

# Once Upon a Time in England

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For you, Mum  
with love.

And in memory of Kirsty Jones  
and  
Lidia Fiems  
and  
Lee Turner.

‘In your town . . . people see with their own eyes what they dread, the transformation during their own lifetime . . . of towns, cities and areas that they know into alien territory.’

Enoch Powell

‘Everyone, after all, goes the same dark road – and the road has a trick of being most dark, most treacherous, when it seems most bright – and it’s true that nobody stays in the garden of Eden.’

James Baldwin

## Part One

Orford, Warrington, 1975

## One

Out on the plains, the icy urban plains, a flame-haired young man was belting down the street, his two-tone shoes sliding and skidding away from his knees. His eyes were slit to the freeze, and his elbows moved freakishly fast, punching and chopping a pin-wheeling path through the night, as though his crazed perpetual motion would keep him upright, outpacing the slick of the sodium-streaked pavements.

An old lady out walking her dog heard his helter-skelter approach, saw the lad spin round the corner and flare right at her. She gasped and shrank back into a neighbour's gate, snatching up the pooch and drawing it tight to her bosom. The ice sprinter did not even see her, barely took note of the dog's startled yelp as he blitzed past in the steaming slipstream of his own breath. He was hardly dressed for the weather, wearing just a thin black shirt rolled twice at the cuffs. The top two buttons remained undone, revealing a flash of flesh as white as the snowflakes gathering in his curls.

On sight of his wild red mane the old lady's heart returned to normal, the dog was returned to the ice-bound floor. There was only one man around there with hair that hue – Jimmy Fitzgerald's lad, Robbie. There he went, running, running – always running, whatever the weather, too hot or too cold. But where was he running to? Or from what? She watched him rip round the next corner and out of sight, stood and stared at his footprints. The snow smothered his skidmarks so that soon there was no evidence of him having been there at all, only a tenuous ribbon of panic lingering in the air. The dog poked its snout up, sniffed at it and ran in little revolutions, yapping madly.

Robbie Fitzgerald was running for his life. He peeled another corner and at last the squat silhouette of the building lurched into view. The windows were blacked out and bore no testimony to the wildness that pulsed within. But as Robbie drew up outside and gathered his breath, the night reverberated with the rampant din of stamping feet and screeching fiddles and the braying spray of laughter. This was Orford's Irish Club, Saturday night. This was make or break. Robbie grinned to himself, took one last deep breath, swung the door wide open and plunged inside.

The heat and disorder slurped him up in one muddled flush. It was chaos in there – people were whooping and howling and whirling one another around. Dark slicks of spilt Guinness sloshed on the floor in contrast with the white of the night outside. To his right, a group of drunken men, arms draped affectionately around one another, belted out 'The Fields of Athenry'. On the small stage beyond, a fiddle quartet struggled to be heard above them. Robbie stood back and soaked it all up. He allowed himself a small smile as he stayed rooted to the spot for a moment, shaking his head at how little the place had changed. Then he got down to business. He needed those fiddle players. Without them, well – it would all turn to dust.

He pushed himself up onto his tiptoes and scanned the room for Irene. His heart kicked out with giddy relief as she ducked up from beneath the bar and flipped open one of those bumper-sized bottles of stout. She laughed her dirty, infectious laugh as she poured, propped up on one elbow, holding court to a gaggle of travellers, her huge freckled bust splayed across the bar top.

'Irene!' he yelled, and hoisted his head up so she could see it was him. He stepped through the black puddles, edging his way through a maelstrom of flailing elbows and thumping feet. 'IRENE!'

Irene O'Connor did not hear her name being yelled across the roof of noise. She couldn't hear a thing in there. It was the

crimson brilliance of Robbie's hair that caught her attention. Red-haired men were two a penny in her club, but Robbie's mop was such a magnificent red it almost glowed. School bus red she called it. She swivelled to meet his gaze, instinctively raking a hand through her hair. Robbie launched himself up and onto the bar. His face, his head, his hair were wrung with sweat. His eyes were big and crackling with some intense energy.

'I need you to help me,' he shouted. His words were drowned out, sucked back over his shoulder into the roistering din. His eyes flickered all over her.

'What you saying, our kid?' She moved right into him, lent her ear to his hot smoky mouth.

'Irene, this is serious, love. I need you to help us. There's been an emergency.'

She pulled back, and for a moment her stretched, anxious face ironed out its furrows, revealing the beautiful girl she once was. 'Good heavens no, Robbie. Not Susheela? Has she started?'

'No, love – no. Susheela's fine. The baby's still cooking nicely. It's not that . . .'

'Vincent? It's little Vinnie, isn't it? What's he . . .'

'Vincent's fine, Iye. It's nothing like that.'

'So?'

He paused, drew himself right up and prepared himself for the inevitable rejection. He looked Irene flush in the eye. 'It's like this, Iye. I need to borrow a couple of your entertainment.'

'You what?'

'Your entertainment . . .'

'Aye-aye, love, I heard you first time . . .'

'This couldn't be more serious, Irene. I need you to loan us a couple of your fiddle players. Yeah?'

She just stared at him.

Realising she hadn't laughed in his face yet, Robbie leapt to ram home his advantage. 'It'll only be thirty minutes, darlin'.



Not a minute more. That's all's I'm asking of you. Thirty minutes of your entertainment's time.'

Irene realised then, he was not joking. She also realised she was powerless to resist. His burning green eyes were all over her, beseeching her, giving her nowhere to go. She tried to play hard to get, pulling down the corners of her mouth, arching an eyebrow, but Robbie could scent victory. He grabbed her chubby wrist, pulling her face close.

'I can tell you the whole story start to finish later on Irene, love – but this is an emergency. Everything's hanging on it. My whole life depends on it. The baby's life, the baby's whole future. I promise I'll have them back to you in two shakes of a lamb's tail.'

She looked right past him into the delirious hub of the room. Robbie knew exactly what she was thinking, and she was right. There would be a riot. But he couldn't let this opportunity slip away – not now, not with the chance of a lifetime so close he could taste it. He took her head in his hands so her nose was almost touching his, as though transmitting the urgency of his crisis to her by shortwave. He gave it one last go.

'Irene, do us a favour – listen to me, will you? I need them fiddlers, yeah? Whatever profit you lose tonight, I'll treble it for you. I'll come and sing for nothing. Do you get me? I'll do five Sundays in a row. I'll do all your favourites – whatever the punters want. I'll do a frigging Elvis night if you like ...'

She didn't bite. A resigned sadness came over her face and, recognising it, Robbie let her go, slumping back down onto the flats of his feet. He turned to go. Irene spoke to the back of his head. She knew full well what this was about. It was Dickie Vaughan. It had to be Dickie Vaughan.

'You've got half an hour, Robert Fitzgerald. Not a minute longer. And you're to bring back my men in person, no later than ...' She consulted her wrist, but Robbie was no longer

there to hear her out. She watched him bob and weave his way to the stage and silence the lead fiddle with a hand on his forearm. As he pointed across to their boss behind the bar she nodded her consent and mouthed 'good luck' to Robbie. If that boy was not a star in the making, then she'd learnt nothing through all her years in the trade. Robbie Fitzgerald was not just a prospect: he was the real thing.

