘the American Pastoral par excellence’ which is Thanksgiving, and which ‘lasts for twenty four hours’ the final passage states:

The breach had been founded in their fortification, even out here in secure Old Rimrock, and now that it was opened it would not be closed again. They’ll never recover. Everything is against them, everyone and everything that does not like their life. All the voices from without, condemning and rejecting their life! And what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs? (p. 423)

The jury is still out on the final question. Critics like Safer wonder whether the life of Swede Levov is comic, ironic or tragic. I argue that the final verdict, based on the extensive unravelling contained in the final scenes, marks it down as a species of grotesque going back to Thomas Mann’s formulation of the concept in his essay on Conrad. It is a kind of tragic-comedy.

The tragedy of Swede Levov’s life, assuming it is one, is robbed of its dignity by its comic underpinnings—the ‘dry-humping’, the ‘cardboard cock’, while the tragic elements—the destruction of individual lives, means that the comedy is never totally convincing. The reader runs an emotional gamut moving from mirthless laughter to wry pity. If the Swede is not really ‘letting the beast out of the bag’ and is only ‘sinking’ then so is America. New forms of social solidarity have not removed old class and ethnic antagonisms and the lifeboat metaphor is used again in the final

144 Elaine B. Safer, ‘The Naiveté of Malamud’s Calvin Cohn and Roth’s Seymour “Swede” Levov: Comic, Ironic, or Tragic?’ *Philip Roth Studies*, 4 (2008), 75–85.

145 Mann says, ‘For I feel that, broadly and essentially, the striking feature of modern art is that it has ceased to recognize the categories of tragic and comic, or the dramatic classifications, tragedy and comedy… It sees life as tragic-comedy, with the result that the grotesque is its most genuine style…’ Quoted in John R. Clarke, *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), p. 13.
paragraphs, issuing in, as it does, the gales of Marcia Umanoff’s laughter. If the Swede is sinking then so, finally, is America:

Marcia sank into Jessie’s empty chair…to laugh and laugh and laugh at them all, pillars of a society that, much to her delight, was going rapidly under—to laugh and to relish, as some people, historically, always seem to do, how far the rampant disorder had spread, enjoying enormously the assailability, the frailty, the enfeeblement of supposedly robust things. (p.423)
6: I Married a Communist

Although positioned by many critics as something not significantly greater than a thinly veiled retort to Claire Bloom’s book on her relationship with the writer, _I Married a Communist_ (1998) is not actually so churlish as to poison a whole novel with simple score settling. And while the title, with its collocates of 1950s shock and horror, might be a droll comment on the claims made in _Leaving a Doll’s House_, it is more than a simple retort to an embittered ex-wife. Morley, for example, notes how the narrator looks at betrayal in a much broader literary and biblical context similar to Northrop Frye’s literary analysis. Hutchinson also suggests this wider focus arguing that betrayal is central to how the novel understands ideology and the concept of political commitment. Like the other books in the American Trilogy, then, _I Married a Communist_ comes with an historical context: the McCarthy years in America, and aims to develop that context. There are real legal trials conducted by the state which produce crippling ordeals for the main protagonists.

The book is different to the other novels in the trilogy in that the tale of the main character is told to Zuckerman by a person who is still alive. There is less imagining for Zuckerman to do and consequently the postmodern motifs found in _American Pastoral_ and _The Human Stain_—concerning narrative construction and who is telling the story and what is getting told, coupled with the drawing of the reader’s attention

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146 Claire Bloom, _Leaving a Doll’s House_ (London: Virago, 1996). The title _I Married a Communist_, given the setting of the book is in itself a possible parody of the accusatory hyperbole which mars Bloom’s book. It is also borrowed from the 1949 RKO Radio Picture which was a rather silly attempt at anti-communist Cold War propaganda.

147 Morley is commenting on Frye’s _Anatomy of Criticism_ (1957) with its idea of the Bible as master text. Morley, pp. 109–110. _Communist_ uses betrayal as a master trope leading back to the many stories of betrayal emerging from the Bible.

148 Anthony Hutchinson, “‘Purity is Petrifaction’: Liberalism and Betrayal in Philip Roth’s _I Married a Communist_”, _Rethinking History_. 9 (2005), 315–327.
to the constructed nature of the tale, are much less in evidence. Instead of this, there is a filling out of a childhood picture and its adult re-description. In this case, the younger Zuckerman’s picture of his childhood hero, the 1950s radio star Iron Rinn, aka Ira Ringold, and the revision of this picture and its deepening through Zuckerman’s chance meeting, many years later, with his brother Murray Ringold, a sprightly old man who tells of Ira’s rise and subsequent fall because of the book *I Married a Communist*, ostensibly written by Ira’s betrayed wife, actress Eve Frame.

Roth’s book, set as it is during the McCarthy years, is very much about both literal and psychological trials.\(^{149}\) Many of Roth’s trials start off with some kind of branding. Coleman Silk is branded a racist. The early Zuckerman was branded an anti-Semite. Ira Ringold is a ‘Communist’. The Cold War period and the Truman Doctrine set in motion a slice of American history which, for Roth, was very much defined by betrayal and subsequent trial and persecution. As Murray Ringold attests about Eve Frame’s behaviour:

> To me it seems likely that more acts of personal betrayal were tellingly perpetrated in America in the decade after the war—between ’46 and ’56—than in any other period in our history…Eve’s behaviour fell well within the routine informer practices of the era. When before had betrayal been so destigmatized and rewarded in this country? It was everywhere during those years… (pp. 264–246)

In the American Trilogy there are a number of persecuting spirits who move through the novels dragging everything in their wake: McCarthyism, Nixon, Johnson and Vietnam, and finally the phenomenon of Political Correctness. Each novel dramatises ideas about America, about what it was and has become. Once again, as with

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\(^{149}\) As Scott Martelle says in the preface to his book on McCarthyism, the ‘Communist’ label was a very serious charge. Scott Martelle, *The Fear Within: Spies, Commies, and American Democracy on Trial*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011). Because of his early history Roth has always been particularly sensitive to labelling. As well as the more obvious types, he also reacts against lazy shorthand. On his runaway success after Portnoy he said, ‘To become a celebrity is to become a brand name…Ivory is the soap that floats; Rice Krispies the breakfast cereal that goes snap-crackle-pop; Philip Roth the Jew who masturbates with a piece of liver’. *RMO*, p. 98.
American Pastoral, I Married a Communist starts off by referencing various founding documents which were meant to establish the nature of America. ‘The Kid From Tomkinsville’ is replaced by ‘Citizen Tom Paine’, the lurid fictionalized portrayal of Thomas Paine by the American novelist Howard Fast, who, as a novelist, was himself persecuted through the McCarthy years, becoming the recipient of the unfortunate ‘Stalin Peace Prize’, and seeing his books partially banned through the actions of J Edgar Hoover. The description of these real foundational books and their fictionalised depiction sets up the reader for a rise and fall narrative. The commentary on what America is and could become is personified around the character of Ira Ringold. Ira works as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator on a cornball radio show called The Free and the Brave which aims to dramatise uplifting moments from American history. In dramatic contrast to the ideology surrounding the America dream, Roth then goes on to portray a country that is neither free nor, despite the odd act of personal defiance, brave.

Through the vortex that is Ira, Roth explores the naivety of the American Old Left and their refusal to properly countenance the realities of life under Stalin, as well as debates at the time surrounding the Democrats and the newly formed Progressive party under Henry Wallace and what both parties would or wouldn’t do to end segregation in the south and the Jim Crow laws. These debates, like so many in Roth, put child against parent. There is, for example, a discussion of the merits of the Democrats versus the Progressive party, the young Zuckerman is a watered down version of Merry Levov, and the older Zuckerman, who still believes in the Democrats, is a Swede. The former desires a more radical break with the past; the latter, a New Deal Democrat, believes in the necessity for gradual change. These point

150 Like many writers and artists during the period Fast was briefly imprisoned and blacklisted.
counterpoint dialogues are themselves miniature trials and artistic hurdles for the young Zuckerman who moves through different, mostly paternal mentors in establishing himself as an artist.

