

## Anne Marie

MA DA'S A nutter. Radio rental. He'd dae anythin for a laugh so he wid, went doon the shops wi a perra (knickers) on his heid, tellt the wifie next door we'd won the lottery and were flittin tae Barbados, but that wis daft stuff compared tae whit he's went and done noo. He's turnt intae a Buddhist.

At first Ma thought it wis another wanny his jokes.

'Ah'm just gaun doon the Buddhist Centre for a couple hours, Liz, ah'll no be lang.'

'Aw aye, is there free bevvy there?'

'Naw, hen, ah'm serious. Just thought ah'd go and have a wee meditate, try it oot, know?'

Mammy turnt roond fae the washin up, and gied him wanny they looks, wanny they 'whit's he up tae noo?' looks ah'd seen a million times afore.

'Jimmy, d'you think ma heid buttons up the back? Yer a heathen. The last time ye set fit in a chapel wis when yer daddy died. The time afore that was when ah'd tae drag you tae Anne Marie's First Communion. And you're tellin me you're gaun tae a Buddhist Centre on a Tuesday night, quiz night doon the Hielander? Tae meditate? Gie's a break.'

When ma da gets embarrassed he looks like thon skinny wan in the Laurel and Hardy films and starts tae scratch his ear wi his left haund. That's when ah began tae think he could just be tellin the truth.

'OK, ah know it's funny, ah probably should of tellt ye afore, but it's no the first time ah've been there. Know that job we've been daein in toon, thon shop? Well, ah wis gettin a coupla rolls for ma lunch when ah met wanny they Buddhist guys. We got talkin and ah went along wi him tae see the centre. It wis rainin, ah'd nothin better tae dae and ah thought it'd be a laugh, you know, folk in funny claes, chantin and that.'

Ma wis staundin at the sink, soapy bubbles drippin aff her pink rubber gloves.

'And?'

'And it wisnae like that. They were dead nice, dead ordinary, gied me a cuppa tea, showed me the meditation room, and, ach, it wis the atmosphere, hen. Ah cannae explain it, but it wis just dead calm.'

Ah'd never seen ma da lookin like that afore; there wis a kinda faraway look in his eye. Ah kept waitin for him tae come oot wi the punchline but he just stood there for a minute, lookin oot the windae.

'Anyhow, ah know it's daft but ah just want tae gie it a try. They have these classes, embdy can go, so . . .'

'Oh, well, suit yersel. Just watch they don't brainwash you.'

Ma da turnt roond and spotted me, sittin at the table, daein ma homework – ah think he'd forgotten ah wis there. He winked at me.

'Nae chance ae that, is there, wee yin?'

'They'd need tae find a brain.'

At first bein a Buddhist didnae seem tae make that much difference tae ma da. He used tae go doon the pub on a Tuesday and noo he went tae the Buddhist Centre tae meditate. Same difference. He never talked about it, wis still the same auld da, gaun tae his work, cairryin on in the hoose. He stuck a photie of the Buddha up on the unit in their bedroom and noo and again he'd go in there and shut the door instead of watchin the telly – mediatin, he said. Ah thought he'd get fed up wi it. He wisnae a great wan for hobbies ma da, but sometimes he'd decide tae take on whit he cries 'a wee project'. Wanst it wis buildin a gairden shed, anither time it wis strippin an auld sideboard that came fae ma granny's. And of course he'd start it then get fed up and no finish. It drives ma ma roon the bend.

'Jimmy, ah'm sick of lookin at they tools lyin in the hall. Are you no gonnae finish that?'

'Steady on, hen, it's in progress.'

'Whit does that mean?'

'It means ah'm havin a wee break. Ah need tae get some varnish, that ither stuff wis the wrang shade. Ah'll finish it the morra. Nae sweat.'

And two weeks later the tools hadnae moved fae the hall so ma ma takes a flakey and dumps aw his stuff.

Ah thought this Buddhism would be like that. But efter a

few weeks he wis still gaun tae the Centre and he'd startit meditatit in the hoose every night for aboot hauf an hour.

Ah decided tae ask him aboot it:

'Da?'

'Aye, hen.'

'See this meditation, whit is it?'

He pulled a face.

'Ah'm no sure how tae stert. It's difficult tae explain.'

'Aye, but, whit d'you dae?'

'Well you sit doon quiet and you try tae empty yer mind, well no exactly empty, mair quiet it doon so aw the thoughts that go fleein aboot in yer heid kinda slow doon and don't annoy ye.'

'Why?'

'Ah'm no very sure masel, hen.'

'D'you like daein it?'

He smiled. 'Aye, hen, ah dae.'

'Mibbe that's why.'

'Mibbe you're right. That's dead profound. Mibbe you're a Buddhist and you don't know it.'

'Ah don't think ah want tae be a Buddhist, Daddy.'

'How no, hen?'

'If ah went tae meditate wi you ah'd miss *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*.'

It's hard tae remember when ah realised it was gettin serious. Maisty the time things went on as normal. It wis comin up fur the summer and this would be ma last term at primary; ah'd be gaun tae the big school, as ma granny kept cryin it, efter the holidays. So we'd tae visit the new school and prepare fur the school show, and since this'd be oor last yin, Mrs Shields wis pullin oot all the stops. Ma ma wis dead busy too, buyin



the new uniform and that, and ma granny had no been that well, so wi wan thing and anither, ah never really thought that much aboot ma daddy and his Buddhism. He startit gaun tae the Centre mair often, right enough. Thursdays as well as Tuesdays and sometimes even on a Saturday when his team were playin away. Then wan day while we were daein the dishes he reached up high and sumpn fell oot his pocket.

Ah lifted them fae the flair. Beads. Big broon beads strung on a thick rope. Like rosaries but much bigger and no divided up.

Ah held them oot and he pit them back in his pocket.

'Whit are they, Daddy?'

He cairried on placin the dishes carefully on the shelf as he spoke. 'Prayer beads, hen.'

'Rosaries?'

'Kind of. Ah suppose they're the Buddhist version.'

'Ah thought it wis just meditation you done. Ah didnae know you prayed as well.'

'Sort of.'

Ah wis well confused noo. He never came tae the chapel wi us, said he didnae believe in God.

'Who d'you pray tae, Daddy?'

'The only prayin he does is that his horse'll come in at fifty tae wan.' Mammy came intae the kitchen wi her coat on. 'Ah'm just gaun roond tae yer granny's for an hour. See yous later.'

'Aye, right, hen.'

Ah wiped a bowl and haunded it tae ma daddy.

'Who dae you pray tae?'

There was a funny look on his face.

'Look hen, this isnae easy, ah'm no really sure masel whit's happenin, ach . . .'

'It's OK, Da, ah just wondered, that's aw. It's cool.'

He smiled, his auld self again.

'Hey, listen tae you, it's cool, man. Where d'you think ye are – New York?'

Ah flicked the tea towel at him.

'At least ah'm actually doon on the earth, no yogic flyin roond the sky.'

Ah startit tae dae an aeroplane impression roond the room, airms ootstretched, duckin and divin, 'Sheeom, sheeom, sheeom . . .'

Da caught me and tickled me tae the grund.

Mammy and me had just got back fae the Co-op when the lamas arrived at the door. It caused a bitty a sensation, lamas in Maryhill. We've had some Hare Krishnas singin roond the streets wi their wee bells fae time tae time, and ye cannae go doon Byres Road on a Saturday wiout bein stopped by thon wifie in pink robes ootside the library that keeps on tellin you tae be happy, but these were lamas, the genuine Tibetan kind wi maroon robes and shaved heids. Three of them, staundin on the doorstep on a Saturday efternoon and the way the neighbours were lookin at these guys they might as well have been llamas wi humphy backs insteid y lamas. They seemed oblivious tae the commotion; ah suppose they're used tae it, or mibbe meditatn really does make ye laid back. They bowed and the middle wan spoke.

'Hello. Does Jimmy McKenna live here?'

He spoke dead clear but wi an accent ah'd no heard afore.

'Ma da's no in the now.'

The wee guy nodded and stood there smilin.

'He'll no be lang. He's just up the road for a message.'

They never moved.

'We shall wait for him,' said the wee guy.

'Do you want tae come in and wait in the hoose?'

'Thank you.'

They followed me intae the livin room.

'Have a seat,' ah said, pointin tae the couch.

Mammy wis in the kitchen.

'Ma, there's three lamas at the door for ma daddy. Ah've tellt them tae wait in the livin room.'

'Lamas?' She near drapped the plate.

'Aye, lamas, you know, like priests, only Buddhists.'

'You know whit you've been tellt aboot talkin tae strangers.'

'Aye, Ma, but you've always said ah've tae be hospitable, and they're pals of ma da.'

'See thon man . . .' She looked oot the windae fur a minute then turnt back tae me. 'Go and ask them if they want some tea.'

Ah went back tae the livin room where the three of them were sittin cross-legged on the flair wi their eyes shut. The main man opened his eyes and smiled.

'Ma mammy says would you like some tea?'

'You are very kind. Thank you.'

Just then ah heard the door openin.

'In here, Da.'

'Whit is it, hen? Oh . . .'

When he saw the lamas sittin there, his face changed all of a sudden, it wis as if sumbdy'd switched on a light bulb in his heid. Then he got doon on his knees and bowed tae each lama in turn. Ah couldnae make oot exactly whit he wis sayin but it wis sumpn like Sammy Rinpoche, Hammy Rinpoche and Ally Rinpoche. Funny that. Wi names like Sammy, Hammy

and Ally they could play for Scotland. Later ah found oot that Rinpoche means holy wan – it's a bit like callin a priest 'faither'.

'Ah'll just make the tea, Da,' ah said, and slipped oot.

When ah came back they were deep in conversation, and ma daddy hardly noticed ah wis there tae ah planted a tray doon on the table in fronty him.

'Thanks, Anne Marie. Listen, hen, you'll never guess whit. They've found the new lama.'

'Oh.' Ah hadnae a scooby whit he wis on aboot.

'You know, the heid Rinpoche's successor, the wan they'll train up when he moves on.'

'Oh, very good.'

'In Carmunnock.'

'Carmunnock, Jimmy?'

Ma ma had appeared at the door, where she stood wi her airms foldit, and that voice, where she sounds like she's been tae elocution lessons, rang through the room. She disnae dae it very often but usually it has a magical effect on ma da. But the day he never even noticed the sarcasm.

