

The Coincidence of the Arts

'This is a farce, man. Have you read my novel yet?'
 'No.'

'Well why's that now?'
 'I've been terribly -'

Across the road a fire truck levered itself backwards into its bay with a great stifled sneeze. Round about, a thousand conversations missed a beat, gulped, and then hungrily resumed.

'The thing is I've been terribly busy.'

'Aren't those the exact same words you used last time I asked you?'

'Yes.'

'Then how many more times do I got to hear them?'

The two men stood facing each other on the corner: that mess of streets, of tracks and rinks, where Seventh Avenue collapses into the Village . . . He who posed the questions was thirty-five years old, six foot seven, and built like a linebacker in full armour. His name was Pharsin Courier, and he was deeply black. He who tendered the answers was about the same age; but he was five foot eight, and very meagre. Standing there, confronted by his interrogator, he seemed to be lacking a whole dimension. His name was Sir Rodney Peel, and he was deeply white.

They were shouting at each other, but not yet in exasperation or anger. The city was getting louder every day: even the sirens had to throw a tantrum, just to make themselves heard.

'Find time for my novel,' said Pharsin. He continued to urge such a course on Rodney for a further twenty minutes, saying, in conclusion, 'I gave you that typescript in good faith, and I need your critique. You and I, we're both artists. And don't you think that counts for something?'

In this city?

The sign said: Omni's Art Material - For the Artist in Everyone. But everyone was *already* an artist. The coffeeshop waiters and waitresses were, of course, actors and actresses; and the people they served were all librettists and scenarists, harpists, pointillists, ceramicists, caricaturists, contrapuntalists. The little boys were bladers and jugglers, the little girls all ballerinas (bent over the tables in freckly discussions with their mothers or mentors). Even the babies starred in ads and had agents. And it didn't stop there. Outside, sculptors wheelbarrowed chunks of rock over painted pavements past busking flautists, and a troupe of clowns performed mime, watched by kibitzers doing ad lib and impro. And on and on and up and up. Jesters teetered by on ten-foot stilts. Divas practised their scales from tenement windows. The AC installers were all installationists. The construction workers were all constructivists.

And, for once, Sir Rodney Peel happened to be telling the truth: he *was* terribly busy. After many soggy years of artistic and sexual failure, in London, SW3, Rodney was now savouring their opposites, in New York. You could still see this failure in the darkened skin around his eyes (stained,

scarred, blinded); you could still nose it in his pyjamas, unlaundered for fifteen years (when he got out of bed in the morning he left them leaning against the wall). But America had reinvented him. He had a tittle, a ponytail, a flowery accent, and a pliant paintbrush. He was an unattached heterosexual in Manhattan: something had to give. And Rodney now knew the panic of answered prayers. Like a bit-part player in a dream, he looked on as his prices kept doubling: all you needed was an aristocratic wag of the head, and a straight face. Under the floorboards of his studio, in brown envelopes, lurked ninety-five thousand dollars: cash. And every afternoon he was climbing into an aromatic bed, speechless, with his ears whistling like seashells.

Rodney still felt that he had a chance of becoming a serious painter. Not a good chance – but a chance. Even he could tell that his artistic universe, after ten months in New York, had undergone drastic contraction. The journey into his own nervous system, the groping after spatial relationships, the trawl for his own talent – all this, for the time being, he had set aside. And now he specialized. He did wives. Wives of wealthy professionals and executives: wives of the lions of Madison Avenue, wives of the heroes of Wall Street. His brush flattered and rejuvenated them, naturally, but this wasn't especially arduous or even dishonest, because the wives were never first wives: they were second wives, third wives, subsequent wives. They gazed up at him righteously, at slender Sir Rodney in his smudged smock. 'Perfect,' he would murmur. 'No. Yes. That's quite lovely . . .' One thing sometimes led to another thing; but never to the real thing. Meekly, his lovelife imitated his art. This wife, that wife. Rodney flattered, flirted, fumbled, failed.

Then change came. Now, when he worked, his paint coagulated along traditional lines, and conventional curves. In between the sheets, though, Rodney felt the terrible agitation of the innovator.

'There's been a breakthrough,' he told Rock Robville, his agent or middleman, 'on the uh, "carnal knowledge" front.'

'Oh? Do tell.'

'Quite extraordinary actually. Never known anything quite . . .'

'The fragrant Mrs Peterson, mayhap?'

'Good God no.'

'The bodacious Mrs Havilland then, I'll wager.'

Twenty-eight, sleek, rosy, and darkly balding, Rock, too, was English, and of Rodney's class. The Robvilles were not as old and grand as the Peels; but they were much richer. Rock was now accumulating another fortune as an entrepreneur of things British: holiday castles in Scotland, Cumbrian fishing rights, crests, titles, nannies, suits of armour. Oh, and butlers. Rock did much trafficking in butlers.

'No. She's not a wife,' said Rodney. 'I don't want to say too much about it in case it breaks the spell. Early days and all that.'

'Have you two actually slimed?'

Rodney looked at him, frowning, as if in effortful recall. Then his face cleared and he answered in the negative. Rock seemed to enjoy scattering these phrases of the moment – these progeriac novelties – in Rodney's path. There was another one he used: 'playing Hide the Salami'. Hide the Salami sounded more fun than the game Rodney usually played with women. That game was called *Find* the Salami.

'We uh, "retire" together. But we haven't yet done the deed.'

'The act of darkness,' said Rock, causing Rodney to contemplate him strangely. 'How sweet. And how retro. You're getting to know each other first.'

'Well that's just it. She doesn't . . . We don't . . .'

Rock and Rod were leaning backwards on a mahogany bar, drinking Pink Ladies, in some conservatorial gin-palace off Lower Park Avenue. Inspecting his friend's anxious leer, Rock felt a protective pang and said suddenly,

'Have you done anything about your money yet? Talk to Mr Jaguar about it. Soon. Americans are very fierce about tax. You could get locked up.'

They fell silent. Both of them were thinking about the four or five seconds Rodney would last in an American jail. Now Rodney stirred and said,

'I'm in a mood to celebrate. It's all very exciting. Let me get you another one of those.'

'Ah. You're a white man,' said Rock absentmindedly. 'And do let me know,' he added, 'when you've slimed.'

Rodney was one of those Englishmen who had to get out of England. He had to get out of England and grow his hair. Helpless against his mother, his grandmother, helpless against each dawdling, prating, beaming milady they somehow conscripted him to squire. When he tried to break out they always easily reclaimed him, drawing him back to what was theirs. They owned him . . . Rodney had a fat upper lip which, during those soggy years, often wore a deep lateral crease of resignation – of vapid resignation. In the Chinese restaurants of Chelsea you might have glimpsed him, being lunched and lectured by a heavy-smoking aunt, his arms folded in the tightness of his jacket, his upper lip philosophically seamed.

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'You get to my novel yet?'

'What?'

'Have you read my novel yet?'

'Ah. Pharsin.' Rodney collected himself. 'The thing is, I've been trying to make time for it in the afternoons. But the thing is . . .' He gazed unhappily down Greenwich Avenue. Sunday morning, and everyone was staggering around with their personal burden of prolixity, of fantastic garrulity, of uncontainable communicativeness: the *Sunday Times*. 'The thing is . . .'

The thing was that Rodney worked every morning and drunkenly socialized every evening, and in the afternoons – the only time of day he might conceivably pick up a book, or at any rate a magazine or a catalogue – he went to bed. With humming ears. And perpendicular in his zeal.

'Come on, man. This is getting insane.'

Rodney remembered a good tip about lying: stay as close to the truth as you dare. 'I've been trying to make time for it in the afternoons. But in the afternoons . . . My lady friend, do you see. I uh, "entertain" her in the afternoons.'

