

John Muckle was born in the village of Cobham, Surrey, but has lived most of his life in Essex and London. In the 1980s he initiated the Paladin Poetry Series and was General Editor of its flagship anthology, *The New British Poetry* (Paladin, 1988). His previous books include *The Cresta Run* (short stories), *Cyclomotors* (a novella with photographic illustrations), *Firewriting and Other Poems* (Shearsman Books, 2005), two novels, also from Shearsman, *London Brakes* (2010) and *My Pale Tulip* (2012), and a critical study of British fiction in the 1950s and 1960s, *Little White Bull* (Shearsman, 2014)

SAMPLER

**Also by John Muckle**

*It Is Now As It Was Then* (with Ian Davidson)

*The Cresta Run*

*Bikers* (with Bill Griffiths)

*Cyclomotors*

*Firewriting and Other Poems*

*London Brakes*

*My Pale Tulip*

**CRITICISM**

*Little White Bull*

SAMPLER

# Falling Through

*a novel*

SAMPLER  
JOHN MUCKLE

Shearsman Books

Published in the United Kingdom in 2017 by  
Shearsman Books  
50 Westons Hill Drive  
Emersons Green  
BRISTOL  
BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office  
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB  
*(this address not for correspondence)*

ISBN 978-1-84861-535-9  
First Edition

Copyright © John Muckle, 2017.

The right of John Muckle to be identified as the author of this work  
has been asserted by him in accordance with the  
Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.  
All rights reserved.

SAMPLER

Falling Through

SAMPLER

SAMPLER

## ONE

Graham looked up at the sloping ceiling above his single bed. It was four in the afternoon, the winter darkness had fallen suddenly, and a blueish glare from the portable TV struck his ceiling obliquely, which created an odd pair of linked reflections up there. They looked like a model glider: a stick for a fuselage, wide billowing wings and a slender, spill-like tail somebody had twisted out of a sheet of file paper. He wanted to get up, pick it off the ceiling and throw it out of the window; watch it drift over the gardens, lift above chimneys, trees, and float away over the braided railway tracks that wove on down to King's Cross Station.

He wondered sleepily if he should make a new one of a similar design ... but any thoughts of gliders he'd previously stuck together and the awful prospect of doing it all again tired him out; he stretched out his limbs until they loosened, relaxed, and drifted off again into sleep.

Once he was properly asleep, the dreaming began. Always the same one. He sat in the begging chair, begging for forgiveness. The shadow of the larger man loomed over him, and then the tall man struck him hard in the face, again and again, first with the back of his hand, then with something harder. He was used to it. He almost liked it. It was no less than he deserved. He began silently to cry. There was a deep crease at the corner of his right eye, a conduit for a steady stream of salty water. He tasted it on his tongue, almost comforting: a pleasant-unpleasant dream he expected to be living in for the rest of his life, probably.

He awoke from it without fuss and peered at the alarm clock. It was after six o'clock. Dark outside. Swiftly he got up and dressed in his suit, his brown interview suit, splashed some water on his face in the bathroom, briefly combed his hair, picked up his bag and let himself out of the flat into Rathbone Avenue, its long curve of Edwardian terraces stretching down a hill for a while before climbing towards the shining blocks of council flats which he vaguely associated with Harringay itself, whatever self that was. Beyond them a small library was tucked away on a corner, a quiet building mainly containing crime thrillers and children's books. Somewhere along there you could pick up the New River;

it ran somewhat unimpressively along the backs of the houses of Wightman Road.

He turned in the opposite direction, walked up the short rise to Tottenham Lane, turned right at the top and walked purposefully downhill to Hornsey station and First Capital Connect. He recharged his Oyster card and hopped on a train heading in the opposite direction from Kings Cross. Alexandra Palace, Bowes Road, Palmer's Green. He hopped off at Winchmore Hill and hurried down the long hill, past the fancy Victorian shopping hub and on to his appointment.