The person on literal trial for being a Communist is Ira Ringold, star of the radio show *The Free and the Brave*. Ira is a Communist and, until the advent of McCarthy, a proud one. The person who put him in the dock is his film star wife Eve Frame, the name itself suggesting both the idea of lost innocence and entrapment. Ira’s persecution results from Eve’s commissioning of a ghost written schlocky book about him called *I Married a Communist*. This is in revenge for perceived marital sleights and unfaithfulness. The persecution of Ira and his immediate family constitutes the main trial and the book is, once again, crucially connected to exploring the difference between the promise of America and what Roth sees as the rather different reality. The early hope and promise of the country after the Second World War is, for the young Zuckerman, symbolised at the start by descriptions of the Golden Age of Radio and epitomised by the legendary radio broadcaster Norman Corwin and his ‘On a Note of Triumph’ address to the nation at the end of the war in Europe. This broadcast gives the young writer an early idea of what art should be. As the young Zuckerman says of this broadcast and his own early writing:

> My subject was the lot of the common man, the ordinary Joe—the man that the radio writer Norman Corwin had lauded as “the little guy” in On a Note of Triumph, a sixty-minute play that was transmitted over CBS radio the evening the war ended in Europe…and that buoyantly entangled me in those Salvationist literary aspirations that endeavour to redress the world’s wrongs through writing…it…helped strengthen my first ideas as to what I wanted and expected a literary artist’s language to do: enshrine the struggles of the embattled. (p. 38)

As we shall see, the young Zuckerman’s literary tutelage, as well as his political views, are scrutinised tried and found wanting. This process results in the destruction of another pastoral: the dream of the virtuous proletariat who can be schooled en
masse into creating a better society. The examination of the changes in Nathan’s own beliefs about writing also provides a necessary background to the main trial of Ira Ringold.

The Trial of Ira and Murray Ringold

The main trial in Communist, a very literal one, is that of the radio actor Ira Ringold and once again we are in the terrain of people brought low by American life. As Murray says to Zuckerman right at the start:

I don’t remember anybody else brought down quite the way Ira was. It wasn’t on the great American battlefield he would himself have chosen for his destruction. Maybe, despite ideology, politics, and history, a genuine catastrophe is always personal bathos at the core. Life can’t be impugned for any failure to trivialize people. You have to take your hat off to life for the techniques at its disposal to strip a man of his significance and empty him totally of his pride. (p. 3)

Ira’s trial, however, also has an effect on others. Because of his Communism, his brother Murray is brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee. We learn how Murray loses his teaching job as a result and has to sell vacuum cleaners.

Ira’s activities have also had an impact on the young Zuckerman which the older Zuckerman knows nothing about until the fortuitous meeting with the elderly Murray Ringold, many years later, which commences the story. In talking to the older Zuckerman about what Ira suffered Murray says:

“About you, too, you know. About what happened to you?”
“Me?” I said. “Nothing happened to me. I was a kid”. (p. 15)

151 ‘Just substitute the proletariat for rustic shepherds’ says Derek Parker Royal in commenting on how the pastoral dream of a simple and uncontested life is moved from Old Rimrock, in American Pastoral to romantic conceptions of the working class in ‘Communist’. Derek Royal, ‘Pastoral Dreams and National Identity in American Pastoral and I Married a Communist’, in Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American author, ed. by Derek Royal (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), pp. 185–209 (p. 191).
Zuckerman then learns that he was probably denied a Fulbright Scholarship because of his close connection to Ira. This leads him to speculate that:

Of course it should not be too surprising to find out that your life story has included an event, something important, that you have known nothing about—your life story…is something that you know very little about. (p.15)

This remark sets out one of the main ways of building the narrative which is essentially a re-description, a fleshing out of the partial things Nathan glimpsed as a child. Murray tells him the story of his brother Ira from his adult’s point of view and in so doing Nathan gets a deeper picture of his fallen hero. The initial hero worship that Nathan has for Ira is similar to the worship that the young Zuckerman has for the Swede in American Pastoral. Both are glamorous and of imposing physical stature and their healthy physicality is generously described. As is, later, their physical decline.

The Ira Trial: Inciting events

There are a number of key events which lead to Ira’s downfall and once again, as in most of Roth’s books, desire is the force which drives the tragedy. This continues an essential Roth theme: the inability of individuals to live out the moral scripts created for them by society and their subsequent trial and punishment for transgression.

Having married Eve Frame, Ira discovers that the relationship between the mother and daughter is hostile and conflicted. Eve gets pregnant but has an abortion because her daughter, Sylphid, does not wish her to have Ira’s baby. Because of her neglect towards her daughter when younger, Eve is paralyzed with guilt and is emotionally blackmailed by Sylphid, who is anything but Sylph-like. One of the key catalyzing incidents which shows Ira to be a victim of not only America but also his own personal hubris occurs at a party given by Eve where he insults Bryden and Katrina
Grant, two rich socialites who seemingly have great power in the entertainment industry. He calls them Nazis because of their association with Werner Von Braun, the real German rocket engineer who later worked for NASA.

It is this insult that Murray believes has galvanized the Grants into pursuing a personal vendetta against the Ringolds and years later, in talking to the older Zuckerman, Murray opines that it was probably nothing more than pettiness that made the Grants go after them, firstly causing Murray to lose his teaching job and then ghost writing the book *I Married a Communist* for Eve. Ira’s downfall is brought about by two other crucial events. He is unfaithful to Eve with both his Estonian masseuse, Helgi Parn, and a friend of Eve’s daughter, Pamela Solomon. The tipping point comes when Helgi Parn, whom Murray calls the ‘deus ex machina with a gold tooth’, is patronized by Eve. Murray says of Helgi that:

> Behind the blanked-out Baltic mask, there was somebody reckless who knew when to strike out and how to strike out against her dismissive betters. And when she struck out at Eve she brought the whole thing down. (p.184)

Once again, as with so much of Roth’s work, it is illicit sexual desire that brings about the trial as well as the need for revenge. After Helgi reveals that she has been sexually servicing her husband, Eve calls the Grants and they break into Ira’s writing desk. Soon all of Ira’s subversive thoughts as a Communist are appearing in the gossip column ‘Grant’s Grapevine.’ Another woman who also ‘betrays’ Ira is the friend of Sylphid, the flutist Pamela Solomon with whom Ira has had an affair. As Murray tells us:

> There was a photograph that Ira had taken of Pamela at the shack. A photograph of her in her bathing suit, by the pond…Pamela wasn’t necessarily wrong in her appraisal of the danger to her of Ira’s Communist mess and of the mood of the country. The atmosphere of accusation, threat, and
punishment was everywhere. To a foreigner particularly, it looked like a
democratic pogrom full of terror. 152

The comparisons and the language used to describe the nature of America are
remarkably similar to those writers who have written about the former Soviet Union
under Joseph Stalin. Here, for example, is Roth writing about America and betrayal:

It was everywhere during those years, the accessible transgression, the
permissible transgression that any American could commit…the satisfaction
of undermining. Undermining sweethearts. Undermining rivals. Undermining
friends. Betrayal is in this same zone of perverse and illicit and fragmented
pleasure. (p. 264)

And here is Robert Conquest talking about the far more serious situation in the Soviet
Union and comparing the fear induced by the threat of being informed upon and the
fear experienced during the trenches in the First World War:

What is so hard to convey about the feeling of Soviet citizens through 1936-8 is
the similar long drawn out sweat of fear, night after night, that the moment of
arrest might arrive before the next dawn… Fear by night, and a feverish effort
by day to pretend enthusiasm for a system of lies, was the permanent condition
of the Soviet citizen.153

The important difference, however, between the types of trial experienced by the
average Soviet citizen during Stalin’s purges and the Black Listing of Americans
during McCarthyism is commented upon by Murray:

In an open society, as bad as it can get, there’s an escape. To lose your job and
have the newspapers calling you a traitor—these are very unpleasant things.
But it’s still not the situation which is total, which is totalitarianism. I wasn’t
put in jail and I wasn’t tortured. My child wasn’t denied anything…I could put
up a legal fight I had free movement…you can find alternatives, which I also
did. (p. 14)

152 IMC, p. 266. In the dialogues between Murray and Ira, the former reveals the latter’s frequently
delusionary state. Ira is constantly a victim of everything and everybody except himself. He tells
Murray that he is astonished by Pamela’s betrayal and that he had acted like a gentleman and left her
when she requested this. Ira’s attempts to take credit where no credit is strictly due are frequently
mocked by Murray. ‘I loved her.’ ‘Speak English. You loved fucking her’ (p. 270). ‘I never bothered
her again.’ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘be that as it may, honourable as you were in gentlemanly taking your leave
of six months of fancy fucking with your wife’s surrogate daughter, you’re in a bit of hot water now,
my friend’ (p.271). Murray’s re-descriptions always fall on deaf ears.
According to critics like Robinson, however, the liberal argument about the political limitations to McCarthyism misses the point. For Robinson fear during that time was institutionalised and Hobbesian and even though the label ‘Communist’ was unlike the apparitional ‘Sovereign’ that floats over the cover of *Leviathan* in that it did not possess the threat of massive state violence, it was still just as effective at getting people to conform.\(^{154}\)Ira’s trial then becomes like all the others in Roth: a physical and mental ordeal. This ordeal is an echo of the earlier Zuckerman novels. The endless self-questioning is there, as is the idea of an explosive book that begins a process of accusation and retribution. And the trial of the mind is reflected in the breakdown of the body. Roth uses the same type of interrogative discourse that we find in *Pastoral* with Swede Levov. Ira’s chastisement of his self is tragic-comedy:

> All his ranting Ira now directed at himself. How could this farce have wrecked his life? Everything to the side of the main thing…All the bourgeois shit! Why hadn’t he lived like O’Day? Why hadn’t he gone to prostitutes like O’Day? Real prostitutes, trustworthy professionals who understood the rules, and not blabbermouth amateurs like his Estonian masseuse. The recriminations started to hound him…The pile-on of humiliation that was the key to it. It wasn’t as though a book had been thrown at him—the book was a bomb that had been thrown at him. (pp. 281–282)

Once again there is Rothian comedy here—‘trustworthy prostitutes’—as well as tragedy. In his rants, Ira resembles Henri Bergson’s definition of a comic character—somebody who is visible to everybody but himself. In the way in which Ira reacts so predictably to many of the themes explored he does resemble the Bergsonian idea of ‘something mechanical encrusted upon the living’ and seems caught up in a

\(^{154}\) Robinson says that liberal critics ‘lambasted the social types of the 1950s as conformists, coining phrases like “the man in the grey flannel suit,” “the lonely crowd,” and “status anxiety.” But these were terms of moralistic accusation that evaded or sublimated the reality of McCarthyism. People were frightened during the 1950s, and they were frightened because of political repression. Their fear bore none of fear’s obvious marks; they did not resemble the terrorized face in Edvard Munch’s famous portrait *The Scream*. They looked instead like Hobbesian man—reasonable, purposive, and careful never to take a step in the wrong direction. Fear didn’t destroy Cold War America: it tamed it’. Corey Robinson, *Fear: the History of a Political Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 48–49.
psychological straitjacket. Lives being ‘detonated’ and the detonation being the source of the trial is a common theme in the American Trilogy. In *I Married a Communist*, the detonator is the book, in *American Pastoral* it is the bomb, and in *The Human Stain* the word ‘Spooks’.

Like the Swede in *American Pastoral*, the body of Ira Ringold breaks down. The body of Ira mirrors his mind. One doctor describes Ira as ‘hyperinflammatory’…He described Ira’s joints as quick to develop inflammatory reactions that rapidly escalate. Quick to inflame, slow to extinguish’ (p. 178). Finally, however, like the Swede and like Coleman Silk, Ira is ‘extinguished’ and dies by the Zinc Town rock dump, a place where he used to work with his mentor, the steelworker Johnny O’Day.

**Judgment on Trial**

As well as the pillorying of individuals during the trial, the conceits that they hold are also scrutinized. One is what we might call the utopia of a rational existence. Murray’s version of the good life, albeit one that is far more nuanced and sophisticated than Ira’s, is critical thinking and the scrutiny provided by great literature. Ira’s is the science and triumph of a Marxist theory of history. Both are wrecked by life. Murray’s through chance, Ira’s almost by design and character flaw. The hysteria and lack of emotional intelligence in most of the characters, apart from Murray Ringold, is one of the defining features of the book. All of them are

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156 Posnock notes, for example, how Roth’s work borrows ideas from his friend Milan Kundera, specifically a rejection of eighteenth century rationalism and a rejection of different forms of utopian thought, the most basic being the idea that people are essentially rational creatures. Reasonable discussion is in short supply in the American Trilogy. Posnock, p. 63.

157 Goleman’s bestseller partly borrows from Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* in saying that Emotional Intelligence is a matter of reacting to the right stimulus at the right time and with an appropriate degree of emotion. Daniel Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), pp. 43–44.
revealed to betray each other in various ways and all produce the kind of accusatory discourse we find in the other books. As Shechner says, *Communist* is one of Roth’s ‘noisiest’ books:

The waves of indignation that sweep through the novel eventually become the novel. Johnny O’Day fulminates at Ira Ringold; Ira fulminates at anyone in earshot; Sylphid fulminates at her mother; her mother fulminates at Ira; Murray Ringold fulminates for six nights at Nathan in the latter’s Connecticut retreat, and Nathan passes it on to us…a steamroller of woe. (p. 151)

This lack of emotional intelligence and the complete absence of any consequentialist thinking have dire results for Ira and what starts off as a simple domestic squabble becomes a slippery slope leading to public vilification in the press and the loss of his job. As Murray Ringold points out about Eve’s careless accusations:

The only hitch is that in the halcyon days of the Cold War, turning somebody in to the authorities as a Soviet Spy could lead right to the chair. Eve, after all, wasn’t turning Ira in to the FBI as a bad husband who fucked his masseuse. Betrayal is an inescapable component of living—who doesn’t betray?—but to confuse the most heinous public act of betrayal, treason, with every other form of betrayal was not a good idea in 1951. Treason, unlike adultery, is a capital offence. (p.265)

The paradox in Ira’s tragedy is that it is the thing that nearly destroys him that also saves him. After the abasement in the media and the loss of social standing Ira ends up in a ‘Semi-Disturbed Unit.’ And it is not the pure and unforgiving revolutionary ideologue that is Johnny O’Day who comes to his rescue, but, in a typically Rothian paradox, the very person who has betrayed him, his mixed up wife Eve Frame. Ira’s anger at his predicament, which has driven him into a near vegetative stupor, now

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158 Roth has a fine time sacking revolutionary purists and their shibboleths. The Communist steelworker Johnny O’Day works out with a punch ball like the ‘testicle off a dead hippopotamus.’ *AP*, p.228 He refuses Murray’s request for help with Ira and, apropos the latter’s ‘selling-out’ inconsistency, we are told that, ‘Who would dare to explain the failure of purity to a militant…Never in his life had O’Day been this with this one, and that with that one, and a third person with somebody else.’ *AP*, p. 289
pulls him out of it when he hears Eve’s voice. The tragic is once again mixed up with the comic:

God knows how long Ira might have languished in the Semi-Disturbed Unit if it hadn’t been for Eve… She was sorry, he mustn’t hate her, she couldn’t live her life knowing he hated her. (p. 289)

When Ira tries to find out why Eve betrayed him she says that ‘terrible pressures had been exerted’. It turns out that she was merely worried for the career of her harpist daughter. The lack of balance and the absurdity of her position reaches even Ira who ‘hits the Semi-Disturbed Unit roof’ (p. 289) upon finding out about why Eve wrote the book. Finally, the publicity machine that Eve has turned loose, turns against her. Her own Jewish self-hatred and anti-Semitism is exposed and she is revealed to be originally Chava Fromkin from the Bronx rather than the daughter of a respectable WASP whose grandfather was the ‘Captain of a Yankee Clipper’ and whose mother ‘ran a very nice tearoom’. 159 The publicity machine that has hunted Ira now turns on Eve. More lies are printed, this time claiming that Ira had nothing to do with the Communist Party and that the Communist plot to infiltrate the broadcasting industry was simply false. As Murray says, ‘by the time all these savage intellects…were finished…to find anything anywhere of the ugly truth that was the story of Ira and Eve, you would have needed a microscope’ (p.308). The fifties then is conceptualised by Murray as not only an era of conformity but also of gossip and prurience and trial by media:

The beginning not just of serious politics but of serious everything as entertainment to amuse the mass audience. McCarthyism as the first post-war flowering of the American unthinking that is now everywhere… McCarthy understood the entertainment value of disgrace and how to feed the pleasures of paranoia. He took us back to our origins, back to the seventeenth century and the stocks. 160

159 IMC, p. 308.
160 IMC, p. 284. Roth, of course, knows only too well the horrors of trial by media. Critics who believe his later work to show significantly greater postmodern development should recall his celebrated essay ‘Writing America Fiction.’ In it he notes the murder of the Grimes sisters and the attendant media
I have already noted, for example, the Culture Wars concept developed by theorists like Hunter. This concept has found recent expression and modification in the work of Cohen who notes the polarizing debates currently sweeping America and revolving around Republican candidates like Rick Santorum. The ‘battleground issues’ are still gay marriage and abortion. The conduit for these ‘all heat and no light’ debates are the talk show ‘Confessionals’ and the shock jock radio shows with their hissing, honking and shaming audiences.\(^{161}\) The Puritan origins of America and their ramifications have been written about at length by Roth and at the start of The Human Stain, with his depiction of the ‘ecstasy of sanctimony’ that attends Clinton’s Impeachment.

In I Married a Communist Eve Frame appears in her own ‘trial by media’ and with her unloving and unobliging daughter. In talking about this television programme, which is supposed to be about parents and their gifted children, Murray tells us that:

> What I realized watching that program was that this girl could never have loved her mother…The daughter has no understanding whatsoever of the life of a woman. All she has is her J’accuse. All she wants is to put the mother on trial before the whole nation. (p. 311)

Years later Sylphid deserts and betrays her mother and Eve dies a ‘hopeless drunk’.

