

ON THE ROAD

Derek rang again, louder. He had booked in advance, for heaven's sake, so the least they could do was let him in. Yet, not only was the front door locked, all the windows were dark; no light except the dim lamp in the porch. That seemed odd in itself. Surely there must be other guests; folk who hadn't yet gone to bed?

He turned up his collar against the bullying March wind; cursing his own folly in not opting for a better class of establishment. But, by staying at the cheapest dives, he could pocket the difference between the small amount such places charged and his official hotel allowance. And, if ever he got the chop (a prospect depressingly likely), he would need every damned penny he could save.

VACANCIES, the notice on the door read, so they must be open for business. Admittedly he was late – much later than he'd said - but his first customer had kept him waiting hours, which had set him back all day.

'Third time lucky,' he muttered to himself, as he pressed his thumb, hard, against the bell-push.

Ah - footsteps! His salesman's smile was now so automatic, it switched itself on without him even willing it. The woman who'd taken his booking had sounded old and crotchety, so he was expecting a bad-tempered crone to come limping to the door. But, there, standing in the doorway, was a small, slight girl, with flame-red hair, an elfin face and a profusion of freckles that masked her milk-white skin.

‘G...Gemma,’ he stuttered, all but reeling in astonishment. Decades had passed since he’d seen her, yet here she was, restored, revived, regained.

She gave him a blank stare. ‘My name’s Stacey,’ she said, with undisguised hostility.

Flushing with embarrassment, he stammered his apologies. What in Christ’s name was he thinking of? Gemma would be fifty now: grey and lined and, most like, menopausal, whereas this girl was barely out of her teens. ‘Sorry,’ he mumbled again. ‘I...I was confusing you with someone else.’

She was still regarding him suspiciously. No wonder.

‘You’re Mr Baines, I take it?’

‘That’s right. Sorry I’m so late, but -’

‘Yeah, we’d given you up.’

‘Sorry,’ he said, fourth time. ‘Always apologize’ was one of his personal mantras, even when he wasn’t in the wrong, although he was definitely overdoing it right now. But the uncanny resemblance between Gemma and this girl had completely knocked him off his guard. ‘I was held up on a call. I did try to ring, to warn you I was running late, but no one answered the phone.’

‘Mum must have switched it off. It’s *her* who runs this place, but she’s gone down with a stomach bug, so she’s left me in charge – worse luck! Anyway, come in. Your room’s all ready. Shall I take you up?’

‘Actually, I wouldn’t mind a drink first,’ he said, putting his case down in the hall, to signal his intention of not moving from her vicinity.

‘Sorry, the bar’s closed.’

‘Any chance of some food?’ OK, he was pushing his luck, but he just had to feast his eyes on her. It wasn’t food and drink he craved, but her face, her voice, her presence. Now that she’d switched the lights on, he could see she was shorter than Gemma, and had a

different shape of mouth and slightly smaller breasts. None the less, she was stirring deep emotion in him; wild, tempestuous memories.

‘We don’t do meals – only breakfast.’

‘Well, could you make me breakfast?’

‘What, *now*? It’s ten past midnight.’

He risked a jovial laugh. ‘Don’t they call it “all-day breakfast”? I would be grateful, honestly. I haven’t eaten anything since six o’clock this morning.’

The girl looked dubious. ‘I could make you scrambled eggs, I suppose. Or egg and beans and sausage. But I’m not doing the full works – not cereal and toast and stuff.’

‘Egg and beans and sausage would be great. And maybe some fried bread.’

She ignored his last request. ‘The dining-room’s this way.’ she muttered, leading him past the reception desk into a small, shabby room, over-stuffed with ugly fake-wood tables and an assortment of mismatched chairs.

‘Tea or coffee?’ she asked, her tone suggesting that both were forms of poison.

‘A pot of tea would be perfect. If you’re sure it’s no bother.’ Of course it was a bother - she was making that perfectly plain. Yet, however sullen she might be, he still yearned to take her in his arms, crush her close against his chest, beg her never to leave him again.

‘Why don’t you wait in your room till the food’s ready? I’ll give you a shout, OK?’

‘No, I’d prefer to stay down here.’ Quickly he took off his coat and sat at one of the tables. How could he miss this chance of watching her come in and out; that lithe and lively figure he’d assumed he would never see again? However, she shut the kitchen door with what sounded like a petulant slam, leaving him with no company save the cutesy kitten gazing at him beseechingly from a picture on the wall.