He rang the bell of a large semi-detached property in an avenue which was a bit better appointed than his own – bigger houses, bow-fronted, mostly in that suburban style of the twenties, of which there were two basic sorts: teapot trad, and teapot moderne. Quite a few, including the one whose bell he was currently pushing, had skips in front of them, recounting their stories of improvements in progress. On his first visit here, early himself, he'd walked around the corner and found Edmonton cemetery, full of nineteenth century Poles and Jews, and glanced cursorily at a few of the impressive stones. Nobody in his family had ever been deemed worthy of a headstone, so far as he remembered.

Mrs. Anstis loomed behind the louvred glass of the front door, stooped slightly to open it and smiled up at him on the step. She was a small, solicitous woman of Italian ancestry who had once studied psychology, about the same age as the tutor. Her son Paul, at the sound of Graham's approach, had once again locked himself in the upstairs toilet. She apologized for his poor behaviour. "I am embarrassed!" She ushered his tutor towards the large living room and called upstairs plaintively – "Paul! Paul!" – going up sideways as she attempted to cajole her son away from his ablutions.

He walked over to their cluttered dining table, sat down at a chair and pulled his folder and a couple of books from his battered tan satchel. Their front room was crowded with piles of displaced kitchen equipment, piles of woks and pans, an expensive toaster jammed back into its dog-eared box. Mrs. Anstis' balding, elderly mutt approached him, woefully wagging its amputated stump of tail. After a few minutes the boy himself came downstairs, vacant



and unprepared, and slid into the chair opposite. The lesson, if you could call it that, got underway.

He didn't seem able to spark any interest in Paul, not in W.H. Auden, Christina Rossetti, Daphne Du Maurier or Bram Stoker. The only novel on his syllabus he liked was *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, which he had dutifully read and to an extent enjoyed, but couldn't quite bring himself to fully approve of. How likely was it really that the head of the Taliban was a blue-eyed half-German Nazi who was running a gay paedophile ring on the side? His study of the relevant Wikipedia pages had revealed the author to be the son of a diplomat. Like a lot of them he'd written himself down a social notch or two, and the whole thing was a love letter to America, more or less. His actual relationship with the impossibly loyal Hazara boy had been somewhat more distant and formal than implied by the tear-jerking outcome of his book. Typical novelist. Just another self-serving, lying little prick.

Still, none of this was Paul's fault. He felt himself to be a complete failure as a teacher. This perfectly normal boy, English, middle-class, with a builder for a father – who incidentally had doubled the size of the back of their teapot with a kitchen extension complete with Roman tiles and underfloor heating – had preoccupations other than passing his A levels. He'd just learned to drive, wore his trousers halfway down his backside, wasn't so sure he needed to go to university anyway. Forty years earlier, he himself had felt much the same.

Afterwards he walked back to the station. It was fucking cold, so he stepped on it, feeling in his pocket for the hand-warmer – the crisp sheets of a couple of banknotes, a ten, a twenty. He refused to dwell on anything in particular about the lesson. As usual the session had been like pulling teeth. Plainly the boy was not interested in the subject; he was just going through the motions to please his mother. Either out of stupidity or contempt he never seemed to remember what had been said from week to week. His notes and all of the interesting essays his tutor had copied for him were always left behind at school in another folder, or lost somewhere in his chaotic bedroom.

On the short train journey he flipped through a copy of *Metro*, read his horoscope and a five minute interview with a twenty-three

year old TV actress whose favourite programme turned out to be *Twin Peaks* (before she was born surely) and he worried a little as the shrouded landscape of this little stretch of suburban London trundled by into the recent past. Alexandra Palace. Ally Pally. He hadn't been up there for ages. He wanted to go. No reason, none whatsoever. Just that he had a vague feeling that a glance through the telescope towards Canary Wharf would do him some good. Clutching at straws? He was getting worried about this peculiar little job of his. It wasn't much, but it was all he had been able to obtain in part-exchange for his careless, half-baked sense of how things go.