Pharsin assumed a judicious air.

'For instance,' Rodney enthused, 'on Friday afternoon I was just settling down to it. And in she came. I had your novel on my lap.'

This was of course untrue. Pharsin's ruffled, slewing typescript had never made it on to Rodney's lap. It was still under the piano, or in whatever corner or closet he had booted it into, months ago.

'She come every day?'

'Except weekends.'

'So what's your solution, Rod?'

'I'm going to clear some evenings. Settle down to it.'

'You say Friday afternoon you had my novel on your lap?'

'Just settling down to it.'

'Okay. What's the title?'

Pharsin stood there, skyscraping over him. Each of his teeth was about the size of Rodney's head. When he leant over to spit in the gutter, you'd think someone had voided a bucket from the third floor.

'Give it up! What's the fucking title!'

'Um,' said Rodney.

Pharsin he had first encountered in the southwest corner of Washington Square Park, that inverted parliament of chess, where the junkies were all Experts, the winos were all Grand Masters, and the pizza-bespattered babblers and bums were all ex-World Champions. Rodney, who for a year had played second board for the University of Suffolk, approached the marble table over which Pharsin showily presided. In half an hour he lost a hundred dollars.

Never in his dealings with the thirty-two pieces and the sixty-four squares had Rodney been so hilariously out-classed. He was a mere centurion, stupidly waiting, in his metal miniskirt, his short-sword at his side; whereas Pharsin was the career gladiator, hideously experienced with the weighted net and the bronze trident. After half a dozen moves Rodney could already feel the grip of the cords, the bite of the tines. In the third game Pharsin successfully dispensed with the services of his queen: things looked good until Black drove the first of his rooks into the groin of White's defence.

They got talking as they loped together, seranaded by

saxophones and sirens, past the bobbing dopeddealers of the northwest corner and out on to Eighth Street.

'Do you uh, "make a living" at it?'

'Used to,' said Pharsin through the backbeat of nineteen different boomboxes and radios turned out on to the road. 'Chess hustling is down with the economy. Forcing me to diversify.'

Rodney asked him what kind of thing.

'It's like this: chess is an art. You can do one art, you can do them all.'

Rodney said how interesting, and toddled on after him. It seemed to Rodney that he could walk through Pharsin's legs and out the other side. No, not enough room: muscles stood like heavies leaning against the tunnel walls. Pharsin's head, perched up there on that body, could only look to be the shape and size of a car neckrest. Rodney experienced respect for Pharsin's head. Whatever chess was (an art, a game, a fight), chess was certainly a mountain. Rodney strolled its foothills. Whereas the forward-leaning cliff face that closed out the sky had Pharsin halfway up it.

'You see this?'

Halting, Pharsin from inside his hoodie produced a fistful of scrolled paper: an essay, a polemic, entitled 'The Co-Incidence of the Arts, Part I: The Indivisibility of Poetry, Photography, and Dance.' Rodney ran his eye down the opening sentence. It was the kind of sentence that spent a lot of time in reverse gear before crunching itself into first.

'Are you sure you mean "coincidence"? Not uh, "correspondence"?''

'No. Co-incidence. The arts happen in the same part of the brain. That's how come I hyphenate. Co-incidence.'

Rodney had a lot of time for coincidence. Everything he now had he owed to coincidence. It happened on a country

lane half a mile from his grandmother's house: a head-on collision between two Range Rovers, both of them crammed with patrilinear Peels. All else followed from this: tide, nerve, Rock, America, sex, and the five thousand twenty-dollar bills underneath his studio floor. And talent too, he thought: maybe.

'You English?'

'Oh, very much so.'

'My wife is English also. The oppressiveness of the class system caused her to leave your shores.'

'I sympathize. It can be very wearing. Is she in the arts too, your wife?'

'Yeah. She does -'

But Pharsin's monosyllable was quite cancelled by city stridor - someone detonating a low-yield nuclear weapon or dropping a dumpster from a helicopter. 'And yourself?' said Rodney.

'Sulptor. Mathematician. Choreographer. Percussionist. Essayist. Plus the art you and I engaged in some while ago.'

'Oh, I remember,' said Rodney humbly. 'I'm a painter. With other interests.' And he said what he usually said to Americans, because it was virtually true, geographically (and what would *they* know?): 'I studied literature at Cambridge.'

Pharsin gave a jolt and said, 'This intrigues me. Because I've recently come to think of myself as primarily a novelist. Now, my friend. There's something I'm going to ask you to do for me.'

He listened, and said yes. Why not? Rodney reckoned that Pharsin, after all, would be incredibly easy to avoid.

Pharsin said, 'I'll be in an excellent position to monitor your progress with it.'

Rodney waited.

'You don't recognize me. I work the door of your building. Weekends.'

'Oh of course you do.' In fact, Rodney had yet to begin the task of differentiating the three or four black faces that scowled and glinted through the gloom of his lobby. 'The coincidence,' he mused, 'of the arts. Tell me, are you all a little family down there?'

'Why would we be? I don't associate with those animals. Now. I'll bring you my novel early tomorrow. Casting all false modesty aside, I don't believe you'll have a problem falling under its spell.'

'Um,' said Rodney.

'Three months you been sitting on it, and you don't even know the fucking *title*?'

'Um,' he repeated. Like the novel itself, the title, Rodney recalled, was very *long*. Pharsin's typescript ran to more than eleven hundred pages: single-spaced. Pharsin said it comprised exactly one million words - a claim (Rodney felt) that few would ever call him on. 'It's very *long*.' He looked up into Pharsin's blood-spoked eyes and said, "'The . . .'"

'*The* what?'

"'The Words of . . ." Wait. "The Noise of the . . .'"

'Sound.'

"'The Noise of the Sound . . .'"

'Bullshit! *The Sound of the Words, the Sound of the Words, man. The Sound of the Words, the Sound of the Words.*'

'Exactly. *The Sound of the Words, the Sound of the Words.*'

'Commit the fucking energy, man. I say this because I'm convinced that your effort will be rewarded. The structure you'll particularly relish. And also the theme.'

After another forty column-inches of reproach, dissimulated threat, moral suasion and literary criticism, Pharsin wrapped things up, adding, as an audible afterthought,

'Thirteen weeks. And he doesn't even know its *name*?'

'Forgive me. I'm stupefied by, uh, "amorous excess".'

'That I can believe. You look totally fucked out. Man, take care: you're going to blow away on the wind. My marriage has survived thus far, but woman action and woman trouble I know all about. What's her name?'

Rodney murmured some feminine phoneme: Jan or Jen or June.

But the truth was he didn't know *her* name either.

'We've slimed.'

'Good man. Tell all.'

This time Rod and Rock were to be found in some kind of *Irish* restaurant high up on Lexington Avenue. They occupied two places near the head of a table laid for eighteen. Their practice on such occasions was to meet an hour early, to chat and drink cocktails, before some Americans showed up and paid for it all. This night, in Rock's comfortable company, Rodney belied his eight-and-a-half stone. Pared down to the absolute minimum (carrying just two or three extra grams in that buxom upper lip), he nevertheless seemed to share in his friend's bland rotundity; they both wore the cummerbund of inner fatness conferred by their class. Black Velvet, quaffed from pewter tankards, was their tipple of the hour.

'What's there to say?' said Rodney. 'Frankly, I'm speechless. Words cannot ...'

'Dear oh dear. Well describe her body at least.'

'Actually I'd rather not. I mean there's nothing to say, is there, when things go so gloriously?'

'... It's Mrs Peterson, isn't it?' Rock paused unkindly. 'No. Far too swarthy for you. You like the dairy-product type. Raised on curds and whey. They have to look like English roses. Or you get culture shock.'

'How very wrong you are,' said Rodney in a strained voice. 'It may interest you to know that my inamorata happens to be ... "bleck".'