Susheela perched on the cold Formica of the kitchen table, and fixed her sleepy gaze on the kitchen clock. Robbie was fifteen minutes late. She glanced at the oven where the plates were warming and wondered whether she should take them out again. Absent-mindedly she patted her globe-tight belly, then took her weight on her slender, fragile wrists and pushed herself up from the table. She held her breath. Beyond the subsonic hum of the fridge there was only the deadweight of silence. Was that snow she could sense out there? Clicking off the kitchen light, she padded over to the window above the sink and, bending forwards, pressed her face into the darkness. She was right. High above the fence in the back yard, a miasma of snowflakes whirled madly in the aureole of the street lamp. She prised herself up onto her tiptoes and unhooked the window, her belly jutting over the sink. She fed her arm out into the cold night air and just held it there. The majesty of a new snowfall shot her through with the same childlike amazement as the first time she'd seen it, when the sheer magic of that midnight blizzard had taken her breath away. She yielded tenderly to the memory, drawing her hand back in and draping it around her hot neck.

It was December of 1971, not long after she had started her training at Warrington General. She'd just clocked off from a gruelling shift down in A&E. She'd barely made it back to the

nurses' home before she collapsed into deep slumber. But something jolted her wide awake – some foreboding, a powerful sense that all was not right. The room was cold, so all she could see was her own breath – and hers was the only breath she could hear. At first she thought something terrible had happened to the other girls. They hadn't come home. They'd been involved in some accident. But then she heard a muffled cough; someone turning over in their sleep – Mata, from the obstreperous groan that accompanied it. And as she adjusted herself to the familiar acoustics of the dormitory, she managed to count the rise and fall of six pairs of lungs. She sighed her relief out loud, but still the gnawing sense persisted that something wasn't right.

And then it hit her. Outside on the streets, an eerie silence had descended. Where was the usual soundtrack to a Wednesday night? Where were the taxis, coming and going to the hospital? Where were the ambulances? What had happened to the wail of sirens, the shriek of girls fighting over men? Her heart bounced against her rib cage. All those sounds which had fed her insomnia those first few nights in the nursing home – the thrum of long-distance lorries on the motorway; the drone of the factories, pumping their bilge into the night; the low giddy puttering of the generator outside – none of this was audible. The whole symphony had seized up. Trembling, she wrapped her bedcover around her shoulders and tiptoed to the window. She hovered there, one hand lingering on a curtain, afraid of what she might see. The timorous young Malaysian girl, already adjusting to the shock of the new on a daily, an hourly basis, pictured scenes of mass destruction. In Warrington, any horror was possible. Some deadly nuclear fog could have descended during the night, sucking the life out of all who moved.

She took a deep breath, screwed her eyes tight and yanked back the curtain. When she opened them she almost passed out.

Everything was white. White and velvet and stock still. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Now Susheela looked out from her kitchen window at the falling snow and smiled at the memory of the dark-skinned girl in her flannel dressing gown, waking all the nurses and racing down the stairs to dance in the snow. She was just a girl back then – not so long ago. A few nights after the snowstorm, Robbie Fitzgerald had been carried onto her ward and into her life. She smiled again and slid her hand across her heaving belly and thought that one day she would recount this story to her unborn child; the story of the brown girl spinning and gambolling on the pavement, trying to catch the snow on her tongue, baffled each time it melted to nothing.

Susheela closed the window and clicked the light back on. She hoped it would snow hard and blanket the landscape white. Make it all pretty. Yes, even Orford could look pretty in the snow.

## Two

Flicking a clot of fringe from his damp freckled brow Robbie Fitzgerald tried to suppress the glee wrought on his face. Catching his breath, he stood dead still, stage centre, trying to revive the cool that had carried him through his performance.

When Robbie had spotted Dickie Vaughan earlier that evening he'd dropped his pint. He'd never believed that could happen – a fresh, foaming pint of Best and it had slipped right through his fingers. But it wasn't every day that Dickie Vaughan walked into your local working men's club. There was no doubting it was him, though. The legendary talent manager was sat right there in the centre of St Stephen's lounge bar, chomping contentedly on his cigar. His famous paunch took up the entire table, and Robbie Fitzgerald was rooted to the spot. Only a month ago he'd asked his young wife to read out the profile in the *MU* magazine, where Vaughan was bemoaning the death of outstanding new cabaret talent, and predicting the slow and sad demise of the working-class social club scene if things didn't change. Robbie agreed with every word. At the age of twenty-four he was already a veteran of that selfsame cabaret scene, and he'd witnessed at first hand the shabby trail of bad comedians, pub warblers and novelty acts passing themselves off as The Entertainment. Robbie could sell out any one of the clubs in the Greater Warrington area – and beyond – on reputation alone, but it was getting harder to win a crowd over. They wanted it on a plate, where he liked to build up an atmosphere. They wanted Jack Jones and Tony Bennett soundalikes, smooth easy listening, where he revered the dark, aching soul of Van Morrison and Robert Johnson. It was Robbie's dream to team up with a

big-hitter like Vaughan. With a manager like that, he could go all the way – he knew he could. His bruised fusion of soul and blues with the maudlin strains of folk was not to everybody's taste, but Dickie Vaughan would see beyond the labels, right to the heart of Robbie's genius. And there could be no doubting that Robbie was exactly that – a spirit, a genius. A star.

Robbie had stopped dead in his tracks. He didn't even notice he'd let his pint slip until Barney tried to usher him back out of the room.

Barney was St Stephen's Concert Secretary, a role that brought him a certain prestige, not to say considerable power in the world of Warrington cabaret. Barney booked the Turn, compered the night, ran the show in every sense – and he could never quite resist showing he was still as good as any singer, especially after a few large Whyte & Mackays when he'd cap off a perfectly good night by treating the crowd to a Sinatra ballad. At first, Robbie thought that was behind Barney's blundering attempt to stop him performing. If there was one turn he couldn't follow, it was Robbie Fitzgerald's splintered sweet soul voice. Barney had pushed Robbie back out of the lounge, reaming him some yarn about a charity night he'd forgotten.

'Serious, Rob. Pure slipped me mind. It'll just be the stand-ups tonight.'

Robbie craned his neck round Barney's shoulder, eager to make sure that it was Dickie Vaughan. 'What? You're looking to raise money for charity and there's no music on?'

Barney shrugged, beseeching him with his 'what can I tell you' face. Robbie humoured him with an eyebrow. He was too overwhelmed with terror and excitement to get angry. The biggest talent scout in the North was here in Orford, sat right there in his frigging club. Of course there was going to be fucking music!

'I'll be going on as usual, Barney mate. Fifteen minutes.'

Barney shook his head, panicked now. 'Robbie! No.'

‘What you on about – no?’