SAMPLER

## TWO

Next morning, Saturday morning, he got up at a reasonable hour and wandered down towards Crouch End. Succumbing first to the temptation of a hearty breakfast in Wetherspoons, he popped into Flashback Records, a cramped shop opposite the Harringay Arms, bursting with memories – his own and other peoples – to clack quickly through a few racks of pre-owned CDs. Dinah Washington, classy, withheld but passionate; Sonny Rollins, still trotting along like an old cowhand; Marc Bolan, dug up at the root, lost through a hole in the soul of his suit; Mary Hopkin's gloriously infectious Russian polka. *Those Were the Days*. Mary Hopkin, shy, beautiful, Welsh. Balalaikas, orchestral arrangements, children's choirs – these were the things that did him in.

But he soon found himself shoulder to shoulder with half-a-dozen other gold prospectors; so he left them to it and strolled off to the library to check his emails.

Viagra from Canada, Big Willy; a showing of *Jonah Who Will Be Twenty Five in the Year Two Thousand* at the National Gallery; *À Bout de Souffle* in French at Hornsey Film Club; a Word-a-Day; another request from persistent Taryn Buster asking if he wanted to be her FuckBuddy; a wide selection of photos of the more grotesquely overweight customers of Wal-Mart, kindly forwarded by a childhood friend who now lived in Houston, Texas. He deleted the lot of them. A flying bird had brought the message. It is better not to strive upwards. It is better to remain below. He threw away his *I-Ching* reading too and clicked around a bit in a well-worn but non-random way, compulsively checking on all three or four things he routinely checked. They were still happening, those relevant, irrelevant people still existed. He was just glad they weren't gathered in his courtyard, which only meant trouble, unhappiness, revolutions, demands for immediate payment.

On the other hand, he quite often clicked on The Cobham Blogger, enjoying his accounts of pizza franchises and restaurants opening and closing on the High Street, speculation about what might be next on the site, controversy over the disused buildings of the primary school Graham had once attended (should they

be turned into a homeless shelter, or demolished to make way for luxury flats?); the poor condition of the outside garden of the Fairmile Hotel; the preponderance of WAGS in 4x4s since Chelsea Football Club's training ground had been relocated to nearby Stoke D'Abernon, and their arrogant behaviour; floods, washed out bridges – in memory and in the present; and the annual Christmas lights turn-on, with sardonic comments about what astonishingly cheap celebrity might be afforded this year.

Back in the day it had been Ronnie Carroll opening Fine Fare supermarket. "Are those roses still red, Ron?" somebody had called to him. "Of course they are, red enough for me," the briefly popular Northern Irish crooner had replied. He remembered how his mother had come home with a PG Tips album, featuring a chimps' tea party on the cover, for him to stick in the cards of animals and birds and wild flowers and flags of the world which came with every green and blue quarter packet. On it an Indian lady delicately picked tea and cast the resinous buds into a basket suspended on her back by a leather thong around her forehead. Just as it still was, always would be. "Imagine doing that all day long in the blazing hot sun," his father had said, "just so we can have a cup of tea whenever we like."

He quite liked reading the blog, but it seemed to be dribbling away: a fracas; a car accident; an unsuccessful ram-raid on Barclays Bank; a few more demolitions and rebuildings; road widening; unaffordable housing and the perfidy of Elmbridge council. Gerrard Winstanley dragged in as most famous Cobhamite: the irony of it, had anything really changed? And what would they think of him now, etc? He was casting his bread, but the commenters weren't biting. About the only things biting around there were bloated, genetically-modified chub with which the Mole had been stocked by the local angling club. Graham suspected he'd given up, been told to desist by his neighbours, or by what he called 'the powers that be'.

But today his favourite blog was telling a different tale: a body had been found in a wheelie bin in Hamilton Avenue, a woman's dead body. Under a heading which read 'Where are you Peter and how did this happen?' he'd simply reproduced a statement by the Surrey constabulary:

A man who may be able to assist a murder investigation is being sought after the body of a woman was found in a wheelie bin in Hamilton Avenue, Cobham.