Slowly he took in his surroundings. Kitten apart, there was little in the room that wasn’t part its prime: old-fashioned, faded wallpaper; scuffed, grey vinyl floor; limp, half-

hearted curtains that didn't quite meet in the middle. Even the table-top was smeary, and the red plastic tomato standing guard by the salt-and-pepper-set was oozing drools of congealed and crusted ketchup.

'Please wait to be seated' ordered a notice on the wall – a request that underlined his solitude. He tried to picture the room full of cheery diners, queuing for a table, but failed to make the imaginative leap required. This hotel was in a backwater and off the beaten track, and it was giving him the feeling that it was a ghost hotel, or hotel in a dream, and that no guest but him had ever ventured here. Maybe even Stacey had vanished into the stratosphere and he would continue to sit, abandoned and alone, throughout the long night hours.

He reached out for the pepper-pot and gripped it in his hand, just to anchor himself to something real and solid. Perhaps the girl was avoiding him deliberately. It must have seemed peculiar, the way he'd called her Gemma, or she might even have regarded it as some sort of clumsy chat-up line. He fumbled in his pocket for his wallet. A tenner (maybe a couple) might work a minor miracle; change her mood from aggressive to amicable.

Just at that moment, the door burst open and she barged in with a tray. Once she'd unloaded the tea things, he slipped the notes surreptitiously into her hand; his fingers tingling from the shock of meeting hers. 'I realize I'm keeping you up late, so here's a little something for your trouble.'

'Gosh, thanks! Fantastic! And it *isn't* any trouble - honest.'

The cash had softened her up, but who was he to object? He knew all too well how money made the difference between battling on in life, or giving up.

'Great cup of tea,' he enthused, although the brew was weak and pallid; a single teabag floating in the chipped brown earthenware pot.

'Mum says I can't make tea to save my life. Normally, she never lets me near the kitchen.'

A definite advance. Information offered in a congenial tone of voice. ‘Are any other guests staying at the moment?’ he asked, keen to take advantage of the truce.

She shook her head. ‘Mum’s been ill – not just the stomach thing, but – you know - other problems ...’ The sentence petered out.

Poor kid, he thought. If business was so bad, the mother might be forced to sell up; even land in the bankruptcy court. The sense of insecurity, the constant dread of ending up with nothing – they were *his*, as well.

‘Must dash, or I’ll burn your egg.’

He’d gladly risk a burnt egg – indeed, a completely charred and ruined breakfast – for the privilege of keeping her in view. But she had already disappeared, although her pale, slender legs continued jouncing in his mind. He knew those legs – the silky feel of the skin; the two special, star-shaped freckles on the inside of the left (and luscious) thigh.

Within minutes, he heard steps approaching, and racked his brains for some wise or witty overture. Somehow, he must charm her, gain her interest, prove he could be trusted. But, as he opened his mouth to speak, he saw not Stacey, but a young gangling man slouch into the room.

‘Sorry,’ the stranger muttered, wiping his hands on his dirty denim jeans. ‘Didn’t know anyone was here.’

‘That’s OK,’ said Derek, speaking to empty air. The youth had gone as swiftly as he’d come.

He spooned more sugar into his tea, to add a bit of flavour, although aware that every spoonful increased the calorie-count. When he’d first met Gemma, he’d been as slim as a swordstick. Now, he was developing the male equivalent of love-handles – something of a misnomer, since he’d made love to no one else in all those barren years; years he called his

exile, in the sense of lifelong banishment from the one woman in the world who had been his hope and haven.

He jumped as Stacey banged back in. ‘D’you want your egg soft or hard?’

Would *he* be hard, he wondered, if he were back in bed with Gemma? The very thought sent a flutter through his groin.

‘Did you hear what I said?’

‘Sorry – yes. Hard! By the way, a guy popped in just now. Was it your brother, by any chance?’

‘No!’ She gave a nervous giggle. ‘I’m an only child, worse luck! That was Steve, our handyman.’

‘He’s working late.’

‘Yeah, we had a ... problem. But he’s fixed it now, so he’ll be leaving in a jiff. Listen, I’ve done you some fried bread.’

‘Wonderful! It’s one of my little weaknesses – fried bread. D’you find you have certain things you just can’t do without?’

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘A decent night’s sleep.’