'Bleck?'

'Bleck,' said Rodney with emphasis. It sounded more like *blick* than *black*. A year or two ago they might have said *bluhck*. But having largely shed their class signatures, the two men were now recultivating them.

'Bleck?' repeated Rock. 'You mean a proper ...? What are they calling themselves these days. A proper American-African?'

'African-American.' As he continued, Rodney's voice grew drowsy, and it was with a haggard sensuality – slow inhalations, feeding some inner fire – that he relished his nightly cigarette. 'Well, African. I sense Africa in her. I taste Africa in her. One of the French bits, probably. Senegal, perhaps. Sierra Leone. Guinea-Bissau.'

Rock was looking at him.

'She moves like an empress. A Dahomey Amazon. Cleopatra was very dark, you know.'

'So she's posh, too, is she? As well as bleck. Where does *she* say she's from?'

Simultaneously ignoring this and rousing himself, Rodney said, 'It's what's so wonderful about America. There *aren't* any good bleck girls in London. All they've got there are those squeaky Cockneys. Magnificent creatures, some of

them, but – quite impossible. Simply not on the cards, over there. But over here, in the great uh, “melting pot” . . .’

‘The salad bowl.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Rodney, looking around for the salad bowl.

‘They call it the salad bowl now. Not the melting pot.’

‘Do they indeed.’

‘In a way, you could say that English blecks are posher than their American cousins.’

‘How so?’

‘How so?’

Here were two men living in a silent movie: when they were alone together, the millennium seemed about a century away. Rock was now about to speak of the historical past; but his urbanity faltered, and he suddenly sounded sober.

‘Oh come on. We know a *little* bit about this, don’t we? The English contingent, they were shipped in after the war. To run the tubes and so on. And the buses. Contract labour. But not – but not like American blecks.’

‘Same stock, though. One imagines.’

Rod and Rock: their family trees stood tall. Their family trees stood tall and proud. But what kind of trees were they – weeping willow, willow, mahogany, ash? And something ailed or cankered them, shaping their branches all arthritic and aghast . . . The Peels had been among the beneficiaries when, on a single day in 1661, Charles II created thirteen baronetcies on the plantation island of Barbados. Rock’s lot, the Robvilles, rather disappointingly (rather puzzlingly, from Rodney’s point of view), didn’t go back quite so far. But the Peels and the Robvilles alike had flourished at a time when every English adult with cash or credit owned a piece of it: a piece of slavery. The place where Rock’s dad lived had been

assembled by massive shipwright profits out of Liverpool, *circa* 1750. Intelligence of these provenances could never be openly acknowledged by either of the two men. Lifelong inhibition protected them: in their childhood it was like something terrible hiding under the bed. Still, Rock was a businessman. And he had never expected business to be pretty. He said,

‘There’s not much in it, I suppose. But the English contingent were freed longer ago.’

‘Yes, well,’ pondered Rodney, ‘I suppose you can’t get much less posh than being a slave. But that’s to forget what they might have been originally.’

‘Posh in Africa.’

‘In a way. You know, Africa was quite advanced for a while. I mean, look at African art. Exquisite. Ancient, but immediate. Immediate. They had great civilizations there when England was just a sheepdip. Ages ago.’

‘What have you been reading? The *Amsterdam News*?’

‘No. *Ebony*. But it’s true! We’re just upstarts and counterjumpers compared to them. Scum, Rock. Anyway I have a hunch my one came direct from Africa. The Sudan, quite possibly. Timbuktu was apparently an incredible city. Crammed with princes and poets and amazing *houris*. Jezebel was of –’

‘Did you say amazing hoorays? Sorry? Oh never *mind*. What sort of accent does she have? Your one.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘I don’t know.’

Rock paused and said, ‘Pray describe this relationship. How did you meet? Or don’t you know that either?’

‘We met in a bar. But it wasn’t like that.’

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They met in a bar but it wasn't like that.

It was like this.

Rodney had just asked for a Bullshot. Consisting of vodka and consommé, a Bullshot is arguably a bullshit drink; but Rodney, his eyes lurking and cowering behind his dark glasses, badly needed his Bullshot. What he really felt like was a Bloodshot. He wore a pinched seersucker suit and a grimy cravat. He had spent the morning in a sepulchral brownstone on East Sixty-Fifth Street, doing what he could with the long upper lip and ridiculously interproximate eyebrows of a Mrs Sheehan – wife to the chat-show king.

'Worcestershire sauce, if you please, and the juice of at least one lemon.'

'You know something? I could listen to your voice all day.'

It was not the first time Rodney had been paid this compliment. Sequestered in a deceptively mild cocaine hangover, he said, 'How sweet of you to say so.'

'No. Really.'

'So kind.'

This waitress at some point or other might have wanted to be an actress. She might have had the odd prompting towards the stage. But not recently. And anyway Rodney was looking past her, Rodney was flinching past her . . .

So. She was up on a stool at the counter – and up on the turret of her swivelling haunches, rising in her seat whenever they crossed or uncrossed, uncrossed or crossed. Rodney stared. There she sat, drinking milky tea from a braced glass, being bawled at by some ballgame on the perched TV, and exchanging vigorous but inaudible smalltalk with a hidden figure behind the bar. Unquestionably she was a person of colour, and that colour – or so it seemed to Rodney – was *american*. As in black, brown, american; then beige, white,

pink . . . Beyond this room lay another room, where some kind of talent contest was being noisily disputed. Poetry readings. Monologues. Stand-up.

Rodney was staring at her with a pang of recognition, although he knew she was a stranger. He thought he had seen her before, in the neighbourhood. But never fully seen her. Because she was the woman on the street whom you never see fully, sent here to elude you, always turning away or veering off, or exactly maintaining parallax with mailbox or tree bole, or vanishing for ever behind the burning glass of a phonebooth or under the black shadow of a truck. Indignant poems have been written about these women – about these *desaparacidas*. Even the douce Bloom grew petulant about them. Men mind, because for once they are demanding so little, no contact, just a free gaze at the moving form. And this was Rodney's initial disposition. He didn't want to date her. He wanted to paint her.

'There you go, sir.'

'Thank you most awfully.'

'That voice!'

Even now, at the bar, she always seemed to be occluded or eclipsed. In particular a pink lady, a Germanic middle-aged blonde with a whole reef of freckles and moles on her bared throat (how Rodney struggled, each day, with such imperfections in his sitters) kept masking her, kept hiding her and then revealing her. Suddenly the view cleared, and he absorbed the lavish power of her thighs – then her face, her glance, her unspecific smile. What she said to him was Talent. Not just *her* talent. His talent, too.

'Waitress! Waitress! Ah. Thank you. I wonder if you would very kindly lend me your pen there. For just a couple of minutes.'

'Certainly!'

'Thank you so much.'

He knew what to do. At his agent's prompting, Rodney had had some cards printed up, headed: Sir Rodney Peel (Baronet): Portraitist. The flipside gave an example of the portraitist's art: looking like non-identical twins, the wife and daughter of a burglar-alarm tycoon were pooling their repose on a pair of French armchairs. Rodney started writing. He still wasn't entirely reconciled to that bracketed 'Baronet'. At first he had argued for the more discreet and conventional abbreviation, '(Bt)'. But he had eventually submitted to the arguments of his agent: according to Rock, Americans might think that Bt was short for Bought.

In the great wreaths and plumes of his embarrassing calligraphy Rodney said that he was an English painter, come to America; said how rare it was, even in this city, with its famed diversity, to encounter a face so *paintable* as her own; said he would, of course, remunerate her for her indulgence; said his rates were high. Rodney then used up a second card and most of a third with a fantastic array of apologies and protestations, of microscopic diffidences – and then added a fourth, for her reply.

