

HANIF
KUREISHI
GABRIEL'S GIFT



Gabriel's Gift

HANIF KUREISHI



For Kier

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Chapter One

‘School – how was, today?’

‘Learning makes me feel ignorant,’ said Gabriel. ‘Has Dad rung?’

As well as the fact he didn’t know where his father was, something strange was happening to the weather in Gabriel’s neighbourhood. That morning, when he left for school with Hannah, there was a light spring shower, and it was autumn.

By the time they had reached the school gates, a layer of snow sat on their hats. At lunch-time on the playground, the hot floodlight of the sun – suddenly illuminated like a lamp – had been so bright that the kids played in shirtsleeves.

In the late afternoon, when he and Hannah were hurrying home along the edge of the park, Gabriel became certain that the leaves in the park were being plucked from the ground and fluttered back to the trees from which they had fallen, before turning green again.

From the corner of his eye, Gabriel noticed something even odder.

A row of daffodils were lifting their heads and dropping them like bowing ballerinas at the end of a performance. When one of them winked, Gabriel looked around before gripping Hannah’s hair with his hand, something he had always been reluctant to do, particularly if a friend might see him. But today was different: the world was losing its mind.

‘Has he been in touch?’ Gabriel asked.

Hannah was the foreign au pair.

‘Who?’ she said.

‘My father.’

‘Certainly no. Gone away! Gone!’

Gabriel’s father had left home, at Mum’s instigation, three months ago. Unusually, it had been several days since he had phoned, and at least two weeks since Gabriel had seen him.

Gabriel determined that as soon as they got back he would make a drawing of the winking daffodil to remind him to tell his father about it. Dad loved to sing, or recite poetry. ‘Fair daffodils, we weep to see / You haste away so soon ...’ he would chant as they walked.

For Dad the shops, pavements and people were alive like nature, though with more human interest and as ever-changing as trees, water or the sky.

In contrast, Hannah looked straight ahead, as if she were walking in a cupboard. She understood little English and when Gabriel spoke to her she grimaced and frowned like someone trying to swallow an ashtray. Perhaps they were both amazed that a kid spoke better English than she did.

Although Gabriel was fifteen, until recently his father had usually walked him home from school in order to keep him away from any possible temptations and diversions. Not long ago Dad had had to rescue Gabriel from a dangerous scene in a nearby block of flats. Fortunately Dad was a musician and often had spare time during the day; too much spare time, said Gabriel’s mother, who had started to find Rex himself somewhat ‘spare’. Going to the school had been the only ‘structure’ Dad had, apart from his daily visits to the pub, where several of the other parents also considered the world through the bottom of a beer glass.

Gabriel and his father often stopped at cafés and record shops. Or they went to collect the

photographs Gabriel had taken recently, which were developed by a friend of Dad's who had a dark room. In the sixties and seventies this man had been a successful fashion and pop photographer. The girls with ironed hair and boys in military jackets he had 'immortalized', as he liked to put it, were as distant to Gabriel as Dickens's characters. The man was out of fashion himself and rarely worked anymore; however, he liked to talk about photography, and he lent Gabriel many books and tore pictures from newspapers, explaining what the photographer had tried to do.

Dad liked to say that school was the last place where anyone could get an education. But outside, your eyes were open, there were teachers everywhere. All that Dad recalled from his own school-days was something about wattle and daub, freezing swimming pools at nine in the morning, and the rate of glacier movement, which was – well, he couldn't remember.

Getting home was a protracted business for Gabriel and his father. Planting his legs wide on the pavement and swinging his hand for illustration, Dad would ask the most intimate questions of people he knew only vaguely – How much do you drink? Do you still go to bed together? Do you love her? To which, to Gabriel's amazement, the person not only answered but elaborated on, often interminably. Gabriel's father nodded and listened. The two of them would discuss the results for the rest of the walk home.

Now Dad had gone and was living somewhere else. If the world hadn't quite been turned upside down, it was at an unusual and perilous angle, and certainly not still.

Since Dad's departure, Gabriel's mother insisted that Hannah pick Gabriel up. Mum didn't want to worry about him more than she already did.

Today, as Gabriel and Hannah rushed on, there was a sound behind them: it was either a giant clapping in their ears, or thunder. Going up the front path, a cloud of fog and hail descended and they couldn't see in front of them. Gabriel tripped on the step, but luckily Hannah was ahead of him. At least she guaranteed a soft landing.

When Gabriel returned from school these days, the house almost echoed. Neither of his noisy quarrelsome parents came to the door. Normally he, Mum and Dad would have Earl Grey in a pot and crumpets soggy with butter – 'I love a bit of crumpet in the afternoon,' Dad would always say, and a remark that could only have hastened his departure – and cakes; they loved anything involving cream and chocolate.

What had happened was this.

One evening, three months ago, Gabriel had looked out of the living-room window and seen his father packing his clothes and guitars into the back of a friend's van. Dad returned to the house, kissed his son, and waved at him from the street.

Gabriel had run to the gate. 'Where are you going?'

'Away,' said Dad. 'For a time.'

'On tour?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'On holiday?'

'No. No ...'

'Where then?'

'Gabriel –'

'Is it my ... er, bad behaviour, that has caused this?'

'Could be ... Oh, don't be stupid.'

In a hurry to get away, and not wanting to talk, his father had stood there with his oldest guitar under one arm and a shaving bag, briefcase and trumpet under the other. For some reason he had a camera round his neck, as well as a bag out of which shirts were tumbling; his pockets were packed with underpants and socks; planted on his head were several woolly hats.

‘Go inside,’ he said. ‘Keep warm.’

‘When are you coming back?’

‘I will explain everything later,’ he said, as he always did when he intended to say nothing.

‘Don’t go.’ Gabriel took his hand. ‘Stay a bit longer. I won’t interrupt when you’re talking for long time.’

His father had pulled away. ‘I’ve got to get out. It’s what your mother wants. Will you pick up those socks for me? You know I can’t bend over.’

Gabriel had stuffed the fallen socks into his father’s top pocket. Dad climbed into the van.

As it started to draw away, Mum had raced from the house and flung at the van, with hysterical strength, a forgotten pair of Dad’s boots which the car behind ran over, crushing them. When the van stopped and Dad climbed down to pick up his useless flattened footwear, Gabriel wondered whether his father might return to the house.

‘My favourite part of that man is his back.’ Mum had said, slamming the door. ‘But what will happen now, I don’t know. You never stop eating and wanting!’

‘Me?’ he said. This was normally how she talked to Dad.

‘We haven’t got any money!’ she said.

‘We’ll have to earn some.’

‘What a good idea. When are you going to start work?’ She looked at him properly. ‘In lots of ways you’re still a little kid but actually you’re big enough. But I wouldn’t want you to put up with what I’ve been through.’

The rumble and whirr of his mother’s sewing machine had been the soundtrack to Gabriel’s childhood. She had started off, in a more glamorous time, by making party clothes for her young, fashionable friends in the music business, and then for the bands, their managers and groupies. Mum had done this as a favour and because she liked to please. Had she been a designer like her heroine Vivienne Westwood, she might have progressed.

As it was, for the last few years she had supported herself, Gabriel and Rex by working in a cramped room in the house, making tour jackets for groups, roadies and their helpers. Sometimes she had to work all night for weeks to have them ready, doing everything herself, with only opera on the radio for company.

