Late Driver

SAMPLER

Also by John Muckle

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Bikers (with Bill Griffiths)
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Firewriting and Other Poems
London Brakes
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Falling Through
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Criticism
Little White Bull: British Fiction in the 50s and 60s

Late Driver

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Snowballs in June

The Highfields Estate was a sprawling congeries of small, sand-coloured bungalows and houses ranged along curving tongue roads that were laced up by narrow alleys, sheltered and shaded by dark shrubs and trees and at night dappled by the light of low street lamps and pale-yellow windows, all of which lent it a feeling of justified warmth and safety. Louis Way, Kennedy Way, Walden Road; Tower Way, Platt Drive, Simcoe Road, Whitebeam Road, Liberator Way, Catalina Close, and Mitchell's Stile. The names told a story that would be known one day.

Pauline and Bill's bungalow was small; it had a conservatory built onto the back, and a short windowless corridor that had once been a box room led down to it. And once the conservatory had been built, creating another large room filled with light from all angles, a burning glass in summer, a resonator for rain, Pauline perched in a big brown swivelling armchair and watched the birds at the bird feeder and critically contemplated the garden, and began to notice the darkness of the resultant corridor, which had a narrow divan bed in it, and to want a window put in the box room.

There was a lot of underused skill on the estate. People who knew how to do things but were no longer needed, and the damp Devon air revived them sufficiently so they wanted to exercise these skills, just to make sure they still had them. Alf, a retired builder who lived a few doors down, said: "I'll do that for you, Bill," and he knocked a sizeable hole in the ticky-tack wall and stuck in a window in a single afternoon, perfectly, and he wouldn't take any money for it apart from materials. Bill serviced his car in part-exchange.

Old habits of thought kept their attitudes where they'd always been: stoked, seething, even anguished at times, and all about things that didn't really concern them in the slightest. This was caused by frequent appeals to another kind of feeling they had, ideas which seemed to spring up in them like the airborne manned kites spiralling up and down from the airfield; from a distance reassuring, like beautiful flowers, but dangerous, and all too fragile as the ground rushed up to meet them.

A small miracle of community had occurred, at least amongst some like-minded elderly folks, chilled transplants from everywhere, and, like all the best miracles, it was self-replenishing. The few immigrants who lived there turned out to be good neighbours, religious many

of them, competent women from Malaysia and Indonesia, a South African guy into model aeroplanes, helpful and kind, gift-bearers of trinkets and inedible foodstuffs, and so they overcame the prejudices of the old people, who nevertheless continued to complain and to vote, some of them, if they bothered, for parties who wanted to expel their neighbours from these shores.

Pauline was wool-gathering, all the snagged black sheep wool in the world. She was throwing snowballs in June. She was cycling on a clear summer's morning to her job at the Milk Marketing Board in Thames Ditton, 1947. Wearing comfortable sandals and a flowery blue cotton dress. Came flouncing in. Except she didn't. Very meek and mild, she had been. Enjoyed being told what to do and getting on with it until lunchtime. Looking in shops. Going into a clean café. Walking down to the riverside to sit on a bench to watch arrowing swans and circling ducks. Admiring the lines of Hampton Court Palace on the opposite bank, still standing, its long water, criss-crossed by the wakes of moorhens, stretching off through a colonnade of tall trees.

She couldn't remember now what she had got up to at work, perhaps just sat at her desk and chatted to one of the older women. Her job was to type up the daily submissions of milk yields into neat columns. Buttercup, Daisy and Bluebell in multiple incarnations, each animal inundating the nation's cornflakes to the tune of something like fifteen pints a day. Highly necessary, she supposed, to make sure the farmers weren't diddling the government by selling their milk on the side. If yields were consistently lower than what they should have been, this aroused suspicions. It was a responsible job and important not to make any mistakes, because the farmers would bounce them right back at you.

It had been a boring job, but there you are. She told one of her carers about it, Margot she thought it was, and she agreed. But she looked it up on her phone – on which she logged every lot of tablets Pauline swallowed – and said milk yield had quadrupled since then. Genetic engineering. Poor cows. It was something nobody thought about in those days. Probably gone on for centuries. Another Daisy and Buttercup and Bluebell. On and on and on. The cattle were lowing.