'Waitress? Excuse me! Excuse me!' Rodney's voice was having to contend with the espresso machine and the robust applause coming from the back room, as well as with the gasps and hiccups of human communion, all around: like a schoolyard. But Rodney's voice was bigger than he was. Trained by centuries of hollering across very large rooms.

'Ah. There you are.'

The waitress stood by as Rodney outlined her mission. And it seemed that her avowed preparedness to listen to Rodney's voice all day came under immediate strain. Her face toughened, and she knocked a fist into her hip as her shoulders gave a single shrug or shudder. But Rodney just

tapped his calling-cards into alignment and contentedly added,

'Now, not the orange-haired one, do you see, with all the freckles. Behind her. The dark one.' Rodney had a witty notion. His interlocutor was a cocktail waitress: why not speak her language? 'The Pink Lady: no. By no means. Rather, the Black Velvet. The Black Velvet.'

He tried to watch as the waitress delivered his note. Its recipient, again, seemed to glance and smile his way; but then a wall of new bards or jokesmiths, heading for the back room, interposed itself, and when the room cleared she was gone.

The shadow of the waitress dropped past him. He looked down at the tray she had placed on his table: the check, plus the fourth postcard, which said tersely and in neat small caps: 'You talk too much.'

Triple-lipped, Rodney paid and added fifteen per cent and took his leave.

It was as he crossed Tenth Street that he realized she was following him. Realized, too, in the light of day, that she was as black as night. And twice his size. His first impulse (one not quickly overcome) was to make a run for it. On Eleventh Street the darkened window of Ray's Pizza told Rodney that she was still behind him. He halted and turned, weakly squinting, and she halted, intelligently smiling, and he took a step towards her, and she took a step back, and he moved on, and she followed. Across Twelfth Street. Now with every step his legs were getting heavier and tenderer; it felt like the marrow-ache of adolescent growth. Despairingly he turned left on Thirteenth Street. She stopped following him. She overtook him. And as her pace slowed and slackened, and as he attended to the amazing machine of her thighs and buttocks, the parts accommodating themselves so equably in

the close quarters of her skirt, all his fears (and all thoughts of his easel) gave way to a reptile vacuity. For the first time in his life Rodney was ready for anything. No questions asked.

When she reached his building she turned and waited. He summoned breath to speak – but she smoothly raised a vertical forefinger to her lips. And he understood, and felt like a child. He talked too much. He talked too much . . . Mounting the steps, he pushed the inner glass door and held it open behind him; when he felt the transfer of its weight he withstood a rush of intimacy, as intimate as the press of boiling breasts on his spine. Dismissing the elevator as an impossibility, he began the long ascent, afraid to turn but minutely alert to her tread. His door. His keys all jammed and tangled in their ring, which he weepily picked at. Each lock turned a different way, the English way, the American way. He pushed, and felt the air rearrange itself as her shape moved past his back.

Many times, during that first half hour, speech gulped up in Rodney's throat – and just as often her forefinger sought her lips (and there would be a frown of real warning). The finger side-on, always. But then they were standing near the piano, when she had completed her tour of his space; Rodney swallowed his most recent glottal stop, and her finger was once again raised; only now she turned it, rotating her whole hand through ninety degrees, showing him the bruised pink of the nail. After a beat or two Rodney took this as an invitation. He hovered nearer still and strained upwards. He kissed.

'Well what the fuck's the story, Rod? You read my novel yet or what?'

Jesus: the guy was like a neighbour's dog that just kept on hating you. You never gave him an instant's thought until there he was, balanced upright on the tautness of his leash, and barking in your face.

'Not yet,' Rodney conceded, as he stepped out of the elevator.

'Now this is basically some *rude shit* we're looking at here. Why the contempt, Rod? What's your answer?'

Rodney wrongly regarded himself as an expert at excuses. After all, he and excuses had been through a lot together. Gazing upwards, with tubed lips, he softly said,

'You're going to hate me for this.'

'I hate you already.'

Feeling a furry hum in either armpit, Rodney decided to change tack. The occasion called for something more than a negligent simper. 'But there was nothing I could do,' he found himself saying. 'My aunt died, do you see. Suddenly. And I had to compose the uh, "eulogy" for her funeral.'

'Your aunt where? In England?'

'No. She lives in . . .' This was not the verb Rodney wanted. 'She was in uh, Connecticut. It was all very awkward. I took the train to, to Connecticut, do you see. Now normally I'd have put up with Auntie Jean, but her, her son was there, with his family, and I . . .'

When he wasn't talking, which wasn't often, Pharsin had a stunned look. As if he couldn't believe he was listening to a voice other than his own. Rodney's agonizing tale had brought them out on to Thirteenth Street. In the middle distance the Empire State seemed to sway for a moment, and was then restiffened by its stress equations.

' . . . and *that* train was cancelled too. So with one thing and another I've had my hands full all week.'

Pharsin's expression had softened to something more

quizzical, even indulgent. He said, 'I see it. I see what you're doing here, Rod. You're digging yourself into a situation. You *want* to read my novel. But it's like you left it so long you can only see it coming back the other way.' Pharsin tapped his temple. 'I understand the mind. I know the mind. Last year I took a lot of -'

He paused as if to listen. Rodney was expecting the next word to be *Prozac*. But Pharsin went on quickly,

'- psychology courses and I know how we do this, how we set these traps for ourselves and walk right into them. I understand. Rod?'

'Yes, Pharsin?'

'You're going to read my book next week. Isn't that right?'

'Pharsin, I will.'

'One more thing. You got to imagine that novel is written in my blood. In my blood, Rod. It's all there. Everything I am is in that -'

Rodney tuned out for a while and listened to Manhattan. Listened to Manhattan, playing its concerto for horn.

'- the trauma and the wounds. Written in my *blood*, Rod. Written in my blood.'

That night (it was Sunday, and Rock was out of town) Rodney faced a void of inactivity. He was so at a loss that for the first time ever he contemplated digging out his typescript of *The Sound of the Words, the Sound of the Words*. But there turned out to be a reasonably diverting documentary about synchronized swimmers on TV. And he managed to kill the rest of the evening by washing his hair and rolling around in twenty-dollar bills.

'I see her in an Abyssinian setting. Or Ancient Ethiopia.'

She's a Nefertiti. Or one of the Candaces. Here'll do. Actually I think it's a gay place but they don't seem to mind me coming here.'

No irony was intended or understood by this last remark, and Rock followed Rodney unsmilingly down the steps.

Rock's older brother Inigo had known Rodney at Eton; and in his schooldays Rodney had apparently been famed for his lending library of glamour magazines and his prolific onanism. So Rock sensed no sexual ambiguity in his friend. But others did. For instance, it had never occurred to any of his sitters' husbands that Rodney was straight. And Rodney himself had entertained inevitable doubts on this score, in the past, in London, lying on his side and apologetically stroking the back of yet another unslain giantess of the gentry.

They ordered their Highballs. The clientele was all-male but also middle-aged (woollen, paunchy), and Rodney received no more than his usual deal of stares.

He said, 'This'll amuse you. The first time we uh, "hid the salami" . . . No. The first time I *revealed* the salami - I felt a real pleb. A real cur. Like an Untouchable.'

'How so?'

'I'm a Cavalier.'

'Me too.'

'Of course. We're English. But over here they're all Roundheads. It's posh to be a Roundhead here. Only the hicks and Okies are Cavaliers.' Rodney well remembered Mrs Vredevoort, wife to the construction grandee: how, when at last she had found the salami (the salami having been located and identified), she gave a little mew of surprised distaste, and immediately came up for air. 'Ours look like joints. As opposed to cigarettes. Which is what they're used to. I bet they're all Roundheads in Africa.'

'But there's not much difference, is there, when you've got the horn.'