Surrey Police was called by a woman at around 3:20pm yesterday (Saturday 6 June), after a human foot was seen protruding from the bin.

Scene of crime officers carefully emptied the bin to preserve forensic opportunities, recovering the full intact body of a white woman believed to be in her 30s, which had been surrounded by rubbish.

A post mortem at the Royal Surrey County Hospital in Guildford was inconclusive as to probable cause of death. It found signs of a serious head injury, but could not confirm that this had caused the death.

Detectives are focusing their inquiries on locating a previous resident of the address where the body was found, who may be able to provide useful information for the investigation.

33-year-old Peter moved out of the address roughly three weeks ago and his whereabouts are currently unknown.

He is described as a heavy-built white man with broad shoulders, roughly six feet in height, with slightly-receding brown cropped hair and brown eyes.

He clicked other news sources and filled in a few details. The murder had taken place on the road where he'd grown up, in a newly built block of flats called Hamilton Court: a set of eighteen two-bedroom family places capping the avenue of semi-detached fifties council houses, which were somewhat more attractive properties. The Styles family had been awarded one of them after their two girls grew too big to share a room, thereafter ceasing to be landing neighbours. Tish no longer came in with her Elvis records and put her ear down to the spindly radiogram to listen to him breathing and to practice hula-hooping with his mother. There had been a row of shops, a grocer, a newsagent and a greengrocery, knocked down since to make way for more housing. Hamilton Court still stood, but what had once been a brand new block looked knocked about now; some flats didn't even have curtains up, and he had heard it was a dumping ground for single mothers and benefits claimants.

The similarity of its name to Hampton Court had not been lost on him.

Peter Wallner was a former chef at a local hotel, a German apparently, and the body was soon identified as that of his wife Melanie, a South African woman who had once looked confident and alive, her blonde hair done up in an old-fashioned, somewhat regal style: she wore a large brown velvet jacket, looked sideways at the photographer with a full, toothy smile. Another photograph showed a bloated-looking man with a short pudding-bowl haircut and a sparse goatee, a cropped image in which he was sitting slumped on a brown sofa, his left arm behind his head, peering at something or somebody, his eyebrows raised imperiously above gold wire-framed glasses. He seemed to be watching television. An unidentifiable object which might have been a surfboard was propped against the white wall behind his sofa.

Of course, it had all been different once. He had launched his first gliders outside on the green, on towlines and lengths of shirring elastic stretched between cricket stumps. He remembered how one such hopeless homemade contraption, unsightly, slapped together by instinct, had caught a freak gust above the rooftops and kept going, disappearing from sight towards the lazily circling sprayers of the sewage farm on the far edge of the estate.

In the local and national press photos, Hamilton Avenue looked much as it always had. The neat fifties council houses, the clipped privet hedges: a fully realized version of somebody's idea of lower middle-class heaven; order, tranquillity, and very nice too. A little tent stood in the front garden of one of the semis, presumably to cover the site of the wheelie bin. There were police standing in yellow jackets, beside cars, and swathes of neutralising plastic incident tape, everything about their deployment suggesting an outbreak which had been successfully contained, reassuring the public of its restored security.

Turning into the estate from the alley behind the police station, where above the tall brick wall an air-raid siren had stood freshly painted on its pole in readiness, he had once daily crossed the front of the lock ups whose dented doors concealed no less dented cars, had turned again at the corner onto the estate proper past Norman's house where the school clarinetist would be forever practicing his scales, composing his sonata for clarinet and piano;

a shy, bespectacled, isolated boy with a deep dimple in his cheek when he smiled.

On his way out of the library he caught an unwelcome glimpse of his reflection in the glass door: a tallish, dumpy man in late middle-age with a shock of sticking-up white hair, not what he was inside at all, but there you are, there you go, he felt totally worn-out, and that he was definitely ambling towards the departure lounge.