‘OK, don’t rub it in. Look, the minute you bring me my breakfast, I’ll gobble it down double-quick.’

‘Don’t worry – only kidding! Anyway, the sausage isn’t done yet. I had to get them out of the freezer, and they’re in this huge great catering pack. It took me ages to hack one off from the rest. In fact, I almost lost a finger!’

‘I’m sorry.’ Sixth apology. They must somehow move from sausages and ‘sorrlys’ to something more profound. ‘Do call me Derek,’ he urged, hoping to strike a more intimate note. ‘And do you mind if I call you Stacey?’

‘Not bothered.’ She gave a dismissive shrug, although at least she made no move to go. ‘So what line of work are you in?’

I’m a ‘champion’, he all but said, a ‘hero’. Those were the terms bandied about at sales conferences, in an attempt to flatter conference-members that they were venturing out to win new lands, like the pioneers who had conquered the Wild West. In point of fact, most salesmen were despised, and with some real cause, he felt. There *was* something rather creepy about employing all the social graces not for genuine friendship but just to make a profit.

‘Well,’ he replied, ‘you’ll laugh at this, in light of what you said about your sleep, but I work for a company that manufactures Sleep-Sound beds. They’re a totally new concept in sleep-health. Each bed has a memory-foam mattress that reduces pressure on the joints, and our double-deluxe model is electrically adjustable and comes complete with a built-in massage function. Or, if you upgrade to our top-of-the-range bed, you’ll get an integral stereo system that plays hypnotic “sleep-well” CDs and -’

God, he thought, he was lapsing into sales patter, purely from force of habit. And, far from seeming impressed, she looked a shade alarmed. Perhaps it wasn’t very tactful to have broached the subject of beds so early in their acquaintance. And ‘massage’ sounded worse, with its sleazy connotations.

‘I bet they’re pricey,’ was all she said.

‘Yes, I’m afraid even our standard single would set you back six hundred, and our most expensive king-size costs a cool three grand.’

‘So who buys them, then? Rock stars?’

Who indeed? He could spend hours with potential customers, demonstrating every last detail of the beds, only to be told, ‘We’ll think about it’, or even have the door slammed in his face. Or they might ask him to return tomorrow, when he’d driven miles for *today’s* appointment. Or totally forget that he was coming, and go out on a shopping trip, like Mrs

Watts this morning, who had eventually returned, loaded down with packages, pretending *he* had got the time wrong, although he'd phoned her only yesterday, to confirm. But, whatever the provocation, he must never lose his cool, but be unfailingly polite, upbeat and positive. His time didn't matter, only theirs. Indeed, he hardly even existed as a person. He was just a smile, a spiel.

'OK, I'll get your nosh now.' The girl had clearly lost all interest in the buyers or non-buyers of his beds.

'Thanks,' he said. 'And bring a second cup, so you can join me for a cup of tea.' He was probably being way too forward, but it was all he could do not to clamp his body onto hers and keep it there by force. He should have done that with Gemma, he realized now, with hindsight. The love of his life, lost to some phoney artist – and one called Tristram, for God's sake. What chance had a lowly Derek Baines against a Tristram Trelawny? The slimy ponce had not only stolen Gemma, but used her as a life-model, as if she were a slapper who stripped off for anyone? He should have killed his rival in cold blood, instead of slinking away to lick his wounds in private. Yet he was sick and tired of 'might-have-beens' - his companions now for close on thirty years.

When Stacey returned with his food, he pulled out the chair beside him and patted it invitingly. But she ignored the gesture and remained standing where she was. If only he was skilled at conversation and could enthrall her with some exotic traveller's tale, or launch into a discussion about the Meaning of Life or the Riddle of the Sphinx. But all he could manage was sales-talk, and he would hardly sweep her off her feet with an account of 'Sleep-Sound's flame-retardant mattress-covers, or their 'no-quibble' five-year guarantee.

'Eat up! It's getting cold.'

What she really meant was that he was keeping her from sleep. He would gladly whisk her to her bedroom, cuddle up beside her, demonstrate his skills in a different, wordless way.

Instead, he cut slowly into the rubbery fried egg. It was so small, a wren must have laid it; possibly a sparrow. The frilled edges of the white were overlaid with globules of fat and flecked with black specks from the sausage, itself afloat in a greasy pool of beans. Who cared? It was enough that she was *here*, so that he could flash back thirty years and imagine he and Gemma were breakfasting together after a night of passionate love.