The Search for Surrogate Fathers

\(^{161}\) Cohen describes a ‘shadow movement’ that produces this climate. This ‘shadow movement’ is predominantly religious. Nancy L. Cohen, Delirium: How the Sexual Counterrevolution is Polarizing America (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012). The discourse positioning of people on Talk Shows as being utterly beyond the moral pale is reflected in much of the serious analysis about them. See, for example, Joshua Gamson, Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
The trial of Ira and Murray Ringold is both a physical and mental ordeal. I have argued that many of the accusatory dialogues between the main characters show a lack of any kind of emotional intelligence and that this, in turn, does not hold out significant hope for rational discourse between people. A paradox, however, and one that continues some of the themes developed in the earlier Zuckerman trials, is that while the young Zuckerman seems initially in thrall to a series of surrogate father figures who judge and offer up their own versions of the good life—he very soon rejects most of their advice and is able to surmount their totalizing visions and desire to recruit him. This continues earlier themes of fathers judging sons and widens them into a debate which pits the claims of a reductionist political philosophy against a literary approach which insists upon the particular. As Zuckerman says about his many fathers:

Who are they? What is it, this genealogy that isn’t genetic? In my case they were men to whom I apprenticed myself, from Paine and Fast and Corwin to Murray and Ira and beyond—the men who schooled me, the men I came from…each in his turn, had to be cast off along with their legacy…thus making way for the orphanhood that is total, which is manhood. When you’re out in this thing alone. (p. 217)

This ‘Portrait of the Artist’ occurs through a pattern of initial acceptance and later rejection of various mentors and their ideas on life and art. For Ira, art and writing are about slogans and propaganda. As Murray says about his radio broadcasts:

There was the secrecy, the conspiratorial edge—hiring like-minded people, influencing the ideological bias of the script, however, they could. Ira would sit in his study with Artie Sokolow and try to force into the script every corny party cliché, every so-called progressive sentiment they could get away with…They imagined they were going to influence public thinking. The writer must not only observe and describe but participate in the struggle. The non-Marxist writer betrays the objective reality: the Marxist one contributes to its transformation. The party’s gift to the writer is the only right and true
worldview. They believed all that. Crapola. Propaganda. But crapola is not forbidden by the Constitution. And the radio in those days was full of it. 162

The overall verdict in *I Married a Communist* rejects totalizing narratives and one-book creeds. This rejection can be traced back to Roth’s defence of his own early work against the propagandistic idea that it should portray Jews in a positive light. For example, Gooblar notes how Roth made subsequent use of Bellow’s defence of *Goodbye, Columbus*. A response Gooblar argues which ‘best sums up’ the response of the so-called ‘New York Intellectuals.’ Bellow argues that:

> Here and there one meets people who feel that the business of a Jewish writer in America is to write public relations releases, to publicize everything that is nice in the Jewish community and to suppress the rest, loyally. This is not the business of Jewish writers or of writers of any kind… The loss to our sense of reality is not worth the gain. 163

Gooblar traces the development of this assertion of the importance of the self-asserting individual standing against society to the reaction which developed against the naivety of the old liberal belief in progress and the perfectibility of various social institutions and the destruction of this belief through the totalitarianism of autocrats like Stalin. This reaction found eloquent expression in the work of individuals like Lionel Trilling. 164 Roth has dramatised the dichotomy throughout his work and the trial is the vehicle he uses to drive forward the narrative.

In *I Married a Communist* the rejection of Nathan’s Ira-inspired, propagandistic view of life and art is hastened by the aesthete homosexual, Leo Glucksman, who is

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162 IMC, p. 217. Unlike Ira, Roth has repeatedly stated that he does not believe his writing emerges out of a desire to confront oppressive social forces. ‘Finally: “rebelling” or “fighting” against outside forces isn’t what I take to be at the heart of my writing…Over the years, whatever serious acts of rebelliousness I may have engaged in as a novelist have been directed far more at my own imagination’s system of constraints and habits of expression than at the powers that vie for control in the world’. *RMO*, p. 13.

163 Bellow in Gooblar, p. 12.

his tutor when he goes to University. Looking at one of Zuckerman’s first essays

Glucksman says:

“Art as a weapon?” he said to me, the word “weapon” rich with contempt and itself a weapon. “Art as taking the right stand on everything? Art as the advocate of good things? Who taught you all this? Who taught you art is slogans? Who taught you art is in the service of ‘the people’? Art is in the service of art—otherwise there is no art worthy of anyone’s attention. What is the motive for writing serious literature, Mr. Zuckerman? To disarm the enemies of price control? The motive for writing serious literature is to write serious literature.” 165

Not realizing that Leo is gay results in more comedy when the young Zuckerman finally tell him that he is going to run away and live with the Communist steelworker, Johnny O’Day, who looks like a ‘an ageing Montgomery Clift’. The jealous Leo explodes:

“You shit! You whore! Go! Get out of here! You two-faced little cocktease whore!” he said, and shoved me from the room and slammed the door. (p.239)

Zuckerman’s lack of understanding is mirrored by the other characters. Characters reveal little critical thinking and even less emotional intelligence. Ira cannot become the change he himself would like to see enacted in the world. His own personality is itself a critique on utopian ideals concerning the social engineering of humanity. Like Coleman Silk’s it is stained and riven with contradictions. And finally Ira is prepared to kill in pursuit of his own ideals. His endless harangues finally drive the young Zuckerman away and we are told:

165 Glucksman is the complete antithesis of Ira, but similar in that he believes in destiny. An elitist, he wants Zuckerman to join him in ‘being someone superior to the rest’ (p. 221). The mentor/ disciple relationship runs through most of the Zuckerman novels. Glucksman is another E.I Lonoff. In Communist Zuckerman’s development as an artist and a person pushes him through the tutelage of various father figures, starting with his own and moving through Ira, Johnny O’Day, Glucksman and most profoundly Murray Ringold who provides a much deeper outlook on life. Glucksman’s high modernist opinions and mistrust of totalizing visions put him at one with the critics of the time, especially Lionel Trilling.
Whatever the name of the driving new force that had come to the surface, it had come unbidden, all by itself, and was irreversible. The tearing away from my father, the straining of filial affection prompted by my infatuation with Ira, was now being replicated in my disillusionment with him. (p.194)

As Zuckerman moves through his various mentors the text builds to an overriding concern with both who and what shall have dominion over the self, both in public and private life. I would argue that the young Zuckerman’s process of continually testing and examining his various mentors, his endless sleuthing, is a more muted echo of the endless questioning that engages the main characters. As in the early Zuckerman novels, many surrogate fathers who stand in judgement are rejected. In I Married a Communist the young Zuckerman moves beyond his own father, and finally rejects Ira. Only his English teacher Murray Ringold retains his respect and admiration. Ira, on the other hand, never moves beyond the posturing of Johnny O’Day.

**Agency and Determinism: History and the Trial of Ira Ringold**

In the trial of Ira Ringold Roth argues that it is impossible to stand outside a particular historical moment. Like Coleman Silk and Swede Levov, Ringold is a victim of both himself and the times:

I had never before known anyone whose life was so intimately circumscribed by so much American history, who was personally familiar with so much American geography, who had confronted, face to face, so much American lowlife. I’d never known anyone so immersed in his moment or so defined by it. Or tyrannized by it, so much its avenger and its victim and its tool. To imagine Ira outside of his moment was impossible.¹⁶⁶

While this may suggest that in terms of judgement it may be difficult to stand outside history and obtain a ruling that is not influenced by the times, it is equally true that Ira’s character also shapes his fate. Despite the encircling nature of history there is a sense in which Ira’s tragedy has also been of his own devising and it is the development of this back story which complicates the idea that Ira is simply a victim

¹⁶⁶ *IMC*, p. 189.
of history. History cannot be totally determining because of the conflicted nature of human motivation. Ira’s portrait reveals the very irrationality which stops social processes from being completely defining. In *I Married a Communist* we get a psychological portrait of an ideologue like Ira who represents a complete failure to live up to his revolutionary ideals. The very conflicted fabric of his life seems to make this impossible. Ira betrays his beliefs in the very obvious sense that he fails to live up to them, but also in the sense that he ‘gives himself away’ usually in bursts of homicidal mania. And this failure is of the grossest kind. Ira, we must remember, is ultimately tried and convicted for the wrong crime: of being a ‘Communist’ rather than a murderer. Coleman Silk is convicted of being a racist rather than for the psychological ‘murder’ of his mother and family through abandonment. Ira has committed the ultimate act against the very idea of equality, which is, ostensibly, the sine qua non of his existence, by murdering the Italian thug called Strollo. He has also tried to kill people in the army, plans to kill Eve and her daughter and at the end of his life is happiest learning of her death. There has always been a dark side to Ira and it turns out that Nathan, in bringing out the man’s kinder feelings has always been a defence against it. The creation of Ira’s personality reveals his lack of purity with respect to revolutionary ideology. It also shows that history is a symptom and not an absolute cause of destiny. As Murray says of Ira’s revolutionary credentials:

> The Communist wants everything that is at the heart of bourgeois. Wants to get from Pamela what he thought he was getting from Eve when he was getting Sylphid instead. (p. 167)

If Ira is a far from pure representative of the proletariat, then so are some of his friends whom Zuckerman meets. Having known them years ago as Communists, these individuals have now been incorporated within the capitalist ethos. Early in the novel, for example, Ira takes Zuckerman to meet Ervin Goldstein, a sergeant that he knew in
the war. Goldstein has completely changed and now owns a mattress factory. In *American Pastoral* it is gloves that are being manufactured, in *I Married a Communist* it is mattresses. Listening to Ira’s spiel Goldstein tells the young Nathan not to listen.