Margot had something to do with farms, she thought, but was more interested in talking about her daughter – a real bookworm, and a horse rider. Unlike Margo. Margo liked nothing better than to get into a nice hot bath with her battered copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Reading

for her was an immersive experience. Pauline told her she couldn't concentrate on books any longer. She read a page, turned over, and lost her place immediately. Margo joked that with the kind of books she read that didn't matter.

Margot completed the rolling record of her visit on her phone outside in her hatchback and called up a fresh blank field for the next of her three remaining twenty-minute slots. Bill emerged from the bedroom once he was sure she was gone, cautiously peeping around the corner on his walking frame.

"You're a cowardly man," Pauline greeted him. "I know what you're trying to do to me, DON'T worry, I know alright. I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING." She glared at him with the sense of triumphant certainty she had always enjoyed about his motives.

He lurched towards her, grinned at her savagely.

"Stop that! Stop that!!" She reached for a fresh cigarette. After all these years she was still burning money like water.

Her husband fell back into his own chair, pulled a strange, mad face, and clamped his right hand over his eyes like a small child blotting out the world. But he knew enough still to know that the world could not so easily be blotted.

Not so long ago things had been livelier. He'd been sitting next to the radio, angrily chewing a sandwich as he listened. Pikeys were everywhere. He knew that alright. He'd even had few of them round to chop down the branches of an overhanging tree, not realizing until it was too late that they were Irish travellers from around the corner. He was also convinced the Indian workers in the new restaurant on the parade were slave labour, and to his delight a dawn police raid netted some of them, actual illegal immigrants, living in another house on the Highfield estate.

He'd puttered about in the garage, not just idly puttering, but purposefully working on his bikes, and as usual, slowly, surely getting somewhere, moving from one to another, bringing them to states of near completion. He'd bought himself a new ramp to jack them up to a comfortable height, set up his little compressor and his spraying equipment. Sifting through boxes, cleaning off corroded old parts from the forties and fifties in petrol baths, searching for carburettors at autojumbles in Taunton and Exmouth, and three boxes of bits from his second cousin's stash of bit-boxes stuffed with encrusted dark jewelled residues of other machines. Three Ariels had begun to materialize,

taking shape with newly chromed details and downpipes, new rims, re-laced wheels.

Puttering along until all the puttering was done, well aware it soon would be, but the last days had seemed to go on so long; perhaps he'd been lulled by them, unprepared for the hammer blow of Pauline's, and his own, final, definitive crash landings. Bill didn't miss the garage. He hadn't been out there in months and months, or it was years? He didn't know or care.

Pauline heard a quiet tap-tapping at the door. It was Jessie from next door, the adjacent bungalow. Bill was locked into some inner muttered dialogue, he was cowering behind his frame in terror. He hadn't heard the knocking. Pauline lurched to her feet and shambled out to open up to her. "Bill! Bill!" she shouted in passing. Jessie was a small Malaysian woman in her thirties. She stood below the step, smiling with a miniature basket in her hands. "Hello Pauline," she said. "I've brought you a present."

"Ooh, lovely. Come in then." Pauline stood back, started trembling from head to foot in confusion, overwhelmed by emotion as Jessie stepped in for a moment and tried to give her the basket of small foil-covered Easter eggs nestling in green paper. "You are good to me, you are a lovely girl." Pauline put her arm up and tried to hug her. Thank you, thank you very much."

Jessie followed her through to the living room, where Bill had managed to pull himself together for a moment. "Are you alright, Bill?" she asked.

"We can't complain," he said.

"Bill, look what Jessie has brought us," Pauline said. "For Easter." She looked around vaguely as if expecting to find or see something she could give in return. She showed the basket to Bill.

"Lovely Jessie." Bill peered down at the small eggs, some blue, some wrapped in silver and gold foil, and saw the trouble she had taken. "Did you make these yourself?"

"I always do, Bill," Jessie laughed.