‘So where d’you live?’ she asked, perhaps finding the silence oppressive - as indeed he did himself - or maybe feeling duty-bound to earn the cash he’d slipped her.

Again he hesitated. Walsall sounded so unappealing, on a par with Slough and Scunthorpe. He was tempted to say Land’s End: the most romantic spot on earth, because he’d met beloved Gemma there - and romantic in its own right as the last land before America, wooed by clamorous waves. He rarely went on holiday, either then or now, but a pal had talked him into a fishing trip, and he’d caught not bass or mackerel, but a slender, red-haired beauty, who had nibbled at his bait, threshed and plunged as he hooked her; become even more tempestuous as he reeled her in and netted her; as wild as the wild waves themselves.

‘My territory’s the West Midlands,’ he said, at last, hoping the word ‘territory’ might compensate for the ‘Midlands’. And, for a moment, yes - he’d exchanged the fishing-boat for a trusty steed and was galloping full-pelt across the prairie, with Gemma flung across his saddle, and the far horizon beckoning him on to adventure and escape.

‘Yes, but where’s your actual house?’

Flat, he corrected silently. What he hated about the Midlands (West or East) was its sheer distance from the sea. He had always longed to live on the coast – indeed, he and Gemma had planned to stay in Cornwall and buy a cliff-top cottage. He remembered wandering hand-in-hand with her along the wind-whipped strand, and the thunderous waves breaking on the shore had been so unrestrained, explosive, they had seemed an apt expression

of his love. Later, when he'd lost that love (*and* the hoped-for cottage), he had walked the same unhappy beach; the strident seagulls mocking him, as they screeched out Tristram's name.

'So is this your full-time job?' he asked, keen to drown memories of Tristram, and also shift attention from the location of his flat. 'Helping run the hotel?'

'No fear! I can't wait to get away.'

'And what then? Do you have plans?'

A dreamy look came over her face. 'Oh, yes! I want to see the world. Swan off somewhere exciting; trek across the desert or maybe climb the Himalayas. Actually I don't care where it is, so long as it gets me out of this hell-hole.' She gave an embarrassed laugh. 'Shit! I shouldn't have said that, should I?'

'Don't worry. It's good that you have ambitions.' His own ambitions had died along with Gemma. After that doomed encounter, he'd become panicky and paralysed; no longer daring to spread his wings or take the slightest risk. He still lived close to his birthplace, as if any other part of England was dangerous, even disastrous. And although his life was spent on the road, every day was trammelled; yoked to rigid appointments and unremitting sales-targets, with no scope for breaking out.

'You're not eating,' Stacey said. 'Don't you like it? I must admit, I'm not the world's greatest cook.'

'It's delicious,' he said, biting into the sausage, which, although burnt both ends, was still semi-raw in the middle.

'I don't want to rush you, Derek, but I have to be up at the crack of dawn tomorrow.'

'Sorry,' he repeated. He'd lost count of the times he'd said it. Although being apologetic never really paid. Brash, bold blokes were the ones who got the girls. Still, at least

she had used his name, which was definitely encouraging. ‘I won’t say another word, I promise. I’ll just concentrate on eating.’

He scooped up a forkful of beans. The sauce was thin, yet unpleasantly sweet and a brilliant orange in colour, as if it had been watered down with orange squash. And, as he cut into the fried bread, a yellow pus of grease spurted on to his chin. He didn’t mind in the least. Gemma, too, had been a lousy cook. They had lived on love – and chips.

‘D’you mind if I clear off the tea-things?’

‘No, go ahead,’ he mumbled, through a mouthful of cold egg. He hadn’t even succeeded in pouring her a cup of tea, and she’d already whisked away the second cup. Why was he so backward? A slow learner. A slow eater.

At last, he put his knife and fork down, feeling slightly nauseous. The excess fat had congealed on his plate into a semi-solid phlegm. Yet he’d happily drown in blubber if only he could watch her dainty hands again, picking up the teapot and the milk jug. He yearned to be the sugar-bowl, so that he, too, could feel that close caress. He suspected she was lingering in the kitchen just to get away from him. Yet, however knackered she might be, she’d be duty-bound, in the absence of the mother, to show him to his room. Could he delay her there, perhaps – say he needed extra blankets; pretend he’d forgotten his toothbrush and ask if she could find him one?