He sounds very similar to Lou Levov talking about Gloves:

> You want to come down to my capitalist factory and watch a mattress being made the way a capitalist makes a mattress? You come down and you’ll talk to real working guys. This guy’s a radio star. Come on, Ira, you’re a star like Jack Benny—what the hell do you know about work? The kid comes to my factory and he’ll see how we manufacture a mattress. (p. 95)

This type of talk ignites Ira and we learn something of his violent past as Goldstein forces both Zuckerman and Ira out of the house at gunpoint saying:


Ira has a history. The idea of ‘history’ then, in the sense of simple biography and something you need to be ashamed of, is mentioned by Brauner in the scene where Murray’s daughter defends him when he is accused, at his own hearing, of ‘having a history’. 167 In *I Married a Communist* history is something that has to be purged. Ira cannot escape his history as a murdering ditch digger. Eve is still Chava Fromkin. Even Murray Ringold, clearly the most reasonable character, is at its mercy. In order to teach Murray opts to stay in a Newark of soaring crime, and for these progressive sentiments his wife is murdered. Murray tells us:

> Finally the Somebody hit her over the head. Just about half a mile up from where Ira killed Strollo, somebody cracked her skull open with a brick. For a handbag with nothing in it. (p. 317)

167 Brauner argues that, ‘Ever since *My Life As A Man*, Roth has been interested in the relationships between personal and political history, but *I Married A Communist* is his most explicit consideration of the relationship between private lives and public policy…In the sense that Grant uses it, ‘history’ signifies a shameful past, a stain on one’s character that can only be erased by a public ritual of purification’, Brauner, p. 156.
Murray’s being reasonable in the face of no reason leads him astray:

Murray had ‘failed to elude the turmoil of his time and place and ended up no less a historical casualty than his brother. This was the existence that America had worked out for him—and that he’d worked out for himself by thinking, by taking his revenge on his father by cri-ti-cal think-ing, by being reasonable in the face of no reason…Hopelessly entangled in the best of intentions, tangibly, over a lifetime, committed to a constructive course that is now an illusion, to formulations and solutions that will no longer wash. (p.318)

I link this to the failure of liberalism portrayed in American Pastoral and the earlier point made by Žižek about the limitations of tolerance and the difficulty of formulating a tolerant response in the face of intolerance. The Swede, although far less articulate than Murray, tries to be reasonable with his daughter. Murray tries to be reasonable with his brother, tries to engage him in discussion and reduce the worst of his excesses. Neither man succeeds.168

Finally Zuckerman doesn’t give Murray his verdict on the man’s life:

‘I was dying to say to him, “You weren’t had, Murray. That isn’t the proper judgement to be made of your life. You must know that it isn’t” But, as I am myself an aging man who knows what unexalted conclusions can be reached when one examines one’s history probingly, I didn’t. (p. 319)

The Stars are Indispensable: The final verdict

In talking about ‘constructive courses that are now an illusion’ Roth’s final verdict on the idea of human social improvement seems perilously close to a resigned and defeated quietism. The final scene sees Zuckerman retreating back to his shack in the

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168 In this way the American Trilogy casts a very sceptical glance on the ideals of human progress and the use of reason. Even the University, which presumably should be a bastion of level-headed thinking and inquiry, emerges in Stain as crushingly parochial and corrupt. In this way the American Trilogy seems to contain a significant amount of the despair we find in thinkers like the John Gray of Straw Dogs (2003) with a view of history as cyclical rather than linear and a questioning of Enlightenment Values.
He looks up at the stars and has an epiphany brought on by the cosmic perspective. Instead of an icy lake there is a cold sky full of hot stars:

Neither the ideas of their era nor the expectations of our species were determining destiny: hydrogen alone was determining destiny. There are no longer mistakes for Eve or Ira to make. There is no betrayal. There is no idealism. There are no falsehoods... What you see from this silent rostrum up on my mountain—is that universe into which error does not obtrude. You see the inconceivable: the colossal spectacle of no antagonism. You see with your own eyes the vast brain of time, a galaxy of fire set by no human hand. The stars are indispensable. (pp. 322–323)

This ending seems to offer a final verdict on a flawed humanity. The ‘inconceivable’ which is the ‘colossal spectacle of no antagonism’ does not seem to offer much hope for us except the consolation of an alien world. Posnock says of the ending that Roth approaches the radical immanence of Spinoza. Spinoza strips the universe of such man-made projections as purposes, goals, obligations, trends, in effect enlarging to cosmic dimensions Emerson’s insight that the “frame of things preaches indifferency. (p. 262)

While Posnock suggests interesting affinities between the Naturalism of Spinoza and the final starry scene in *Communist* he does not elaborate fully on the paradox that ‘the colossal spectacle of no antagonism’ would not make much headway in a Roth novel. In which way are the stars indispensable? Do they reduce and/or enlarge us? Posnock seems to suggest that this starry firmament is a massive enlargement taking us beyond our desires and preaching equanimity in the face of the tribulations that make up our life. The problem with this, however, is that, in Roth, it is mostly a large dose of Dionysian desire that makes us recognizably human in the first place. And while it is true that he shares superficial heretical affinities with Spinoza, the lineage between the two is uneasy and this part of Posnock’s argument does not fit

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169 In *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman does not even have his hut as a retreat, realizing that after his final confrontation with Les Farley out on the ice that he will have to move.
well when considering the idea of the Rothian rhapsody and the fecund and abundant engagement with life that so typifies most of his work.

In terms of the trial motif, the indifferent nature of the cosmic perspective does not hold out much hope for social justice or society. For many of the protagonists, all that can be managed, finally, is a retreat or withdrawal in order to avoid further punishment and even this seems illusory. Zuckerman’s retreat to his mountain is mirrored by Ira’s shack and Johnny O’Day’s anchorite single room. Zuckerman traces its lineage thus:

How did the idea of Ira’s shack maintain its hold so long? Well, it’s the earliest images—of independence and freedom, particularly—that do live obstinately on…the idea of the shack, after all, isn’t Ira’s. It has a history. It was Rousseau’s. It was Thoreau’s. The palliative of the primitive hut. The place where you are stripped back to essentials, to which you return—even if it happens not to be where you came from—to decontaminate and absolve yourself of the striving. The place where you disrobe, molt it all, the uniforms you’ve worn and the costumes you’ve gotten into, where you shed your batteredness and your resentment, your appeasement of the world and your defiance of the world. (p. 72)

However, as much as the stars may be indispensable, the most salutary warning comes not from the cosmos but from Murray Ringold who in remembering the dynamism of the younger Zuckerman warns him about the ‘temptation to yield’.

Things may be hopeless he seems to say, but we still need to get up in the morning:

Beware the utopia of isolation. Beware the utopia of the shack in the woods, the oasis defence against rage and grief. An impregnable solitude. That’s how life ended for Ira, and long before the day he dropped dead. (p. 315)

Although Posnock argues that ‘the stars’ are not simply another kind of pastoral retreat it is easy to imagine that Zuckerman is being reliably unreliable in his ‘galaxy of fire set by no human hand’ final ‘comforting’ verdict. The stars are at least ‘set’ by
human hands in their constellations and they are given massive mythic and human significance as a result. As a retreat from the process of endless trial and persecution and as offering the chance to ‘molt it all’, the ‘palliative of the primitive hut’ may be an illusion on another level, too. As theorists like McKibbon have argued ‘Nature’ and the idea of the Natural is itself a construction, a concept in retreat in a world where everything has become increasingly anthropogenic. As Zuckerman finds in The Human Stain, there is no pristine wilderness either on earth or as here, in the stars. In The Human Stain Zuckerman is hounded out of his retreat by the menace of Les Farley, in I Married a Communist there is a clear danger of malignant autonomy. The final argument of the novels, despite initial appearances, suggests the inevitability of continual engagement.