'Aye, hen, isn't it amazin?'

'Amazin! It's flamin incredible.'

Ma da kept gaun. 'They want me tae go wi them tae talk tae the faimly and help them break the news. Explain aboot the trainin programme and that, how they'll take him away when he's a wee bit aulder, teach him aw the chantin an prayers and that. Thought it might come better fae a Glaswegian, you know.'

'Jimmy, you really are wired tae the moon.'

Daddy just stood there, starin at her.

'Look, ah've got nothin against you meditatin, and the lamas seem like very nice people.'

She smiled at the three wee guys, who smiled back. Then she turnt tae ma da and she wisnae smilin.

'But if you think that ah'm gonnae sit by and watch you make a complete laughin stock of yersel in fronty strangers, you've got another think comin.'

'But, hen.'

'Jimmy, get a grip, for godsake. Whit on earth are these folk gonnae think when you turn up and tell them their wean's the new Dalai Lama? The best you can hope fur is that they call the polis, the worst is that you'll get yer heid kicked in.'

'You don't unnerstaund . . . it's no the Dalai Lama, it's the lineage of . . .'

'Ah unnerstaund wan thing right enough, Jimmy – you're no gaun wi them tae Carmunnock.'

'But, hen . . .'

She marched oot the room.

Five seconds later she opened the door, grabbed me and dragged me intae the lobby.

'Anne Marie, you go wi him.'

'Whit?'

'Don't let him oot yer sight.'

'Do you think he's gonnae go tae Carmunnock?'

'Of course he's gonnae go – when did he ever show any sense in his life?'

'Could you no go wi him?'

'Don't be daft – how can ah efter whit ah just said? But ah don't want him heidin aff by hissel wi they lamas. He'll get murdert.'

So the next thing there ah wis in the back of the van sittin on a pile of auld blankets wi Hammy and Ally, cross-legged wi their prayer beads clickin away like knittin needles. Every



time the van turnt a corner or hit a bump on the road the three of us shoogled thegither and they bowed in apology then giggled. Sammy sat in the front tryin tae navigate wi a streetmap of Glesga.

You'd think by the number of roads that lead tae it, Carmunnock wis the Mecca of the west a Scotland. You can get there fae Castlemilk, Cathkin, Clarkston or Croftfoot. Or you can dae whit ma da done and drive roond and roond the Carmunnock bypass missin every turn.

'Ya bastard! Oh, sorry, Rinpoche.'

'OK, Jimmy. What about this – could this be it?'

'Aw naw, Clarkston again. Whit is it wi these soothsiders, every bloody place has got tae stert wi a C – sorry, Rinpoche.'

Between his map-readin and ma da's drivin it wis a miracle we got there, but then ah suppose if you're a lama a miracle isnae oot the ordinary. Though, frankly, ah don't think it was worth the effort. After aw they roads, signposts, and a bypass that took us an hour tae get roond, at the endy it, Carmunnock's this funny wee place wi about four streets. The hoose we were lookin for was in a cul-de-sac. It wis a hoose, no a flat, nothin very special aboot it, except that they had they net curtains, know the kind that cross ower and tie back? And they were pink, bright pink. Ah don't know why but somehow that made me feel better. Would folk that put up bright pink net curtains be the sort that would beat ma da tae a pulp?

'Right, Rinpoche, this is it. Anne Marie, you stay in the van.'

'Da, ah'm comin with yous. Ma ma said . . .'

'Look, hen, it's for your ain safety. Just in the unlikely event of there bein any bother.'

'I think she should come, Jimmy,' said Sammy. 'If the parents see that you are also a father, they will be more likely to listen to you.'

Ma da nodded. 'Aye, see whit you mean, Lama. But just keep yer mooth shut, wee yin.'

'Aye, Da.'

A wumman opened the door.

'We're here tae see the baby,' says ma da.

'Oh, aye, come on in. She's sleepin the noo. Ah'm Sharon's mammy, she's just gone oot tae the shops, she'll be back soon. Sorry, son, ah don't think ah know you, you're . . . ?'

'Jimmy McKenna.'

She set aff doon the lobby wi us followin on behind. She paid nae heed tae the lamas, just kept chunterin on.

'You'll be a pal of Tommy's, then? Ah'm lossin track of who everybody is. This place has been like Central Station all week, ah cannae believe the number of folk that have been tae see this wean. Ah'd forgotten whit it wis like when the first wan's born. Aw the lassies fae Sharon's work came roon yesterday – therteen of them there wis, you should of seen the presents they brung. That wean'll get spoilt rotten. At least tae the next wan comes along. Sharon'll no know whit's hit her then. She thinks this is hard work. Wait tae she's had four or five – her man'll no even bother tae visit her.'

She opened the door of the livin room and we trooped in. In the middle of the flair wis a Moses basket, draped in pink frilly covers.

'Whit did they cry the wean?' says ma da.

'Olivia,' says the wifie.

'Olivia. At's nice.'

'Aye, it's a nice enough name but ah don't know how

they couldnae have cried her efter sumbdy in the faimly. Still, young yins nooadays, dae things their ain way.'

'How auld?'

'Wan week the day.'

We all stared at the baby, well no at her exactly since you could only see a glimpse of skin between the frilly stuff and a wee white hat. Ah wondered when ma da was gonnae start his speil aboot the wean bein the new lama. He shuffled fae wan foot tae the ither, lookin at the lamas, who stood smilin at the wean in the cradle.

Then she opened her eyes and looked at us. Ah've never seen a newborn baby afore and ah thought they couldnae focus, yet this wee yin looked straight at us as if she knew everythin, could see right through you.

'Bright as a wee button, in't she?' says the granny.

'That wean has been here afore,' ma da says solemnly.

At this, the wee lama pipes up. 'Yes, he is the reincarnation of the twenty-ninth lama of the lineage of the Gyatso Luckche dynasty.'

The wifie nods at him. 'Whit's he on?'

'It's a bit complicated. You see, they're lamas, fae Tibet. And wee Olivia, has been picked by them tae . . . well, she's very special.'

'You can say that again,' says the granny. 'She's a beautiful wean, right enough, good as gold. Never cries.'

'His nature is like the bright sun. One of the signs,' says Ally.

'But whit is it she's been picked for? Sharon wis gonnae enter her for that *Evenin Times* Beautiful Baby competition, but ah don't think the closin date's tae next week.'

'Well, no, it's no exactly a beauty competition. It's mair . . . spiritual beauty.'

'Spiritual beauty?' The wife looked at the lamas, her eyes narrowin a bit.

'His spirit is clear like running water,' says Hammy, and the others nodded.

'Haud on a minute. Whit's gaun on here? Who are these guys?'

'They're lamas, holy men.'

'Are yous anythin tae dae wi the Mormons?'

'Perhaps, Jimmy, you could explain the lineage of this beautiful boy whose eyes are like stars which will light the world.'

Ah wis beginnin tae get fed up wi this stuff.

'Perhaps, Da, you could explain tae the lamas that a wean in a cot wi pink frilly covers isnae a boy.'

'Not a boy?'

'Naw, Rinpoche, it's a wee lassie, Olivia . . . ah thought you . . . surely it disnae make any difference?'

Ally shook his heid. 'I'm very sorry, Jimmy, but the baby we are looking for is a boy.' He turned tae the wife and bowed. 'We are very sorry but this baby is not the one. Please accept our blessing.' He took his prayer beads and waved them above the wean's heid, mutterin some stuff ah couldnae unnerstaund, then the lamas turnt roond and heided towards the door. At this point Olivia decided she'd had enough and let oot a roar.

'Haud on, whit d'yous think you're daein? You've made the wean greet, wavin they rosary beads in her face.'

She turnt tae ma da. 'And as for you, ah don't know whit the hell you're up tae but it's no funny. Tommy'll kill you if he funds oot - he's a good Protestant, so he is.'

'Let's get ooty here, Da.' Ah startit tae push him up the lobby. 'Sorry, Missus, he didnae mean any herm.'

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Ma da wis awfy quiet on the way back in the van. Ah thought the lamas would be dead disappointed that the wean wisnae the new lama but they never seemed that bothered, went on wi their prayin as though nothin had happened. Ah wis startin tae unnerstaund how ma da had been that taken wi the lamas; there wis sumpn about them, they were that cheery and smiley that you couldnae help likin them. But wan thing bothered me.

'Rinpoche, can ah ask you sumpn?'

Sammy paused in his prayin and turnt roond fae the fronty the van. 'Of course.'

'Know how thon wean wisnae the new lama — is that because yous had been tellt it definitely wis a boy this time, or does it have tae be a boy?'

'The lama is always male.'

'Is that no a bit sexist?'

'Shoosh, hen,' says ma da. 'It's different for them.'

'How's it different?'

'You don't unnerstaund.'

'How am ah gonnae unnerstaund if ah don't ask?' Ah turnt back tae Sammy. 'Ah mean, yous went harin aff lookin for him in Carmunnock. Yous were dead certain aboot it, but the minute yous fund oot the wean's a lassie you're oot the door. Suppose Olivia is the new lama?'

'Only a male child can be the successor to the lineage. It is our tradition.'

'That's no a reason. That's whit they said aboot no lettin lassies on the fitba team at school but when Alison's ma wrote tae sumbdy on the cooncil they had tae let us play. And ah'll tell you sumpn, the team wins a sight mair often since there's lassies on it.'

'Look hen, this is no the same thing. Just leave it the noo, eh?'



'But, Da . . .'

'Anne Marie, ah said leave it.'

Ah wanted tae go on but ma daddy sounded mair weary than anythin so ah shut up. Anyway, there wisnae much point in arguin wi the lamas, they just kept smilin and clickin away at their prayer beads.

But ah couldnae let it go in ma heid. Ah knew it wisnae right and ah think in his hert ma daddy knew as well and that was how he wis quiet. Thon time wi the fitba team, ma da wis right behind us. He wis the wan that taught me tae play in the first place. Ah decided tae talk tae him on his ain, later.

## Liz

THE GARDEN OF the cottage was a real suntrap. Never a breath of wind and a bench sat right where it caught the sun all day. We've been comin here the first week of July for years and always been dead lucky with the weather. Jimmy, Anne Marie and me always went abroad as well but Mammy doesnae like flyin and it's a chance for her tae get a break.