Jessie was a hesitant and briefly alighting visitor. She was not the type to impose herself or to pry. She soon left, backed out chattering and smiling amiably. Mission accomplished. A believing Christian, she thought that the efficacy of her visits was contained in the nature of gifts themselves, the sacred gifts she had borne, which would go

on working their goodness after she had left. They were symbols of Jesus's redeeming love; therefore they were real. Job done, she trotted cheerfully back to her husband. Giving healed her.

"Isn't she a lovely person?" Pauline said. She dropped the basket on the footstool, herself back onto the brown leather sofa where she lit up another Superking Blue.

"Good as gold," said Bill. His head once again descended into the cradling cage of his hands.

"What did you say?" Pauline shouted. "I can't hear you when you mutter and moan like that."

"Good as gold. I said she's as good as gold. Jessie is."

Pauline grunted. He would soon wake up again and get all busy when it was time for them to have their soup and to give Pauline her insulin injection, before the next carer came in at six o'clock.

Bill gave her her injection and the district nurse came and went; Pauline sat on the settee in her usual place. They watched some things that happened to be on, the usual ones, and each night he remembered to pull the curtain across the front window, which offered a panorama of the whole empty street. Louis Way. Shadows passed over their faces, the big bright shadows from the wide flat screen, and despite the kitchen light throwing a patch across them, there they were; two small, shriven beings being bathed in all-blotting bright shadows, occluded, hidden from each other. This was their last pleasure, their rest, as after nightly agonies they finally succumbed to sleep.

Pauline found herself in Bushey Park looking up at the Diana. It had been covered over completely in the war, shrouded in nettings and camouflage because it was too easy to spot from the air, a glowing blob of a white marble fountain surrounded by a low circular pool to act as a reflector said come and get me, this way London to attacking German aircraft. It was as if one of the most beautiful things in the world had been re-revealed to her. Diana herself stood atop the high rectangular fountain, the filament of the bulb, an imposing blackened figure with green shoulders, a little like Queen Victoria. As a child, she had thought it was Victoria, but then she had been told she was not really Diana the goddess of the moon but another wicked woman who had drowned all her children in the lake, which was a lake of tears.

The cherubic boys with instruments cavorted around at a lower level, grasping fishes with gaping mouths and young girls with uncovered

breasts were perhaps her daughters. She remembered it had been lovely once with all the crisscrossing water jets spouting – she could not remember where they had all been spouting from – Diana and her pissing sons – but they weren't spouting today.

The American base was tucked away, big when you found it. Or perhaps she had hopped off the bus that ran through the park, she remembered, and walked through the sparse silver birch woods where groups of deer scarcely stirred at her tread, suckling, scraping themselves, moulting, steadily staring towards her with melting eyes to show off their great mossy antlers, rutting in season. Three were still a lot of vegetables planted back there, she remembered, seedling trees planted out, and flowers being brought on. Inside the base was a different story. A parade ground where they all marched up and down to comical music, wearing ridiculous chrome helmets. They took it all seriously, but they were just like a load of kids playing soldiers.

She'd worked in the *Stars and Stripes* office, the English headquarters of a worldwide US Army glossy magazine. She was a shorthand typist – she knew Pitman's, she had to learn American spelling, and they'd treated her well. But she did remember looking out of the office window at the parade ground, and them all marching by with their silly chrome hats shining in the sunshine. There had been coloured soldiers on the base, she did remember, but they weren't allowed to mix and had to be kept separate, have their lunch at different times and live on their own. They'd said to the girls who thought it wrong that they didn't understand, and when one of the English girls went out with a coloured soldier they got rid of her.

She only had one photo of herself on the base, so thin, from when she had meningitis and had to leave. They thought she was going to die, people did die of it. In the photo, she was like a stick, but she liked to remember it, how she was smiling out of her skull with lipstick on, and other people in the office she could no longer put a name to were there beside her, supporting her, loving her. They were very caring people, the Americans. At first, she had thought it was fake, but then she realized they were sincere, they really did care about people and what they thought of them. Except some of them really hated one another in the office. They used to tell her all their secrets, about what a bastard this or that one was, and they were always trying to do one another down. They were nice to her. But they had some funny ideas.

"And what do you think, Pauline? What's your opinion?" they would ask her about this and that going on in the world, as though what she thought mattered to anyone, as if she had an opinion. What did she know? She was only a young girl who didn't know anything.