A few years ago, when the country decided it should become entrepreneurial and began dizzily to bolt about like someone who’d just awoken from an overlong sleep, she had tried to expand the business by renting a small warehouse and employing the unemployed. But the work had become irregular and she had got into debt. Now, working alone again, the job was lonely. She was looking for something else; somehow her whole life had become a ‘looking for something else’.

Gabriel considered the ideas his parents used to enjoy discussing over supper. One of them was for a shop that sold only blue objects. Another was for a shop that sold pyjamas.

‘It isn’t difficult to see why we haven’t been able to afford a new carpet for years,’ Mum had said.

A better idea was for a shop where you could pop in to have your dreams interpreted and be told about your future. Mum had said this wasn’t entirely vapid: if you saw the present or the past in a dream you could predict the future, since for most people the present was merely the past with a later date. Gabriel wasn’t sure how lucrative this would be, even if dreams, like pyjamas, were something that everyone had to have.

‘At night even the most conservative of us becomes an avant gardist,’ his mother had said.

Gabriel had been very interested in this. ‘I want to be an avant gardist all the time.’ he said.

‘That’s why they have schools,’ said his father. ‘To stamp out that kind of thing.’

His parents had argued a lot, saying the same things repeatedly, louder each time. He remembered his father placing objects in inconvenient positions on the floor, in the hope that Mum would fall over

and break her neck.

It was clear that she, in her turn, wanted Rex to wake up one day as a different sort of person, the type who earned money, didn't mind cleaning, sometimes kissed her, and was less melancholic than her. A tall order, obviously.

Gabriel had never seen his mother more agitated than on the day his father left. She had gone into her room and shut the door. What could Gabriel do but sit outside trying to draw, waiting for her? It reminded him of standing on a chair at the window as a child, awaiting Mum's return from the shops.

'When I'm gone, you won't know what to do without me,' Dad used to say.

'When you're gone, Rex, we'll know exactly what to do. Our souls will soar. You're the ballast in our balloon, mate. We'll be better off in every way,' his mother replied.

Would they be?

He thought he heard his mother opening the window. Drawers were pulled out; the wardrobe door banged. For too long, there was silence. He wanted to call someone. But who? The police? A neighbour? Mum might stay in bed for days, perhaps for weeks. If she wasn't arguing with Father, what would she do?

He had noticed, in his friends' parents too, that there were different styles of madness for men and women, fathers and mothers. The women became obsessive, excessively nervous, afraid and self-hating, fluttering and blinking with damaged inner electricity. The men blunted themselves with alcohol and cursed, blamed and hit out, disappearing into the pub and then into jail.

When it came to suffering, Gabriel's mother was, at least here, something of an artist, with a range of both broad and subtle manoeuvres. She could enter an airless tunnel of silence that would wither Rex and Gabriel until they felt like dried sticks; or she could put together words and noises of a force that could fling them against a wall and leave them shaking for days. Whichever method she selected was guaranteed to ensure that her 'common-law' husband and son felt it was them – bad guilty men, both – who had strangled and stifled her.

Waiting for her, the words 'broken' and 'home' had come to mind. 'He's from a broken home,' he recalled people saying of other children, with knowing pity. He pictured a drawing ripped in two, and a doll's house with an axe through it. He thought of how it felt to miss people and the relief of their return. With his father, though, it seemed to be an absence without end. Gabriel had never been angrier. It wasn't even as though he had been consulted. But what family was ever a democracy from the kids' point of view?

At last he had looked up. He would know what the future would be like.

The door had opened. His mother was wearing her darkest, most menacing clothes and make-up; her hair was scraped back.

'Get our coats.'

'Are you going to get a new boyfriend?'

'I'll find a job first. It's time we got moving.' As he hurried for their coats, she said, 'I think you'll quite like all this exciting action.'

'So do you,' he said.

'Maybe,' she said. 'Now – into the future!'

That evening and the next morning she and Gabriel had gone to offices, shops and restaurants, asking, wheedling and arguing.

'Not you, I don't want to see you, but the boss!' Mum had said to the unfortunate person deputised to dismiss her.

This technique had been successful.

His mother had started work the following Monday, as a waitress in a fashionable new bar replete with armchairs, lamps and big windows, where young people could do what they enjoyed most: study.

themselves and one another in numerous mirrors. Like all the bars now, it was bathed in coloured light, blue or red or pink.

‘They asked me whether I’d had any experience,’ she had told him. ‘Experience, I said! I’m a mother and wife. I’m used to waiting on ungrateful, detestable people.’

He had been to the bar but didn’t like the way young people in polo-necks, puffa-jackets and leather trousers snapped their fingers at her and shouted ‘Excuse me!’ or ‘Waitress!’ as she flew over the floor with tiers of dishes attached to her, looking as though she were trying to carry an open Venetian blind. Now Gabriel crossed the road when he came to the place. At work, she was like a woman he used to know.

The new bar was an indication of either futile hope or a new direction. The city was no longer home to immigrants only from the former colonies, plus a few others: every race was present, living side by side without, most of the time, killing one another. It held together, this new international city called London – just about – without being unnecessarily anarchic or corrupt. There was, however, a little chance of being understood in any shop. Dad once said, ‘The last time I visited the barber’s I came out with a bowl of couscous, half a gram of Charlie and a number two crop. I only went in for a shave!’

Their neighbourhood was changing. Only that morning a man had been walking down the road with a mouldy mattress on his head, which you knew he was going to sleep on; other men shoved supermarket trolleys up the street, looking for discarded junk to sell; and there were still those who had no idea of dressing up was to shave or put their teeth in.

However, there lived, next door, pallid television types with builders always shaking their heads on the front step. If you weren’t stabbed on the way, you could find an accurate acupuncturist on the corner, or rent a movie with subtitles. In the latest restaurants there was nothing pronounceable on the menu and, it was said, people were taking dictionaries with them to dinner. In the delis, queens and pinnies provided obscure soups for smart supper parties. Even ten years ago it was difficult to get a decent cup of coffee in this town. Now people threw a fit if the milk wasn’t skimmed to within a centimetre of its life and the coffee not picked on their preferred square foot of Arabia.

For those who knew, what really presaged a rise in house prices was the presence of film crews. Hardly a day passed without tangled wires on the pavement, people with clipboards wearing black jackets, numerous trucks, and fans, thieves and envious kids drawn by the self-importance of what was little happening very slowly. Gabriel was one of those kids. To him the word ‘Action’, preceded by the particularly intriguing ‘Turn over!’, had a mesmeric effect. He couldn’t wait to use these words on himself.

Because his mother worked most of the day now, and often, in the evening, didn’t come back until he was asleep, she wanted someone to keep an eye on Gabriel and look after the house. She had said to one of her women friends, ‘I’d no sooner leave a teenager alone than I would a two-year-old. In fact, the teenager would get into more trouble!’

Hannah, a refugee from a former Communist country, was that restless eye, which slept, encased in the rest of her, on a futon in the living room.

‘Why have you chosen her?’ Gabriel had whisperingly enquired, the first time Hannah came to the house.

She was a big round woman, like a post-box with little legs, dressed always in widow black.

‘Unlike you, she’s incredibly cheap to run,’ was the reply. ‘What were you expecting?’

‘Julie Andrews, actually. Hannah’s fat.’

‘I know.’ She was laughing. ‘But make friends with her. If you let yourself get to know people, you might come to like them.’

‘Is that right?’

‘Please try and help me, Gabriel. I’ve never been through such a difficult time. I want us to have good life again.’