Ah watched her carry the tray doon the stairs, concentratin on every step; there was a slight blur round her haund – wasnae sure if it was the sun playin tricks or if they really were shakin. Mammy's only sixty-three and up till a few month ago was as fit as a flea, but she had a wee turn just in April there, and she's no been hersel since.

She sat doon beside me on the bench and put the tray on the white plastic table.

'This heat would melt ye.'

'Well, it's gonnae melt they chocolate biscuits in two seconds flat.' Ah nodded at the plate piled high wi Jaffa Cakes. 'How many are you plannin tae eat?'

'Ach, ah was thinkin Jimmy and Anne Marie would be here.'

'They're still at the beach.'

Ah lifted the plate and took it inside tae the cool of the kitchen. The chocolate was startin tae melt already. Ah left three of the biscuits on the plate and put the rest in the biscuit tin. When ah went back ootside Mammy was flickin through a magazine.

'Would you look at the price of that jumper?' She pointed tae a multicoloured crocheted thing hingin aff the model's shoulder. 'Four hundred and eighty-five pound – and she's layin about on a beach gettin it covered wi sand.'

'Looks like wanny they cushion covers Auntie Betty used tae crochet. Pity she's no still around – ah could of got her tae make me wan – be dead trendy on the beach.' Auntie Betty was Mammy's aulder sister – she'd passed away three year ago.

'Aye, Betty was lovely at crocheting.'

'Aye, Ma, pity she was colour-blind.'

Auntie Betty used tae make squares in hideous mismatched colours then sew them thegither intae cushion covers and blankets. Mammy's hoose was full of them.

'Aye, well, whoever crocheted thon jumper must of been colour-blind too – and look at the money they're gettin for it.'

'Suppose so. But it's the designer that gets the money – the poor sods that make them probably get paid buttons.'

Mammy put the magazine on the bench and lifted the

mug of tea tae her lips. Ah took a sip of mines but it was too hot for tea; ah felt as if it was stickin tae ma tongue. Ah picked up the magazine and turned tae an article aboot mobile phones.

Mammy looked over ma shoulder. 'Thought you'd just bought a new wan?'

'Ah did. But ah'm thinkin of gettin wan for Anne Marie. It's only four weeks tae her birthday.'

'A phone? At twelve?'

'Ah know. At first when she asked me ah said no. But then ah thought it was actually a good idea. She'll be at secondary next year – and if she's got a phone at least ah'll know she's safe.'

'Whit does Jimmy think?'

'He thinks it's daft but you know Jimmy – whatever Anne Marie wants she gets in the end.'

'Aye, lassies can aye wind their daddies round their little fingers.'

'And to be fair, Anne Marie doesnae really ask for much, no when you hear aboot some of them.'

'Naw, she's a good lassie.'

'These pay as you go wans are dead cheap and you cannae run up bills on them. But don't say anythin to her.'

'Ah'll no. It's hard tae believe she's twelve this year. It's amazin how the time flies.'

'You're tellin me.'

Ah left Mammy at the hoose and went doon tae the beach. Jimmy had built an enormous sandcastle, wi turrets and a moat, and Anne Marie was decoratin it wi shells.

'Yous've been busy.'

Ah started tae pick up shells, toty pale pink and lilac conches buried in the sand. 'Here. How about these?'

'Thanks, Mammy. Ah'll put them round the turrets.'

'When you've finished we'd better get up the road – remember we're gaun oot for wer dinner the night.'

'Plenty of time.' Jimmy pulled aff his tee shirt. 'C'mon, who's fur a swim?'

'Ah've no got ma swimsuit on.'

'So whit? Race yous.'

He ran across the beach, Anne Marie and me followin, mair slowly; it's too hard tae run on sand, the wee bits of shell and seaweed jag intae yer feet if you don't take the time tae pick yer way between them. Ah stood at the edge of the water, dippin ma toes in the ripples, then Jimmy started tae splash me and ah splashed him back and the next thing ah knew ah was soaked tae the skin. Ah moved further intae the water; it was freezin and ma shorts and tee shirt felt heavy and clingin round me but the sun was burnin ma heid and ah could hear the seagulls cryin. The sand sloped away suddenly and ah stood waist high in water. Jimmy grabbed me, liftin me high oot the water then doon and ah caught ma breath for a minute and shut ma eyes, feelin the cauld water and the heat aff the sun and the nearness of him all at once. He jumped me again, pushin me high in the air then lettin me doon again, and the two of us stood there, just lookin at each other. Him silhouetted against the sun, his face dark and his hair glintin bright and he was laughin.

Ah peeled aff ma wet claes, chucked them intae the washin basket and jumped under the shower. It was roastin and ah turned the dial round tae make it even hotter, staundin there wi ma eyes shut, feelin the heat surround me. Ah could hear



music – must be in the next room but it was muffled as if it was far away and ah could just make it oot. ‘Material Girl’. Anne Marie was obsessed wi Madonna.

Ah dried masel, wrapped ma dressin gown round me and opened the bathroom cabinet. A box of Tampax fell oot and skited across the flair. Ah picked it up and stuck it back on the shelf. Ma period had finished two days ago and ah’d need tae remember tae start takin ma pills again the night. Ah sat doon on the toilet seat and opened a bottle of body lotion, smoothed it over ma legs.

‘One fish pie, one lemon sole, one fish tea and one scampi and chips. That it?’

‘Aye, thanks.’

The waitress was a young lassie about seventeen, fair hair tied back in a pony tail. She looked at us, nodded, then heided aff intae the kitchen.

‘It’s warm in here, isn’t it?’

‘Aye, you could mibbe take your cardi aff, Gran.’

‘Ah’m fine.’

It was mobbed as usual. The restaurant was at the back of the pub and there were always folk waitin in the bar for a table.

The lassie came back wi our drinks.

‘Do you want the tea now or will you wait till after your meal?’ she asked Mammy.

‘Ah’ll have it the noo, hen.’

Anne Marie footered aboot wi her straw. ‘Ah’m starvin.’

‘The food’ll be here soon. They’re always dead quick in here.’

At the next table there was a faimly wi a couple of weans. Wan looked aboot six and was colourin in a picture, his face

intent on whit he was daein. The other was in a high-chair, eatin chips, coverin hissel and everythin round him in tomato sauce. He seen me lookin at him and gied a big grin.

'You forget what it's like at that stage, don't you?' ah said.

'Whit stage?' Jimmy looked round. 'Oh, aye.' He dug Anne Marie in the ribs. 'Ah mind when mair of your dinner ended up on ye than in ye, hen.'

Anne Marie made a face. 'Aye well at least ah don't dae it noo – you should see yersel eatin tomato soup.'

We got back fae the meal in time for Mammy tae watch *EastEnders* – ah think the world would end if she missed it. While she sat clocked in fronty the box, me and Anne Marie went on wi the jigsaw puzzle. Wannay they holiday traditions – ah'd nae mair think of daein a jigsaw at hame than fly in the air, but every year afore we came here, ah went tae Woolies and bought wan. It was set oot on the table in the livin room and everybody done it; got quite obsessive sometimes – you'd find yersel sittin up skelly-eyed, tryin tae finish it afore you went hame. This year's was a cottage wi a thatched roof and roses round the door. It had a duck pond in front of it and that was hellish – wanst you'd got the ducks the rest of it all looked the same, water like glass.

When the programme finished Mammy switched aff the TV and came and sat at the table. She started pickin oot dark green bits. 'Must be the hedge.'

'Or the grass at the bottom.'

'Too dark. By the way, where's Jimmy?'

'In the bedroom,' ah said.

'Meditatin,' said Anne Marie.

'He done it last night.' Mammy fitted a piece of hedge in, then took it oot again. 'That's no it.'

'He does it every night, Gran.'

'Every night? How?'

'He likes it,' said Anne Marie.

'He's sumpn else.'

'Each to his ain,' ah said.

'Aye, said Anne Marie. 'Some folk like meditatoin, some prefer *EastEnders*.'

The rest of them were in bed but ah was still up, daein that flamin jigsaw puzzle. There was fifteen bits of pond in front of me, all lookin exactly the same. Ah'd stick two of them together, then try them the other way round. Worked either way but then ah couldnae get any of the other pieces tae fit. Ah looked up at the clock. Midnight. Must be gaun daft – what difference did it make if it got finished or no?

Ah sat back in the chair, stretched ma airms above ma heid. Jimmy'd went up an hour ago but ah wasnae sure if he'd be asleep. Ah knew we should talk but ah kept puttin it aff. This meditation stuff. It was all very well me sayin tae Mammy it was just sumpn he done, as if it was like gaun tae the footie, but it wasnae. Ah didnae know why he done it or what it meant tae him. It just wasnae like him tae want tae be on his ain. Usually it was the other way round – me tryin tae get a bit of peace and him the wan that never shut up.

Ah went intae the bathroom, took cleanser oot the cabinet, squeezed it ontae a bit of cotton wool and rubbed it over ma face. Ah lifted the pack of pills and stood lookin at them. And a picture came intae ma mind; the wee boy in the high-chair, smeared wi red, smilin at me and the other wan, quiet, colourin in.

Nearly every month ah done this, looked at the pack, thought aboot talkin tae Jimmy. Mibbe ah shouldnae bother, mibbe ah should just chuck them in the bin and let nature take its chance.

Ah stood there for a minute, lookin at the days printed under each wee bubble on the pack. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. Wednesday. Ah pushed the plastic casin till the pill popped oot, then put it in ma mooth.

## Jimmy

IT WIS DAURK when ah got there and ma heid wis wasted drivin on they wee twisty roads. Ah parked the van and went intae the hoose. It wis a huge buildin, used tae be a hotel or sumpn afore the lamas took it ower. In the hall wis this big skinny guy, blue robes an a shaved heid. Wisnae Tibetan though, sounded dead posh.

'Excuse me,' he says. 'Could you leave your shoes in the porch please?'

'Sure thing, pal,' ah says, feelin a bit stupit when ah turnt round and seen rows a boots and shoes and a big sign: 'Please leave all outer footwear in the porch. Slippers only to be worn inside the house.'

Course ah'd nae slippers so ah hud tae go aboot in ma stockin soles, and did ah no huv a big hole comin in the toe



ae the right yin? Just as well Liz wisnae here – she'd huv been mortified. The big guy stauns waitin while ah take aff ma boots.

'Hope yous've got air freshener in here,' ah says, but he just looks at me.

'My name is Vishanadanashonta.' (Well, it wis sumpn like that. Ah didnae like tae ask him tae repeat it.)