Barney slumped down into a cup chair, its vermillion arms singed by a hundred cigarette butts. He held his head in his hands. ‘I’m sorry, Rob. You can’t go on. I . . .’ He glanced up at Robbie, pink, foolish and found out. ‘I sent the backing band home.’

‘You what?’

‘Your musicians, mate. I paid ’em off . . .’

Robbie’s heart slumped with his shoulders. There was no way Barney was lying. He could see it all now, and he understood why he’d done it – why Barney would have thought he had no choice. Robbie was mildly flattered. He almost felt sorry for the blustering Concert Secretary. Still, he couldn’t absolve him. It was a dirty world, clubland, but Robbie had to think about Number One. This was it for Robbie Fitz and his young family, and there was no way he was letting the chance pass by. Come hell or high water, Dickie Vaughan was going to hear him sing.

He clipped the mic back into its stand and narrowed his glare into the spotlight. He bowed, once – not so much a bow as a brief incline of his head – then beckoned his backing band forward. Another swell of applause built from the back and ricocheted around the room as Robbie’s fiddler and banjo player stepped forward, joined hands and took a bow grinning like they’d never seen a crowd before, let alone been feted like this. People were standing on their chairs. Euphoria swooned around Robbie’s head. It hung there, dizzying him, raining sparks over the boisterous locals and then it hit him. He’d pulled it off. Whatever Dickie Vaughan thought of him didn’t matter now – Robbie Fitz had just given the show of his life.

‘Thank you . . . I . . . er . . . you’re very kind,’ he spluttered, truly lost for words now. ‘I . . . em . . . I’m sure we’d all just like to thank the, erm . . . the real stars of the show, Feargal and er . . .’

He shot an embarrassed glance at the two men standing to the left of him. They laughed and yelled out their names. 'One more time, if you will. Thank you. Put your hands together for Peter and Feargal then . . . that's the spirit. Thank you. God bless.'

Robbie grazed the audience, incredulous at the response. He'd never wooed a crowd like that before, never – and he wouldn't in a hundred years have thought St Stephen's capable of such an outpouring of sheer emotion. But then they hadn't heard him sing like that and they'd probably never heard music like that. Not there, in their local club. The regulars had grown bloated on the mandatory cabaret standards, week in, week out – but Robbie Fitzgerald had blown all that away tonight. That nervous vaulting in his guts on first sight of Vaughan had crystallised into something big and magical. At first Feargal's ragged style of five-string banjo jarred with the regulars, hoping for a smoother ride. But then Robbie's vocals kicked in. His gorgeously forlorn croon seemed to flood the room with one prolonged and delirious strafe, stroking conversations to a lull. A knot of chairs and torsos, bent to their neighbours' small talk, twisted back round towards the stage. Cigarettes hovered in mid-air, never to meet the puckering lips that sought them, and by the time Robbie had reached the final refrain of Hank Williams' 'Your Cheating Heart', a stunned silence had descended upon the small and smoky salon of St Stephen's. Standing up there now, Robbie felt as stunned as they did.

Behind the veils of smoke Vaughan's eyes nettled with tears. Like the rest of the room, he was gone. Robbie Fitzgerald had him transfixed, utterly caught up in the ferocious beauty of his voice. He had never heard a voice so visceral and honest, so needy and hungry and splintered with pain. He didn't think it possible to transform the jarring, maudlin wail of bluegrass into something so profound and sensual. That voice planted a hankering in his groin, ripping the skin from his flesh in one violent tug. And as the smokescreen lifted, Vaughan appraised



the young flame-haired minstrel with mounting disbelief. He took in the flat boxer's nose; the wild green eyes; the litter of scars that marked his face and the fading shamrock inked between his thumb and forefinger. He observed Robbie's cheap cheesecloth shirt, his high-waisted pinstripe bags and his two-tone shoes gleaming defiantly in the spotlight, and he wondered how this crude male could radiate such beauty.

As the crowd erupted Vaughan felt that rare but shrill sensation of mad, mad excitement coursing up his spine. He'd known it on a handful of occasions, sometimes to his chagrin as record companies and publishers beat him to the catch. He wasn't letting this one slip away. He scanned the room. There was every kind of punter in the club, young and old – jazz lovers, big band fans, young stylish Motown mothers all jostled with the regular weekend drunks who'd dance to anything. Robbie's plangent, quavering voice had got to each and every one of them. With Vaughan's canny guidance, the lad had the power to seduce the nation. Dickie laughed at the random nature of his find. You walk into a club – any old club – and this! He shook his head, still emotional. He'd seen it all, Dickie Vaughan, but this wonderful business of show never failed to surprise and delight him.

Susheela glanced nervously at the kitchen clock – a china plate, with gold stencilled numerals. Another ten minutes had elapsed, and Robbie was seriously late. A slow trickle of perspiration rolled down her neck, halting in the cleft of her cleavage. She turned off the oven, feeling foolish at her disposability, her fringe role in the evening's events. Robbie was out there, living it. It was work, but he loved it. It was a life. It was his life. Susheela? She stayed at home with their son. She waited for Robbie's return. She warmed the plates. How love's young dream had delivered for her! A chaste little box at the heart of the worst estate in Orford, where she played out time, day after day, waiting for

the new baby to announce its arrival. Another little Fitzgerald half-chat. Even when they were joking, the Orford people frightened her. With Robbie by her side it was different. It was grudging, but she had respect. When he was out at work she was completely and utterly alone. Even her friends from the ward found a trip into the badlands of Orford a trip too far and the first time round she'd lingered on in the cocoon of the hospital well beyond her confinement time. She couldn't tell Robbie – he was working all hours as it was – but apart from little Vincent, the only brown faces she ever saw were the doctors and nurses at Warrington General. It was all very well for Robbie; he had a life to lead. For Susheela this was the highlight of the week. Warming the plates for their Saturday night takeaway.

But when she glanced across at the slumbering figure of her Little Man, little Vincent Fitzgerald, her heart was swept away by the force and the swell of her love for him. She shuffled across and covered his head with kisses. How could she even have thought those things? She loved her time at home with her inquisitive boy. At five years old Vincent's personality was steadily forming, giving her a glimpse of the young man he might become. Already he displayed a preference for adult company, rebuffing the offers from next door's brood to come and play, choosing instead to stay indoors with his mother. He spent long slabs of the school holidays fussing around in his bedroom with only his Noddy books and the gentle puttering of the radio for company. Susheela marvelled at his quiet, industrious nature and imagined that he might become a doctor or a lawyer. The thought shot her stomach with a little frisson of delight.

She dawdled back to the kitchen, sighed hard and relit the oven. She clicked the light off again, and watched the snow. It spun around the roofs of the low-rises like the squall in a paper-weight. She strained her eyes. Beyond the low-rises she thought she could make out the lights from the tower blocks, slowly

blinking awake, standing sentinel over the estate. She wondered if they, too, were snowgazing. She'd come to despise Orford but she loved the different inflections of the tower blocks. Sometimes, in the summer, they'd refract the red sunset off their windows like a wild fire, and she'd ache for Kuala Lumpur – the big glass towers behind the temple which would ripple like an army of glass spaceships in the midday haze.