He had to promise to try. But his mother didn’t trust him and she could have; she seemed to take pleasure in punishing him, as if she wanted to hurt everyone around her for what had happened.

Hannah was, as far as Gabriel was able to make out, from a town called Bronchitis, with a winding river called Influenza running through it. She had been recommended to them by a friend, or perhaps the person was secretly their enemy. Whatever the situation, when Hannah came to them with her Eastern European clothes and cardboard suitcase, she had nowhere else to live.

Mum had explained, in her practical way, ‘Hannah, you will have to sleep in the living room. But at least you will have accommodation, a little pocket money, and as much as you can eat.’

The words – ‘as much as you can eat’ – had proved to be unwise.

Hannah, whose only qualification with children was the possibility that she might once have been a child herself, at least knew how to eat. When she first arrived in England after spending three disoriented days in a coach admiring the motorways of Western Europe, she would walk around those heavens called supermarkets, twisting with desire and moaning under her breath like someone who had pushed a door marked Paradise rather than Tesco. To her, what people threw away would be a banquet.

Hannah could eat for England; she saw any amount of food in front of her as a challenge, a food mountain to be scaled, swallowed, flattened. Once, Gabriel found her squeezing a tube of tomato puree down her throat.

Sometimes, to tease Hannah, Gabriel would say, ‘If you could choose to have anything in the whole world to eat, what would it be?’

‘Ice-cream,’ she would say in her strange accent. ‘Um ... and burgers. Pigs’ trotters. Pies. Rabbit stew. Jam. And ... and ... and ...’

As she described her favourite meals, electric-eyed, lips moist and chest heaving, Gabriel would sketch the food. She would laugh at the drawings and pretend to eat the paper. Once he drew a picture featuring her several chins, inserting a zip into one, with half a sausage extending from it, a drop of mustard and smear of mayonnaise on the tip. This offended and upset her.

What she did like was Gabriel photographing her ‘in London’, as she put it. Recently Gabriel had been taking photographs with cheap, disposable cameras which he used like a notebook. He liked to photograph odd things: street corners; people from behind; lamp-posts; shop fronts. He took Polaroids and drew on them with a pen. He didn’t like anything too designed, too careful or artificial. Some of the pictures his father’s friend had blown up onto large sheets, which Gabriel drew and painted on.

Gabriel had noticed that whenever he picked up a camera, Hannah became watchful and would wipe her crumbly mouth, plump her split ends and adjust her collar. The pictures he did take, she sent home to her family. She was quite nice to him afterwards.

Mum knew it wasn’t much fun with Hannah. At first Gabriel had refused to walk home with her. It wasn’t just that he was too old to be walked home; he didn’t want the others to know he had an ‘odd pair’. In some schools the middle class – to which Gabriel almost, but not quite, belonged – was a persecuted minority, and anyone who had the misfortune to come from such a minority did all they could to disguise it. They were so loathed, the members of this class, they even had their own schools. Luckily, there were several entrances to Gabriel’s school and he could elude Hannah altogether, or just run away. But his mother became so upset that he compromised by having Hannah meet him not outside the school but on the corner; she walked home behind him. ‘I think that woman’s following us,’ his friends would say.

‘She’s one of the local madwomen,’ Gabriel would say. ‘Ignore her.’

However, she always had crisps and drinks for him, and as they neared the house and his friends

went in different directions, he and Hannah would end up together.

~~As compensation, and to show off the benefit of her wage packet, Mum had taken him to see the Who – her favourite band – up the road at the Shepherd's Bush Empire. Mum still knew someone from the old days connected to the band, and they had great seats in the front of the circle. 'I hope it's going to be loud,' Mum had said, as they went in. It was. Afterwards, they had gone out to supper with their ears still numb. It seemed a long time ago.~~

Now Gabriel sat at the table eating his tea.

'I'll watch him, Mum,' Hannah had promised. 'Don't you worry, like a vulture I will observe the bad boy.'

She did watch him; and he watched her watching him. Hannah had a queer look, for her eyes instead of focusing on the same point in the normal way, pointed in different directions. He wondered if she might be able to watch two television programmes simultaneously, on different channels, on each side of the room.

What she could certainly do was watch TV and keep an eye on him at the same time, while pressing boiled sweets into the tight little hole beneath her nose. To 'improve my English' as she put it, she watched Australian soap operas continuously, so that her few English sentences had a Brisbane accent.

Even if Gabriel wasn't doing anything wrong, one of her eyes hovered over him. His mother must have given Hannah an unnecessarily prejudiced report of the scrapes and troubles he was prone to. But to Hannah, being a kid in the first place was to be automatically in the wrong and these wrongs which were going on all the time – had to be righted by adults who were never in the wrong since adults were, all the time, whatever they did, the Law. Perhaps her experience of Communism had given her this idea. Wherever she had obtained it, she would prefer it if Gabriel didn't move at all ever again. She liked it best when he wasn't there but was somewhere else, preferably asleep and not dreaming.

She loved food, but the meals she cooked tasted of dirty dishcloths and toenails, topped with blood and urine sauce. Gabriel considered picking up the plate and flinging it at the wall. The past would, at least, make a pretty shape on the yellow wallpaper.

It had been his policy to be horrible to Hannah in the hope that he would drive her away and his mother would look after him again. But if he made a mess, Hannah would make him clear it up. If he sulked, she didn't notice; if he whinged, she turned the TV up louder.

He pushed his plate away. Today Gabriel had an idea.

'Hey!' said Hannah.

'French homework. *Vous comprenez?* If Dad phones, you'll call me, won't you?'

'If I am available.'

'Available?' He was laughing. 'What else might you be doing?'

'Mind your own nose,' she said, tapping her forehead. 'He won't call anyway. He gone for good.'

'No, Hannah. You don't know him. You've never met him.'

'I won't met him.'

'I'd watch what you say. He was a friend of the Rolling Stones. He played with Lester Jones actually! His eyes get big and he shakes. He might come back and bite you somewhere you won't like.'

'Bah!'

He picked up his school bag, fetched some other things from his own room, and went into his mother's bedroom.

His mother had always been tiresomely strict about his homework. She didn't want Gabriel to fail at school, for fear he would become an artist. Having spent her life among musicians, singers

songwriters, clothes designers and record producers, she knew how few of them had country houses with recording studios and trout farms. Most were on the dole, passing through rehabs, smelling failure or dying of disappointment. It wasn't only lack of talent, though most were prodigious untalented, with stupidity coming off them like bad charisma. Few had the basic ability to organize and preserve the proficiency they did have. When she was in a good mood, his mother said humorously that she didn't want to discourage Gabriel's artistic endeavour but crush it altogether, so he'd go into business, or become a doctor or lawyer able to support her in her 'old age'.

For a moment Gabriel stood at the window, wondering whether someone he knew might be walking up the street. He closed his eyes, hoping that when he opened them the person might appear. It was turbulent: clouds sailed past, as if being tugged by invisible strings; the sun and moon sat side by side in the sky, flashing on and off. All the weather seemed to be coming at once. Perhaps, when this strange period ended, there would be no climate at all but an enormous blankness.

His mind seemed to have turned into one of the psychedelic records his father used to play, closing his eyes and moving his arms like hypnotized snakes. This was a mystery tour he couldn't stop.