'Jimmy McKenna,' ah says, puttin oot ma haund, but he just bows.

'I think everyone else has arrived. We're about to eat.'

'Thank God. Ah could murder a plate a mince and tatties.'

Ah wis jokin, ah knew the food wis aw vegetarian, but he just looks at me as if ah'm daft.

'Only jokin, Rinpoche.'

'I'm not actually called Rinpoche,' he says. 'I'm a trainee. I haven't taken my final vows.'

'Sorty apprentice, ur ye?'

'You could say that.'

He opens the door on tae the main room. At the far end was a log fire wi cushions and bean bags piled roond, and in the middle were three wooden tables. Aboot thirty folk sittin at them. The caundles on the tables and the firelight made it look kinda welcomin, but ah wis feelin definitely ooty place.

'There's a chair here,' says Vishanawhitisface.

Ah sits doon at the endy the table next tae a young guy wi a shaved heid and aboot twenty-five earrings on the wan ear. Vishana pits a bowl a soup in fronty me and the wee guy passes doon a plate wi big dauds a breid cut up rough on it. Ah get wired intae the soup. It wis good, dead thick wi loads a different veggies in it. 'Pass us the butter, pal,' ah says tae the wee guy.

'It's soya margarine,' he says. 'There's a lot of vegans here.'

'Aw well, it's good tae mix wi folk fae another planet, intit?'

He doesnae answer, so ah try again.

'Didnae know they hud Buddhists on Vega, but. Thought they were aw Mormons there.'

The wee guy nods and cairries on eatin his soup, and the auld guy opposite just looks at me as if ah'm the wan that's come fae another planet. Ah'm beginnin tae panic a bit. Ah wis really lookin forward tae this retreat but so far it's hard gaun. Then ah catch the eye of a wumman on the other side ae the table, coupla seats doon. She's smilin at me and ah'm no sure but ah think she actually winked.

Anyway at this point Vishana comes back and asks if anybody wants mair soup, and ah says, 'Thanks a lot but ah'll hang on fur the next course.'

'There's fruit for the next course,' he says.

The wumman across saves me.

'Have some more soup,' she says. Her voice is quite posh but no English, mair Edinburgh or sumpn. 'You've just arrived, haven't you? You must be hungry.'

'Aye,' ah says, and Vishana ladles oot mair soup.

'Thanks, pal, it's great soup.'

'Thank you,' says he, 'I made it myself.'

Efter we've finished we get a cuppa tea and sit roond the fire while Vishana tells us about the weekend. Meditation three times a day and teachin every mornin. Efternoons free. We've got chores as well; makin meals, washin up and that. Ma job is choppin the veggies the morra efternoon. And then there's the boy scout bit – nae bevvy, nae fags, boays on wan sidey the hoose, lassies on the ither. Ah didnae expect a

Buddhist retreat tae be an orgy but there wis a couple there, merriet and all, and they wouldnae even be sleepin in the same room. Ah thought that wis a bit weird.

‘Any other questions?’ asks Vishana. Naebdy says anythin. He smiles. ‘All we ask of you this weekend, is that you stay mindful. Pay attention.’

Surely that couldnae be too difficult, no for a weekend.

The first meditation session started at nine o’clock that night. The meditation room wis separate fae the main part of the buildin, a big shed wi high windaes and cushions and blankets on the flair just like the wan in the centre. At the far end wis a statue of the Buddha, sittin in the lotus position wi his eyes shut.

We filed in, efter takin aff wer shoes in the cloakroom, and took up wer places. Ah thought ah wis gettin a loat better wi this sittin cross-legged but at the Centre it was only fur twenty minutes at a time. And ah don’t know if it wis bein tired efter a day’s work, or the drivin or whit, but ah couldnae sit still. Vishana talked us through the mindfulness a breathin meditation but ah couldnae settle. Ah kept fidgetin, and every time ah made the slightest wee movement ah felt as if everybuddy could hear it, cos it wis dead quiet except fur some guy ower tae ma right somewhere who sounded as if he wis on a life-support system.

And as fur ma mind. Mindfulness aye, but no the way Vishana meant. Ma mind wis full aw right – thoughts fleein about lik motors on a racin track. Vroom, vroom, wan efter anither. And the main wan that kept comin up wis, whit the fuck are you daein here? Ah couldnae stop thinkin about the look on Liz’s face when ah went oot this mornin.

‘See you on Sunday night, hen.’

'So you're gaun, are you?'

'Ah've said . . .'

'Aye, ah know. Well, have a nice time.'

Ah'd went tae kiss her but she turnt her face away and that wis whit kept comin back tae me as ah tried tae focus on ma breathin. That picture ae her staundin in the kitchen, butterin toast, wi her back tae me and just the line of her neck, tense, held in. If she'd only shouted at me, chucked the toast at me, that'd have been OK; ah can haundle that, blow up, blow doon, but ah hate this no sayin.

Then the next thing ah know, the meditation's ower and we're back in the big room. Ah thought we'd sit roond the fire, get tae know each ither a bit but Vishana mair or less tells us tae get tae wer beds.

'Early start tomorrow morning. Meditation at six a.m. in the prayer room. See you all there.'

Turnt oot ah wis sharin wi the wee guy wi the earrings and another tall, skinny bloke wi straggly grey hair tied back in a pony tail. Ex-hippy lookin. The room had three mattresses on the flair and ah chucked ma sleepin bag and rucksack on the wan unner the windae.

'Ah'm Jimmy McKenna,' ah says, stickin oot ma haund. The tall guy takes it and gies it a squeeze.

'Jed,' he says. 'Glad to meet you.' Sounded a bit American.

'Gary,' says the young guy, and turns his back, takin stuff oot his rucksack.

'Have yous been here afore, then?'

'I've been a few times, yeah,' says Jed. 'I go to other workshops too, though, not just Buddhist ones, go round them all, get a taste of everything, you know.'

'Aye, right enough,' ah says. 'You don't need tae just support the wan team. Whit aboot you, pal?'

Gary's footerin aboot, pittin a wee widden statue of the Buddha on tae the shelf above his mattress. He doesnae turn roond.

'Ah've been coming for the past three years.'

'You must be pure brilliant at this meditation lark then. God, that wis heavy gaun the night. Ma mind wis birlin.'

'Some days it's like that,' says Jed. 'Best to accept it.'

'Suppose so. It wis hard gaun at first, never thought ah'd get the hang ae it. It's just that ah thought ah wis gettin better, know?'

Jed laughs. 'That's fatal.'

Ah take oot a hauf bottle a Bell's fae ma rucksack. 'Fancy a nip, pal?'

Jed pits his haund up. 'Woah, that stuff's poison. No wonder you're having a problem with focusing.'

'Ah wisnae drinkin afore the meditation, but. It's just a nightcap.'

'Yeah, but you're relying on it to make you feel better. It's addictive.'

'Look, ah'm no an alkie, pal. Ah just like a wee bevvie, right?'

Jed put baith his haunds up. 'Hey, it's cool, whatever. I'm just saying, it doesn't really make for clarity. And that's why we're here, right?'

Ah climbed intae ma sleepin bag, took a few swallys oot the bottle. The whisky went doon warm and rough ower ma throat. Ma body stertit tae heat up inside the sleepin bag and the tiredness hit me. Whit wis ah here fur? Fuck knows.

Ah wis nae clearer the next mornin when ah got woken up



at quarter tae six wi a bell ringin in ma ear. At furst ah thought it wis a fire drill or sumpn then ah remembered the meditation. No way. Ah turnt ower and went back tae sleep. Next thing ah knew Jed wis shakin me and the sun wis streamin through the windae.

'Christ, whit time is it?'

'Quarter to nine. The teaching starts in fifteen minutes. Thought maybe you'd like to be there.'

'Thanks, pal.'

Ah scrambled up and intae ma claes, splashed ma face wi cauld watter and got doon the stair in time tae grab a plate a cornflakes and a cuppa tea afore the session. They're aw sittin in this big dinin room, some on chairs set oot in a hauf-circle, ithers sittin on the flair, cross-legged. Vishana's in the lotus position at the front and beside him is a big vase a lilies.

Ah grab a seat at the back. Ma mooth feels like the insidcy a budgie's cage: no that ah'd drank much whisky last night, it's just ah need about three mugs a tea afore ah come to in the mornin and ah'd only hud time fur wan. Ah'd nae time tae brush ma teeth either and the cornflakes were stickin tae them. Ah kept tryin tae dislodge them wi ma tongue. Ma arse wis numb wi sittin on this plastic seat and ma mind sterted tae wander ootside where the trees were swayin aboot in the wind. They're pure beautiful, so they are, leaves turnin gold an red and bronze; ah love they autumn colours. Ah wanted tae paint a room in the hoose in them, thought it'd be nice in the bedroom, but Liz didnae fancy it. That's the thing aboot bein a painter; ye spend yer time paintin folk's hooses but you never get the chance tae pick the colours. Maisty the time ah don't gie a toss; it's ma job, and there's a kind a satisfaction in watchin a wall turn fae sumpn dingy and streaky tae clean and fresh. Just watchin the paintbrush

travellin doon the wall, know, takin the colour wi it, that's enough. Ah've been daein it fur twenty year and ah still think it's the goods.

Suddenly ah realised that Vishana'd stoapped talkin and everybuddy wis lookin at me.

'Jimmy?'

'Sorry, Rinpoche, ah was in a dwam. Whit were you sayin?'

'I was asking how you found the meditation. How's it been since you arrived?'

'Well, tae tell the truth, it's a bit heavy gaun.'

'In what way?'

'Ma mind keeps fleein. Ah cannae concentrate. And ah thought ah wis gettin a bit better at it.'

'Sometimes it's like that. You just have to sit it out. I noticed you looked a little uncomfortable last night. You know you don't have to sit on the floor. You could use a chair if it's easier.'

'Ah thought it wis the right way – at the Centre they tellt us tae sit on the flair so's we were grounded.'

Vishana smiled. There wis sumpn smarmy about him ah didnae like. Mibbe it wis his English accent or the way he wis dressed in they robes when he wisnae a real Tibetan or that, but he just got right up ma nose.

'Ideally, yes, but you have to remember that in the East people are used to sitting cross-legged from childhood. They don't use chairs.'

'Ah know that.'

'We can't expect to learn to sit in a short space of time. Sometimes it's better to forget about sitting in the lotus position. Just be comfortable and you can focus on the actual meditation.'