‘OK, ready?’ she asked, zooming back in, and locking the kitchen door with pointed emphasis

‘Yes, but I’m wondering if I should move the car?’ If she followed him outdoors, he might manage to waylay her by pointing out the constellations. Except he didn’t have a clue how to distinguish Mars from Venus, let alone Orion’s Belt from the Plough. And, anyway, there *were* no stars – the night was too overcast.

‘Why? Where did you leave it?’

‘In that little space by the side of the house.’

‘It’s OK there. No problem.’

She seemed in such a rush, there was little chance of dallying in the moonlight.

Instead, she all but shoved him into the hall.

‘Your room’s on the first floor. I’ll just go and get the key.’

As she turned her back, he gazed at her legs again. Her skirt was provocatively short – little more than a cake-frill – which meant he could admire the full expanse of milky, freckled flesh; the seductive curve of the thigh, disappearing beneath the –

‘Got your case?’

‘I left it somewhere here.’

‘Ssshh! Don’t wake Mum. She sleeps on the ground floor.’

And where do *you* sleep, he longed to ask, as he followed her up the stairs, riveted by the wiggle of her bottom as she took the steps two at a time. That energy, that verve – so similar to Gemma’s.

‘I’m afraid it’s not exactly the Ritz,’ she said, unlocking the door of a small, low-ceilinged room. An expert when it came to beds, he knew this one didn’t rate at all, although at least the lurid counterpane matched the frilly curtains – more or less.

As she held the door for him to enter, he was tempted to pick her up bodily and deposit her on the bed. Then he’d -

‘Shower’s in here,’ she said, opening the door of what looked like a dark cubby-hole.

‘Though the water won’t be hot at this hour. Oh, shit – the bathroom light’s gone!’

Good, he thought, now you’ll have to fetch a replacement.

‘Do you *need* the bathroom tonight?’ she asked, a note of desperation in her voice.

‘Well, yes, I ...’

‘Thing is, I don’t know where the sodding light bulbs are kept.’

‘Don’t worry,’ he said, suddenly taking pity on her. ‘I can always prop the door open. The light from here will be quite enough to see.’

‘Great! That’s really decent. Thanks a mill. Goodnight.’

She couldn’t wait to get away, rattling down the stairs even faster than she’d climbed them. He crept after her surreptitiously, to see where she was going; watched her zip along the corridor and disappear into one of the ground-floor rooms. She was obviously dead-tired, desperate for some shut-eye. Young girls probably needed loads more sleep than fifty-something males, although he wouldn’t really know. His entire experience of girls – young, old or middle-aged – had been restricted to Gemma, which only went to show what a total wimp he was. *Other* men knew how to handle females. Kevin, his Sales Manager, had slept with strings of women, whereas he was still an almost-virgin at the age of fifty-three.

Heaving his case on to the (patently substandard) bed, he unpacked his few possessions. The wire hangers in the wardrobe had rusted slightly and felt sticky to the touch. He only hoped they wouldn’t stain tomorrow’s clean white shirt. In the drawers he found a Bible, a dead moth and a bent hairpin. Sitting on the bed in his underpants, he began leafing through the Bible; every verse he read seeming to threaten retribution. He saw God as very similar to the ‘Sleep-Sound’ C.E.O.: remote, vindictive and tyrannical; bestowing rewards and punishments at whim. Gemma’s God was different – female and benevolent.

What had happened to her, he wondered, as he’d done umpteen times before? Had she stayed with Tristram and produced a clutch of kids; celebrated her Silver Wedding and be aiming for her Golden? Was she even at this moment knitting booties for a grandchild? The world was built round families, yet, apart from those few months with her, he had always been alone. And his job only served to emphasize his solitude. Despite the fact he spent his days with customers, they were strangers, more or less, and, as he motored from one town to

the next, the very streets seemed alien. There was no sense of being ‘at home’, and, when he did return to his flat, he would eat and sleep (and plan and dream) on his own.