He pulled the curtains and climbed up to his mother's bed, which, to make more space in the high-ceilinged room, was on legs, with a little ladder up to it, and a table and chair under it. There was a padlocked metal drawer in the base of the bed, full of old cosmetics. On a shelf beside the bed was a pile of small and large art books he loved to look at. His mother had used them a long time ago, at a school. The books smelled musty but it was a seductive perfume. Within were worlds and worlds. Unlike films, they didn't move; he could get lost inside the colours and shapes.

He wondered what talking to the people would be like. Van Gogh's friendly-looking postman, no doubt smelling of tobacco, seemed like someone to give lengthy advice. Degas's dancers, standing in a big ornate room with a churlish teacher waving a cane in front of them, seemed like girls he could take an interest in. One of the warm, pink dancers seemed to reach out to take his hand.

Gabriel had brought his sketchbook into his mother's room, along with the old pencil box with its iron corners that his father had given him just before he left home, made up of drawers for pens, trays for rubbers and pencil sharpeners, and a hidden section that so far had nothing in it.

In the last few days he had been drawing the story-board for a short film. He and his father had been watching Carol Reed's *Oliver!*, which, when Gabriel was younger, had been one of his favourites. The 'Dodger' had been his original punk hero. At the annual school concert, Gabriel's version of 'Consider Yourself', done in ripped tails, top hat, muddy boots and orange-tinted shades, had been much applauded by the junkies, paedophiles, no-hopers and greedy bastards called parents. Gabriel had thought it was still possible to make a film about the parts of London that most people never saw.

His idea was for a story called 'Dealer's Day', about a young drug courier who is used by his older brother to make deliveries, and eventually gets caught and sent to a 'secure' institution.

Gabriel was saving up to get a 16mm film camera, but that would take time. He would have to fix the lights and buy film stock. He would not use cheap video. His best friend Zak, a natural exhibitionist who fancied himself as an actor and singer, a boy who took it for granted that he would be successful, would play the lead; local kids would play extras and help with equipment. Gabriel wanted to make the film soon, before Zak was too old to play the kid.

Meanwhile, as he could see the film in his mind but was afraid of forgetting parts of it – once he had started work new ideas occurred every day, often in a rush and usually on his way to school, where they faded like hidden murals exposed to the light – his father suggested he draw it. Dad had taken him to buy story-boards, books consisting of rows of white squares, like film frames, into which you could draw the scene. Beneath the pictures Gabriel neatly wrote the dialogue and had persuaded his father to start writing the soundtrack.

Lately he had done virtually nothing. Since Dad had left, it wasn't that Gabriel had lost

concentration, for this came and went, like everything; it was that his sense of purpose was wavering. His father's interest had worked as a little driving motor. Why would anyone think they could achieve something? Only because someone believed in them.

Gabriel's grandfather – Dad's father – had been a greengrocer, with a shop in the suburbs. He had spent his days serving others, of whom he had a high opinion. Anyone who walked into his shop was better than him. He was a tight-lipped man from a generation who believed you 'spoiled' children by being pleasant to them; you certainly shouldn't praise them. So convinced had he been by this that he had taken no interest in his son whatsoever. Dad felt he had been held back by this 'small' idea of himself. He didn't want his son to be the same.

Gabriel thought of his father climbing into the van and being driven God knows where. The incident replayed itself repeatedly in his mind like a song that wouldn't go away. He remembered his mother crying in this room, his parents' bedroom, emptied now of his father's guitars, tablas and other musical instruments.

He thought, too, of the time, a few months ago, when his father had come to look for him after Gabriel had started to hang out in the local flats.

His mother had been working hard in her room and Dad had at last managed to get a job playing sixties songs in a bar in Oslo, sitting on a stool surrounded by blondes, going 'Rebel, rebel, you're a star ...'

After school, Gabriel had been meeting with some older and more 'advanced' adolescents who had taken over a flat – known as the 'drum' – in a nearby block. The place was filled with stolen junk like black and white TVs which the local fences couldn't pass on in neighbourhood pubs.

The kids watched satellite TV with Bullseye, the albino Alsatian, and whisperingly busied about with much secret urgency, labouring at the most desirable alchemy known to mankind: how to earn money without getting a job. It wasn't too difficult. Many eleven-year-olds turned up after school wearing Tommy Hilfiger coats over their uniforms, to buy hash. The demand was so great that an older kid had set up a counter in the kitchen called 'the tuck shop', from behind which blocks of dope were handed over, like putrid chocolate bars.

A few street beggars came by, too – local kids, and children blown down from the North, who mostly slept in children's homes and hostels. Not only were they more experienced than Gabriel, but they had lived under harsh, cruel regimes. Terrible things had happened to these unprotected children and, Gabriel guessed, somehow always would.

Despite his normalcy, or because of it, Gabriel was sent on errands to flats, squats and street corners, delivering packages that he hid in his underwear and shoes. Being a 'tiddler', and young and white, and knowing the local short cuts and hideouts, he was less likely to be stopped by the police, or worse – other gangsters. Sometimes on these trips he pushed the prams of local girls. Later he was told that the baby's nappies had been stuffed with sachets of uplifting powder.

Unlike some of the other kids his age, he had never had a regular girlfriend. But there was a secret room in the drum. A couple of the girls were so amused by his virginity that as a favour they had pushed him onto the dirty mattress and stolen his cherry, taking it in turns to hold a crying baby while the short, absurd ceremony continued.

'You won't forget that – buoy,' one of them had said.

'No, I don't think I will,' he had replied.

When Gabriel's father returned from Norway and failed to find him, he called at Zak's and other school friends of Gabriel's. No one had seen the boy. Asking everywhere for his son, Dad visited shebeens where sixties reggae was played over card games – there were towering piles of money on the tables and a threatening unease; he visited community centres where he heard 'lovers' rock', and pool halls full of bejewelled gangs and posses in 'pukka' gear.

Gabriel remembered Dad walking into the filthy drum, coming over to pick him up from the floor and trying to heave him over his shoulder as if he were a child.

‘I can walk,’ Gabriel had said. ‘You’ll ruin your back again.’

Dad had been carrying a guitar, and one of the older boys thought he was a tube busker looking for a score or a place to sleep. Gabriel giggled to himself at the thought of how irked his father would have been had he known this.

Gabriel had been impressed by how his father hadn’t been afraid; he would have known that the kids were contemptuous of authority and carried knives and worse. But Gabriel saw, as his father touched fists with the kids and sat down to talk with them, that Dad didn’t believe they were beyond his human reach.

When Dad led Gabriel away and told him never to return, saying he was too young for such a forlorn and unhappy place, Dad himself was troubled by the prohibition. He had grasped that Gabriel required other worlds and needed to move away from his parents. The ‘drum’ was something Gabriel should know about, Dad said, but he didn’t think, at the moment, that Gabriel could come through intact. Some people felt compelled to live self-destructive lives, but these lives could become addictive and impossible to escape.

Dad had ridden to the rescue at the right moment: a grille for the drum door was arriving, and older, more serious villains were starting to use the place as a hide-out. A few weeks later Gabriel heard at school that the ‘drum’ had been raided, the police forcing everyone to lie on the floor. Some of the kids had been hauled out, smacked hard in the stomach and taken away. There were many available crimes for them to be fitted to.

After this, Gabriel was at home most of the time and his trespasses – horrid though they were – were mostly of the imagination. Fortunately there were plenty of them, since his mother, clearing out her room, had inadvertently made him a great gift. She had leaned a gilt-edged mirror against the wall at the end of his bed.