'Exactly! That's *exactly* it. Exactly. Mine didn't seem to mind. She didn't say anything.'

'She *never* says anything.'

'True,' said Rodney. 'You know, there's just one thing she won't let me do. No, nothing like that. She won't let me *paint* her. Or even photograph her.'

'Superstitious.'

'And I feel if I could just paint her ...'

'All slime,' said Rock, 'and no paint. A reversal of your usual setup.'

'Balls. I did pretty well with the wives. All slime and no speech. That's what's really weird.'

'Come out to the house this weekend. It's finished now.'

'Ooh. That does sound like a good idea.'

Love without words. A caveman could do it. And it sounded like something that Picasso or Beckett might have pulled off. But Sir Rodney Peel? He had never shown any sign of pretending to such masterful purity. More scavenger than predator, in matters of the heart, Rodney was the first on the scene after the big cats had eaten their fill. He liked his women freshly jilted. His lips knew the sweet tang of liquefying mascara; his eyes knew the webby rivulets it formed on the blotting-paper of a powdered cheek. He was an old hand at the consoling caress. Rhythmically he would smooth the sideswell of the breast, murmuring *there there* ... It suited him. Sexual expectation, in such circumstances, was generally low. In such circumstances, impotence could almost be taken as a gallantry.

Love without voices. Usually she came around half past two. Flushed and blotchy from his shower, wearing his long blue robe, Rodney would be lying on the chaise longue, trying to skim a magazine or else just dumbly waiting. Sometimes he went and stuck his head out of the window and tried to glimpse her as she glided under the ginko trees; once he saw her out there in the middle of the street, sharply questioning the driver of the cab from which she had slid. When he heard her keys in the locks, he felt, beneath his robe, the ceremony of painless circumcision.

A smile was all she wanted by way of greeting. Humbly he looked on as she walked the room, her head dipped over her folded arms. She had arrived at his place; but it took time for her to get around to him in her thoughts. Then she would move towards the two lacquered screens that bowered the bed. She undressed matter-of-factly, laying her clothes on the chair (as if ready for school). Around now a switch would be thrown in Rodney's head, immersing him in greater gravity. His ears were trained inwards only, and he listened to the muscles creaking in the root of his tongue.

There *was* something primitive about it – about what followed. Not least in the startling elevations engineered by his blood. But she was one thing and he was the other. Rodney Peel had come to Africa. Her body seemed preternatural in its alternations of the soft and the hard; and her skin, unlike his own, did not reflect the light but absorbed it, confidently annexing its powers. As for her scent, it seemed to Rodney to be of a higher proof, or just more concentrated. And his thoughts went further – to her volcanic breasts, her zebra-ripping teeth! Sun-helmeted and canvas-shoed (and settling down to his task of tribute), Sir Rodney parts the lianas and the sweating fronds and sees ...

Actually it reminded him of a barbecue at Rock's place in Quogue, when he pierced the charred surface of the beef and saw that the flesh was still very rare.

Afterwards she rested. She never slept. Quite often, and increasingly cravenly, he would point to his easel or his brushes; but she always swiped a finger through the air and turned away. And once, early on, when he sat on the bed with his cocked sketch pad, she wrenched it from his grasp with an awful severity in her snuff-coloured eyes. With real strength, too – a strength he knew all about. Still, she had created or revealed something in him, and he thought it might be talent. Rodney's loft contained no internal walls, so he was allowed to watch her as she used the bathroom or made the milky tea she liked. She had the overdeveloped upward-surging calf muscles of a dancer. All her movements showed the mechanical security and high definition of intense technique. Rodney thought about it: of course she was an artist. A non-businesswoman under thirty-five living in Manhattan? Of course she was an artist. A dancer. Maybe a *singer*. The performing arts, without question. But which one?

She never slept. She drank her tea, and rested, sighing sometimes and powerfully yawning, but she never slept. Her thoughtfulness seemed centralized and assiduous, as if she were following an argument taking place on the near side of her eyes. Rodney worried about interrupting this argument when he later returned to the bed, but her body always fully admitted him to its heat. He often imagined, as he squirmed and bounced above her, that the first word he would ever hear her say would be the forename of another man . . . All the same, what they did and made together had nothing to do with art. No play: sheer earnest. It felt like honest work.

*

'Hey. Hey! Ain't no damn use you sneaking out like that. Have you read my novel yet?'

'Yes,' said Rodney.

Rodney said Yes, not because it was true or anything like that, but to make a change from saying No. It was an impulse thing. And Rodney was surprised it worked so well.

Pharsin stepped back. For several seconds he wore a plugged expression. Then with his brow softly working he bent and lowered his head. Rodney almost reached up a hand to stroke the black filings of Pharsin's hair.

'So, man. What did you think?'

It was gently said. What a welcome change this makes, thought Rodney (putting all that unpleasantness behind him): these chaps are exceptionally sweet and reasonable. He laughed, saying,

'Ho no, my friend. With a novel like that . . . with a *writer* like that, I'm not going to stand here in a doorway as if I'm talking about the weather. Oh no.'

'But you saying it measures up?'

'Oh no. Pharsin, don't try and do this! You my friend are going to come up to my studio. One day very soon. We're going to take the phone uh, "off the hook", put a log on the fire, and open a bottle of good red wine. A claret, I rather think – a nice sharp Morgon. *Then* we'll talk.'

'When?' said Pharsin, with familiar vigilance.

'Actually there's a good reason why we can't do it this weekend.'

'What's that?'

'I'm rereading it.'

' . . . I applaud your rigour. Such works seldom render up their secrets on a first absorption.'

'Exactly so.'

'As I've said, Rod, a great deal hinges on your critique.'

It's been suggested to me that I'm not cut out for fiction, and I'm impatient for a second response. I'm at a stage in my life where . . . You got a minute to hear this?

Half an hour later Rodney said, 'Of course. On second thoughts, perhaps we'd be better off with something thicker – like a Margaux. We'll have some Stilton. And black olives . . .'

On parting, the two men performed an old ritual (now long disused): a series of street-guy handshakes. Rodney, as ever, looked like someone slowly and painfully learning how to play Paper, Scissors, Stone.

It was a gallery opening near Tompkins Square Park – an occasion sponsored by a new brand of vodka, and marked by a nostalgic deluge of Martinis. Rod and Rock had established themselves near the caterers' table. Sexually at peace, and additionally numbed by cocaine, Rodney was temporarily under the impression that everybody loved him. Now he bantered with the barman, affecting interest in the lot of barmen everywhere. Though invariably polite to servants, Rodney never differentiated them. Failing to see, for example, that this waiter was definitely an actor who had waited way too long.

'I have reached a bold conclusion,' he said, swinging round on Rock. 'All my troubles with women come from . . . from words. From speech.'

And there was something in this. Surprisingly, for such a fragile and ingratiating presence, Rodney, over the years, had had his face slapped practically out of alignment, so often had his patter gone awry. He was a flatterer – by profession. He believed in flattery and was always trying to deploy it. But something went wrong with the words: they

came out, as his mother would say, just a bit *off*. If conversation was an art, then Rodney was no artist. He created ratty atmospheres around himself. 'Put a sock in it, Rodney,' they would say. 'Oh shut up, Rodney, do.' And the fat beak of his upper lip, after framing its latest unwelcome bauble, would stoically self-transect. Prose wasn't any better. His scented notes routinely caused year-long *froidours*: 'non-speaks', as in 'She and I are now on non-speaks.' Non-speaks: that's how they should have *started* . . .

'Silence,' he went on, 'was the only reason I got anywhere with the wives. You can't speak while you paint.'

'I thought women liked the kind of rot you talk.'

'Me too. But they don't. I always seem to say the wrong thing.'