Having put on his pyjamas, he cleaned his teeth in the dim and shadowy bathroom, squinting at his reflection in the mirror. He wasn’t actually fat – ‘well-covered’ was more the term he’d use – and at least he still had hair, quite decent hair, in fact, though admittedly more grey than brown. Some women preferred older men, valuing their wisdom and experience. Stacey hadn’t mentioned a dad. Perhaps the old boy had passed away, which meant she’d need a father-figure, someone solid and dependable. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he realized her life was rather similar to his. She was trapped, as *he* was; tied to a sick mother and to a wreck of a hotel; her hopes and dreams frustrated. And if the mother was seriously ill, the poor girl might soon be orphaned and completely alone in the world. She’d said she was an only child (like him), so she’d have no brother to turn to, no sister to offer refuge. But *he* could take her in; help her find her feet. And gratitude did sometimes turn to love. OK, the age-gap was huge, but he often read in the paper about blokes in their fifties shacking up with nymphets. Granted, such men were usually rich and famous, but love must feature sometimes – genuine affection; a bond between twin souls.

‘Don’t be so ridiculous,’ he muttered. ‘You’re fantasizing, as usual.’

Turning off the bedroom light, he groped his way to the bed. A bedside lamp hadn’t been provided, or indeed a fire. The radiator was obstinately cold, and its valve so stiff he couldn’t move it an inch. He shivered as he eased his body between the clammy nylon sheets. Forget memory-foam mattresses – this one felt like horsehair. As he edged his legs down, he suddenly encountered a rip in the sheet, only to tear it further as he tried to extricate his foot. The thing was paper-thin, probably rotting from years of laundering. Couldn’t the invalid mother even afford some decent bed-linen?

Wearily he dragged himself up again, deciding to remake the bed and use the ripped sheet as the top one rather than the bottom. He switched the light back on and stood inspecting the damage. The tear was eighteen inches long, for heaven's sake! Surely he had every right to demand a serviceable sheet? Stacey was probably still awake, so if went down now, he'd catch her. From what he gathered, women took an age before they actually settled down to sleep; doing mysterious female things such as creaming their faces or putting their hair in curlers.

Flinging on his dressing-gown, he descended the stairs as quickly as he dared, although being careful not to wake the mother.

His heart was racing as he paused outside Stacey's door, and not from the exertion. This might be all it needed – a ripped sheet leading to romance. He must handle the situation with the utmost care and tact; forget his own base desires and focus on her needs. It was sympathy she lacked; tenderness, devotion. For all he knew, she might be weeping at this very moment, distraught about her mother's fate - her own fate. He must treat her very gently; clasp her in his arms only to console her; not to sate his lust.

He cleared his throat, smoothed his hair, wishing now he'd sprayed himself with aftershave. But no way was he retreating. He might lose his nerve if he delayed a second longer, so, screwing up his courage, he tapped softly on the door.

No answer.

Maybe she was in the bath. An image of her naked body leapt into his mind; the white flesh gleaming seductively through a haze of foamy suds - although recalling what she'd said about there being no hot water caused the vision to collapse. No, she was probably crying, as he'd thought at first, and embarrassed to be seen with red eyes and tear-stained face.

'It doesn't matter, darling,' he rehearsed in a soft purr. 'You're still beautiful to me, however red your eyes.'

He knocked again, louder, but no response whatever. Maybe she *was* asleep, and sleeping very deeply. Was it fair to wake her?

Yes! He could always soothe her back to sleep, once he'd explained about the sheet, and – more important – explained his rescue-plan. In fact, she'd sleep much sounder when she knew there was an escape-route, and that his little flat awaited her, as lovers' nest and haven, should death or heartless bankruptcy blitz her world to shreds.

His own life seemed poised on a knife-edge as he wrestled with himself. One part of him was tempted to creep cravenly back to his room. He wasn't the type of bloke to pound on women's doors, or drag them rudely out of bed. Yet, if he didn't act incisively, for once, he'd lose this precious second chance – a chance, he knew, that would never come again. If things worked out between them, she might actually bear his child – a whole brood of children, even. He'd not only be a husband, he'd be a family-man – a fully paid-up member of the human race. He'd no longer feel inferior to those younger, keener colleagues who all had wives and kids; all earned higher commission; drove superior cars. With Stacey in his life, he could sell a million beds; sell beds to sleepaphobics, even sell them to the *dead*.

'Yes, go for it!' he muttered, clenching both his fists and only hesitating a second longer before beating them against the door. The loud drumming noise was a shock to his whole system, yet a triumphant shock, bordering on euphoria. At last, he was acting like a champion, a hero. And his courage was paying off. He could hear movement from inside the room, footsteps approaching – closer – and, all at once, the door was flung open.