Looking in it one wet-fingered day after school, he had fallen in love. There would be a lifetime of such swooning! He understood why grown-ups whispered and what there was to hide. There was a secret. The world was a façade. It was the beyond, behind and underneath – a nether factory making dreams and stories that writhed with strange life.

He went to work.

In the glass-walled world, listening to music by Lester Jones, Gabriel liked to watch himself smoking a cigarette in a kooky hat and exotic waistcoat, as if he were a movie character. Adjusting the angle of the mirror, he could pretend to be someone else, any woman he wanted to be or have, particularly if he had painted his toenails in some dainty shade and was wearing his mother’s rings, necklaces and shoes. He preferred the ones with straps and heels, or anything that resembled a cross between a dagger and a boat. Low-heeled sandals did nothing for him. Perhaps they were an acquired taste. His mother, to his chagrin, didn’t wear boots any more.

When he was in the ‘shoe’ mood, the different characters he brought together enacted rumbustious scenes as he tore in and out of the mirror’s eye, a crowd of actors in one body. It wasn’t an uncreative pastime. If, like all children, he was a pervert, he was also a film director and screenwriter.

Today, however, he wasn’t in a ‘shoe’ mood. Earlier he had thrown a sheet over the mirror. He wanted to draw. A thought had remained in his mind from watching TV the other night. As far as he could remember, it went something like this: art is what you do when other people leave the room.

Left in his mother’s room, he turned the pages of the art book until something attracted his attention.

He found himself looking at a picture of a pair of boots – gnarled, broken, old work boots. Often when he wanted to draw, he copied something, to warm up. He decided to work in charcoal. As he

sketched, the boots came easily, the lines seeming to make themselves in the way his legs did when running, without persuasion.

After a few minutes he noticed an unusual smell. He went to the door to see if Hannah was standing outside the room, as she was a person around whom different odours seemed to congregate like bums on a street corner. He could hear her moving about downstairs in the kitchen. Probably she was dyeing her hair, which she did at least once a fortnight: this involved her putting a plastic bag over her head, which didn't stop strings of dark colour running down her face, until she resembled Christmas pudding.

No; the smell wasn't her.

Turning around, he saw that in the middle of the room were the boots he had copied from the book.

He walked around them, before going closer and squatting down. They smelt of dung, mud, the countryside and grass.

He picked the boots up, touched them, slipped off his shoes and tried them on, shuffled a little way, and collapsed. He couldn't stop laughing in surprise and perplexity. When he tired of this, he returned to the sketchbook. In the centre of the page was a boot-shaped hole. As he turned the page the boots were sucked back onto it, and everything returned to normal.

Or did it?

He looked about fearfully. An eerie terror, like a ghost, had swished into the room. The purple knob of the wardrobe handle seemed like one of Hannah's eyes. Perhaps it had detached itself from her face and flown up here to spy. He was reminded of a picture by Marc Chagall that featured a barn-like house with a huge all-seeing brown eye in the roof. When Gabriel returned the stare, the eye turned back into a dull rough surface.

He was disturbed but excited by what he'd done. It didn't seem like a dangerous ability. But it was wrong to mess with magic, wasn't it? He didn't know. Who would know? Parents and teachers were there to be believed in, or at least argued with. If they no longer functioned, or, like his father, were blasted by doubt, where was there to turn for the rules? Who knew what was going on?

He did what he always did at times like this: consulted his twin brother, Archie, truly his other half.

There would today – if fate hadn't fingered one of them – be two identical boys sitting side by side in this room, one born a few breaths later, clutching the heel of the other. Gabriel would be talking to and looking at, himself and not-himself, face to face with his own features, worn by another.

Instead, the dead brother, alive inside the living half, had become a magic, and wiser, boy – Gabriel's daemon or personal spirit.

Gabriel's father still talked of how proud he had been, pushing his two sons up a hill in the tank of a double pushchair, face into the wind, to the park. Wherever he went with them, they drew crowds and comment. 'Two for the price of one,' he would say, standing back so others could look at and converse with or tickle his boys. 'Double trouble,' he'd add fondly.

Then, aged two and a half, one boy died from meningitis. It was a miracle, the doctors said, that the other survived.

How could Gabriel and his parents ever recover? For a long time he had been an imprisoned prince, living with an elusive woman who had gained a child and lost one. She could be both indifferent and passionate. He had never learned how to convert the one into the other, except in his imagination, where he could do anything, apart from be with other people; that was, he guessed, the hardest art of all.

When Gabriel was four, he almost drowned in the sea, his father running in to save him. At that time Mum almost drowned in sadness and terror herself. Afterwards, she had become too careful with Gabriel, not letting him live for fear he might die. Worry was like an engine that kept people alive.

Fortunately, her husband had a reckless, frivolous, streak, which stopped them all from suffocating her, but she had entered a zone of fear that she was unable to leave. When he was young, they rarely left the house.

Gabriel didn't remember Archie outside of the many photographs of the twins together, displayed in the hall, his parents' bedroom and the living room. These precious framed pictures were never touched, moved or commented on, but they had always disturbed Gabriel for one important reason. His parents didn't know which boy was which. His mother claimed that, when Archie was alive, they and they alone could tell the two apart. But recently his father had admitted that he had given one boy a dose of medicine twice, and that sometimes they put them in the wrong cots and didn't realize the mistake until the morning.

This made Gabriel wonder whether they had been permanently mixed up. Perhaps he was Archie and Gabriel was dead. Certainly, he was always aware of his brother's absence, and whenever he saw a pair of twins he wanted to rush over and tell them or their mother that there were two of him, too; it was just that one of them was a shadow.

'Will Archie come back?' he liked to ask Mum, from the age of six. They had gone to visit his grave, as they always did on the anniversary of his death. Gabriel's birthday – their birthday – was always sad, too.

'No,' she would say sharply. 'Never, never.'

'Does he hear us talking about him?'

'No.'

'Does he think?'

'No.'

'Does he see?'

'No.'

'Not even black?'

'No. He sees nothing. Nothing for ever.'

'Is he in heaven as well as under the ground?'

'He could be. Gabriel –'

'With his friends?'

'Gabriel, we carry him with us, wherever we go, in our minds but he will be dead for ever and ever and ever.'

She would say no more and would clench and unclench her fists as if trying to retain water in the palm of her hand.

If Archie was in his mind, Gabriel always had someone to talk to. Together, the boys could conspire against their parents. If Gabriel didn't fidget and listened carefully he could hear Archie, for Archie looked out for his brother and was sensible and always knew what to do. Sometimes, if he felt frivolous, Gabriel would call up Archie by singing 'Two of Us' by the Beatles.

Now Gabriel became silent so as to hear his brother's voice whispering within his body.

Archie was saying not to be afraid; Gabriel should go on drawing. If the objects became real, it wasn't bad or black magic, just an unusual gift that could be of use. When Gabriel hesitated, Archie said that things might change, but that he should go on to see what might happen.

First, though, Gabriel would have to see if it might be possible to repeat the strange exercise.

On the next page of the art book was a picture of a yellow chair. He didn't want to admit liking this kind of art, just right for the front of a postcard. He'd rather prefer the stronger stuff: toilets, blood and pierced eyeballs with titles like 'Pulsations of the Slit'. The pretty pictures that had shocked people in the old days had lost their power. But this one spoke to him now.

It was, as Archie murmured, useful. There was no point being snobbish. Their father, who had

plenty of curiosity but little taste, except in music, might like it. The last time Dad had rung, he said he'd found somewhere to live. He had taken a room in a big house not far away.