'OK. Ah'll try it.'

'I think I might try it that way too.'

It was the wumman who'd spoke up last night when we were havin wer soup. She'd been sittin in the lotus position when we were mediatin.

'I find I get a sore back if I sit too long. Maybe I've been getting hung up on getting the position right.'

'It's your choice,' says Vishana.

At the coffee break the wumman came ower and sat beside me. She wis tall wi her hair cut dead short and she'd these big dangly earrings jinglin fae her lugs. It wis hard tae work oot whit age she wis; could of been anythin fae thirty-five tae forty-five. She wis dressed in black wi a flowery-patterned shawl thing flung ower her shooders.

'I'm Barbara,' she says.

'Jimmy McKenna.'

'You're from Glasgow?'

'And me wi ma posh voice on.'

'I lived in Glasgow for three years; I really liked it. Beautiful buildings.'

'Where d'you stay noo?'

'Edinburgh. My home town.'

'Edinburgh's nice too. Anne Marie likes the castle and we used tae go tae thon Museum a Childhood when she was wee. Gettin big fur it noo.'

'Anne Marie's your daughter?'

'Aye.'

'How old?'

'She's twelve. First year at secondary. Looks aulder though. Big fur her age. Huv you any weans?'

'No.' She lifts her coffee cup. 'Better put this back. I think we're starting again. See you later.'

'Aye, right.'

The next session Vishana talked about reincarnation. This wis sumpn ah couldnae get ma heid roond. As far as ah'm concerned, wanst yer deid, yer deid. Aw the stuff ah wis brought up wi, heaven and hell and limbo and the next life – that wis daft enough but compared tae reincarnation it sounded dead sensible. Ah mean, at least you're the same person livin yer life here on earth, then gaun somewhere else. Simple. But if yer reincarnatin aw the time, how come you don't remember who you were in the previous life? Or are you somebuddy different each time?

Somehow it hud never mattered afore, in the Centre wi the lamas. Ah knew they believed in aw that stuff but ah'd never really bothered tae find oot about it. It wis enough just tae go there, dae a meditation, have a cuppa tea and go hame. Ah liked bein wi them; they were that funny and the way they looked at you made you feel good. But this Vishana guy – ah knew it wisnae really his fault but it's no the same. So ah just sat, lookin oot the windaes at the trees, ma belly rumblin, waiting fur the dinner break.

Mair soup fur lunch, left ower fae last night, but this time it hudnae been heated up enough. Ah hate soup that's luke-warm, but naebuddy else seemed that bothered; they were either eatin away in silence or discussin reincarnation.

'Who do you think you were in a past life, Alice?' says a big wifie wi dyed jet-black hair hingin roond her heid like a witch.

'Cleopatra,' says her pal, shovin her hair back so it didnae dangle intae the soup. It's funny, aw the folk on this retreat either have their hair long and straggly or else dead short.

'Come on,' says the pal. 'Everyone says they were Cleopatra. Nobody ever thinks they were ordinary.'

'I can dream, can't I? How about you?' she says, noddin at me. 'Who d'you think you were in a past life?'

'Huvnae a scooby, missus. Tae tell the truth, ah don't really unnerstaund this reincarnation lark.'

She and her pal start laughin. 'Hark at you,' says Alice. 'If you understood it, you wouldn't be here, would you?'

Ah couldnae figure oot if they were laughin at me or no, but ah wis saved havin tae reply by Jed, who said, in a slow, serious voice, 'Surely, the point isn't where we came from, but where we're going.'

Gary pipes up. 'Yeah, it doesn't matter who we used to be in a past life, but who we're going to be in the next life.'

'I thought we were supposed to stay in the present,' says Barbara.

Alice's pal stopped eatin and held her soup spoon in the air as if she wis blessin us. 'Truly being in the present encompasses both the past and the future. You have to hold them all together as one.'

'Amen, oh great one,' says Alice. 'You hit enlightenment today, Shirley?'

'Just call me Cleopatra,' she says, turnin back tae her soup.

Ah'd an hour tae kill afore ah'd tae go and chop the veggies fur the dinner so ah went oot fur a walk. The roads roond the Centre were dead quiet and it wis beautiful there; rough fields wi sheep grazin, trees turnin autumn colours. It's no sumpn ah dae much, go fur walks. Sometimes if we've a job on ootside Glesga ah drive through the countryside but ah'm aye hash-bashin along in the van wi the guys, music blarin, no lookin at the scenery.

The conversation at dinner time had made me feel better.



Alice and her pal were a laugh, and the way everybuddy wis talkin sounded as if they werenae sure whit it wis aw about either. Mibbe ah wisnae that daft efter aw. And there wis sumpn, no exactly excitin, couldnae find the word fur it – ah suppose mibbe you’d say stimulatn, if it didnae sound sexy – but anyway, sumpn aboot listenin tae folk talkin aboot ideas, things ye couldnae quite unnerstaund. Ah mean, the guys ah work wi wid be cartin ye aff tae the funny farm if ye tried tae have a serious conversation, and wi John it’s the footie, and Liz and me it’s Anne Marie or the hoose or that. There’s naebuddy that talks about anythin beyond the day tae day.

Ah never want tae see another fuckin carrot in ma life. Hate the orange bastards. Mountains of them in a basket in the corner of the kitchen – ah’ll be in a basket in the corner by the time ah’ve finished choppin them. No that ah mind choppin a few veggies, it’s no that. It’s just, why don’t they gie folk chores they’re good at? There’s this wee skinny lassie, anither wanny the pierced brigade, and she’s cartin in huge logs for the fire. Ah offered tae help but she looked at me as if ah’d pit ma haund up her skirt. She’s practically cairryin them in wan at a time cos they’re that big fur her, and ah could of done them in five seconds flat. Ah like choppin wood an ah know how tae dae it right, worked on the forestry wan summer years ago up north.

Carrots, on the other hand, are no ma forte. Jeez, ye huvtae manhandle them tae get them tae stay on the choppin board, they keep skitin aff every time ah pit this knife in them, and as fur the shape – well, ah hope they’re no expectin nouvelle cuisine. No that the knife helps. It’s as blunt as buggery, which is why next minute ah’m standin here lookin like a scene fae *Reservoir Dogs*.

Barbara puts a clean tea towel roond ma haund but in a few seconds the blood's soaked through.

'That's a deep cut. Press hard on to the wound – there must be a first-aid kit around.'

Vishana appears and leads me intae a wee room aff the kitchen where he produces a green box fulla plasters and dressins. Ah let him get on wi it, cannae bear tae look at things like that.

'This is nasty. Keep the pressure on it for a few more minutes till the blood loss slows down, then I'll clean it up and dress it. Hold tight.'

'Ah'm ur haudin tight.'

'How d'you do it?'

'Choppin carrots. Hope there's no a bit of finger in the stew the night. Bitty a shock fur aw they vegetarians.'

'It won't be the first time.' He cracked a wee smile. 'You're not used to chopping carrots, I take it. Or do you prefer them with bits of flesh in them?'

'Ah'm better at choppin wood actually. How come you don't gie chores tae folk that can dae them best?'

Vishana slowly unwound the tea towel. The blood was still flowin, but no as bad.

'Getting better.' He started tae dab at the wound wi a bit a cotton wool. 'This may sting a bit.'

He wisnae kiddin.

'So Jimmy, you think people should get to pick which chores they're going to do?'

'Might make mair sense – ah mean, thon wee lassie that wis choppin the logs . . .'

'You think she should have chopped the carrots?'

'No necessarily choppin carrots, but she could of done sumpn else she'd be mair suited to.'

Vishana took a dressin oot a sealed pack.

'Cleaning the toilets, perhaps?'

'Aw, come on, ah never said that . . .'

'You suggested people do the chores they're most familiar with. Most women are more used to cleaning toilets than men are.'

'Aye but ah'm no meanin tae be sexist; it's just that some jobs need strength.'

'And some need other things.'

He wrapped the dressin roond ma haund and pressed doon on it haurd.

'Jimmy, I understand what you're saying, but we allocate jobs on a random basis, not just to be fair but because sometimes you can learn more from doing an unfamiliar job you find difficult rather than one you can do easily.' He smiled. 'Reflect on it. While you're chopping the rest of the carrots.'

But when ah got back intae the kitchen Barbara'd practically finished them.

'Thanks,' ah said. 'Can ah dae sumpn?'

'It's OK, that's them,' she says, scrapin the last of them aff the choppin board intae a big bowl. 'Take them over to Simon; he'll put them in the stew.'

'Right.' They were that neat the way she'd done them, no the big dauds ah'd managed. 'How d'you get them that neat wi thon blunt knife?'

Barbara's wipin the choppin board and the work-surface wi a cloth. She turns roond. 'I sharpened it. Didn't you see this?' She points tae a big electric knife sharpener at the other end ae the work-surface.

'Eh, naw, never seen it.' How could ah have missed it? Never dawned on me tae look fur it of course. See whit

Vishana wis sayin is all very well, but that's it, in't it? A wumman thinks tae sharpen a knife that's blunt but a man just goes on choppin wi it and ends up cuttin hissel.

That night in the prayer room, ah sat listenin tae the rain. Ah'd gied up on the meditation, couldnae concentrate again. Ah wis tired and everythin that had happened ower the weekend so far wis churnin away inside me; the new folk, the stuff ah couldnae unnerstaund, Vishana and they fuckin carrots, and ah felt weary in ma bones. Ah'd taken Vishana's advice and sat on a chair instead ae tryin tae dae the cross-legged bit, and ah fund ma fingers drummin on ma leg in time tae the rain's rhythm. Ah stopped and pit ma haunds on ma legs, just rested them there and listened. The prayer room had a glass roof and you could hear every drap; some plip-ploppin, some squelchin and some thumpin doon as if they were gonnae break it. And somehow ah fund masel followin the raindraps as they landed on the roof, no really listenin, no anythin, just sittin. Sometimes it got a bit heavier and sometimes the wind would blaw it soft, makin wee skittery noises, like an animal scratchin.

And it wis like the rain wis alive, know, and everythin in the prayer room seemed tae disappear, couldnae hear anybuddy or see anythin; it wis just me and the rain.

Frosty. Very frosty. Liz, ah mean. Anne Marie wis neither up nor doon. Ah could of been away at a footie match for all the notice she took.

'Hiya, Da.'