Up at the top end of Tottenham Lane he spotted Ray Davies, frontman and songwriter of sixties pop group, The Kinks. Graham loved their music, he'd had the right kind of childhood, prancing around the next-door neighbours' sitting room. Ray's studio, Konk, was situated at the corner of a semicircular parade of Edwardian shops, semi-derelict, then refurbished, but still mostly unlet. The studio's wood-panelled door was topped by a small blue neon sign, which said KONK, lit up when the facility was in use. He sometimes wondered what was going on in there and if Ray Davies was in residence, rerecording his great hits with a children's choir.

Once he had seen him buying a packet of salted peanuts at the corner grocery, looking slender and youthful, as though this was all he was going to eat that day; another time he had been passing on the street and had noticed his awestruck stare through the window of the kebab shop as he lifted a small cheeseburger to his open mouth, returning it with a wry smile; on yet another occasion he had been waiting and chatting with a shorter, younger woman by the bus stop.

Ray Davies was talking to a dog. "Alright mate? Alright?" Graham heard him say, bending almost formally to shake paws with a large ornamental poodle tied-up to a rail outside the betting shop. He passed before he could catch the dog's reply. But his spirits were lifted. His heart filled up with gratitude to see the insouciant giver of much pleasure and instruction so evidently enjoying the company of a dog. No-one was ever going to say Ray Davies was stuck up. All around him the pedestrian traffic of Tottenham Lane flowed past obliviously.

He kept going, propelled by this apparition, this celebrity sighting, past his own turn-off and down the hill, past Hornsey rail station and right onto Turnpike Lane. He crossed the over at

Wightman Road just opposite the West Indian Cultural Centre with its giant etched stainless steel mural of palms, and headed down to Wood Green, feeling, as always, a little different as the skin colour of the other pedestrians gradually changed and the procession of Somali internet cafes, Mauritian restaurants, Indian takeaways, nail emporiums, hair shops specialising in threading, exotic fish and vegetable supermarkets, law shops and dentists, thickened up quickly towards Duckett's Common. He crossed over Turnpike Lane and turned left onto the High Road, pace slackening as he loitered down its length, savouring its jostling difference, and indifference; losing himself in the usual weekend throng.

Everything was going on down there. First of all in Maplins, the electronics specialists. Rack upon rack of conjunction boxes and multiple networking connector hardware of all kinds, gizmos for turning vinyl into mp3s, coils of whip-like cable and differently-abled DVD players filled up the centre of the shop, whose walls were lined with sentinel plasma screens of various dimensions, usually quite big. The shop wasn't however filled with customers – most people appeared to possess most of those things by now, and he himself wasn't in the market.

Instead he sought out a pyramid of radio-controlled cars and helicopters which usually dominated the window space, slavered over them for a while, and sought out the ever rarer twin-propeller aeroplanes. They were getting cheaper all the time, but also disappearing fast. He could see only a scuffed box or two promising all sorts of elegant controlled curves and acrobatics from airily suspended contraptions of polystyrene foam at the touch of a joystick; but did they really work? He remained unconvinced – he couldn't afford to speculate.

There were clothes shops where everything seemed to be under ten or twenty quid. Poundland, its side wall embellished by a Banksy. Little prayer stalls sold cheap phonecards; next to them large transparent washing-up bowls out of which wind-up furry monkeys attempted to climb to freedom. Coffee shops. McDonalds. On one corner was a huge Vietnamese restaurant with framed numbered colour photos of a hundred dishes, closed. Stalls which sold a bunch of bananas, a clutch of oranges, or a pound of apples in a plastic bowl for a quid. A man and a woman arguing



some point of theology, gesticulating wildly, enjoying themselves; further down West Indian churches offering to help you get ahead with lifestyle advice, ran courses in it. Everybody called you boss.