'It's a little bare and cold,' he had said. 'But there's a bed and –'

'And?'

'Wardrobe.'

What he needed were some bright pictures.

'What did he say? What did he say?' asked Gabriel's mother, who had fortuitously overheard the conversation, no doubt by bending over and pressing her ear to the door.

'Dad's found a room.'

'What sort of room?'

'It's bare and cold.'

'Oh dear.' Mum had giggled. 'Very cold? But he hates the cold.'

'He hasn't got anywhere to sit.'

He imagined his father standing up to read, eat and watch television, or leaning against the wall now and again, for relief.

As Gabriel started to copy the chair, he began to feel he was bringing it into existence. He worked rapidly; it was like singing a song: once you'd started you shouldn't think about it. When he had finished drawing and colouring in, he closed his eyes and looked up.

There it was.

He ran his hand over its ridges and curves. Gingerly, wondering whether it might collapse, he sat down. It was secure and comfortable. Gabriel stood on it, and danced a bit. It took his weight; this was a chair you could put your arse on and wiggle about.

When he returned to his sketchbook and turned the page, the real chair disappeared, but his copy remained.

The more he considered what he had done, the more disturbing he found it. Winking daffodils had tried to communicate with him. Dead brothers spoke within him. The earth, surely, had tilted and was trembling on its axis. Who would put it back before it tipped into eternity?

To check that everything else was as he'd left it, he went down to the living room to find Hannah watching television, her wayward eyes flickering fitfully in the darkening room.

'Hannah.'

She looked about in surprise. 'Bah!'

'What?' he said, grateful, almost, to hear another human voice.

'Bath!'

'Right.'

She ran his bath.

He could do it himself but he liked her to feel capable. Really, the poor woman, of all people, was only his mother's conscience. Sometimes he wondered whether he thought about Hannah more than she thought about him.

She was watching him. 'Those clothes – to me give.'

'What will you do with them?'

'Wash.'

'Hannah ...'

'No, you mama says – three days too long without washing clothes. Every day you change clothes – she has ordered.'

'You know it takes me a few days to start feeling comfortable in anything. Thinking about new clothes makes me feel tired. And I haven't got a girlfriend at the moment.'

'Here!'

He put on a dressing gown and handed her his clothes. 'Still, as Dad says, never wear anything that is actually stiff. Hannah, he's a funny guy.'

'He is?'

'You should hear him. You'll understand when you meet him some time.'

'You mama say, he is fool.'

'What? She's a fool to say that.'

Scowling, Hannah fetched clean towels.

He locked the door, bathed quickly and went to his room to do more 'homework'. When Hannah had checked on him and gone back to watch television, he crept into his mother's room. He picked up the art books from the floor, and looked and thought, afraid he might cry.

He had no idea what time his mother would come home; he had given up waiting for the hiss and rustle of her clothing, the trail of her perfume, the swing, fall and tickle of her hair, and her arm around him, pulling him into her. Samuel Beckett, whose play he had seen at school, produced by the local college, had been on to something: waiting was hard, wearing work, probably the worst torture of all, turning people into both victims and murderers in their minds.

Since his father had left and she had got a job, Mum had changed in other ways. For a start she had acquired a new wardrobe.

Late at night, when she came in to kiss him, she would wear a big fur-collared overcoat, jewelled shoes and high heels. She would be accompanied by a symphony of new smells: the night air of unfamiliar parts of the city – he believed he could smell the East End on her at times, as well as aftershave, alcohol and marijuana. She had even, late in the evening, brought men he hadn't met into the house. Loud music would be played, bottles would be emptied, and there'd be dancing. In the morning she would forget who he was and call him 'Sugar'.

Now, back in his bedroom, lying in the dark, he heard the door open slowly. He was afraid; it had been too strange a day already.

'Gabriel ...' whispered Hannah. 'Are you in this world?'

'At the moment.'

'Something to tell.'

'Mum's going to be even later?'

'Your dad has ringed.'

'Dad? It was him?'

'Yes.'

'Didn't he want to speak to me?'

'He offer a message to say he will pick you up tomorrow.'

'He's coming here?'

'He taking you to his place.'

'To his house for the night? Is it that Mum's given permission?'

'Yes.'

'Did he say what has happened to him? Is he all right?'

'No. No more enquiry. Pack your vest and underpant.'

It would be the first time he had stayed with his father. Gabriel had been hoping for this.

'Sleep well,' said Hannah. 'Peace for me, tomorrow then.'

'Get lost.'

'What?'

'An English expression: may you get lost in sweet dreams.'

'I get. Thanks. Get lost to you and God bless you fresh cheeks all night.'

'And all your fresh cheeks, Hannah.'

Chapter Two

After school the next day Gabriel was waiting at the living-room window with Hannah behind him. He shut his eyes, and when he opened them his father was at the gate.

‘Yes!’ Gabriel shouted. ‘Yes, yes!’ He turned to Hannah. ‘See, he did come.’

‘No noise,’ said Hannah. She was watching Dad warily.

Even though he knew Gabriel’s mother was out at work, Dad didn’t come into the house but stood on the step with his back to the door, tapping his foot as Gabriel packed his drawing things and a few books into his rucksack.

Dad was unshaven, wore dark glasses and had his woollen hat pulled down. Gabriel remembered Mum saying to him, ‘Careful: people will take you for a burglar. A police record is the only recording you’re going to make!’

‘I’ll burgle your arse in a minute!’ he had replied, grabbing her.

On good days he would be affectionate, always touching, kissing and hugging. But Mum said Dad was clumsy, and didn’t know how to touch.

Under his hat Dad was balding; the hair he did have was pulled back by a rubber band he picked up off the street. The rest was straggly and frizzy. His jeans were ripped – ‘ventilation’ he called it – and he wore plimsolls, which gave him ‘uplift’. His idea of dressing up was to pull a fresh pair from a number of similar boxes he kept in the cellar.

‘Let’s get going,’ Dad said, hurrying Gabriel away from the house.

Hannah stood at the window, mouthing, ‘Get lost!’

Gabriel said, ‘I’ve been excited all day. Two houses instead of one. I’ll be like other kids now.’

Gabriel was thinking of children whose absent parent felt so guilty they became eternal indulgent, and couldn’t stop giving them presents.

‘It’s a kind of flat, not a house,’ said Dad.

To Gabriel’s surprise they didn’t go straight to Dad’s place, but to the V&A in South Kensington walking around the old jars and pots in an agitated silence that Dad called ‘meditative’.

Gabriel was used to his father taking him to see the latest work – the strangest stuff – by young artists working in squats, lofts and abandoned garages. Gabriel had looked at heads made of blood, hair and old skin; he had seen dissected animals, and strange photographs of body-parts. The one on canvas he saw was Tracy Emin’s tent. Gabriel had learned that anything could be art. His father had no shame about knocking on the door of young artists he admired, and going in for ‘a chat’, since he knew they had been keen to talk about their work. Today, however, he wasn’t feeling ‘inquisitive’.

Gabriel had started to draw seriously two years before, when his father hardly worked and was home much of the time. There were no artists in the family, but perhaps Gabriel had turned to art and making films because it wasn’t something Dad had ever thought of doing.

Unlike most musicians, Dad could read music as well as play several instruments pretty well. The house had been full of guitars; Dad also used to have a saxophone, a piano and a drum kit. At one time, in a garage near by, he had started to build his own harpsichord.