A while ago, as an experiment, Rodney had reopened his flirtations with two of the wives: Mrs Globerman, wife to the telecommunications tycoon, and Mrs Overbye, wife to the airline boss. The idea was to see if his new puissance was transferable and could be tried out elsewhere. Both efforts were failures – impossibilities. The things he said and the things they said. The things they all said. It seemed far stranger than silence. With these women Rodney had felt the utter superfluity of human speech. So the rain held off. So tell me about your week. So how have you been? Oh, you know: so-so. So-and-so said this and so-and-so said that. So tired. So soon? And so on and so on.

'You and your bleck girl seem to made for each other.'

'We do. We are. Capital cocktails, these. Blimey, though. Bit strong, aren't they? Feeling rather tight. It's loosening my tongue. Rock, can I ask you something? Why do I *know* it's going to end in tears? Why do I feel all this anxiety? And all this guilt?'

'Because you're getting something for nothing. Yet again.'

Rodney's eyes widened. He thought about the first time: the fraudulent feeling, when he watched her undress. As if he had reached his objective not by normal means (flattery, false promises, lies) but by something worse: black magic, or betrayal. For a moment he had the strange suspicion that she was his cousin, and they were playing doctors.

'Because you've bucked the work ethic. Yet again. Oh. I'm seeing Jaguar tomorrow. Have you done something with that money yet?'

'Yes,' said Rodney. He *had* done something with that money, if you counted counting it and rolling around in it and spending a lot of it on cocaine.

'I'll check with Jagula. I mean Jaguar. Whew, that last one just hit me.' Rock went on in a smudged voice, 'I sometimes feel like a trader in slaves. A white-slaver. Onna butlers. Anna nannies. Maybe that's what's worrying you. It's just because she's black.'

Rodney said suddenly, 'Blick? No.'

Could that be it? No. No, because he had always felt that she was a woman who carried freedom around with her. On her person. Somewhere in the jaws it seemed to lurk.

Soon afterwards he started to find the bruises.

Nothing florid or fulminant. Just a different kind of dark beneath the dark. The hip, the shoulder, the upper arm. On noticing a new one, Rodney would arrest his movements and attempt to meet her eye – but he never achieved this, and, having faltered, went back to what he was doing before; and afterwards he didn't smile at her in praise and gratitude, as he usually did, turning instead to the stain on the wall, oval and the colour of nicotine, where his head had rested these many months.

He thought he knew something about women and silence. There they would sit before him, the wives, engaged in self-conscious smalltalk as he made his preliminary sketches – as he situated the human posture against the jut and rake of the chair, the wall cabinet, the low table. Artists of course crave silence. They wish their sitters dead, stilled: a bowl of apples, a wineglass, a cold fish. But the sitter is alive, and must talk, perhaps sensing that speech is needed to bring colour and indignation to the throat, the cheeks, the eyes. And the painter chats back with his skeleton staff of words until the moment comes when he is incapable of vocalization: when, in short, he is getting the head. Even Rodney knew this moment of deafened concentration (it felt like talent). And the sensitive sitter would come to note such moments, maintaining a pious hush until her next thrice-hourly intermission. Her breather, when it was okay for her to be alive again.

He thought he knew something about women and silence. But this? Rodney slipped from the bed and, in his blue robe, set about the preparation of English Breakfast Tea. He watched her through the gap between the two screens: the pillow clutched to her breast like a baby. And always she was following the argument inside her own head. The bruise on her shoulder, tinged with betel or cinnabar, looked artificially applied – caste mark, war paint. Rodney assessed it with a professional eye. It was no accident that he worked in oil. Oil was absolutely right. His brush, he realized, was not an artist's wand so much as a cosmeticist's tweezer. Oil, in his hands, was the elixir of youth. It would be different with her, he felt. Because everything else was different with her. But he would never dare broach it now.

For an instant she loomed over him and then moved past, to the shower. Rodney had never supposed that he was her

single -- or even her principal -- erotic interest. How could he own *her*? He thought of a scene in a huge American novel he had read, years back, where a young man comes of age, pleasantly, in a Chicago bordello. And it went something like, He had used what others used. So what? That's what cities are.

On the other hand he suddenly knew what he wanted to say to her. Three words: a verb flanked by two personal pronouns.

'Hey. Hey.'

No black shape -- no roller or mugger, no prison-yard rapist, no Hutu warrior, no incensed Maroon on the blazing cane fields of Saint Domingue -- could be as fearful to Rodney, now, as the man who occasionally guarded his building: namely Pharsin. Rodney's weekends were entirely devoted to avoiding him: four of the last five had been spent in Quogue. He had even made a couple of phone calls about the possibility of moving. There was apparently a place in midtown, quite near Rock's offices . . .

'Ah, Pharsin. There you are.'

Rodney turned, physically wincing, but only from the rain. He was afraid of Pharsin, and generally well attuned to threat. But his anguish here was almost wholly social.

'What's the latest, Rod?'

'Yes it's high time we uh, "broke bread". I find myself leaning towards a Chambertin-Clos de Beze. And a swampy Camembert.'

'I keep hearing about these goddamn wines you got. But I'm thinking these are the exact same hoops we were going through before. What do I got to do, Rod? It's not just me who's hurting -- it's everyone around me. I never thought a

man could do this to me. I never thought a man could reduce me to this.'

It was raining. Raining on the terrible city, with people suffering through it and giving voice to their pain, groaning, swearing, babbling. In New York, if you had no one to talk to or shout at, then there was always yourself: always yourself. As Rodney debarked his umbrella he noticed the way the raindrops fell from the lobes of Pharsin's childishly small ears.

'Friday at five.'

'That's in stone?'

'On my mother's life. Hock and smoked salmon might be more the thing. Or some Gewurtztraumeiner. Or what about some Trockenbeereauslese, with Turkish Delight?'

'Friday at five.'

'Busy week?' said Rock on Thursday evening.

They were drinking in a bar they usually went to only very late at night: Jimmy's. Although he had been there perhaps a dozen times, it turned out that Rodney had no idea where it was. 'Where is Jimmy's?' he asked, as Rock guided him there. The place looked different, in the happy hour.

'Not really,' Rodney answered. 'But you know how it is in New York. You've got nothing on and you think, I know: I'll stay home and read a book. Then the next thing you know . . . there's an opening or something. And then you're bawling your head off across some restaurant.'

'Got anything on tonight? There's a freebie at some punk club in Brooklyn. I've got all-you-can-drink coupons. It doesn't start for hours and it'll be a bugger to get to.'

'Oh all right,' said Rodney.

The next day he left for Quogue rather earlier than usual. He rose at noon and, held upright only by the strata of dried come in his pyjamas, made tea. He took a fifty-minute shower. He performed surprisingly creditably during his tryst (she seemed relieved that afternoon, but expeditious) and he practically joined her in the elevator. To the weekday janitorial he entrusted a long note for Pharsin about his aunt's exhumation and reburial in another plot; by way of a PS he switched their date to the same time on Monday. Only when the Jitney was idling outside that cinema on its stop near the airport did Rodney question the packing choices in his garment bag: the three new magazines, along with his standard weekend kit.

Just gone one on Monday afternoon.

He was sitting at the kitchen table and reading – in preparation for his task – the back of a cereal packet. Lifting his head and blinking, he thought of the corpulent Victorian novels he had gaped his way through at university, the *Middlemarches* and *Bleak Houses*: they had taken him at least a month each. Still, he had never contemplated spending more than about half an hour with *The Sound of the Words*, the *Sound of the Words*. He was just beginning to reread the back of the cereal packet when he heard the keys in the door.