7: Conclusion: Dark Complexity and Engagement

I have argued, building partly on the work of Brauner, that a major motif in the writings of Philip Roth is that of a trial. Unlike Brauner, I see this structure as something that runs throughout Roth’s writings. Sometimes the trial is an explicit legal procedure and sometimes, especially in the American Trilogy, it is suggested by a series of dialogues that seem to be about America as a symbol and idea. In the early Zuckerman novels, the focus of the trial is very much on a younger man, unjustly accused of writing unflattering portrayals of Jews. These earlier narratives mirror the details of Roth’s real life. The books make use of the introspective psychoanalytical monologues that Roth perfected in Portnoy’s Complaint and the writer’s ‘appeal’ against the judgements seems centred, perhaps rather narrowly, on the nature of fiction and what can and should be said or written about Jewish identity. The Judges in these early books seem to be fathers and surrogate fathers as well as the local Jewish community. The ‘appeal’ seems to be essentially directed to these paternal authorities. Roth’s proxy alter-ego Nathan Zuckerman experiences censure and responds to it with a mixture of comedy and bravado, as well as a tacit acknowledgement that the writing process itself may not be as innocent as it first appears, either for the writers engaged in it or for the individuals written about.

While Brauner does not explicitly mention trial in his writings on the American Trilogy, I argue that it is still a major driving force in Roth’s later writing. What Brauner labels rituals of purification and utopian dreams create the conditions for persecution and this persecution is largely driven forwards by committees of people in legal and quasi-legal surroundings. In American Pastoral, the supposed benevolence
of liberal democracy is tested through a daughter’s fury at American involvement in
the Vietnam War. Whereas in the earlier novels the parents accuse the children of
impropriety, here the children lambaste the parents for their political apathy and
indifference to the foreign policies of their government. Whereas the earlier novels
reveal a concern with writing and the fictional portrayal of Jewishness, late
Zuckerman moves beyond ethnic identities and, as the final question in American
Pastoral makes clear, questions the morality and rationale of a largely apolitical,
consumerist lifestyle within an advanced capitalist society. In American Pastoral, I
have argued that a specific courtroom procedure is replaced by lengthy claims and
counterclaims, accusations and counteraccusations about how to live and the nature of
America. In the American Trilogy, these dialogues about the nature of America
emerge as accusations from brothers and daughters, state and university committees,
rather than simply from fathers to their sons. Roth’s theatre of persecution has
widened.

In The Human Stain, the persecutory forces emerge on a college campus and
through the banishment and trial of a college professor. The trial of Coleman Silk is
linked to the impeachment of President Clinton. While Brauner does not explicitly
focus on this, I have argued that these legal battles are foregrounded by the various
intense acts of reading and writing that occur throughout the text. I have also argued
that the many funerals in Roth’s work and their eulogies create a ‘conventionalised
narrative’ which attempts to conservatively recast any kind of transgressive life into a
form that is acceptable to the local community. The funeral eulogy in Roth offers a
final verdict on an individual’s life. It is the capping point of the trial.

Despite the difficulty of linking the work with the biography of the writer, I would
argue that the many trial-like, accusatory dialogues in the American Trilogy between
father and daughter, daughter and grandfather, father and son, brother and brother, go directly back to Roth’s own early experiences. At the surface level of the text, for example, the question mark is a ubiquitous mark of punctuation, especially in *American Pastoral*. Many of the dialogues have an inquisitorial nature and when Merry Levov says, in her final confrontation with her father, that ‘nothing I am saying is actionable daddy’, Seymour thinks, ‘the awful legalism. Not only the awful Jainism, but this shit too’ (p.264). This ‘legalism’ is something that Roth has been dealing with for a very long time, in both his private and writing life.

In early Zuckerman, writers are undone by books, in late Zuckerman single words can serve as brands which beget trial and retribution. Coleman Silk is branded a racist; Ira and Murray Ringold, Communists. Swede Levov is accused of everything from child abuse to being a ‘kindly rich liberal’ who doesn’t know anything about the world. These accusations are superheated because of the historical periods in which they occur. McCarthyism establishes the mood music to *I Married a Communist*, the Vietnam War to *American Pastoral* and the impeachment of President Clinton and political correctness form the background to *The Human Stain*. Unlike the earlier novels, the final sentences in the American Trilogy also broaden the focus to make it clear that the novels are ultimately meant to offer a wider comment on America and humanity. They ask for judgement, sometimes explicitly so, although from whom or what is not immediately clear. At the end of *American Pastoral*, for example, we are asked what is ‘wrong’ with the life of the Levovs. In *The Human Stain*, we are told that rarely does the image of a man, in this case unmolested murderer Les Farley, sitting out on the ice, offer up such a pure and peaceful ‘vision’. In *I Married a Communist*, the night stars offer us the ‘inconceivable’ which is the ‘colossal spectacle of no antagonism’. If Roth is offering us a verdict, in the loose sense of a
totalising and final opinion on a country, and through a chronicling of some of its most turbulent times, then this ‘verdict’ is not, overall, a particularly positive one. In contrast to a popular American mythology which trumpets the importance of eventual victory over adversity, the main characters in the America Trilogy, and at the end of their various legal and psychological ordeals, do not emerge stronger or wiser or necessarily victorious. Most of them are bloodied and broken. And many of them, like Murray Ringold commenting on Katrina Van Tassel’s presence at Nixon’s funeral, live to see their enemies and oppressors gain the ascendancy. Although Roth here offers a much broader comment and canvas about America than the early Zuckerman books, unlike Brauner, I would argue that he still uses the emotional trauma of his early experiences to continually feed his fiction and that these later books, in their quasi-legalese and structure, are to a great extent echo chambers of that earlier work.

I have tried to show how the Rothian trial may manifest itself as a slow stripping away of everything a person once was or as a curveball sent to remove the armoured carapace that has accumulated throughout a life and which shores up identity and sense of self. Roth’s vast oeuvre has meant that I have been selective. Roth’s book are now typically divided into a number of sections: ‘Zuckerman Books’, ‘Roth Books’, ‘Kepesh Book’, ‘Nemeses: Short Novels’, ‘Miscellany’ and a rather unfortunate yet seemingly capacious ‘Other Books’ section. Physical and emotional ordeals are a recurring feature of these works.

The late work, by which I mean the ‘Nemeses’ quartet of short novels and the final Zuckerman of Exit Ghost (2007), the last Kapesh of The Dying Animal (2002) and the ‘one-off’ Sabbath’s Theatre (2006), continues Roth’s focus on mortality. There are the same physical ordeals which faced the young Zuckerman. The difference is that these ordeals are faced by older men with limited resources. Whereas Roth focused
on the state in the American Trilogy, his late work has little obvious political content and largely examines the aging body in pain. What does it mean to grow old and what special challenges are posed by old age? Most of the trials here are physical and emotional ordeals. They take us back to the body in pain first described in *The Anatomy Lesson*.

*The Humbling* (2009) grouped with *Indignation* (2008) in the short novels category, features an ageing actor suddenly gripped by a paralyzing fear who is then unable to act. The critical reactions to the sexual shenanigans, where a heterosexual male has a sexual relationship with a lesbian, were almost similar in their incredulity as the reactions to *Portnoy’s Complaint*, albeit in a totally different direction. While the earlier book seemed to shock by the mere fact of writing about sex openly, the latter merely irritated by the seeming naivety of an author who should have known better than to question the absurdity of a lesbian ever having sex with a man.

While the younger Roth was castigated for betraying both the promise of what he could and should have written, the much older one seems to be managing a similar feat by refusing to respect what are now taken to be common sense demarcations in the realms of sexual politics. Roth is still, then, very much ‘on trial’, even if his age and assured place in the canon means that he no longer sees fit to issue book length, novelistic rebuttals.

Since *The Humbling* is about the relationship between a much older man and a younger woman, John Crace’s parody picked up on the rather obvious fact that the actor in the novel couldn’t ‘perform’ and went on to suggest that the whole book was nothing more than a species of sexual writer’s block. William Skidelsky evidenced

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the same cruel bill of particulars – an ‘old man’s sexual fantasy dressed up in the garb of literature’. In *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman calls his childhood baseball book, ‘The Kid from Tomkinsville’, a ‘Boy’s Own Book of Job’. *The Humbling* is an old man’s Book of Job and the trial is the physical ordeal placed on the main character by an ageing body.