Bill always made a lot of his memories, as if they were possessions he could put on display, events which had made him who he was, but now they didn't seem to matter so much, and he was baffled as to how he 'd thought the things he'd spent his life on were anything. They seemed like nothing. And yet, at moments of recovery, there was nothing to do but remember, nothing to return to but those things which had defined him, made him get up in the morning and carry on.

Del Withers was the first of the Molesey mob to rub out, lung cancer. Bill was choked. He couldn't believe there was no more Del. They hadn't been close for years, but he'd still lived around the corner with his wife (who wore a bright red wig), their two kids, Steve and Candy. Bill had sometimes popped in there for a cup of tea. Charlie disappeared somewhere off the map, he was the son of a builder's merchant, an heir, but he drank all the money, ended up going inside for something. Derek Bowers turned out to be shifty – he stole a box of lead soldiers what Charlie had bought for the boy. Brum went back to Brum, and that was that, apart from the time they all rode up there to see him. And Ray, his brother, he taught him to ride a bike. Holding the saddle, watching his little brother wobble away like yesterday.

There were stories never told again, stories of friendships that had broken and never mended … put aside, forgotten. I was glad to see the back of him … he did that because he could do it, he knew he could get away with it … smiling about the dog, as if he'd accomplished something … sided with the others at the end of the day … never stuck up for me as I did for him … she was strange, too friendly … I didn't really like her, did you? No, I didn't like him either. Amongst them were many stories he'd simply told too often. Dice-ups with the Kingston law along the Fairmile, who'd had the new Triumph 110s, didn't matter who it was, Pete, Ray, Charlie, on Bonneville, Ariel, Vincent – but his Black Shadow had left them well back. The law nodded admiringly. "Catch you next-time, lads."

Jessie listened to them, shouting, and fighting, day after day, through the shared wall. Joe would be watching television, or sitting at his

computer working or sticking together one of his model aeroplanes at the dining room table. She would be lying on the bed, reading her bible. She heard them. And she heard them every night in the middle of the night when they were quarrelling, Pauline was telling Bill he was a monster, and Bill would be telling her to get back into bed. Sometimes she heard one of them falling over, groaning. And she heard a high keening, moaning sound, which she had at first thought was Pauline, and then she had realized it was Bill.

She felt so sorry for them. She wanted to help. She knocked on the door, but they took so long to answer. She persisted, but finally she realized they no longer wanted to see her. It was when Bill had told everyone who knocked that he and Pauline didn't want them to come. They were doing fine on their own and just couldn't cope with visitors. They didn't want anyone to see them the way they were. Bill felt ashamed, ashamed to be saying this, but he felt he had no choice. Somehow, he had to stop everyone from coming to the house. It was the same with the carers, but eventually he had been forced to get used to their visits three times a day.

"They break the china – they leave the pieces on the draining board. Now they've broken the drawer in the bedroom by putting too many clothes in it."

"Don't worry about it, mum," Mikey said. "I'll have a look at it."

"Don't worry! Don't worry, he says!" She tottered angrily, nearly tripping on a clothes hanger, steadying herself on the edge of the stuffed washing basket. "Your father's had a look at it. What good is a look?"

The top drawer had been wrenched off its runners by the carers, stuffing too many socks and knickers into it. Of course, they'd tried to jam it back in. Mikey took it out and emptied it, saw that in fact the left runner had come off completely and was now mysteriously lying in the drawer, minus any of the screws that had formerly held it in place. He found a screwdriver in a kitchen drawer, a few screws in a jar at the back of Bill's garage. A brief glance around reminded him of the man his father had been until lately. Mikey went indoors, carefully refitted it – the drawer ran in and out smoothly now, and he replaced the bits and pieces of worn under clothing. Amongst them was a brown velvet bow-tie with broken elastic which he remembered his brother had used to wear as a teenager.

"Don't leave me here with him," his mother said. "Your father – he's completely lost it. You're not going to leave me in here with him, are you?"

"No," he said.