Traid. They sometimes had good clothes in there and all the money went to fair trade organizations providing help for farmers and producers in the third world. He ventured in briefly and saw a young woman alphabetizing the books. He peered over her shoulder, but there was nothing he particularly fancied, except her. Outside again. Outside was good ... but today it was all too much for him. It was all so generic. He turned back on himself just before Wood Green Shopping Mall.

He turned along a side street, past the trendy little bookshop and the big café he had never entered and the Jamaican barbershop, making his slow way back to Rathbone Avenue. It didn't take him long. He kicked his shoes off and divested himself of most of his clothes and made himself a cup of coffee. Ahhhh. That was much better. He turned on the TV and rapidly manipulated the Freeview box onto BBC Radio – soft pattering voices, familiar music, from the past, that good old mulch of everything that had once meant something to him, to other people. They had him taped, he had to admit. Mix-taped. He blew on his coffee, feeling the blissful blow-back of caffeine as it bounced off his dry eyes.

### THREE

Ray Davies was beginning to mildly enjoy himself in the studio. The ordinary North London house he had converted decades earlier was filled with young musicians who admired him and wanted to record an album of his songs, sounding, if that was possible, exactly like the versions he had recorded decades earlier with The Kinks. Naturally each generation had its own sound as well as its own ideas about things, and a younger person would naturally interpret one of his songs in his or her own way, but somehow they only sounded right when the harmonies were the same and the identical guitar breaks came in exactly the same spots as they did on those old records which had made him so famous.

What was a song after all? He wasn't sure he even knew, although he had given a variety of answers over the years; as far as most listeners were concerned a song was the song it was by virtue of quite small, quite precise moments in it: a break in the voice which broke your heart, or playfully threatened to do so; a rinky-dinky organ part which reminded you of some childhood fairground, a large flat knife thudding into a board only a hair's-breadth away from the assistant's quickly revealed small breasts; your own heart thudding along tumultuously with hers. Those were the days alright – everybody knew it.

Abruptly, he decided they didn't need him anymore and wandered out into the back garden. Nobody was out there, just a yard or two of scrubby grass and breaking up cement surrounded by high brick walls, a few old chairs and the stacked equipment cases of the TV crew. Ray sat on the paint-spattered yellow seat of a scuffed old wooden kitchen chair. The sun had come out and he was feeling a customary sense of enjoyment. Being there in the moment. He enjoyed his thinness and the way his loose t-shirt showed he was still a thin man. Eating next-to-nothing helped, also the shape of his head, especially the shape of his head, with its long lugubrious clown's face, his mouth extending its long expressive corners, as though carved into it with a sharp stick of greasepaint.

He didn't need a mirror to tell him any of this, he knew it if he knew anything, he was tall and thin and slightly stooped, leaning

forward inquisitively into the things of this world. But there you are. He decided to piss them all off by sliding out of the back door of the yard, down the alley and out into the other road for a wander ... yeah, it was time for Ray to wander off and have a gander.

He resisted the temptation to sprint away down the hill, kept his head down and propelled himself rapidly past the curve of terraces, away past the flats and down to the zebra crossing which led to the gaping mouth of the new estate and its guardian pumping station converted into a large restaurant he had never frequented.

He didn't enter the estate with its recent flimsy but elegant-looking blocks which seemed constructed for a mildly futuristic film set, grids of rectangular panels dappled in lime green and pastel orange as though assembled from a child's architecture kit from the mid-sixties. Instead he crossed the sluggish New River and pushed his way through the old iron lych-gate which led onto the path running beside it for a couple of hundred yards.

The New River now had a modest pipe running along its length, presumably delivering water at higher pressure than the eighteenth century canal, even though it looked healthier than it used to. Perhaps it saved North London from flooding, he speculated, or maybe it was like a heart bypass operation taking the pressure off. It wasn't particularly pretty, but then nor were rusty shopping trolleys and bicycle wheels, so some people said. Still, he enjoyed the moorhens with their ducking and diving antics and a couple of pairs of swans, drifting for a little then flapping up onto the pipe with a great and mighty effort of wings to huddle and bask in the mild sunshine.