'Hi, hen. D'ye miss me?'

'Were you away somewhere? Oh aye, ah thought ah hudnae seen much of ye this weekend. How's the yogie flyin comin on?'

'Very funny. Get you a spot on *The Fast Show* wi patter like that. Where's yer mammy?'

'Cleanin the bathroom.'

Ah should of known it'd be hard gaun by the smell a bleach. It's funny but when Liz is really really mad aboot sumpn, she goes mental wi bleach. The place is honkin – you just follow the smell and there she is, rubber gloves up tae her oxters, scourin away round the edges of the plughole wi an auld toothbrush. When we were first merriet ah thought she was just dead hygienic. Took me a while tae clock ontae the fact that efter the mad bleachin there was a big, big silence then an explosion.

Anyway, ah poked ma heid roond the bathroom door.

'That's me hame noo.'

Silence. Except for the scourin. Christ, the enamel'd be aff the bath at this rate.

'Ah'm away tae make a cuppa tea. D'you want one?'

Nae answer.

She'd thawed a bit by tea time, thank God. It was weird bein hame though. The hoose felt dead wee compared tae the retreat place and everythin seemed different, all the wee things you never even look at. Like there's a calendar in the kitchen wi pictures of animals, and September's animal is a polar bear. I mean why a polar bear for September? But ah'd never noticed it afore.

'This is great,' ah said, gettin wired in tae ma dinner.

'It's just chicken cacciatore.'

'Least it's no veggie cacciatore.'

'Was the food rotten at the retreat, Da?'

'Naw, hen, it was quite nice really. But no as good as yer mammy's.'

'Did they have a cook?'



'Naw, we all mucked in. Vishana gied us chores. Ah'd tae chop the carrots. Mountains of them.'

'Who was all there, Da?'

'All sorts. Ah was sharin wi a coupla guys called Gary and Jed. Jed was awright. Gary was a bit, you know, kinda spaced oot. But OK.'

'What did you dae all weekend? Meditate?' It was the first time Liz hud spoke.

'And chop carrots. Ach, there was a few talks and we'd time tae get oot in the fresh air – it's beautiful round there, dead quiet. Yous should come next time. There's another weekend comin up next month.'

'Ah don't think so. Wan member of this faimly wi his heid in the clouds is quite enough.'

'Can ah come, Da?'

Ah was about tae say aye when Liz drew me a look.

'We'll see, hen. We'll talk about it nearer the time, eh? Now how about you and me dae these dishes and we'll all sit doon and watch a video?'

All the time Anne Marie and me were washin up, ah fund masel gettin mair and mair worked up inside. This wee voice kept runnin through ma mind; can she no just gie it a chance, does she have tae gie it this *ah know best* stuff. Ah've always kind of looked up tae Liz, no looked up exactly but she's aye been the sensible wan oot the two ae us. Maisty the time we just get on wi it – we've known each other that long and ah've kind of bowed tae her judgement on the big things. Ah mean, she was the wan that wanted tae buy a flat, years ago. Ah'd have just kept on rentin – why gie yersel the hassle, but naw, she wanted tae buy. Worked oot the money stuff and went tae the buildin society. And she was right. We started oot in a room and kitchen an noo we've got a nice

big three-bedroom flat and the mortgage is less than whit ma sister's payin in rent tae the cooncil for a hoose in a street that's no exactly brilliant.

But it's went on that long that noo she thinks she knows best about everthin. And she knows heehaw about this. No about meditation or the folk at the Centre. Which is fine. She doesnae have tae take an interest if she doesnae want, but why the hell can she no just let it be? How come she's got tae act all superior about it?

Ah managed tae hide ma feelins, kept it in for Anne Marie's sake. We had a quiet night in, watched a video, had a cuppa tea, as usual. But later, when Liz and me were on wer ain, the cracks started tae show. Ah felt awkward. Ah've no been away fae hame that often, the odd weekend at a match wi the boys or that, but ah've aye come back ready tae tell her all about it, lookin forward tae bedtime as you'd expect. But ah fund masel hingin about the bathroom efter ma shower, spendin ages brushin ma teeth and footerin about, kind of hopin she'd be asleep afore ah got intae bed. But of course she wasnae.

When ah got in beside her the frosties reached sub-zero. Ah wasnae feelin much like it anyway but thought ah'd better make a bit of an effort, but when ah reached ower her she rolled away as far as she could the other side. So ah turnt on ma side and said, 'Night.' And she done the same.

The next week we were daein a job in a big hoose, workin late every night tae get it finished. The guy was a pop star – his band had been big a couple a year ago – but it was his girlfriend who was in charge. He didnae gie a toss, was just puttin up the dough for it. Anyway he seemed tae have plenty brass tae chuck about.

It's funny – work. Everybuddy goes on aboot how they want tae win the lottery and chuck in their jobs but ah sometimes think that ah'm happiest workin. And ah wis glad tae have sumpn tae get on wi, that ah could dae wioot thinkin. That weekend at the retreat – ah enjoyed it, but it kind of done ma heid in. Aw they folk. Aw that flamin mediatin. Or should ah say, tryin tae meditate. The only bit ah really enjoyed wis thon night ah sat listenin tae the rain. Just sittin.

Just as well ah wasnae around much that week: by the time ah did get in at night ah was knackered and there was only time tae get a bit of dinner and flake oot in fronty the telly fur an hour afore bed. Gave things time tae settle doon between me and Liz. We just kind of forgot aboot it: there was nae time fur it tae become a big deal. On the Friday night we'd arranged tae go fur a drink and a meal wi Paul and his wife. We finished work early on the Friday, put the last coat on about two so ah got hame first. Ah'd bought a bunch a freesia and stuck them in a vase in the kitchen. It's Liz's favourite – she likes the smell. Ah jumped in the shower then went and laid oot on the bed. The tiredness seemed tae hit me all of a sudden and the next thing ah knew Anne Marie was staundin beside me.

'Is it that time already?'

'It's five o'clock, Da, Mammy'll be hame in hauf an hour.'

'Five o'clock. Ah must of been asleep for hours.'

'You were snorin like a pig. Are yous no meant tae be gaun oot the night?'

'Aye, hen. Just gie's a minute tae come to. Ah hate fallin asleep in the efternoon.'

'Want a cuppa tea? Ah'll make you wan afore ah go roond tae ma granny's. Ah'm stayin there the night.'

'Ta, hen.'

The wee yin planted a cuppa tea doon on the bedside table and went aff. Ah was sittin, lettin the hot tea help me come to, when the door opened and Liz's heid appeared.

'Look at sleepin beauty.'

'You're early.'

'Mr Anderson was feelin kind – he tellt me tae go at hauf-four the day since it's the holiday weekend. Whit happened tae you?'

'Ah was pure shattered. Lay doon for ten minutes and the next thing ah knew the wee yin was staundin at the bed tellin me it's five o'clock.'

'Is she away round tae her granny's?'

'Aye. Whit time are we supposed tae be gettin them?'

'Angie phoned me at ma work. Siobhan's no well so they've called it off.'

'Nothin serious?'

'Naw, don't think so. Just a wee temperature – sumpn gaun round the nursery. But you know whit Angie's like. They just need tae cough and she's callin the doctor.'

'So, want tae just go oot wersels?'

'If you like.'

Liz was sitting on the bed, her back tae me. Her skirt had rode up a bit, showin her thigh and there's sumpn aboot the line of her neck, the way it curves on her shoulder, her hair kind of wispy over it. And it had been over a week noo. Ah put ma haund oot and touched her neck. Then ah moved closer.

'Or we could just stay in. Phone up for a Chinese. There's a bottle of wine in the fridge.'

'Uh huh.'

'Efter all, we've goat an empty the night.'

She turned tae face me and ah knew it was OK.

Later, we were sittin up in bed drinkin the wine, ma airm round her.

'So how come yous have been workin aw these extra hours? Ah thought you said it was just a couple of rooms you were daein?'

'Aye, but that was afore this lassie started choppin and changin her mind aboot the colour scheme. See, she'd wanted the lounge painted champagne, tae match her Versace troosers.

'You are jokin.'

'Ah'm no, honest. They were leather, skin-tight, you should of seen wee Boabby's face when she came intae the room in them, ah thought he'd need resuscitated.'

'Some folk have got mair money than sense.'

'Nae skin aff our noses. At least we're gettin some of it. Anyway that wasnae whit caused the hassle.'

'Naw?'

'We got the shade matched and painted the room and it was lookin fine and we'd just started on the joe loss when her highness changed her mind. She'd got fed up wi they troosers, she'd bought a new pair and could we paint the room lilac noo?'

'Whit!'

'Ah'm no kiddin. It was the boyfriend tellt us, brung the troosers in hissel so we could match the exact shade. She was too busy. It was that important it looked right for a big party they were havin at the weekend.

"You know whit women are," he says.

"Oh aye," says Boabby. "Ma missus is just the same. Gets the kitchenette redeccorated every time she gets a wee top oot What Evries."



'You're havin me on, Jimmy.'

'Did you no see their kitchenette efter Irene got they leopardskin breeks – it took Boabby days tae get that spotty paint.'

She started tae giggle and dug me in the ribs.

'Hey, that was sore . . .'

'Sorry. Naw . . . ah mean, you know . . . the girlfriend gettin the livin room painted lilac.'

'Are you tellin me if ah had that kindy money you widnae be gettin the hoose repainted tae match yer gear?'

'If you'd that kindy money Jimmy, ah think you'd have wanny the Spice Girls fur a wife, no me.'

'That'll be the day.'

'The money, or the glammy wife?'

'Ah think you're glammy enough for me. Anyhow they Spice Girls are auld hat. Ah'd need tae get Britney.'

'Britt Ekland's mair your age. Anyway, if we were that rich, ah wouldnae want a hoose. Ah think ah'd just live out of doors on some desert island . . . wouldnae wear any claes, just wanny they sarong things, silk, wrapped round me . . .'

'Oh, stop it, stop it,' ah started writhin aboot in the bed. 'Ah've spilled ma wine . . . aw, fuck me!'

'Whit – again?'

Ah was that relieved things were back tae normal between me and Liz that the retreat went clean oot ma mind, but on the Tuesday when ah went tae the Centre it all came back tae me. Every week the Rinpoche gied a wee talk then led us through a meditation. After that we'd have a cuppa tea, sit roond and blether. We could ask questions or discuss anythin tae dae wi oor practice and that was a good time

tae have a word on the QT if ye wanted tae say anythin personal.