He pulled the drawer in and out a few times, admiring the smoothness of its run, then putting the screwdriver and a few remaining screws back in the kitchen drawer. But he did leave her. Every day. He hung up the phone on her. And he had been the one to take her out for a drive, and she was so grateful to get away from Bill for a couple of hours. So Pathetically grateful.

Looking past the stained, wrinkled rug out into the garden, Mikey surveyed its half-submerged pig, its papery dead plants, its carpet of dead leaves covering a deeper layer of black leaf residue, a rotting decorative wheelbarrow, toppled flower pots, and an empty cottage birdfeeder swaying like the leaning tower of Pisa. Behind the back fence some of the trees had been chopped down, and through the bare branches of those that remained, the criss-cross dark red roof tiles and gable ends of further, newer bungalows were shouldering for attention. They didn't get it from Pauline or Bill anymore, not very often.

Margot had forgotten to empty the clothes drier, a note from one of the other carers reminded her to do it please. Hung on its wire from the curtain rail, a smiling tin sun, punched and twisted out of a single sheet, continued to revolve in the breeze, winking in and out as light passed through it from outside. The short, steeply sloping rail leading down the steps from the conservatory was no longer enough to steady anyone who'd wanted to go down there, which they no longer did.

Another of their carers, Beth, often brought her dog around, a big Irish setter. Pauline loved the dog, but Beth's boss said she wasn't to take the dog in to see the clients in case it jumped up and knocked someone over, which it sometimes did. It was an old dog, anyway didn't have any teeth left. Beth kept bringing her around. She brought the dog in to see Bill when Pauline was in the hospital.

Pauline talked to them a lot, about her jobs, like managing a string of clothes shops, Antoinette, and how she drove around from branch to branch to sort out the women's problems. Her boss used to phone her at night to ask her for her marital advice. Things were never running smoothly with Monique. He idolized her, behaved like a little boy, threatened to throw himself off Marlow bridge when they had an argument. Listening to his problems was part of the job, but overall he treated her well. She'd started as a part-timer, had an eye for what older women wanted, what suited them, and soon she was a buyer for him,

going up to Oxford Street to see fashion shows. Once she was attacked by a slasher on the escalator, not realizing until she felt the breeze that the back of her dress had been hacked to ribbons with a razor blade.

At Alderton's she was a wages clerk, she worked on a computer and did double-entry bookkeeping, and all the men came and tried to quarrel with her about their overtime, but she never made a single mistake. They loved her there, the bosses who'd built up the small printing firm, and the other women who worked in the office often looked to her for support, and the complaining printers asked her advice about their girlfriends.

Jessie's boss at the airfield was a young woman. The units in the industrial park next to the airfield had been designed and reserved by the county council at reasonable rents for start-up businesses, especially those run by young people and women. She wasn't too bad of a boss. The job didn't pay very well, but that didn't matter very much with Joe's wages from Exeter University. She liked working with the other women. They'd quickly become friends. Assembly work was boring for some people but Jessie liked it and had come to see it as a form of meditation.

Every weekday she left their bungalow at 7 o'clock and strode down to the airfield with her knapsack on her back, down into the dip and up again on the other side, rounding the corner at the Royal Oak – now a pricy gated housing development – onwards to the airfield, scarcely feeling the effort in her short, powerful legs. She burst into the assembly shed, full of life and energy, and everyone was always pleased to see her, which is how she thought it should be? Why wouldn't they be pleased to see her? God lightened her steps through this world. Her strength was that of an army on the march. She liked that idea although not really armies as such.

Pauline went first. Just turned that corner one day from her usual outbursts and sullen recriminations, into an ever-replenishing volcano, a magma of molten hatred splashing over them; Bill especially. It never cooled off, not even with a fresh packet of fags. But was it just tobacco withdrawal as he always thought and said? Those bloody fags? It wasn't of course, but he had no other explanation, nothing else to pin it on. She was demented alright; then again, she always had been. And there it was in the letter from the hospital to the doctor. Written plain. Dementia. Alongside cancer. Far too plain. Did they really know? That

last after she'd coughed up a bucket of blood. Two or three Christmases ago and yet she was still here, she still had them – or him – in her grip.

But there were still those times when she broke and sobbed and said she was so sorry. "I've lived too long," she said.