From the age of fourteen, Dad had played in many longhaired, short-haired and now, mostly, bald bands. He could play in any style, and sing in only one. Gabriel’s mother called him Johnny-about-t-

be-famous. Dad was smart enough to know that by his age you had either become successful, rich and pursued by lawyers, stalkers and the press, as some of his former friends had been, or you found something else to do. 'Something else', of course, was an admission of failure; 'something else' was the end.

Worse than this, according to Mum, was to play pool in the pub every day with other 'superannuated long-hairs in dirty jeans', saying how the latest 'beep-beep' music wasn't a patch on Jimi's or Eric's. This group of has-beens, who, as Gabriel once quipped, could hardly manage 'joined up talking', only left the pub to attend AA meetings. Mum, who remembered being at the centre of the rock scene, wouldn't have these bums in the house. At night Dad went to his mates' houses to drink jam and smoke dope.

At least Dad had never stopped loving music. It was just that he didn't get paid for it.

He still played live with these friends, in pubs or at parties and weddings, where no one listened and middle-aged people danced without moving their bodies. Not long ago they had been invited to play in a hotel while the guests had supper. It was a pretentious place but seventies music had been requested. Gabriel had gone along to help set up, as most of the band were in such bad shape they could barely lift their instruments.

Dad's band had played the tunes that millions had liked when he had been in Lester Jones's group but one by one the guests were driven like refugees from the dining room, carrying their plates and some of them still chewing, until only one red-faced old man remained, dancing in front of the band. He danced till he collapsed into the arms of a doctor who was staying there.

Sometimes Dad became dejected, or distraught with envy at the young kids, not much older than Gabriel, who flashed across the nation's televisions, into the charts and *Hello!* magazine, and then they were gone, carrying a good deal of money with them, if they were lucky.

Gabriel had played both guitar and piano from a young age and had been in a school group, playing indie rock, for a few weeks. He couldn't write songs and didn't improve as a musician. The painful look on his father's face – Dad hated him to play badly – made murder more likely and learning impossible. It was easier for Gabriel not to play, and, anyhow, Dad hated anyone touching his instruments. If Dad watched Gabriel, it was because he was worried about whether the boy would drop his best guitar. When, to the relief of them both, Gabriel 'retired', what he did miss was having something big to be interested in.

One day his mother had taken him to see an exhibition of old and new drawings at the British Museum. Afterwards, she bought him pencils and a sketchbook. Like his father, Gabriel soon had his own 'sacred' objects, obtained cheaply from the numerous second-hand shops in the area: paintbrushes, pencils, videotapes, old Kodaks. He started to take his 'objects' wherever he went, in his special rucksack. If he placed something like a pencil or camera between himself and the world, the distance, or the space, enabled good ideas to grow. He and his father were working in parallel, rather than in competition.

When the weather was good and Dad was feeling 'inquisitive', Gabriel and Dad used to ride their bicycles along the river. Dad refused to leave London: for him, the rest of the country was a wasteland of rednecks and fools, living in squalor and poverty. Luckily, parts of the towpath were so secluded you could almost believe you were in the country, but only a few miles from the fizz and crackle of the city.

In the early evening, before going to the pub, his father would practise his instruments, his banjo, guitar, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, his mandolin, even his old banjo. He said he felt they were looking at him reproachfully, yearning to be played. He devoted time to them all.

As Dad played cross-legged on the floor, humming to himself and swigging beer, a roll-up fixed between his stained fingers, the hard pads of flesh on his right hand, where he held down the notes

flying across the frets, Gabriel had worked too. He drew his father's face and hands; he drew the guitars and the faces of his school friends; he experimented with crayons, with pen and ink, and with paints: he and his father together, both lost in something.

It was dark when they arrived now at Dad's new place. Gabriel had the impression that his father wanted to get there as late as possible. It was a vast collapsing house sliced into dozens of small rooms.

'Magnificent old building, full of original features,' said Dad. 'Worth millions. My room is the penthouse, at the top.'

Gabriel took a camera from his rucksack. 'You stand over there, Dad, by that rotting pillar.'

'Later. Put it away.'

'Dad –'

'Put it away, I said. You might notice ... there are some strange characters here. You'd learn a lot if you talked to them. It's a bit like the sixties.'

'Cool.'

'Right.'

His father spoke of the sixties with reverence, in the way others spoke of 'the war': as a time of great deeds and unrepeatably exciting. Somehow, all the windows everywhere were open, and, in this 'universal moment', God's favourite album, *Sgt. Pepper*, was being played for the first time. Many of Dad's sentences would begin: 'One day in the sixties ...' as in 'One day in the sixties when I was playing Scrabble with Keith Richards – he was a particularly tenacious opponent and fond of the word "risible" ...'

Gabriel thought he might make a film about his father entitled *One day in the Sixties*. Gabriel suspected that his father had actually been quite young in the 'sixties', and that he'd seen less of his father than he liked to make out. But fathers didn't like to be doubted; fathers lacked humour when it came to themselves.

In the hallway Dad said, 'Now, deep breath, heads down. There isn't a lift, I'm pleased to say. This is an opportunity for much-needed exercise.'

Gabriel kept his head down but couldn't help noticing that the colourless stair carpet was ripped and stained. When he looked up he saw that on each landing there were toilets and waterlogged showers. Outside the rooms, bearded men in robes, turbans, fezzes and tarbooshes seemed to talk backwards in undiscovered languages.

Dad followed Gabriel awkwardly, stopping to rest at each bend. He had a limp, or 'war wound' which sometimes he told strangers he had acquired in the 'revolutionary struggle of making the world a better place, with free food and marijuana all round'. In fact his 'wound' was of an altogether more ignominious, though – to some – more amusing, origin.

When at last they got to the top, and Dad had to stop and lean against a damp peeling wall for a breather, which left a white mark on his coat, Gabriel took his father's key and inserted it into the lock. But the lock was stuck and the door already open. Gabriel reached out and snapped on the overhead light.

'A cosy little place.' Dad's breath seemed to scrape in his throat. 'It could be pretty fine, eh? What do you think?'

Gabriel looked about.

Dad was not unclean but he was the sort who'd wipe a room over in July and be surprised in December that the grime had returned. Not that there was much anyone could do with this room.

The wind seethed at the rattling window, like an animal trying to get in; the basin in the corner was sprinkled with cigarette ash. There was a single bed covered by an eiderdown and blanket.

Gabriel couldn't help wondering what Archie would have thought.

‘Original features, eh? What’s in the other room?’

‘~~What other room?~~’ said his father. ‘~~The English never stop talking about property. The price of~~ their house is the price of their life. They’d trade their souls for a sofa. Have you ever known me clinging to material possessions? I’m asking you, Gabriel, how many rooms does a man need?’

‘Well, one for sitting in and one for –’

‘Don’t get technical with me, boy. This is the best I could get ... for the money I have.’

‘Have your mates been here?’

‘No. No one. I couldn’t exactly have a supper party. I’ve been writing letters, though. I didn’t think, when I was younger, that I would end up here. It’s not that I’m particularly foolish. I can’t even explain to myself how such things happen.’

‘That’s all right, Dad.’

‘It’s very disturbing, the sudden feeling that your life is already over, that it’s too late for all the good things you imagined would happen.’

‘Dad, it’s not.’

‘No. I’ve been trying to see this break as a beginning but this room keeps making me think that I’ve been here before.’

‘Déjà vu or reincarnation?’ said Gabriel. ‘Are you beginning to believe in weird –?’