Anyhow, it was when we were daein the meditation ah started tae think about how different it was here fae when ah was on retreat. As soon as ah heard the Rinpoche's voice it semed tae get me calmed doon and followin ma breathin. Ah could dae it. Felt at hame. Efterwards ah wanted tae ask him about it but couldnae say in fronty the rest. Somehow, though, it was as if he knew. He turned tae me and said, 'So, Jimmy, how was your retreat?'

'Kind of haurd gaun, Rinpoche – too many carrots.'

Everybuddy laughed.

'So you are taking the orange way to enlightenment – the future is bright.'

'Sumpn like that.'

He didnae say anythin else, just kept lookin at me, smilin. They were all waitin for me tae answer. Ah looked round their faces and back tae the Rinpoche.

'It was the meditation. It was that haurd. Ah was wonderin . . .'

He kept lookin at me.

'Wonderin how come ah can dae it here – ah don't mean it's easy or that, just ah feel ah'm gettin somewhere – but there, it was terrible. Ah could hardly sit still, ma mind was birlin. In the end ah just sat and listened tae the rain on the roof.'

'Tell me, Jimmy, what were you doing when you were listening to the rain?'

'Ah wisnae daein anythin, ah tellt you, Rinpoche, ah was just sittin, listenin, followin the sound ae the raindraps landin on a roof – ma mind was just empty.'

'How wonderful.'

'But ah thought ah was supposed tae be followin the breaths, daein the mindfulness a breathin.'

'Maybe you were doing the mindfulness of raindrops, Jimmy.'

He reached ower and touched me, on ma airm, lightly, just for a moment. All of a sudden a big lump rose in ma throat and ah felt as though ah was gonnae greet. And he just kept on lookin at me wi that brilliant wee smile of his and it was like him and me were the only two folk in the universe.

Walkin hame that night ah kept seein raindraps. It's funny, you'd think livin in a country where it's chuckin it doon hauf the time you'd be pretty familiar wi them but it was as if ah'd never looked at wan afore. Of course ah hadnae. Who goes roond lookin at raindraps – folk'd think ye were mental. But there ah wis, stoppin at a hedge tae look at a raindrap on a leaf. Ah looked right close and could see the pattern of the veins of the leaf. Wee tracks gaun through it. What were they for? Hudnae a clue. Knew nothin about leafs or plants or that – just never been interested. But the Rinpoche was right – it was wonderful.

Liz was watchin the TV when ah got in. Wanny they daft decoratin programmes. Ah kissed the tap ae her heid as ah passed round the back of the settee.

'Want a cuppa tea?'

'Just had wan. There was a phone call for you – Barbara – fae the retreat.'

She turned tae look at me.

'Whit did she want?'

'Didnae say – she's left a number for you tae phone back – Edinburgh number.'

'Right.'

'Didnae know yous were swoppin numbers.'

'Ah never gied her mines – she must of got it oot the book. Must be sumpn ta dae wi the retreat.'

Ah went intae the hall tae phone.

'Is that Barbara?'

'Speaking. Is that you Jimmy?'

'Aye.'

'How's your hand?'

'Oh, it's fine – looked worse than it was.'

'I hope you don't mind my calling but I was wondering if you ever did any work in Edinburgh.'

'Work?'

'You know, painting.'

'Eh, well, maisty our work is local -- we've usually got plenty tae keep us busy. We dae the odd job as far as Stirling or that but ah don't think we've ever had a job in Embra.'

'I'm looking for a decorator – there's quite a lot of work needing done in my flat. And I've kind of put it off because I work at home most of the time and the idea of having someone around whom I don't know . . . well. Anyway, after meeting you at the retreat the other week I just thought it might be the ideal solution if you were able to do it. Obviously I'd pay you a bit more to compensate for your having to travel.'

'Eh, ah'm no sure . . . when were you thinkin of?'

'Well, it was more when it was suitable for you. Any time over the next few months. Be nice to get some of it done before Christmas but there's really no rush. Are you very busy just now?'

'We've a couple of wee jobs on this week and there's a big commercial wan comin up soon.'

'Would it be possible for you to come through and see

the place, give me a quote, towards the end of this week maybe? I'd pay expenses, of course.'

'Aye, ah think we'll be finished on Friday mornin . . . ah suppose ah could come through Friday lunchtime if that's OK.'

'Great.'

Ah'd never done much drivin in Embra but the flat was quite easy tae find, in a street somewhere up fae the Meadows. Fae the outside it didnae look much different fae a tenement in Glesga. The close was dark and the front door was painted a dull green. There was a tartan doorplate wi 'Tweedie' on it and under that was a piece of card on wi 'B. Mellis' typed on it. The bell was wanny they real old-fashioned bell pulls, no an eletric wan – it made a nice jinglin sound. Ah could hear Barbara's footsteps comin towards the door; she planted her feet doon heavily though she wasnae a heavy wumman, and ah could hear her janglin as she moved.

When she answered the door she was wearin purple leggings, a big baggy jumper and lots of rattly metal bangles up her airms.

'Hi Jimmy. Nice to see you. Come in.'

As ah came in the door she kissed me on the cheek.

'Come through and I'll make us some coffee.'

She led me intae the livin room, which was huge wi a fancy cornice round the ceilin. A couch covered wi a velvet throw and a coupla bean bags was about aw the furniture except for an enormous statue of the Buddha in the bay windae wi caundles aw round.

'My God, you don't need tae go on retreat. You could set up yer ain Centre here.'

'Suppose so. He's lovely isn't he? A friend brought him



back from India then didn't have room for him. I find his presence very calming.'

'Aye.'

'Have you had some lunch?'

'Afore ah came through. Could murder a cuppa tea though.'

'I've got Earl Grey or herbal.'

'Nae Typhoo? Or even Scottish Blend?'

'Fraid not.'

'Oh well, gie's the Earl Grey. Milk, nae sugar.'

When she was oot the room ah had a look round at the paintwork. It was basically in good nick though it was pretty dull, painted a kind of putty shade all round, the cornice a dingy cream. A coupla coats would dae if she was just wantin it brightened up. The hall was a disaster though – a dreary shade of dark green wi a red carpet. Ah can never unnerstaund how folk paint these halls in really dark colours when they get nae light.

'Casting a professional eye, are you?'

Barbara set a tray doon on a wee table wi elephant legs, which she pulled oot fae behind the settee. Two mugs and a plate a biscuits.

'Whit was it you were wantin done?'

'This room, the bedroom and the hall to start off. The kitchen and bathroom have been refurbished quite recently so they're fine and there's another room which I use for my work but that can wait till later.'

'Whit is it you dae?'

'Research – I don't actually carry out the research myself but I do the writing up. I examine the data, work out the statistical evidence and all that. Do you know much about homeopathy?'

'No really. But Liz buys they wee remedies oot of Boots if you've got a cold or that.'

'Yes, it's getting more popular now.'

'Right enough. About yer decoratin – did you have any colours in mind?'

'I'm not sure. Something neutral in here – keep it light. And maybe a violet-blue for the bedroom. I did wonder about orange for the hall. It's such a healing colour and I think it would be welcoming.'

'Ah presume you're thinkin about gettin a new carpet.'

She looked at me as if she didnae know whit ah was talkin about for a minute, then a smile broke ower her face.

'I see what you mean. The red wouldn't exactly go with it. Yes I'm getting rid of it. Actually I might just get a rug. The floorboards underneath are polished – I can't imagine why they covered it over with that thing.'

'They?'

'The people I bought it from. The Tweedies – their name's still on the front door in case there's mail for them. Oh, and speaking of the front door – I'd like that painted too. Bright red. Good feng shui. That's why I haven't put up a proper brass nameplate on the door yet – I was waiting till I got the door painted.'

'Have you no been here lang then?'

'Three months. Look, d'you think you could do the job?'

'It's no a difficult job if you're just wantin it painted. Coupla coats in here and the bedroom, three in the hall tae cover that dark colour. It's just ah'd need tae talk tae ma brother first – you know we don't usually work this far out.'

'Do you work with your brother then?'

'Aye. We used tae work for other firms but him and me set up together nine year ago and we've never looked back. Always had work on the go and it's nearly always word of mouth now. Wan guy works for us full-time and we can call in some others if it's a bigger job.'

'So you're doing well.'

'Cannae complain. Look, suppose ah send you a quote and throw in a bit extra for the travellin. Ah'll talk tae John and check he's up for it. We could fit you in the week after next if he's OK about it.'

'Great. Thanks, Jimmy. I'd be happy to pay whatever you think is suitable. I just couldn't face some strange men wandering round my house.'

'Sorry, Barbara – the job's aff.'

'What do you mean?'

'If you don't want strange men wanderin roond yer hoose ye cannae call in me and our John – ah mean they don't come any stranger than us.'

It's a funny place, Edinburgh. An hour away fae Glesga and you might as well be in another country. Another planet even. Ah mean it just feels different, it's as if it's got different air or sumpn. Clearer. The weather's too – doesnae rain as much. Caulder, brighter. Somehow ah felt different as well, gaun through there tae work. At first ah thought it'd be a drag travellin through but ah sterted tae really look forward tae it. Maistly ah was on ma ain. Just how it turnt oot. John and me and Boabby done the first coupla days thegether, gettin the big stuff done, ceilins and walls, but then we had tae juggle it wi another job that come up in Jordanhill – guy we'd worked for had a burst tank in his loft and the place was in a right tip. The others got on wi that while

ah continued wi Barbara's place. There was a lot of footery stuff – cornice she wanted picked oot in different colours – and ah really like daein them while it does John's heid in.

'You don't mind gaun through tae Embra by yersel?'

'Naw, a wee change.'

'Aye but it's the drivin.'

'Ah can mibbe work a bit later a few nights and that'll speed it up.'

'Ah'm sure that Barbara wumman'd gie ye yer tea.'

'Fish supper'll dae me.'

'Mibbe even gie ye mair than yer tea if you play yer cards right.'

'She's no ma type.'

'She's female, is she no? And yous two could dae a bit of mediatin thegether.'

'That'll be right.'