"We both have, Pauline."

And then one day he had been working on one of the bikes on his new ramp. He passed clean out and smacked the back of his head on one of its sharp edges, and lay there unconscious, his life's blood spreading in a red tide across the floor. Pauline had run out in her flapping nightdress, calling his name. She'd known something was wrong. She'd known somehow. Stood there shouting down at him to wake up, ran out into the road shouting, and someone had been passing by, and had come and called an ambulance, which came and took him away to the hospital in Exeter.

That day she had actually saved his life one last time. Things like that happen, quite regularly – something cuts through everything, a shaft of light, and makes the rest of life seem like play-acting – but there's no explanation, no accounting, and so it's not remembered except by those who were involved, if even them. Two days later Bill was sitting up in bed in Exeter and demanding to be let home, and Mikey was taking her over there twice a day with fresh pyjamas and all the rest of it. In a few days he'd been home again, but he no longer had any interest in finishing the bikes, even though they were nearly done, not the resuscitated North African desert thumper, nor the two red Ariel Hunters.

Some things actually were unforgettable, just as Nat Cole had sung in what had once been one of Pauline's favourite songs. Even if they were forgotten. Some things actually were incredible, *Beautiful Dreamer*. She remembered her brother John whistling that to her mother as he arrived home on leave from the air force, a weekend's respite from the missions over Germany in his Lancaster bomber. Flight engineer out of Lincoln He had sat next to the pilot, ready to take over. She still had his letters to her mother in the wardrobe, faint blue handwriting that had barely touched the surface of the air ministry forms on which they were written by a boy on his bunk in 1943.

Compelled to hoover up the last of the ghost dust, Pauline puffed and coughed, coughed and puffed her way through yet another packet of king-size cigarettes. A framed photograph of a middle-aged looking nineteen-year-old boy hung on the wall just above her head. Smiling in his RAF uniform, a cap on the side of his head, he was surmounted by

a spray of red paper poppies. Reframed across from grandfather Leslie, her father, a tall survivor who had graduated from railway clerk to army lecturer on how tanks had stood up to battle. Drove his eldest daughter away, and his sons. Burned her mother's clothes, buried her things in the garden.

Mad about flying, John always had his nose pressed against the fence of the local airfield. Flight Engineer on a Lancaster bomber. He sat next to the pilot. Johnnie to them. Johnnie head-in-air in that wartime poem. Bill and she had driven up to the airfield in Lincoln where he'd been stationed. They talked to a few old soaks in the pub. John didn't drink, which was unusual with that lot, they pretended to remember. John to her. John and Joan, her runaway sister, who during the war had been an ack-ack gunner in Hampton before she was sent off with the women's land army, cut herself off from the family after the war, ran off with an Arab, then a married man, a disgrace to her father and mother.

Her brother looked old in the photograph, as though every sortie over Germany had burned off a year of his life. But he hadn't really looked old, just like her big brother. John never lived to become an estate agent or a draughtsman, like her other brothers, swap his Brough Superior for a Standard Eight like Bill's first car. "No," Bill said from behind his walking frame, "it was that little Hillman, remember?" Behind his wall frame, John would always be proudly smiling, sacrificed.

"No," she spat. "My brother served his country, not like your family. He was a brave man, not a filthy coward like your horrible family." From cigarette cards – bang – straight up into the blue order books, named in the exhibition of great marble refrigerators at Runnymede. At Lincoln too. Sometimes she had used to get his letters out and just look at them, letters to their mother she had kept all her life.

Faint handwriting specimens traced onto a pale form supplied by the air ministry. Is it normal to be in love like this? he asked their mother. People's feelings were very intense during the war. He'd found a girlfriend. Her parents came around to Hampton when he was shot down. They asked her mother not to write to the girl again. In the letters, he expressed his doubts, misgivings about dropping high explosives on civilians. People like him. The enemy, the Hun, was always some mother's son. They had all been taught that at school, and by their parents. Pauline won a prize for her poem on the subject, and for her recitation of Shakespeare's sonnets with cut-glass vowels, just the way they were supposed to sound.