‘What? No. Stop it. This is what everywhere looked like when I was a kid, before the world bent a bit –’

‘In the sixties?’

‘That’s right,’ said Dad.

‘Cool.’

Presumably, his father’s clothes were in the wardrobe. As for music, Dad had brought a few tapes and only one acoustic guitar, leaving his other instruments with a friend, for fear they would be stolen from the room.

‘What do you do here?’

‘What does anyone do anywhere? You know me: if I need a song I’ll sing one. Now, I should feel you otherwise your mother will accuse me of ... unspeakableness. Was she nervous of letting you come here?’

Gabriel didn’t want to tell his father what Mum had said the previous night, when she woke him up to talk about the next day Dad hadn’t ‘disciplined’ Gabriel sufficiently; Gabriel was doing badly at school because of his father’s bad example. Hannah had been brought in to aid the ‘disciplining’ process. If it showed signs of breaking down, further ‘measures’ would be taken; and if, during Gabriel’s visit, Dad started drinking, ‘you’re to call me,’ she said, ‘and I’ll fetch you home. If he depresses you, or it’s too squalid, ring and I’ll be there.’

Gabriel said, ‘Not really, Dad. I think she wants to do other things now.’

‘Like what?’

‘I’m not really sure. Just something else.’

‘Right, well, that’s exactly what I want to do, too. Let’s eat, pal.’

On the single gas burner, Gabriel had noticed an opened tin of ravioli, black around the bottom and with a spoon in it, probably still hot.

‘Wait,’ Gabriel said.

From his bag he produced some tacks and pinned the picture of the yellow chair over his father’s bed.

He regretted it was a copy of another picture; he wished he had done something original. He would do something original.

In the meantime the yellow chair would do.

It reminded him that he had been intending to speak to Dad about the ‘hallucinations’ and other strange scenes and nightmares taking place within the theatre of his mind. He saw now that his father was burdened enough as it was.

Gabriel finished pinning the picture up and noticed his father’s eyes were as wet as the wall.

‘Magic,’ said Dad. ‘A few more of those and I’ll be tickling myself under the chin rather than trying to cut my throat. You’re good to me, Angel. I hope, whatever happens, that I will be the same to you. I think we should find a restaurant.’

‘Cool.’

‘Stop saying that!’

In the pizza place Dad ate nothing but drank a beer and watched Gabriel, asking him about school and his friends. Gabriel didn’t know if his father had lost his appetite; it occurred to him that Dad couldn’t afford to eat.

He said, ‘Where have you been, Dad?’

‘Yes, sorry. Trying to get my life started again –’

‘Why didn’t you phone? I thought you’d gone gay.’

‘Gay?’ Dad looked shocked. Then he laughed. ‘I remember you said that’s what happened to your friend Zak’s father. One day he woke up and decided he wanted to be with boys. Why would that happen to me? Didn’t Zak’s father always collect teapots? And you say he didn’t know he was homosexual! Have I ever taken such a turn with teapots or any such fancy, nancy objects?’

Gabriel recalled Zak’s father, who had had blond streaks painted into his thinning hair and wore tight white T-shirts with a packet of Marlboros shoved up the sleeve.

Zak and Gabriel had been friends since the first day at school, when they discovered that they not only liked the same films and music but were likely to have the same enemies.

Zak’s parents were well off; his father was a computer magazine publisher and his mother a journalist. Zak had been sent to a state school rather than a fee-paying one ‘on principle’. While he might not be the recipient of any worthwhile information at the school, at least, it was thought, for the only time in his life, he would mix with ordinary people, an education almost worth paying for. Some other kids were in the same situation: their parents were politicians or actors, or they ran the local art cinema where Gabriel and Zak were let in for free. These kids were bullied for being ‘snobs’, as if they were slumming or thought they were doing the school a favour by attending it, popping in for a lesson after breakfasting with their parents and the children of other celebrities in some hip Nottin Hill café where models, producers and movie stars took their first calls of the day. The rough kids knew that no parents in their right mind – unless they were spectacularly privileged or politically perverse – would actually volunteer to send their child to the school.

Zak had never been poor. He didn’t know what it was like. The established middle class had different fears from everyone else. They would never be desperate for money; they would never go down for good.

Sometimes Gabriel was regarded in the same light as Zak. Although there was no question of his parents being able to send him anywhere else and Gabriel’s father turned up at the school not in a car like some other parents, but on his bicycle, waiting outside with a roll-up and a newspaper he had pulled from a dustbin, he was still regarded as a ‘rock star’ for having played with the still popular Lester Jones. He was both derided and admired for this. The kids would sing Lester’s songs in the playground behind Gabriel’s back.

Gabriel said now, ‘You used to wear glitter and make-up.’

‘Of course I did! I was a pop boy. Heterosexual Englishmen love getting into a dress. It’s called pantomime. Anyhow, I admire Zak’s dad.’

‘You do?’

‘Changing his whole life like that. It’s a big, magnificent thing to do. Funny how everyone seems to be living a bohemian life now, except for people in the government, who have to be saints. And me.’ He said grandly, ‘I have had a job.’

‘A job?’ said Gabriel.

‘Your surprise surprises me. I’ve been in gainful employment – out in the fresh air.’

‘What for?’

‘It was just a fantasy I had. Gabriel, I was a sort of coolie. A bicycle courier.’

‘What happened?’

‘I found it very hard, very hard. I got sick. It exhausted me. The distances, across London, were too great for me. I had no idea this city was so ... undulating.’

‘What’s that mean?’

‘Fucking hilly. I thought my chest would explode.’

‘You’ve stopped doing it?’

‘I ... sort of collapsed. I’m looking for something more brain-based.’

‘Like what?’

‘Don’t ask so many questions. How’s the film?’

‘It’s nearly ready to be shot,’ lied Gabriel. ‘All I’ve got to do now is save up for a movie camera.’

‘I wish I could help you. I will get you a camera from somewhere, I promise. What we need is a stroke – one stroke of luck. Tell me what else has been happening at home.’

‘We’ve got a hairy au pair called Hannah.’

‘I know. I saw her watching me. What was her last job, turning on the gas in Auschwitz?’

‘Actually, she’s an immigrant. She’s lost in a bad dream. Most of the time she doesn’t know where she is.’

‘Yes, yes, sorry. And this woman is lazing around in those leather chairs I got for a good price? I hope she hasn’t scratched them up.’

‘Not at all. Mum exchanged them for a new futon.’

‘She exchanged them! Didn’t you try to stop her?’

‘You know what she’s like when she makes up her mind. Out they went!’ Dad looked away. Gabriel said, ‘Now she’s at work, waitressing. You know that, too.’

‘Has anyone come round?’

‘Sorry?’

‘To the house.’

‘Only Mum’s friends – Norma, that fat woman who always says, “Kiss me, stupid.” And the other women – Angie and that lot – who wear big overcoats and too many scarves.’

‘Anyone I don’t know? Strangers?’

Gabriel shook his head. ‘No, no strangers.’

Dad drank his beer. ‘I’m afraid she’s going to find it tough to survive without me there to guide her. When she phones for advice, I might refuse her. You will learn that women like to think they get by without us. But we give them –’

‘What?’

‘Erm ... stability.’

Gabriel pushed his plate away. ‘Don’t want any more.’

Dad finished the pizza himself, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

‘Why are you looking at me like that?’ said Gabriel.

‘Apart from your hair, you look so much like your mother. You sound like her, too.’

‘I can’t help it, Dad.’

‘No, no, course not. Come on.’

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