She tried to recapture the warm careless blush of before. It was impossible. She felt helpless. Somewhere out there the love of her life might slowly, irredeemably be slipping away from her. Typically, he would leave the club just as soon as his set ended and he'd trousered his fee, stopping only for fish and chips on the way home. He knew Susheela lit the oven at 10.45 and put the plates in at 10.50. It was now a quarter to midnight.

She tried to resist the dark thoughts lapping at her subconscious, but as the minutes toiled by she caved. She'd seen it with her own eyes, seen how those barmaids looked at him – those hot bold looks they shot him. Did they care about Susheela's feelings? She doubted they even noticed her. And she'd seen how his very presence rendered even her own friends giddy and girly. It had shocked her at first how Robbie didn't pick up on this, how totally impervious he was to their admiration. But now she was married to him, she could see that Robbie didn't think of himself as handsome. He'd stand with her in the mirror and point to his slain, pulpy nose which he saw as a tell-all about his background.

Susheela had fallen in love with that man, and that nose. Each dent and bump told out their history. She'd been there, on duty, the night they wheeled him in, barely conscious, his nose splayed across his left cheekbone pumping blood into the stung slits of his eyes. She'd sat in as the ENT consultant probed his fingers around the bloody mire and shook his head, frowning upon it as though it were an unsolvable puzzle. And she'd been there in

the room weeks later when his cast had peeled back to reveal his new face. She'd watched him confront the mirror and sensed his disappointment. She'd wheeled him back to the ward. He'd been embarrassed to look at her. The flirty, ebullient quips he'd lavished on her from behind his plaster cast were replaced by a sad, brooding silence. He seemed disgusted with himself, and was at pains to let her know he hadn't caused the fight. He'd been jumped by four lads. Susheela loved him for that, for his embarrassment. Saturday night dragged dozens of Robbie Fitzgeralds into Warrington General – the brawlers, the drunks, their girlfriends, their victims – often all four bound up in the one bloodied casualty. Most of them showed little remorse and took great pride in regaling the medics with blow-by-blow re-enactments of their heroics. Sometimes, Susheela would catch them post-surgery, appraising the splendour of their war wounds, surrounded by admiring comrades. Often they'd seem dejected once their gaping, gushing injuries had been swabbed and stitched so prettily they were barely grazes. Not Robbie. He seemed to shrink away from the dangerous edge his nose now lent his battle-scarred face, at odds with the tender and reticent soul beneath.

It was that contradiction in Robbie that had hit every nurse on Ward 23. Everyone flitted round the flame-haired honey, the more so when news seeped out he was a middling local songster. On the day of his discharge there was a frenetic scramble for his number. Susheela was faintly revulsed by the audacity of her pals, and quietly jealous, too. Oh how she wished she could exhibit herself like that: the saucy walk, their bottoms twitching as they passed, the little glance back over their shoulder making sure he'd had his fill. She couldn't even muster the mettle to reassure him about his nose! She wanted to tell him what a proud, handsome specimen it was, and how it complemented the brilliance of his eyes. Instead she had overcompensated for her nervousness by adopting a brusque, no-nonsense tone with Robbie

and, to the baffled ire of more worldly nurses, the ice queen act paid off. When Robbie left the ward that day, Susheela's had been the only number he took with him. He'd weaseled it out of the stony-faced matron – a feat that still made her smile, whenever she thought on it.

Those first, tentative dates and days out were as close as Susheela had come to the magical romances of her storybooks back home. Although she wanted to dance and dress up and show out, she quickly understood that Robbie preferred to avoid the crowded pubs and discos in town, and just as quickly, she came to love that in him, too. The solitary, yearning poet, striding out into the countryside, filling his lungs with fresh air. She could see the care drop away from his shoulders the further out they travelled, into Derbyshire and the Peak District or the Derwent Valley – great potholes and dripping, echoing caverns one day, heart-stopping panoramas from a crumbling hilltop wall the next.

She could understand why Robbie craved the wide open spaces and cold fresh skies. His other life was indoors; the factory by day, then, most nights of the week, the clubs. And if she thought she loved him when his great huge hands would belt her dainty waist as he lifted her, effortlessly, over a mountain stile, her heart almost stopped the first time she heard him sing. She'd had to beg him, daily, to let her come along. Then one Saturday afternoon, sat on the ridge up by Daresbury, he sighed out loud, 'If they stare, right? Take no notice.' And it dawned on her he was saying yes. Stare at her? She didn't care about that! Of course people were going to stare, she was the only brown face in town, just about. But she was going to see Robbie sing, and she could barely keep the giggles down inside.

He made sure she had a good table, made sure the steward at the Legion treated her like a VIP, but Susheela didn't even want a Coca-Cola. She'd sat there, rapt, waiting – and when her man came on, he nearly blew her soul to dust. It was spellbinding. It

was heartbreaking. Nervously, at first, glancing, rather than staring at his lover, he romped through a few Motown classics: 'Band of Gold'; 'Jimmy Mack'; 'River Deep Mountain High'. And his voice just blistered right through her, turning her stomach sick. That was her Robbie, there. That was her man! And then he did it. He came to her side of the small stage, crooked his left knee and took all his weight on his right hip, closed his eyes, tilted his head back and sang 'When a Man Loves a Woman'.

And when he opened his eyes, he saw his little brown angel, streaks of mascara-black tears flooding her beautiful face.

She loved that time, those first few weeks and months. She loved Robbie, loved his heart, his dreams, his plans. She loved to cling to his waist as they raced through the countryside on his motorcycle, past streams, and glades and hillocks – the England of her dreams. She loved it when he'd suddenly pull over and race her to the top of a hill. One time, they'd stood there, drinking in the view, holding it down, his strong, thick wrists around her waist as he held her from behind, his chin resting on her shoulder.

'Ours, that,' he'd said.

She'd nodded, and gazed out upon the green, green pastures, a land of verdant plenty spread out beneath them.

'We should do it, you know. You and me.'

And she could feel, with her back to him, just exactly what he was trying to say. Within the year, they were married.

Susheela could deal with the way women looked at Robbie. She even allowed herself to feel smug. That'd be as close as any of them ever got – looks. But gazes, glances, admiring darts of the eyes belonged to the daylight. They were harmless gestures – the ritualistic extremes of daytime coquetry. It was night-time she feared most keenly. Night-time aroused them to verbal liberties and dispatched them to the flesh. Night-time meant drink, and

Susheela's time on the ward had taught her there were no limits to a Warrington girl's ambitions once she'd had a drink. Now the picture was emerging, she succumbed fully and tormented herself with its crude and rampant immediacy. Her half-sozzled husband talking, smiling with a young girl – blonde and fair and flat of stomach, her hand brushing his arm, kohl-caked eyelashes fluttering an unmistakeable promise. She buried her head. What could she do about it? She was pregnant, for goodness' sake, pregnant with Robbie's child! She pictured him with Chrissy Taylor, the barmaid with the huge breasts, always displayed to their best in a low-cut top.