Ray looked up towards the majesty of Alexandra Palace, sprawled at the top of its hill, a visible embodiment of beauty, harmony and enlightenment still lifting its mighty beacon to the sky to broadcast to the enslaved peoples of the Earth that, well, somebody was listening to them, or they were listening to us, and those of us who lived in its shadow were also somehow uplifted by those messages written on the air. He of course remembered when the new estate wasn't there, and when the sixties estate behind it was also unbuilt, just a few streets of older houses and small engineering works, and the gypsy horse fair had taken place in the long meadow which lay tumbled below what was now Alexandra Park. Not that

he had been particularly interested in all this, but still, it had once been so.

He carried on between the wire builder's fences which protected the new site of what looked like a hydroelectric dam – or was it a small sports arena of some sort? Just as he crossed the bridge to get out through the gate his path crossed that of a young girl walking up from the direction of the estate. She had short ginger hair, cut in a severe alien punk sort of style, an open child's face, wore jeans and a short-sleeved t-shirt, which revealed her arms to be covered in a riot of recent and colourful tattoos.

Ray couldn't help but clock them; fat coiled snakes, cobras probably, were twined around the voluptuous torsos of a pair of large-breasted Egyptian goddesses in some ancient but contemporary expression of exotic sensuality, looking for all the world like illustrations to James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night*. The girl caught his eye, hesitated and smiled slightly. She obviously didn't recognize him – he was just some old bloke on the path. Ray smiled back shyly, one corner of his clown's mouth shaking up an inch or so, and she passed on, bouncing prettily ahead of him, on a mission of some kind to Wood Green, disappeared out of the range of his poor eyesight. Ray stood there, halted in his tracks, looking back along the path she had come down, up at the looming row of new play brick blocks of flats whose charming Mediterranean balconies, he was pleased to notice, had already begun to fill up with broken furniture and half-dismantled bicycles.

When she was gone, he continued walking, soon entering the narrow railway arch, which was richly dank and scarred with layer upon layer of elderly graffiti, so if somebody had been walking along right behind him they would have seen his tall moving back outlined against the sun pouring into the end of it, breaking him up finally as he disappeared with a pop into the bright spotlight out there in the Wood Green industrial estate and cultural precinct.

He emerged into the brilliant light at the end of the tunnel, stopped and turned slowly this way and that. He found himself presented with three clear choices. He could turn right, which led around to Bateman's Café, which would probably be closed today, but past which he had sometimes enjoyed walking; straight on would lead him past the Chocolate Factory – which was not a chocolate factory – and out past that Turkish pub, the Duke of

York; a left turn would take him around the edge of the estate, past a primary school, and to the edge of a small park which stood at the bottom of Alexandra Park Road. This was the direction, he decided, now with a sort of angry boredom, to take. He walked around the long circling road – completely deserted – and when he arrived at the small park he sat on a bench in the centre of it, one of a number ranged on a path curving around a trellis, a covered walkway which reminded one of the gardens of a ruinous temple. Only there weren't no ruinous temple to be seen. He leaned back, pushed a fried chicken box to the ground with an angry flick, noted the already overflowing litter bins piled with discarded copies of Metro and similar boxes, stood up briefly to toss the offending fried chicken box on top of the pile, sat down, placed his long head in his hands, and wept.

He cried and cried and cried. At length he pulled himself together, finally reassembled his long lugubrious clown's face and went on his way up the long hill towards Alexandra Palace Station, turned right at the pub on the corner and headed for the palace itself. He was winded by the time he'd climbed up to the row of telescopes which stood before its shabby frontage and fumbled in his pockets for a coin or two which he pressed into the slot of the old iron contraption as it slid around with surprising ease on its greased gimbal. He could see nothing at first, just a green blur like the freefall landscape in a bad acid effect video, but soon he was able to make out the distant towers of Canary Wharf. Just about visible. Beyond them? A speck on the horizon. Perhaps it was nothing more than a scratch on the lens of this big sliding dinosaur, maybe the glint of a pair of binoculars in an impossible distant shrouded place on the other side of town, in Richmond Park.