Her appearance almost shocked him into speech. What had happened was this. The argument which for months had been taking place inside her head, illegibly, was now written on the outside. For all to see. Her eyes steadily invited him to register this change: the nether lip all smudged and split, and the right cheekbone loudly marked, as if swiped with a hot daub of rouge. The thing that was

wrong had now been stated, not by her but by the thing that was wrong.

Aghast, he tottered towards her. And found himself leniently received. He kissed her neck, her jaw, and, with circumspection, her mouth – but then all circumspection was lost. Fearfully and ardently, and for the last time, Sir Rodney Peel stoked the tarry blood of Eve.

Afterwards she did something she'd never done before. She didn't speak. No. She slept.

Rodney got to work, and quite noisily.

He dragged his easel across the floor, shifted the screens, and rattled around with his brushes. There was no sense of tiptoe in his body or his mind: her sleep seemed elementally sure, like hibernation. He pulled off the cover. She was lying on her side, the upper knee raised, one hand beneath the pillow and the other placed flat between her thighs. First get the head, he thought. Then get the neck. Then get the body.

'Artists are waiters!' he said. Waiting for the right thing in the right place at the right time. And with that he said goodbye to his discursive mind – until the painting was about done and somebody seemed to be banging on his door.

And Rodney spoke. In a childishly lucid voice he said, 'Oh dear. That will be Pharsin.'

She was looking up at him over her shoulder. And she spoke too. What she said was obliterating; but it wasn't the content. It was the style. Heard by him before only on English high streets, in supermarket checkout bays, in cauldrons of drycleaning. Maybe, too, in the squawk of the minicab switchboard, endured from the back seat, late at night. She said, 'Eez me yusband.'

*

'OPEN THIS FUCKING DOOR RIGHT NOW.'

Rodney would later describe the events that followed as 'something of a blur'. But in fact these events were clear. It was good that he was feeling so talented. And enormous chemicals were igniting his brain.

'YOU GOT ONE MINUTE. THEN I RIP THIS DOOR OFF THE FUCKING WALL. SIXTY. FIFTY-NINE. FIFTY-EIGHT.'

In an ideal world Rodney would have liked rather more than a minute to read *The Sound of the Words, the Sound of the Words*. But before he could read it he first had to find it.

Mrs Pharsin Courier having been shushed, and sealed off behind the twin screens, Rodney went and thrashed around in the double-doored closet (FIFTY-ONE), then bent himself under the piano (FORTY-FIVE), then wriggled about among the low shelves and shadows of the kitchen (THIRTY-FOUR). On the half-minute mark he paused to take stock – and to hoist a lumpy brown rug over the gap between the screens, noticing, as he did so, a suspicious wedge in the heap of death-grey newspapers silting up the corner beyond the bed. Rodney pounced (THIRTEEN): A Novel by Pharsin J Courier (NINE, EIGHT). Skilfully he flipped it on to the table (SIX, FIVE), read half a phrase from page one ('Around noon Cissy thought she'd') and, as he rose to answer the door (THREE, TWO), half a phrase from page 1, 123 ('seemed that way to Cissy'). And that was all he had time for.

'Ah, Pharsin. You respond to our cries of "Author! Author!" Step forward, sir, and be recognized. Now. If you'll just sit yourself there, I'll just . . .

'Now I'm not a writer,' said Rodney sternly, laying before

Pharsin a glass of flat Pepsi. And a saucer with most of a Graham Cracker on it. Heartier and more various fare could have been plucked from the surface of Rodney's burred blue robe. 'I'm a painter, a visual artist. But as you have written elsewhere there is a certain . . . affinity between the arts. Now. The first time I read your book I was quite overwhelmed by this cascade of visual images. These things you describe – I felt I could reach out and touch them, smell them, taste them. Only on a second reading and, may I say, a third uh, "perusal" did I see that these images were, in fact, connected. In very intricate ways.'

Admiringly hefting the typescript in his hands, Rodney gave Pharsin a candid stare. So far so good. Pharsin's wrath, while still manifest, had reached some trancelike register. Rodney knew enough about novels to know that they all *tried* to do something like that – to connect image with theme. Cautiously he continued with his own variations, feeling the spasms of unused muscles: his lits, his crits. Yes, he could still swim in that pool. He could still ride that old bike.

' . . . shaping the whole composition. I could step back from the fretwork, the mouldings, the beadings, the uh, flutings and so on. I could step back from the gargoyles and see the whole cathedral.'

It looked for a moment as if Pharsin was going to ask a question about this cathedral: what it looked like or where it stood. So with a woozy roll of his head Rodney proceeded,

'And where did you find those *characters*? Quite incredible. I mean – take Cissy, for instance. How did you dream *her* up?'

'You like Cissy?'

'Cissy? Oh, Cissy! Cissy . . . By the time I was finished I felt I'd never known *anyone* as intimately as I knew her.' As he talked he started riffling fondly through the pages. 'Her

thoughts. Her hopes and dreams. Her doubts. Her fears. I know Cissy. Like you'd know a sister. Or a lover.'

Rodney looked up. Pharsin's face was a screen of tears. Thoroughly emboldened, Rodney hunched himself forward and leafed through the text.

'That bit . . . that bit where she . . . when Cissy -'

'When she comes to the States?'

'Yes. When she comes to America.'

'The thing with Immigration?'

'Yes. Now *that scene* . . . Incredible. But so true! And then, after that - I'm trying to find it - the bit when she . . .'

'When she meets the guy?'

'Yes. The guy: now there's another character. And there's that great scene when they . . . Here it is. No. When they . . .'

'At the rent tribunal?'

'Oh now that scene. Can you believe that?'

'The judge?'

'Please,' said Rodney. 'Don't get me started on the judge.'

And so, for forty-five minutes, always a beat late, he somehow sang along with a song he didn't know. It seemed like scurvy work, of course; and it was strangely shaming to see Pharsin's face awaken out of hunger into vivid varieties of animation and delight (as at the chess board, Rodney felt dwarfed by a superior force of life). It was scurvy work, but it was *easy*. He wondered why he hadn't done it months ago. Then Pharsin said,

'Enough. Forget the laughter, the characters, the images. What's *The Sound of the Words, the Sound of the Words* actually saying, Rod?'

'*The Sound of the Words, the Sound of the Words?*'

'What's it saying?'

'What's it saying? Well, it's a love story. It's about love in the modern world. How love gets hard to do.'

'But what's it saying?'

Ten seconds passed. And Rodney thought *fuck it* and said, 'It's about race. It's about the agony of the African-American male. It's about the need, the compulsion, to express that agony.'

Pharsin slowly reached out a hand towards him. Once more tears shone in the bloodbaths of his eyes.

'Thanks, Rod.'

'It's been a pleasure, Pharsin. Hello, is that the time? Shouldn't you be uh . . .?'

Until that moment Pharsin had seemed insensible of his surroundings. But now he jerked himself upright and began to move around the room with purposeful curiosity, one arm folded, the other crooked, a forefinger tapping on his chin, pausing to inspect a nicknack here, a doodad there. Rodney wasn't thinking about his other guest (who, he assumed, would still be wedged behind the bed). He was thinking of her simulacrum: her portrait, arrayed on its stand, in blazing crime. Redigesting a mouthful of vomit, Rodney watched as Pharsin loped up to the easel and paused.

The black shape on the white sheet. The beauty and power of the rump and haunches. The sleeping face, half-averted. Rodney, out of sheer habit, had salved and healed her bruises. That was probably a good idea, he thought.

'This a real person pose for this?' Pharsin turned, artist to artist, and added, 'Or you take it from a book.'

'A book?'

'Yeah, like a magazine?'

'Yes. From a magazine.'