She padded back to the window, bereft. Her Robbie was out there and she only had herself to blame. Her work pals had warned her all right. 'His needs don't stop just cos you're pregnant, love,' they'd jeered when she was carrying Vincent. She'd made the mistake of telling them she found intercourse uncomfortable. 'There's more than one way to milk your man!'

Her huge brown eyes had blinked back the tears, trying so hard to force a plucky smile, but their vile prognosis curdled in her ears. She'd tried to relieve Robbie, oh God how she'd tried. Many a night his hard member had pressed tentatively into the flesh of her rump, just to let her know – and she'd lain there, listening to his soft anguished whimpers, wanting so badly to comfort him. Her hand would reach down to him, but somehow she couldn't go through with it. The vulgarity of it was more than she could bear. Her husband's member would slink back, rest sadly against his thigh. Oh how she'd give anything for one more chance. Poor Robbie. All that unslaked love and desire churning his groin, raging through his veins, waiting to explode like a bomb. All those brazen blondes out there, waiting to detonate him.

### Three

The moment Robbie stepped off stage Vaughan swooped on him, guiding him into the dim recesses of the back bar. Regulars hovered in speculative clusters as word seeped out about Vaughan's identity. The more hard-faced of the regulars pushed within earshot, sending back unreliable bush wires on the latest developments. St Stephen's was abuzz with the babble of excited speculation. On one thing they could all agree – Robbie Fitz was going to be big.

Eventually Robbie's beaming, half-bashful face emerged and he was engulfed by well-wishers before he'd got three feet inside the lounge. The men, emboldened by drink and swept away by this tide of communal bonhomie, shuffled over and presented him with pint upon pint of the black stuff. He sipped at one, but was still in a state of shock. Women yo-yoed back and forth to the toilets to freshen their coy smiles and plump up their décolletages. The night rang with drunken attestations as to how well and for how long each had known their home-grown hero.

Robbie just sat there, face glowing, incandescent with pride. He felt a surge of fondness for these people. He wanted to tell them everything, but superstition held him back. Nothing had been signed yet, and if anyone was going to hear his news it would be Susheela. She would be first with the low-down. He had to suppress a giggle as he pictured her eyes – easy to surprise – widening with each new opportunity: the special guest spot at the Talk of the North. The recording contract. The near certainty of a turn on *New Faces*. It was only agreed with a gentleman's handshake, but it was Dickie Vaughan's handshake, and it still warmed his palm. And had Robbie followed him out into the icy night, he would have seen Dickie Vaughan jump up and punch the air before



lowering his massive frame down into his snowbound E-type.

Robbie was no lounge lizard, but he was powerless in the face of all this goodwill. He was overwhelmed by it, really, and he had to admit he'd have liked to have stayed longer. As it was, it was already past eleven thirty when Robbie finally extricated himself from his woozy acolytes, his swoon of self-pleasure eventually pierced by images of his hungry and stranded young wife. He'd sipped his first sup of stardrops and it tasted delicious.

He marched through the snow, the cold night air blasting the sweat from his brow and ripping through the damp of his hair. There was a slight unease that he hadn't returned Irene's musicians as promised, but how often did nights like tonight come along? The band had been a part of the magic, and he'd left them at the bar surrounded by glad-handers, basking in his reflected glory. News would have got back to Iye by now – she'd know all about Dickie Vaughan and she'd be pleased for Robbie. He knew she would.

With each proud stride that took him away from St Stephen's, Robbie was taken over by a sense that he was, at last, walking towards something – something huge. A powerful shudder swept through him and he was overcome by the certainty that tonight was the turning point in his life. He would never, ever forget this evening: the night of the snowstorms; the night Dickie Vaughan walked into his club. He strode on through the blizzard, wanting to hang on to the feeling, that awesome sense of significance, the knowledge that he, Robbie Fitz, was at the very centre of something important.

Robbie turned a corner and saw Crossfields' two smokestacks marooned in the whiteness. A grin sliced his face as another delicious repercussion presented itself: the factory could go and fuck itself! In the very near future, he would be walking into Vernon Cohen's office and handing in his notice. That would take some of the sheen off his ingratiating face. He started to play out the departure scene in his mind's eye, but it was almost too much

to take in. He'd quietly resigned himself to another forty years on the Metso Soap line, maggoting away with all the other maggots – maybe a promotion to Charge Hand if he got lucky. His head was so giddy it felt unsafe on his neck. A surge of recklessness made him want to do something impulsive and totally self-destructive. He looked across the white reach of playing fields and for a brief second thought about jumping a bus to town, really celebrating his newfound freedom! But there was an even stronger pull the other way. Susheela. Vincent. The baby.

He giggled again as he ran through the different possibilities for breaking the news to her, but one thing remained constant. The hell with fish and chips! Tonight they would be celebrating with chow mein and ribs. He patted the roll of pound notes in his pocket and hit the jackpot with a crumpled, pre-made rollie he'd forgotten about. He sparked up and pushed on.

Robbie walked right past the chippie. Some of the lads from the tower blocks were milling around in the doorway, neither really inside nor outside the place. What was it with these kids and big, lit-up windows? The off-licence, the phone box, the chippie – they flocked to them like fireflies. As he passed, their horrible mob laughter spilled out, jarring with the calm of the snowfall. Robbie felt for whomever was on duty in there tonight. He could see one of the little shaven-headed bastards leaning right over the counter, shouting something into the kitchen. His conscience warred with him. He really should go in – stand there and queue. His very presence would be enough to shut this lot up, probably see them off, too. But a glance inside made his mind up. Johny was there, too, and their paper wraps were already being stacked up on the stainless steel counter. Robbie saw the clock. He was an hour late.

Susheela would be worried by now. Even if she'd guessed he was going to Fung Ling, she wouldn't be expecting him to be this late. Perhaps he should just go straight home, but it'd be worth this minor angst when he burst through the front door

with his big news and their swanky dinner, and like a gambler on a roll, he pressed right ahead. He wished he hadn't seen the skins. Subconsciously, he drew hard on his rollie as he passed them by, the sight of their harringtons and major-domo boots planting something queasy in his guts. He wasn't afraid of any of them; he'd come up against all their brothers and cousins at one time or another. He couldn't place the source of his unease, only that it was chemical, instinctive, some imminent menace they exuded just through being there. Maybe he was just experiencing the rude announcement of the new kids on the block, and he simply didn't like the shock of the cockiness their youth brought. Just like the tower blocks and low-rises realigning the skyline of his own youth, Orford was changing. But so, thought Robbie as he reached the other side of the top field, was he.

The skins filed out from the chippie and mobbed up on the corner of the road, cramming fistfuls of hot chips into their mouths as they watched Robbie go. All eyes were on Evo, the oldest of the crew, a squat, solid lad who, at nineteen, was the man among the boys. A kid no older than fifteen pushed himself forward, face twisted tight into a scowl. 'We gonna do 'im, Ev? We doing the Paki-loving twat?'