He wandered back into the studio as dusk was falling. Being as how he was Ray Davies no-one dared to ask him where the fuck he had been. Instead it was Ray, Ray, Ray this, Ray that. We're ready for you, Ray. Ready for your masterly lead vocal. Do you want to hear what we've got so far? Of course he fucking did, or maybe didn't. He put on the headphones and listened to a rough mix of the choral version of You Done Me Up. It didn't sound too bad, even with a bloody awful schoolgirl vocal ensemble keening away down in the mix; but an irritating tinny high up rattle kept cutting in on his right earpiece.

“What the fuck’s that?” he asked.

“That’s you playing the mouth-organ, Ray,” somebody said, laughing at him.

Laughing at him!

“Listen, you cunt. I taught Mick Jagger to play the fucking mouth-organ.” Ray smiled inimitably. “You’re fucking sacked.” At this moment his eye caught the glint of a lens in the corner of the control booth. One of those BBC twats was filming him. “Unless you can do it better yourself, that is.”

Everybody laughed at Ray’s joke.

After they’d wound up the session and the BBC had packed up and gone back to Maida Vale with their equipment Ray called a cab and headed back to the ranch. His living quarters were modest, in a street like many others in North London, and anyone who had knowledge of where exactly he resided was sworn to the utmost secrecy. Anyone who happened to type “Where does Ray Davies live?” into Google would be sorely disappointed. Ray hung up his coat in the hall and slouched through to the living room where one of his living companions was watching *Hair of the Dog*, a programme, as far as he’d been able to make out, which had nothing to do with dogs. It wasn’t that Ray was uninterested in what his living companions watched, but he’d found, over the years, a certain mutual lack of curiosity worked well where living companions were concerned. He didn’t have to provide daily explanation or what he was doing or thinking about, and neither did they, unless they were children. Who was really interested in your doings at the end of the day? Just some obsessive fan. Okay, he knew they existed, but preferred not to think about them.

“Hair of the God?” he asked idly.

“Hair of the Dog,” the living companion seemed unwilling to look away from a large screen on which ...

Ray went into the kitchen and opened one of the cupboards. One of the living companions had opened a packet of Highland Shortbread and eaten two of them. He snagged another from the tray with his finger and ate it, lifting and shaking the kettle, then snapping it on. Cup of tea, cup of tea. “Cup of tea?” he put his head around the living room door and called to the living companion.

“Not for me,” the living companion replied.

Just then he heard a stomp stomping on the stairs. One of the other living companions was descending. He knew from the tread which one. "Cup of tea?" he half-heartedly called.

No answer. He heard the living room door creaking as the other companion went through, to watch whatever portion remained of Hair of the Dog. The word 'portion' made him think of Highland Shortbread. Sipping his own tea, and feeling instantly better, more relaxed, he took another finger from the packet and nibbled at it more frugally than he had the last. There was no way he was going to watch any of *Hair of the Dog*, so he climbed the stairs himself and went into his bedroom. This was a room which contained his bed and a number of other essential furnishings. He lay back on the bed, finished the shortbread and put down his tea mug on the bedside table. He lay there in semi-darkness. He liked the door to be ajar and light spilling in from the hall, and he liked a gap in the curtains so he could look out of the window.

Due to his oblique angle of repose he could see almost nothing; but he already knew what there was to see, so wasn't unduly troubled. He just liked the way the darkness pushed up against the window yet was somehow kept at bay, although some of it always seemed to spill down the wall into a shadowy pool in which he had once seen a school of minute fish leaping and playing. He also liked the suggestion, although not sure where it came from, that there was light out there in the other houses. Over the hills and far away. The only tune he knew how to play. He lifted his cup to his lips and drained it completely, definitively.