'What the bloody hell do you think you're playing at?' yelled an outraged voice. A deep voice. A male voice. A voice like a tornado. And there, standing, arms akimbo, was Steve, the handyman - no longer in his soiled blue jeans, but naked save for a towel. And crouching on the bed behind him (a double bed, a lovers' bed) was Stacey, also naked, although half-covered by the duvet.

He turned and fled, each step he took ageing him a good five years, so that when he limped back into his room, he was a panting, breathless pensioner, a laughing-stock, a dotard. How could he have imagined that a young girl in the springtime of her life would choose to mate with winter - brave its thin, bare, cold embrace, when she already had hot summer to melt her into surrender? He saw their agile limbs entwined; their thrusting, youthful bodies coupling in abandon. Steve was rightly called a handyman – he'd be handy with his *cock*, of course. She had lied to him; told him Steve was 'leaving in a jiff'; pretended she was tired, desperate for her beauty sleep, when, in galling fact, she was desperate to be rid of him, so she could rush to her lithe lover.

He paced up and down the small, cramped room, beside himself with humiliation. How ever could he face her in the morning? Indeed, she was bound to be the one who'd cook his breakfast: more wishy-washy tea and beans; more charred and greasy lies.

Impulsively, he seized his case and started hurling in his things at random; tossing his dressing-gown and pyjamas on the top. Then, naked in the unheated room, he dressed with feverish haste; unable to endure the sight of his blubbery stomach and grizzled old-man's chest.

Grabbing his coat and suitcase, he dashed headlong down the stairs. Too bad if he woke the mother. For all he knew, she wasn't ill at all; maybe in bed with her *own* lover. And certainly Steve and Stacey wouldn't hear a thing. They'd be making too much noise themselves: whoops of passion, moans of desire, wild bellowings of lust.

He unbolted the front door, slammed it shut behind him and raced across the tarmac to his car. Accelerating away, he drove at perilous speed along the winding lane; hit the main road and hurtled on towards the M5 and home. His sole aim was to reach the safety of his flat; hole up there and hide his shame; never show his face again, or brave the mocking world.

As he turned onto the motorway, he pressed his foot down, hard; the breakneck pace reflected in his body: heart thwacking like a sledge-hammer; dizzy blood careering round his veins. Shadows formed and reformed; headlights dazzled, glared; the ghostly glow of distant towns diminished to a blur. Other cars were mere insubstantial shapes, to be overtaken, swallowed up. Nothing else existed but his own frantic sense of motion, as bridges, pylons, hazy landmarks went streaking, flashing past. Even the road-signs failed to register, until, suddenly, the words 'West Bromwich, Walsall' struck him with such force he all but skidded to a halt.

Hardly aware what he was doing, he veered left off the motorway, scorched along the slip-road and on towards the roundabout, and there did a total turnaround, until he was no longer driving north but south. The squall and storm of emotions churning through his mind had banished all clear thought; reduced rational decisions to so much airy moonshine. Since the moment he'd glimpsed Stacey naked on that double bed, he'd been acting on blind impulse; his usual common sense and caution thrown completely to the winds. Yet, strange as it might seem, it was the girl herself who had wrought this crucial change; made him see that he couldn't stay a moment longer landlocked in the Midlands; kowtowing to his customers; cringing to his boss; tied down by schedules, shackles. All that was in the past. No way was he returning to stagnation and surrender, servility, defeat, but now setting his sights on space and scope and freedom - yes, heading down to Cornwall and the last, storm-tumbled outcrop before the ocean stalked the shore; the very furthest limits of the land.

He allowed the shocked speedometer to hit the ninety-mark, as if it shared his own impatience for a new, untrammelled life. Yet, despite the whirlwind speed, his breathing and his heartbeat began gradually to slow, and his tense, angry grip loosened on the steering-wheel. Even his injured pride was fading in significance. Why fret and fume about one small

indignity, when ahead was independence, a new start? However mortifying her methods, Stacey had released him - and before it was too late.

Already, he seemed to hear the brazen waves booming forth their message on the shore: that he could still find love, find purpose; that he wasn't just a piece of flotsam to be battered by the tide. And, overhead in the dark night sky, a flock of gulls went soaring up to a vaster, clearer realm - a more radiant sphere, bordering on infinity.

By dawn, he would reach Land's End. Food and sleep must wait, while he rushed straight out to walk the eager strand, feel the sea-breeze stroke his face, see the gulls for real - triumphant gulls, not crying in derision now, but screeching out a hymn of praise to the lonely but courageous man who had broken free.

At last.