Revelling in his big moment, Evo lit up as he spoke. The flare of the lighter illuminated his burnt, stumpy hand. 'My, my! What a turn-up. English food's no good for the gypo. He's heading straight for the Chink filth!'

The kid was almost jumping up and down. 'Let's do the cunt, then. Let's fucking roll him now and get his wedge before he fuckin' spends it. Paki-loving gypo twat.'

Calmly, and seemingly unperturbed by the boy, Evo glanced down at him – then with minimal backlift, slammed his gnarled fist into his face. The lad buckled, as much through shock as the blow to his nose. Evo pulled him up by an ear and pushed his

face right into his blinking, tear-pricked eyeline. 'Who the fuck are you? You don't say nothing, you!'

There was mute sympathy as the lad slunk back into the folds of the mob, his sleeve pressed to his nose. All eyes were now on Evo. He narrowed his gaze, saw Robbie swing open Fung Ling's door and bound inside out of the cold. He could almost hear the cheery banter between the Chink and the gypo. He could see the money changing hands – notes, not coins. These immigrants were making proper money, and making sure they kept it in the family. That Fitzgerald would be smiling at the Chinawoman now, eyeing up her little sharp tits under that green smock she wore. Sex, he thought. Violence. He wasn't fooled by the lowering of the eyes, the humble, servile, willing-to-please act. She was as depraved as any of them, the Chinawoman. He'd thought of her many a night. Sex. Sex. But with even a sole chop suey roll being out of his price bracket, Evo's visits were few and far between and, still then, he felt strange in there, especially when it was just him and her. Only the Fitzgeralds of this world could eat at Fung Ling, and only then because she gave him a discount; ten per cent for fucking her up against the wall outside. Sex, sex, sex. And another ten because he was married to one of them. A stinker. One more foul, stinking alien. Violence. He watched Robbie's jaunty silhouette, and he seethed with jealousy. Violence. Sex. Violence. Sex. And then it occurred to him that he didn't have to choose. He turned to his boys.

'Come on. Cunt's too pissed to feel a hiding. We'll smack him some other time. I've got a better idea.' He started jogging back the other way – away from Robbie, away from the Chinese. 'Come on!' he rallied, a great leery grin spreading out over his dull face. 'Fuck you waiting for, you Paki-loving cunts!'

They jogged after him, leaving only Fat Brian who, after a wheezy and half-hearted pursuit, contented himself with waddling on behind them, cramming steaming hot potato flesh into his mouth.

## Four

Fung Ling, their local Chinese, the only Chinese this side of Warrington, was empty. Mrs Ling hung in the window, her face pressed up to the pane, her hands clasped above her brow as she scoped the deserted streets for custom. Robbie spied her anxious face and he felt for her. Business had boomed for the Lings those first few months, but slowly the novelty had begun to wear thin and, as winter set in, the locals were shunning the exoticism of eastern spice for the doughy comforts of the chippie. Each time Robbie cycled past on his way back from work now, Fung Ling was empty.

She saw him coming from across the street and quickly re-located behind the counter, trying to look busy. As he swung through the door, she fielded an imaginary telephone order, holding one hand up to Robbie for a moment's patience. She replaced the phone, scribbled on a pad and beamed up at Robbie. 'How Susheela?' she asked in her faltering, sing-song English. She fixed him with an admonitory stare, her black-brown eyes never leaving his. 'No see long time.'

Robbie couldn't be sure if she was scolding him for withholding business, or merely enquiring about the baby. He decided on the latter and leant against the hot stainless steel counter. The heat crawled up his arms and smouldered in his pits, only adding to his all-round sense of warmth, of happiness. He was going to be a star. This woman would boast of it, soon enough. 'Robbie Fitzgerald? Eat here! Always buy duck!'

He grinned into Mrs Ling's solemn face. 'She's very big now!' Cupping his hand, he traced an arc over his tummy, unwittingly blowing out his cheeks, too. 'But she's fine. She's doing great.'

She says she'll be back in to see you just as soon as she's had the little 'un.'

'And Vincent?' She said it Win-senn. She smiled hard, small gaps between each stumpy tooth. 'I save prawn crackers for your little man Vincent!' She laughed and waved a grease-stained paper bag at him. 'You tell Susheela car no go. I no go in Rusholme this week.'

Mrs Ling provided Susheela with her umbilical cord back home. Both women came from Ipoh, the seamy Kuala Lumpur quarter that became more magical the more they romanced about it. And although Mrs Ling had left KL a long time ago to live her married life in Hong Kong, the women took a childish pleasure in communicating in Malay. Theirs was not the Malay spoken in the heaving swabs of the city, but the more sophisticated variety they'd learnt in school. Had they been neighbours back home, racial snobbery would have limited their exchanges to curt, weather-based pleasantries. But here in the brash planes of Warrington, their shared tongue provided a cultural and, often, an emotional, lifeline.

When it had first opened Susheela couldn't keep away from Ling's, frittering all her wages on hit after hit, day after day. She found English food bland to the extent that it depressed her, truly. But Robbie couldn't stand Indian cuisine – it was pungent beyond his threshold, and left him with a longer-lasting and more debilitating hangover than a night on the ale. When the Lings came along, Chinese turned out to be a satisfying compromise for both.

Since Susheela had left work in November, though, her spice fix had been kept to a minimum. With only one wage coming into the household now, any extravagances had to be put in abeyance and, much as Susheela missed her chat, Robbie knew she'd never call at Fung Ling without ordering. Standing there now on the stark lino floor, with Mrs Ling cursing the fryers

back to life, Robbie felt a powerful need to atone. With quick mental arithmetic, he satisfied himself there'd be enough left over from the night's earnings to see them through the week. Grinning expansively, he ordered a half aromatic crispy duck and a special banquet for two. Mrs Ling glowed at the lavishness of the order and bounced off into the kitchen where she barked instructions to an empty room. It had been worth staying open after all.

Twenty minutes passed and Robbie was beginning to regret placing such an elaborate order now. It was past midnight, and Susheela would be beside herself. At times like this he dearly wished he'd said yes to the option of a party line when the telephone company came calling in the summer. But Robbie could never quite quell the image of the hunched, ancient lady in the corner of the Indian shop in Lymm, the phone permanently glued to her ear as she yattered on and on in that indecipherable tongue. He reproached himself, but he couldn't risk a phone with Susheela – and it wasn't just the money. He didn't want her thinking of home too much.

His patience began to fray and he was almost walking out when Mrs Ling reappeared wielding two steaming plastic bags. She sang at him from behind the counter. 'All ready now Mr Fitz yeah? Good enough for a queen! Tell Susheela I missing her. Come in soon. I put small packet spice in bag – she see. Coconut milk also. And prawn crackers for little Vincent man.' Smiling her yellow smile again, she fished a crispy spring roll from the warmer. 'For walk home,' she said, handing it to him.