In the later books, desire is not enough to remove the fear of dying. Nothing is enough. The ageing Lotharios of the late novels are either unmanned because they are unable to feel desire, or unable to do anything with it because it is unreciprocated. Desire itself becomes another source of potential punishment. *The Humbling* has famous actor Simon Axler following a typical Rothian trial downwards: a breakdown, hospitalisation and a relationship with a new woman who eventually leaves him. The difference is that while in the earlier work there seems to be a possible way forward, the only exit here is suicide. All inner resources seem exhausted and Axler only manages some creative remove from the awful reality of turning the gun on himself in the final ‘scene’, by *imagining* he is playing Treplev at the end of *The Seagull*. Only the imagination offers some brief respite and this is a very thin gruel. *The Humbling* maps out a typical feature of Roth’s work in the later works—the problem of intimacy between the generations. In the early works, it was intimacy between young men and their judging fathers; in the latter it is much younger women and men old enough to be their fathers—men who no longer have the power to enthral or captivate and who suffer through their expectations.

critics seem strangely akin to the puritanical reactions that gang up against Coleman Silk’s problematical ‘old fart virility’ in *The Human Stain*. The idea that Roth himself is somehow ‘deluded’ about relationships between older men and younger women is firmly rebutted by his novel *Exit Ghost* the last Zuckerman novel, so far. Here Zuckerman, an undesired and much older man does not ‘get’ the younger woman and can only fantasize about what he cannot obtain. The same happens to David Kapesh in *The Dying Animal*. 
Exit Ghost (2007) sees Nathan Zuckerman meeting a biographer called Richard Kliman who wants to write a book about Zuckerman’s old literary hero Emanuel Lonoff. Zuckerman does not like the way Kliman wants to portray Lonoff, but seems powerless to prevent him. The source of the trial for Zuckerman is both physical—he is both impotent and incontinent, and mental—his memory is going. Kliman emerges as a slightly brash and almost forceful version of the younger Zuckerman. His zest for life is contrasted with Zuckerman’s infirmity and the extinction of his peers:

Amy is no longer beautiful or in possession of all of her brain. I no longer have the totality of my mental functions or my virility or my continence…All of us are now “no longers” while the excited mind of Richard Kliman believes that his heart, his knees, his cerebrum, his prostate, his bladder sphincter, his everything is indestructible and that he, and he alone, is not in the hands of his cells. Believing this is no soaring achievement for those who are twenty-eight…They are not “no longers”…they are “not yetss” with no idea how quickly things turn…the other way.¹⁷²

We are never entirely sure if Zuckerman’s reasons for not helping the younger writer are entirely honourable. Kliman claims that old men, of necessity, hate young men. Zuckerman may simply dislike an earlier incarnation of his younger self:

There it was: The tactless severity of vital male youth, not a single doubt about his coherence, blind with self-confidence and the virtue of knowing what matters most. The ruthless sense of necessity. The annihilating impulse in the face of an obstacle…Everything is a target; you’re on the attack; and you, and you alone, are right.¹⁷³

This admission seems a partial disavowal of Zuckerman’s earlier self, the self that fed on provocation and the desire to affront, and a limited acknowledgement of the guilt he may now feel for that period of blind self-confidence and the ‘virtues of knowing what matters most’ when younger.

The trial in Exit Ghost as well as being connected to the infirmity of age also suggests that even death may not be a final judgement, as the story of who you were

¹⁷³ GW, p. 48.
can be rewritten beyond the grave. This biographical archaeology into another life emerges as yet another ordeal, or to use Roth’s word, an inquisition:

> Once I was dead, who could protect the story of my life from Richard Kliman... How will I have failed to be the model human being? My great unseemly secret. An astonishing thing it is, too, that one’s prowess and achievement, such as they have been, should find their consummation in the retribution of biographical inquisition. 174

This idea of a ‘biographical inquisition’ beyond the grave reflects Roth’s broader, often dramatised fear that the ‘trivialisation of everything’ and the hunger for the lurid details of celebrity biography will replace a real examination of the work. 175 It is ironic, however, that the elderly Zuckerman is now worried about the exposure of unseemly secrets since, as a younger novelist, it was something that propelled his fiction. The trial, then, has come full circle. 176 In Exit Ghost, Zuckerman is now worried about how both he and Lonoff will be written into history. How will they ultimately be appraised? The paradox is that it is now Zuckerman who acts as a possible barrier over the desires of the young to trample over the reputation of the old. He is the censoring force which refuses to support Kliman. As the latter protests:

> “This is censorship. You, yourself a writer, are trying to block the publication of another writer’s work”. (p. 270)

In the end, however, Zuckerman can only go back to the rural retreat where he came from. Desire cannot redeem mortality. He cannot stop Kliman and he cannot obtain the much younger woman whom he has become obsessed with. What the opening pages call the ‘soft headed fantasy of regeneration’ proves exactly that. Death seems

174 EG, p. 275.
175 Amy sometimes feels like a mouthpiece for Roth when she talks about ‘cultural journalism’ and how ‘there was a time when intelligent people used literature to think. This time is coming to an end’, GW, p. 181. In a letter to the Times, she bemoans the simplistic ‘ideological simplifications’ and ‘biographical reductivism’ of literary journalism.
176 Trying to establish a narrative timeline for the key events in Zuckerman’s life is complex. In The Counterlife, an earlier book, Zuckerman dies. So concerned is he about the ‘story’ of his life that he writes his own eulogy and has his agent read it. This earlier book seems to indicate a preoccupation with future ‘biographical inquisition’.
triumphant. To borrow from Yeats, Zuckerman the aged writer is now ‘a paltry thing’. The writer seems no longer able to manage sufficient inner resources to deal with the demands of life. Things seem immutable:

Kliman would pursue Lonoff’s secret with all his crude intensity…And along the way like Amy, like Lonoff, like Plimpton, like everyone in the cemetery who had braved the feat and the task, I would die too, though not before I sat down…and wrote the final scene of *He and She*…

Zuckerman’s only chance of softening the final verdict that proclaims you are nothing but a ‘paltry thing’, his only chance for some form of mitigation in the increasing humiliation that is death and dying, lies in writing. Hence he imagines running away with the younger woman Jamie Logan and in the final He/She dialogues imagines her coming to visit him in his hotel. Imagining a new beginning rather than an ending achieves a limited transcendence of his enfeebled condition.

Even Zuckerman’s desire itself, however, seems half-imaginary: a sort of amputee memory of desire. For as we are told, ‘the sexual union with women had been broken so abruptly by the prostate surgery that I could not prevent myself from pretending otherwise and acting on behalf of an ego I no longer possessed’. All Zuckerman can do at the end is encapsulated in the Shakespearean stage directions of the title—*Exit Ghost* and, in this case, return to a rural retreat.

*Everyman* (2006) also examines ageing and death. The structure, conceived loosely along the lines of the medieval morality play, immediately sets up the idea of trial and judgement with our allegorical representative in the original called to account for his actions and duly sentenced to Heaven or Hell. Once again the novel tells the story of an aging man who has been whittled away by illness and loss. Marriage has

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177 *GW*, p. 280.
178 This transcendence is typically compromised, however. Even in fantasy, death intrudes. The last image produced by the dialogues that Zuckerman constructs about Jamie Logan are of the two of them frolicking in the bayous. ‘Good. Hurry. Into insanity. Off with your clothes and into the bayous. (*He hangs up*) Into the chocolate-milk-coloured water filled with dead old trees’. *EG*, p. 292.
179 *GW*, p. 278.
become an unendurable ‘sentence’ and, following the promptings of desire, Everyman has rejected his loyal wife and eloped with a woman in her early twenties.\textsuperscript{180}

There are funerals and angioplasts and stents and, as in so many Roth books, unforgiving sons who cannot get beyond their father’s early philandering. As in \textit{Exit Ghost} and \textit{The Humbling} loss and loss of control are the main forces of the trial that need to be confronted. Desire leads Everyman out of the prison of marriage but leaves him stranded with a much younger wife who proves hopeless. Everyman’s ‘plea’ to the reader, which he makes intermittently, is that he is sure ‘of his right, as an average human being, to be pardoned ultimately for whatever deprivations he may have inflicted on his innocent children in order not to live deranged half the time’.\textsuperscript{181} Here, then, we have the same Rothian pleading to some kind of higher authority.

It is difficult to assess the guilt of Everyman. In his deferrals and denials the unnamed protagonist sounds very similar to the David Kapesh of \textit{The Dying Animal} with his essentially ‘not guilty’ plea arguing that the ultimate defection to the Rothian succubus of desire merely represents a pathetic and doomed attempt to live as an assailable human-being. In writing about \textit{Exit Ghost}, Wood claims that:

\begin{quote}
The danger in Roth's work has always been a slightly sentimental didacticism; an example is the coercive way he has leaned on the word "human" in the past few years--one of those words which always answer their own questions. In Roth's world, to be human is to have the "human stain," is to get things wrong, to get people wrong, to make mistakes, to have a sexual body, to be messy and vital and, above all, male. Roth has sometimes resembled a man standing on a corner wearing a huge sandwich board bearing the words, in irritatingly hectoring capitals, "WE ARE ONLY HUMAN"; "Everyman," a book both deeply moving and somewhat self-pitying, seemed to switch the board for one with the message "WE ARE DYING." His new novel is a better novel than
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{180} ‘But instead marriage had become a prison cell, and so, after much tortuous thinking that preoccupied him while he worked and when he should have been sleeping, he began fitfully, agonizingly to tunnel his way out’. \textit{EV}, p. 31.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{181} The children, however, remain convinced of his guilt. ‘Into their forties they remained with their father the children that they’d been back when he’d left their mother, children who by their nature could not understand that there might be more than one explanation for human behaviour—children, however, with the appearance and aggression of men, and against whose undermining he could never manage to maintain a solid defence’. \textit{EG}, p. 97.}
\end{footnotes}
"Everyman," intricate, artful, and pressing, and avoids sentimentality with the comedy that the latter novel lacked. 182

The verdict on life in *Everyman* is captured by the words of his daughter who repeats *Everyman’s* earlier advice, saying, over his coffin, ‘There’s no remaking reality just take it as it comes. Hold your ground and take it as it comes. There’s no other way’. 183 Roth’s writing continually points to the importance of the material universe and what he sees as the absurd claims of believers. His writing proclaims the same verdict as the corpse rising out of the grave in the Goya etching: Nada. 184

In *Everyman* death itself, while not a blessing, represents the only reprieve for a body ‘transformed…into a storehouse for manmade contraptions designed to fend off collapse’. 185 Here the ordeal revolves around the slow destruction of the body as it moves through life. While Roth’s novel lacks the explicit religious references of the original story, it shares the way in which both protagonists become increasingly isolated. The original scourging of *Everyman* is, in Roth, represented by the pitiless collapse of the body. Roth’s narrative of a male body is essentially a description of the medical history of that body and all its progressive enfeeblements. In the end, however, Roth’s *Everyman* dies unprepared for death and without reconciling with himself or others. The verdict on his life seems to be a typically Rothian one: it was messy and unprepared and in most ways ungovernable.