'Know who this kind of reminds me of? Cassie. My wife

Cassie.' Pharsin smiled ticklishly as he followed the resemblance for another second or two. Then he rejected it. 'Maybe ten years ago. And she never had an ass like that in all her born days. Well, Rod. I want you to know what this last hour has meant to me. There was a man crying out in the dark here. You my friend have answered that cry. You've given me what I wanted: a hearing. I sent that novel to every registered publisher and agent in the city. All I got was a bunch of printed slips. Know what I think? They didn't read it. They didn't even read it, Rod.'

'That's a terrible thing, Pharsin. A terrible thing. Oh, by the way. You once told me that your wife was an artist. What kind is she?'

Then for a second their eyes met: horribly. And in Pharsin's face you could see the ageless and awful eureka of every stooge and sap and cinch. He said,

'You read my book and you're asking me what Cassie does?'

But it came to Rodney and he said, 'I know what Cassie does. In the book. I was just wondering how close you were sticking to life. I know what Cassie does.'

Pharsin's voice had Rodney by the lapels. It said, 'What?' And he told him: 'Mime.'

With Pharsin caged and dropping in the elevator, and all loaded up with his typescript like a bearer, Rodney's head remained limp and bent, hangdog with relief. Even the strengthening conviction – not yet entire, needing more thought – that he, Rodney, had no talent: this brought relief. He let his head hang there a little longer, before he faced the music of human speech.

She said, 'You fucking done it now.'

He said, 'Oh dear. Have I said the wrong thing?'

*

'All a slight nightmare, really. She couldn't leave, do you see, because Pharsin was on the door. So she rather let me have it.' Rodney was no stranger to the experience of being denounced from dawn to dusk; but he wasn't used to accents such as hers. 'A terrible way for things to end. Our first night together and it was all talk and no sex. And such talk. She was *livid*.'

'What about? I wish those people would go away.'

Cocktails *al fresco* in Rockefeller Plaza: Amber Dreams under a cold blue sky. The square was punctuated by people dressed as mannequins and posing as statues. Just standing there with painted smiles.

'Oh God, don't ask,' said Rodney – for her grievances had been legion. 'She knew someone or something had been driving him nuts. She didn't know it was me. He'd never been violent before. It was me. I put those marks on her.'

'Oh come on. It's in their culture.'

Rodney coughed and said, 'Oh yeah. And she said, "He'll write another one now." She'd been moonlighting for two years. As a waitress. To support him. And she could tell I hadn't read it. By my voice.'

Rock looked on, frowning, as Rodney talentlessly imitated her imitating him. It sounded something like: Ooh, ah say, wort simplay dezzling imagerah. Rodney said,

'She thought I was sneering at him. Him being bleck, do you see.'

'Yes, well, they can be quite chippy about that over here. Do you think his novel might have been *good*?'

'No one will ever know. But I do know this. She won't have to support him while he writes the second one.'

'Why not?'

'Because she stole my money.'

'Oh you *tit*. How many times did I tell you? Jesus Christ, what a silly old tart you are.'

'I know. I know. Waitress? If you please? Two Amber Dreams. No. *Four Amber Dreams*.'

'Are you telling me you just left it lying around?'

'In the middle of the night I . . . Wait. When I first met her, in the bar, do you see, I offered her five hundred dollars. No, as a sitter's fee. So I reckoned I owed her that. Went and got it out for her. Thought she was sleeping.'

'Oh you *tit*.'

'She did leave me the five hundred. Ah. Thank you most awfully.'

And on her way to the door she paused in front of the easel and whispered a single word (stressed as a menacing and devastating spondee): 'Wanker.' And that was the end of that, he thought. That was the end of that.

Rock said, 'Were they in it together, do you think?'

'No no. No. It was all pure . . . coincidence.'

'Why aren't you angrier?'

'I don't know.'

Pharsin he never saw again. But he did see Pharsin's wife, once, nearly two years later, in London Town.

Rodney was consuming a tragic tea of crustless sandwiches in a dark café near Victoria Station. He had just left the Pimlico offices of the design magazine he worked part-time for, and was girding himself to catch a train for Sussex, where he would be met at the station by a childless divorcee in a Range Rover. He no longer wore a ponytail. And he no longer used his title. That sort of thing didn't seem to play very well in England any more. Besides, for a while Rodney had become very interested in his family tree; and this was

his puny protest. The scars had deepened around his eyes. But not much else had changed.

Weatherless Victoria, and a café in the old style. Coffee served in leaky steel pots, and children eating Banana Splits and Knickerbocker Glories and other confections the colour of traffic lights. In this place the waitresses were waitresses by caste, contemplating no artistic destiny. Outside, the city dedicated itself to the notion of mobility, fleets of buses and taxis, herds of cars, and then the trains.

She was several tables away, facing him, with her slender eyebrows raised and locked in enquiry. Rodney glanced, blinked, smiled. Then it was dumbshow all over again. May I? Well if you. No I'll just . . .

'Well well. It is a small world, isn't it.'

' . . . So you're not going to murder me? You're not going to slag me off?'

'What? Oh no. No no. No.'

' . . . So you're back here now.'

'Yes. And you, you're . . .'

'Me mum died.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry. So you're just here for the . . .'

'For the funeral and that, yeah . . .'

She said that her mother had been very old and had had a good life. Rodney's mother was also very old and had had a good life, at least on paper. But she wasn't dead. On the contrary she was, as the saying had it, 'very much alive'. He was back with his mother. There was nothing he could do about that. He had to talk to her a lot but everything he said enraged her. Better to seal up your lips, he thought. Mum's the word. Seal up your lips, and give no words but - mum. She said,

'I can't believe you're being so sweet about the money. Have you got loads more?'

'No. What? Sweet? No no. I was upset at first, of course. But I . . . What did you do with it in the end?'

'I told him I *found* it. In a cab. It's New York, right?' She shrugged and said, 'Went upstate and got a place in the Poconos. We were there twenty-two months. It was handsome. Look. A boy. Julius. Not quite one.'

As he considered the photograph Rodney was visited by a conventional sentiment: the gift of life! And stronger, according to his experience, in the black than in all the other planetary colours. 'Can he talk yet? When do they talk?' And he pressed on, 'Our code of silence. What was that - sort of a game?'

'You were a Sir. And me with my accent.'

The implication being that he wouldn't have wanted her if she'd talked like she talked. And it was true. He looked at Cassie. Her shape and texture sent the same message to his eyes and his mind. But the message stopped there. It no longer travelled down his spine. Sad and baffling, but perfectly true. 'Well I'm not a Sir any more,' he said, and he almost added 'either'. 'Did uh -?'

'It was nice though, wasn't it. Restful. Uncomplicated.'

'Yes, it was very nice.' Rodney felt close to tears. He said, 'Did uh, Pharsin continue with his . . .?'

'He got it out of his system. Let's put it like that. He's himself again now.'

She spoke with relief, even with pride. It had not escaped Rodney's plodding scrutiny that her face and her long bare arms were quite free of contusion. Violence: it's in their culture, Rock had said. And Rodney now asked himself: Who put it there?

'He's back doing the chess,' she said. 'Doing okay. It's up with the economy.'

Rodney wanted to say, 'Chess is a high calling' - which

he believed. But he was afraid it might be taken amiss. All he could think to offer was the following: 'Well. A fool and his money are soon parted.'

'That's what they say.'

'Take it as . . .' He searched for the right word. Would 'reparations' answer? He said, 'Still doing the mime?'

'Doing well. We tour now. How about you? Still doing the painting?'

'Got fed up with it. Don't know why really.'

Although Rodney was not looking forward to his rendezvous in Sussex, he was looking forward to the drinks he would have on the train to prepare himself for it. He turned to the window. His upper lip did its thing: slowly folding into two. He said,

'So the rain held off.'

'Yeah. It's been nice.'

'Thought it looked like rain earlier.'

'Me too. Thought it was going to piss down.'

'But it held off.'

'Yeah,' she said. 'It held off.'