The gentle tick-tocking of the kitchen clock grew louder in her head. Each thrum was a blow to the heart, recalling the absence of her faithless lover. Susheela clamped her hands to her ears and padded through to the living room, swooning again at its pulverising claustrophobia. The living room was sparsely

furnished. Each stick of furniture had been donated by various members of Robbie's family, resulting in a slapdash incongruity that jarred on the eye and, for Susheela, the soul. Day after day, she had to look at the monstrosity of a badly soiled, lime-green settee which dominated the room. It was too bulky for such a tight space and only added to her sense of enclosure. A trestle table draped with a large doily served as an ad hoc stand for their poky little TV. To the left of the telly, underneath the sill, was what Susheela jokingly referred to as the cultural corner. It consisted of a blue cane bookshelf filled with Susheela's nursing books and manuals. Next to that was a bulky, ugly stereogram, stacked with Robbie's records. Coming back into the main expanse of the room – or what passed for it – there was a floral lampshade and a three-bar fire (almost always switched off, though tonight it was defiantly on). A plastic-rimmed mirror above the fire amplified the general haphazardness of the room. The only item of furniture they'd bought themselves was a brown and beige Axminster offcut which they'd stretched to its limits, though not quite to the walls of the room. She felt the urge to pace up and down, worry loose some of the tightness in her chest, but the tiny floor allowed no more than two or three strides. She conceded defeat and slumped down on the couch next to her slumbering boy.

She buoyed at the sight of her son. His cheeks were puffed red and his nose stuffy from the artificial heat. She turned the fire down a bar and the room glowed apricot, but within moments she felt the dip in temperature and whacked the heat back up again. He was snoring gently on the couch, some wild dream flickering his eyelids. She smiled as she wondered what he was dreaming. Maybe it was Rama and Sita from the heroic adventures of Ramayana, or the monkey prince Sugriva. Often, when Robbie was at work, she'd light some incense sticks, rustle up a simple meal of roti canai and mulligatawny and recount the



ancient Hindu legends in her mother tongue. Even before Vincent could speak, she'd always spoken Tamil to him when they were alone. It was their special secret.

She lowered her head to her sleeping boy and inhaled his scent in two short draughts. His sweet, babyish smell rushed to her head, radiating through her like a glass of hot toddy. For a brief spell she was diverted from her woes, absorbed in the wonder of him. But while she marvelled at his beauty and felt weak with her love for him, the knots in her chest worked away, subconsciously tightening that constant stone in her guts reminding her of her heartache. She went through to the kitchen and sat in the dark. Not even the snow spattering the window could placate her. Her man was out there, somewhere – with another.

## Five

The bitter northerly wind swept the snow right across the avenue, stacking it in huge billowing ripples. Banked ranks of council roofs were snowed under, almost cartoon-pretty in the blue-white night. Robbie felt a gush of nostalgia. It wasn't so very long ago he'd have been sick with excitement waking up to a scene like this. He transferred the two bags of hot food to one hand and bent down, scooping up a fistful of snow and hurling it at a road sign. He grinned to himself, satisfied by the thud of the snowball as it hit its target. At the bottom of Poplars Avenue he peeled off down the dark narrow cut of the walkway. A sprinkling of hoar frost blotted out the familiar daubing: 'If you want a nigger for a neighbour – vote Labour.'

Robbie marched past, singing to himself.

The walkway linked Orford's newest two estates, and cut a path right behind the low-rises. Robbie always felt odd passing so close, as though he were trespassing on people's private lives. Tonight, even later than usual, those lives seemed distilled in the late-night glow of their televisions and the dim band of yellow lighting spilling out from their windows. Yet it inspired him now, too. These were his kith and kin, and he aimed to do them proud. Passing right by a drunken argument, then a baby crying, the sweet blare of Motown, a midnight insomniac Hoovering relentlessly, the clatter of a dustbin knocked to the floor, shouting and laughter – these were Robbie's people and this was the soundtrack to his life. He felt a new tune coming, and hummed it out loud, trying to keep it alive in his head.

The walkway gave out to one final clump of wasteland, and beyond it, home. Susheela. He smiled again and crunched his

way across the uneven padded earth, overtaking a hefty young lad cramming huge hunks of chips into his mouth. In the distance, in the town centre, a siren wailed, its howl soaring high above the tower blocks. Tonight, for once, it sounded gorgeous. Humming his tune, he tried to imagine his anthem, his hymn to the working classes with a siren as its intro. He left the patch and turned the corner into his street.

Susheela heard the front gate creak open. Her whole body slumped with the relief of it. She listened out for the clank of the gate being shut but there was nothing. He was drunk! Robbie always closed the little gate, whatever the weather. Her relief quickly gave way to indignation. Now that he was home safe, part of her wanted to punish him. She thought about creeping upstairs and feigning sleep, letting him know that she'd given up on their Saturday supper club long before he had. But the thought of him walking into an empty room and eating alone drove a stake through her heart. Besides, she could never carry Vincent upstairs in that short time. What would he think if he came home to find his little boy asleep on the couch? What kind of mother would abandon their son downstairs with the fire left on?

She pictured Robbie's squiffy eyes and the apologetic slope of his mouth as he fumbled for his keys, fingers lashed raw from the cold. She couldn't help smiling at the image, and just as quickly as it came her rash of anger slipped away. Now that he was back, she was able to find fun in the outlandish excesses of her paranoia. She slid the safety catch along its groove and set it free. She released the latch and was just about to tug the door wide open and surprise him when a menace of hushed voices stopped her in her tracks. She called out Robbie's name through the letter box. Her voice seemed to hang there, frail and scared, accentuating her feebleness, before drifting off into the night, unheard.

The voices came again and this time panic strangled her. She

dared not move and was hardly able to edge towards the window. Only the tender sight of Vincent, innocent, asleep, pushed her on. Heart whamming in her ears, she peeled back an inch of curtain. She couldn't see a thing. The snow whirled around and a white crystal shimmer almost obliterated the window. She launched herself onto her tiptoes and craned her neck to spy out from the one corner of glass still free of the snowdrift, forcing her eyeballs as far right as they'd go, desperate for a view of the front of the house, terrified by what she might see. There was nobody there. But a blizzard of fresh footprints along her path confirmed her worst fears. She had not imagined it; there were people out there.

She stood stock-still in the apricot flush of the room and tried to calm herself with best case scenarios. It was kids, fired up on Saturday-night hormones and drink. They'd get bored in a moment and go. Intuitively though, she knew no teens would stay outside for devilment on a night like this. She heard the voices again. This time further away, it seemed – and fewer of them. Maybe they'd stumbled into the garden on their way home, bursting to piss away the night's beer. The sense of escape was fleeting though, immediately replaced by something much bigger, much worse. Robbie was still out there. He had not come home. The bomb had exploded.