Back on home leave, he lay on her bed, beautiful dreamer, with a tube of Rolos and a bottle of Tizer she'd bought for him with her sweet ration. Propped on his elbows, looking out of the window at Priory Road, Hampton. He couldn't tell them about what he was doing, or how it really was. They were told not to worry their families unnecessarily. Careless talk cost lives. But he liked being there. Or just sleeping. He'd slept a lot when he was at home. Pauline slept a lot now, slept as much as she could. She needed a hundred pounds from the cashpoint. The Nazis had stolen the black patent shoes she was wearing when she came in. They were living in Windrush.

They'd listened to Nat King Cole and all things like that on gang nights in a hut they did out and met in to dance and mess about. They were songs with a meaning of some sort, a story. She had only owned one or two records, same as Bill, but that was one. Nat King Cole in his trilby, his welcoming smile, a coloured man, a sports jacket over his shoulder. It wasn't that she'd liked him in that way. She'd never seen what they saw in Frank Sinatra. There was someone she never told about who was unforgettable. That was later. Someone who had given her a record of Astrud Gilberto singing *Only Trust Your Heart.*

Jessie and Joe were walking back and forth in front of Pauline and Bill's sitting room window, unloading their jeep. They seemed to have been away somewhere, Pauline wasn't sure where. Suddenly, unexpectedly, the doorbell rang. Spotting Mikey inside, seeing he was there to open it for her, Jessie had grabbed an opportunity to bring them presents. A nice bunch of yellow flowers for Pauline. A Tesco's carrot cake for Bill. She tried to hand them to him, but he stepped back and beckoned her indoors. She dashed into the sitting room in a semi-crouch, almost bowing but insistent after all. Sort of apologetic for intruding, her long black hair swayed from side to side as she waved, blew kisses, handed over her gifts, and exited. Joe paused halfway across the window, a box in his arms, smiling in at his wonderful wife and her amazing behaviour.

The cards carried on tumbling through the letterbox at Christmas, but she could no longer remember exactly who had sent them. After years of dutifully keeping in touch with the women she used to work with at Alderton's – women whom she used to miss so bitterly, who respected her, knew her in a different sense – even their names had fallen away, along with relatives of Bill's and everyone else she'd ever known. Many departed, others indifferently recalled shadows for a

time, then no longer worth a stamp, an act of faith she had performed by rote for years, but no longer did.

But she hadn't forgotten to feel afraid, that was the most terrible thing, her naked fear of dying, and with it her failure to believe she would ever see John again, her father, her sister Joan, who she had traced to Birmingham through the Salvation Army but never seen again, or anyone else she had used to care about.

Windrush – named not after the famous immigrant ship but for the Blackdown winds rushing up the wide-open slope of the field which fell away behind the property and howled around the large wooden bungalow as if it might blow it over one of these nights. Bill sometimes looked back at their days at Windrush.

They'd ended up where he wanted to be. They'd followed his plan and it had come to fruition. Pete would call round, and John Wasley, his cousin, full of advice about how to fireproof the place, his old charm gone. Bill and Pauline were retired, but she was still a fierce, proud woman, who had organized them, chivvied them, always insisting things must be done properly, her way.

Bill remembered when she'd come with him round to Wasley's place. She was disgusted by the half-filled coupons and medicines strewn over the floor, John talking on and on about nothing. The parrot had got out of its cage and was shitting everywhere. The situation was immediately clear. The parrot was quite likely to jump off its perch but would soon settle down in much the same position, its green wings ruffed up huffily around its scraggy neck as if to say, "Fuck off." Precisely as Wasley had taught it, now busy filling in coupons in respect of some fictitious special offer, with mixed results to judge by the opened cartons.

How green was my parrot? It had taken wing again, swooping, hopping, one eye beadily judging from the highest point it had discovered, near the ceiling, on the flex hanging down from a light fitting, defying electrocution. Here the parrot was king. Below it, John was blinking behind his strong bifocals, the large black Zapata moustache still etched where it had been on his long dramatic face. He was a good builder at one time, an expert bloke. Now nothing was going anywhere. His family had left him on his own for Christmas, social services couldn't be contacted. Pauline had tried to tidy up but he wouldn't let her. She gave him a piece of her mind and went out to wait in the car.