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182 James Wood, ‘Parades End’, *The New Yorker*, 31 October 2007, p. 94. One crushing image, slightly leavened by subtle comedy, is Zuckerman’s description of his own impotence. He writes of ‘a man bearing between his legs a spigot of wrinkled flesh where once he’d had the fully functioning sexual organ…The once rigid instrument of procreation was now like the end of a pipe you see sticking out of a field somewhere, a meaningless piece of pipe that spurts and gushes intermittently, spitting forth water to no end, until a day arrives when somebody remembers to give the valve the extra turn that shuts the damn sluice down’. *EG*, pp. 109–110.

183 This is clearly the same verdict in many of the novels. As we have already stated it is characterised by Posnock as ‘Being Game’ in the face of adversity.

184 Even the most cursory glance through recorded interviews about the later work shows Roth repeating that he doesn’t believe in God.

185 *EV*, p. 16.
*The Dying Animal* (2001) – the phrase taken from the Yeats poem ‘Sailing to Byzantium’– is a continuation of the life of the academic and cultural commentator David Kapesh. Kapesh’s trial is something that moves him from an aloof and detached perspective concerning love into a deeper and more engaged commitment. The focus of the trial, typically, is thwarted desire and what it brings. The heart of Kapesh is ‘sick with desire’ and this tortures him, but the person who is dying is his much younger lover. A person with whom he has fallen in love and in so doing broken his golden rule of malignant autonomy. Kapesh wants to be physically desired but this seems impossible because he is a much older man. The unequal nature of their desire is why he ‘never has a moment’s peace’ and feels perpetually jealous.

For the youthful Kapesh, desire and transgression led him away from the ‘sentence’ of marriage. While still young he seduced many of his students, in old age the Rothian trial turns this master-pupil relationship upside down. Whereas in the past it was Kapesh who was in charge, now it is his younger female student. The jealousy is consuming and the difference between their ages a further source of pain. The trial for Kapesh both ends and starts when Consuela breaks off their relationship. She only returns when she has cancer and in a despairing gesture throws off her hat to reveal her cancer-shorn hair:

> It was appalling to see her without the hat. A woman so young and beautiful with sort of feathery hair, very short, thin, colourless, meaningless hair.186

The ordeal of David Kapesh moves him from malignant autonomy towards the love of another person. The ending has him hurrying off to be by his younger lover’s side while his inner voice still urges caution in giving up self-sovereignty.

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186 *DA*, p. 154. The ‘meaningless’ hair is a similar image to the ‘meaningless’ pipe or spigot that gushes from Zuckerman in *Exit Ghost*. Both potentially point to a Godless universe.
The later novels reject, then, what Roth has called the myth of the golden years.\(^{187}\)

This is another conventionalised narrative that Roth rebels against, as is the cliché that people, especially men, should ‘act their age’. Roth’s older characters, like their younger selves exemplify the Groucho Marx dictum about not wanting to belong to any club that would admit somebody like them for a member. Many of them who believe they have ‘got it figured’ usually find themselves within the mincer of the trial and, to borrow from the other Marx, soon discover that, ‘All that is solid melts into air’.\(^{188}\) At a more general level, and even though they share the suspicion of Bellow’s character Augie March concerning ‘Recruitment’, Roth’s characters are, at the same time, far more sanguine about human possibility than Augie’s ‘eligibility to be noble’\(^{189}\).

The Rothian trial rather bleakly argues that we are not really ‘eligible’ to be anything- other than ultimately dead. More often than not we make a mess of things and carry on doing exactly the same thing. This makes progress difficult. Reason and desire do not work together in the Socratic sense. In Roth the dark horse of passion frequently usurps the white horse of reason. Betrayed by apparently ungovernable desire people, mostly men, erect shakier familial structures and attempt to compartmentalize their lives. These highly dubious forms of escape are what Roth defines as counter living and are at their most apparent in his novel *The CounterLife*. How reasonable the desire that leads to the ‘Counterlife’ and how unreasonable the

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187 Roth has spoken of the myths of aging in many interviews. A fairly representative one is ‘Old Age is a Massacre’ from a Spiegel interview (2006) <http://m.spiegel.de/international/a-433607/> [accessed 4 January 2011]

188 From *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).

189 In the opening pages of *The Adventures of Augie March* we are asked, ‘What did Danton lose his head for, or why was there a Napoléon, if it wasn’t to make a nobility of us all? And this universal eligibility to be noble, taught everywhere, was what gave Simon airs of honour’. Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (New York: Viking Press, 1953), p. 29.
censorious response is frequently the focus of the trial.\textsuperscript{190} If Roth is more firmly related to Kafka than Bellow, it does not follow that his fiction is completely bleak and despairing. As Posnock suggests, one of the principle things that we take away from Roth is the importance of ‘Being Game’ in the face of adversity. It is never clever, as the much older Murray Ringold reminds the aging Zuckerman at the end of \textit{I Married a Communist}, to ‘give in to the temptation to yield’.

Roth’s fiction is littered with examples of people who have blazed a comet’s trail of destruction only to be consumed by their own hubristic silliness. In the face of their fantasies and the trials and punishments that they generate, Roth argues for the principle of flow, of not trying to hold on to anything.\textsuperscript{191} He is, to borrow from Isaiah Berlin, a typical fox rather than a hedgehog: a writer who distrusts totalizing explanation and conventionalised narratives and the verdicts and punishments that they produce. In a world of crushing forces and totalizing explanations, Roth’s fiction insists on the importance of paradox and nuance. David Kapesh hurries off to be by his younger lover’s side even though she will probably leave him when better. In \textit{Exit Ghost}, Nathan Zuckerman writes his own beginning when he cannot accept the ‘ending’ he has been given. The eponymous Mickey Sabbath of \textit{Sabbath’s Theatre} (1995) finally realizes, towards the end of his own ‘shit-filled’ and ‘despairing life’,

\textsuperscript{190} In Roth it is usually sex that drives forward the trial and particularly the refusal to stay within the boundaries of the socially approved. David Kapesh expresses a typically Rothian position saying that, ‘It’s the chaos of eros we’re talking about, the radical destabilization that is its excitement. You’re back in the woods with sex. You’re back in the bog’, p. 20. For Kapesh marriage is only a ‘stimulant to the thrills of licentious subterfuge’, p. 111. Desire is a form of immortality. He argues that men typically think, ‘Yes, I understand that sooner or later I’m going to relinquish sex in this marriage, but it’s in order to have other, more valuable things. But do they understand what they’re forsaking? To be chaste, to live without sex, well, how will you take the defeats, the compromises, the frustrations? By making more money, by making all the money you can? By making all the children you can? That helps, but it’s nothing like the other thing. Because the other thing is based in your physical being, in the flesh that is born and the flesh that dies…It’s not the sex that is the corruption—it’s the rest. Sex isn’t just friction and shallow fun. Sex is also the revenge on death’, p. 69.

\textsuperscript{191} As Posnock argues quoting Uncle Asher from \textit{Letting Go}, it is not good to be a ‘canner’ of experience ‘Things come and go, and you have got to be a receptacle, let them pass right through…What are you going to grow up to be, a canner of experience? You going to stick plugs in at either end of your life? Let it flow, let it go’. Posnock, p. 85.
that he doesn’t want to kill himself after all. He has just been put through it by a flawed and wretched humanity every bit as degraded as himself but knows, in the end, that:

He couldn’t do it. He could not fucking die. How could he leave? How could he go? Everything he hated was here.\textsuperscript{192}

The fiction of Philip Roth acknowledges the darkness and complexity in our lives but stresses the importance of continued engagement.

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