She sighed out loud and thought about the best way to carry Vincent upstairs when all her woe was blasted away by the shock of sheer terror. There was a face. A horrible face. Pressed to the fanlight above the door, a bald, shaved dome with piggy-mean eyes glared in. She wanted to scream, to shriek out loud but nothing came. A thud at the door. They were trying to charge it open. With her hands trembling wildly, Susheela struggled to clip the safety latch back on. She left it dangling and useless, and instead turned her attention to Vincent, a shattering pain splintering her back as she scooped him up. Crazy, she looked

around her, took a step this way then changed her mind, stepped towards the bottom of the stairs, Vincent already starting to slip from her grasp. Boom! They were throwing themselves at the door. Her eyes fell upon the little cubbyhole under the stairs. She prised it open, heaving the vacuum cleaner to one side and laying Vincent down on the floor beside it. He stirred slightly, but did not wake. She closed the door and crept into the kitchen. Her head was racing, frantic. There seemed only one way ahead for her. With no telephone, she'd have to run out of the back door and scream until someone heard her.

Head banging with fright as she ransacked drawers and cupboards for the back-door key, she was shocked rigid by the smash of the window pane. A gloved hand reached round for the handle. Her last and only chance was to hack at the hand with the bread knife, but Susheela couldn't move an inch. She couldn't breathe. The man came in through the back door, clamped her mouth and dragged her back in a headlock. Another man came in, then another. The kitchen seemed to be full of them.

Enraged now, maddened at the invasion, she squirmed free and reached up for the frying pan. The first intruder – a stocky, ugly man – knocked the pan from her hand and dragged her back by the hair. The lino floor seemed to buffer the clang of the pan. Susheela found herself strangely grateful for that. She told herself that as long as Vincent slept through this, she would survive. She made up her mind to acquiesce, get it over with, get them out of here. Another arm held her at the belly while the pig-man squeezed so hard on her windpipe she could no longer breathe. She started to lose consciousness. She felt her eyes rolling like marbles across the ceiling, then nothing.

When she came round, she was splayed out on the living-room floor. Her arms and head hurt. Through the blur of her vision she could make out four men. The main man, the squat, pig-faced one looming over her, slowly, ritualistically removed

his gloves. One of his hands was scarred, horrifically burnt. He seemed to revel in her disgust, stroking her face with his gnarled, stumpy fingers. His dome head glowed hot from the fire. Standing behind him were two men decked out in identical attire – black lace-up boots and zipped-up black jackets. A fourth boy stood guard at the curtains. He was just a boy. He was wearing this crazed expression but his eyes were fixed on hers beseechingly, almost desperate for forgiveness. As her senses reorientated, she sourced out the pains in her arms. There was a fifth man kneeling behind her, pinning her with the weight of his knees. Slowly, the night flashed before her in crystal-clear chronology. Everything suddenly made sense. Robbie was dead. She could feel the infallible certainty of this radiating from deep in her soul. These men had done him in and now they'd come for her. She knew why too. She'd seen these thugs before, around and about the estate and hanging in packs by the shops. She'd watched them file onto her bus like a small army, glowering at her and Vincent with naked revulsion. That time, she'd got off at the next stop, too frightened to stay and endure their staring. She hadn't told Robbie about it.

The man standing over her unzipped his jeans, and now her fate spun out in front of her, hurling her headlong towards its horrible and inevitable conclusion. What about the baby? They'd kill them both, Susheela and the baby, if they went through with this. She thought of Vincent growing up alone. No, no, no – not Vincent, he wouldn't make it; he wasn't strong enough, he was too soft for this world. But then her panic was obliterated and replaced by something far more ferocious – what if Vincent woke up? What if they found him? Surely there was no limit to the barbarity of men like these. She squeezed shut her eyes and made a bargain with God. She offered up her life and that of her unborn baby's in return for Vincent's safe and undisturbed passage through the horrors ahead.

The skinhead dipped a hand inside his trousers, pulling out a fat, limp dick. Unabashed in front of his accomplices, he kneaded his member, stretching it out and playing with it until it was harder. Whoever was squatted behind her laughed, and as he spoke she could feel the sour waft of drink in her face.

‘Fuck d’you call that, Evo?’ he scoffed. ‘Just stick it in the bitch. Be the best she’s ever had, anyway.’

There was a dull crack as pig-face, Evo, as she now supposed, leant forward and smacked him hard across his cheekbone. ‘You prick! Names!’ he hissed, his hot, fat head glowing red with ire. Susheela felt brief relief as his victim, the man who’d been kneeling on her arms, jumped up in pain and anger. He stormed to the other side of the room, holding his face. A young lad, who she now saw had a wound to his nose, dried blood clogging his nostril, went to his aid. A fourth lad with a spotty face stepped between the two parties.

‘Come on,’ he tried to reason. ‘Fuck all the silly shite off. Gypo Fitzgerald’s gonna be back any minute. Let’s just torch the fucking joint and get out.’

Susheela squeezed shut her eyes in gratitude. Robbie was safe. He was on his way back to her. This would all be over soon and if God willed she came through it, she promised that things would be different. From now on, things were going to be good – always.

Evo stood back, his piggy eyes gleaming. ‘Better and better. We’ll give the IRA cunt his, too.’

‘Don’t talk daft, Evo.’

‘Names!’

The young kid hung his head. The spotty youth spoke up. ‘Fitzgerald’ll fucking murder us and you fucking know it.’

Evo shook his head slowly, disappointed at the mettle of his men. ‘None of you twats is going anywhere till we’ve taught this filthy little slag a lesson.’ He kicked Susheela in the side.

She bit down hard on her lip.

‘Oi! Open your eyes you fucking Paki bitch. Open your fucking eyes.’ He kicked her again. Two of his mates winced and turned away. ‘Look at me.’

He pushed his penis towards her face. She forced her eyeline upwards. He smiled, horribly. ‘Now, see this white cock. Take a good look at it. There, good girl. That’s a white cock, that is. It’s quite beautiful, isn’t it? Would you like to kiss it?’ He looked to his gang, waiting for them to laugh. One or two of them managed a sneer. He turned back to Susheela.

‘Now listen, you slag. Listen good. What I’m going to do now, is I’m going to teach you a lesson. And you must learn this lesson. You hear me, Paki? Because if you . . .’ He stepped back to reinforce his sermon with another hard kick to the groin, sending a shock of pain ripping through her abdomen. She groaned, tried to swallow it, anxious not to make any noise at all. Surely Robbie would be home soon now. Surely? Evo crouched now, pushing his face up to hers. ‘If you and your horrible gypo so-called husband carry on swamping this estate with your fucking mongrels, I will knife your fucking womb right out. So take a good look at this pure English cock, and make fucking sure it’s the last time you ever see one.’

With a thin, psychotic smile he dropped to his knees, dragged down her pyjamas. With his coarse, hairy gut grazing her pregnant belly, he entered her hard and began fucking her, fast.

Susheela clenched her fists, willing her senses to shut down, feel nothing. All that was left was sound. As he thrust and thrust and thrust, a strange, high-pitched whimpering came from him. There was an awful slurping from between her thighs. A violent contraction deep in her womb. Her head lolled sideways as she felt herself starting to slip away. So this was it, then. They were not going to kill her after all. Robbie was still out there, alive. Susheela was already dead.