It had crossed ma mind at the start that Barbara might of had a wee fancy for me. Efter all, it was a bit funny gettin a painter tae come aw the way fae Glesga tae Embra. But there was nae sign of any funny stuff, no even when ah turnt up on ma ain. She made me a cuppa tea when ah arrived and then left me to it. She always offered tae gie me lunch but ah like tae nip oot for a roll or a poke a chips or that when ah'm workin – just get oot the hoose fur a bit a fresh air. Hate bein stuck inside aw day. She spent nearly all day in her wee room at her computer or whatever she was daein. Sometimes ah'd hear her on the phone or she'd stick her heid round the door tae tell me she was gaun oot. Ah kind of got used tae havin her round in the background, there but no there.

Like ah said, a lot of the work was quite footery, specially the cornice that she wanted done in different colours. Ah

usually listen tae music when ah'm workin but ah didnae like tae have it on too much in case ah was disturbin her at her work so ah spent maisty the time quiet, just paintin. It was dead peaceful in the hoose and thon big statue of the Buddha; well, it was like she said, it had a calming presence. When she came in the room ah near fell aff the ladder, ah'd forgotten there was embdy else there.

'Christ, ah goat a fright – ah was in another world there.'

'Sorry – want a cup of tea? It's about half three – I'm ready for a break.'

'Aye, thanks.' Ah climbed doon aff the ladder, stretched ma airms above ma heid. 'Does yer back in, that stuff. You get that involved in it you don't realise you've got yersel intae really awkward positions and then when you come doon it's agony. Thon Michelangelo fella done his back in paintin the Sistine Chapel.'

'You should do yoga.'

'Yoga? Ah don't think ah'd look too hot in a leotard.'

'Lots of men do it. They wear shorts. I'm serious. It's really good for your back. The stretching strengthens it, and if you do a few positions when you come down from the ladder it'll help avoid any pain. I could show you a few basic ones – look.'

She bent ower and put her haunds on the flair. Her arse was stickin up in the air; just as well Boabby wasnae there.

'Ah can just imagine me and the boys daein a yoga routine afore we started work. Ah mean, they think the meditation's weird enough – if ah start dain yoga they'll be cartin me aff tae the funny farm.'

Ah followed her intae the kitchen where she put on the kettle and ah started tae wash ma haunds at the sink. It was



a beautiful kitchen; you could tell the units were they dead expensive wans, wi a dragged paint finish on them and carved bits round the edges. Ah wondered how she made her money – couldnae see that this research lark could pay that much.

We sat doon at the kitchen table tae have wer tea.

'You seem to enjoy your job, Jimmy.'

'Aye, ah dae. Ah really love paintin that cornice of yours. It's beautiful.'

'Yes, it's going to be lovely when it's finished. So many people just paint them one colour but I think you owe it to the design to pick it out in different ones.'

'A lot of folk want tae dae that but when you gie them the estimate and tell them how much time it's gonnae take they change their minds. It is a lot dearer.'

'How long d'you think it's going to take you?'

'Well, wi me bein on ma ain noo, a bit longer. Ah mean the mully's aw done but there's still the joe loss.'

'Huh?'

'Painter-speak. Mully's emulsion, Joe Loss – gloss.'

She laughed. 'I like that. What other words do you use between yourselves?'

'Ah don't know if ah can tell you – ah mean, givin away state secrets and that . . .'

'Go on, won't tell a soul.'

'Well, if you ever get a painter in for an estimate and he says tae his mate, "This is an elsie", run a mile – means they're just gonnae put wan coat of paint on it. Elsie Tanner – wanner – get it?'

'My God.' She was really laughin noo, her eyes shone. Ah'd never seen her like that.

'That was how me and John set up in business for wersels.'

We used tae work for this guy years ago and he just cut corners aw the time. You'd put wan coat on a wall and it'd be near four o'clock and he'd come in and say, "That'll dae boys, that's an elsie, finish up." See, it can look OK wi wan coat but when you look close there's streaks and everythin in it – it's no right. And you'd say, "Naw, it's no an elsie," but he was the boss. And we got jobs all right but you wouldnae get folk askin you back, no unless they were blind. So me and John decided tae set up on wer ain, dae things properly.'

'I like that, it shows you've got integrity.'

'Well who wants tae dae folk? Fair's fair – you may as well dae it right. And the thing is, it pays in the long run. When we sterted oot we didnae know if it would work oot or no but that's us gaun for nine year noo and we're always workin and maisty oor work is word of mouth – folk recommend us and we get asked back. And we make good money.'

'Right livelihood. Very Buddhist.'

'Sorry?'

'Most people think Buddhism's about meditating, but it's really about how you live your whole life. Part of it is the idea that you make your living in a good way, not a harmful or dishonest one.'

'So all this time ah've been a Buddhist while ah'm paintin. Ah could of saved masel all that hassle mediatin.'

'I think maybe that's true – I don't mean that you shouldn't meditate, but . . . I don't know how to put it; it's as if we're always trying to get there, reach something, and that isn't it. It's being fully aware in the day to day that's important, being completely engaged in what we're doing. And maybe for you, it's the painting. When you're doing your job, you're fully present.'

Ah sat for a moment, haudin the mug, cradlin it in ma haund. What was left of the tea was cauld noo but ah didnae want tae put it doon, didnae want tae stop this conversation. Barbara looked straight at me, serious, but wi a wee hauf smile; and it was the first time ah'd ever seen that look on anybody but the lama. Just for a moment, a split second, it was as though the room had disappeared and there was just the two of us, mugs in wer haunds, lookin. Ah wanted tae ask her mair, talk about it, but somehow ah fund ah couldnae speak, just sat there. Then ah stood up.

'Better get back tae ma mediatin, then.'

Barbara smiled.

'Me too.' She lifted the mugs and took them tae the sink.

Ah stopped at the door. 'Eh, Barbara, mind you were askin how long the job's gonnae take?'

She turned roond. 'Yes – have you any idea? I mean, it doesn't really matter, it's just if it's going to be over the weekend I need to rearrange some plans.'

'Well, ah was gonnae suggest, if you didn't mind me stayin a bit longer, workin intae the evenin a bit, ah could finish it quicker.'

'That would be great. If you don't mind – makes it a long day for you.'

'If ah leave at teatime ah'm only gonnae hit the rush hour traffic anyway, so ah'm wastin time sittin in a traffic queue.'

'Why don't you do that then, stay a bit later, but on one condition.'

'Whit's that?'

'You need to let me give you something to eat – you can't work late on an empty stomach.'

‘Done.’

So the next few nights that was what ah done. Ah fund masel gettin intae a routine, heidin through tae Embra in the mornin, gettin a paper and a roll at a wee shop round the corner fae Barbara’s. Then she’d make me a cuppa tea and ah’d get stuck intae the work aw day wi just a wee break at lunchtime. She left me by masel durin the day but about five o’clock she’d make a meal, pasta or rice wi vegetables; no a big dinner, just enough tae keep me gaun. It was nice, sittin in the kitchen, cosy. She lit caundles every night and we’d sit there wi some classical music on the CD. She never really talked aboot hersel much, nothin personal, just aboot meditation or the work she was daein or asked me aboot ma job. It was weird, sittin in candelight across fae a wumman and just no really knowin anythin aboot her. Efter we’d eaten ah’d get back tae work and dae another coupla hours then heid hame. Ah was back about nine at night and risin at haulf six so you’d of thought ah’d of been knackered but ah wasnae. Seemed tae have loads a energy – no mad, jumpin aboot energy, just feelin right in masel, kind of peaceful and centred.

By the Thursday ah’d finished the cornice and all the woodwork in the big room. It looked brilliant. The two of us stood at the door and just looked.

‘It’s fantastic, Jimmy, I’m so pleased.’

‘Aye, me too. Pity John cannae see it . . . ah’ll need tae take a photie.’

‘Jimmy, d’you think you could do me a favour tomorrow?’

‘What is it?’

‘Well I’d like to get the room back to order. Could you

help me put up the curtains – they’re velvet so they’re a bit heavy.’

‘Aye, nae bother. Ah’ve no that much left the morra. Just the woodwork in the hall and the last coat on the front door.’

‘The joe loss?’

‘Get you an apprenticeship yet.’

The next day ah helped her wi the curtains and she spent a while puttin all her bits and pieces thegether. Paintin the the woodwork in the hall was a bitty an anticlimax efter the cornice – room looked nice though, the orange she’d chosen was dead warm. She’d a good sense a colour, Barbara. Some folk pick shades that you know are gonnae be a disaster but she was wanny they folk that could pick really strong colours that could of maybe been too OTT, but somehow just worked.

When ah’d finished the door she came oot intae the close.

‘Wonderful. It’s perfect. Red front doors are really lucky you know. Ready for a cup of tea?’

‘Aye, ah’ll just get cleaned up first.’

Sittin opposite her in the kitchen ah wondered whit tae dae. It was only hauf-three so ah couldnae expect tae be stayin for ma tea but it felt a bit flat tae just be gaun hame. Ah didnae want tae leave. Ah know whit John would of said if ah’d tried tae explain it tae him but it just wasnae like that. There was nothin gaun on; ah didnae fancy the wumman wan bit and ah got nae signals fae her either. It was just, there was some kind of a bond between us. And efter the week ah wanted it tae end wi us sittin doon and havin a meal thegether, no me just heidin aff like that.



Then she said, 'Jimmy, can I ask you one more favour? It might seem a bit strange.'

'Ask away.'

'It's just that I feel the flat is now my home, thanks to your work, especially the living room, and I want to do a kind of clearing – you know, meditate there so it has really good energy. And I'd like you to come and meditate with me. It would be really nice if we could do it together as you did all this beautiful work. If you have the time we could eat together afterwards, if I'm not keeping you back too much.'

'Ah'd like that, Barbara, really.'

And though ah'd never ever have thought that was the favour she wanted to ask me, it was the most perfect thing that could have happened.

We sat in the living room facing the Buddha. She'd these foam blocks like you get at the Centre to sit on and we wrapped them round our knees. She'd lit candles and was burning some kinda herb thing. A didn't know what it was then but ah know now it's sage and Native Americans use it to purify things – it's supposed to take away all your negativity. Anyway, there we sat, the room was clean and perfect, while the light was fading outside.

Barbara started, 'I call upon the Buddha, the bodhisattvas and all the good powers to witness our giving thanks for the blessings of life. I want to thank Jimmy for the wonderful work he has done in making my home a clean and good space to be. I thank him for the mindful way he has painted and the friendship he has shown. I thank life for bringing us together. And I ask that this home will be a safe and welcoming space for everyone who comes here.'

She paused for a moment. 'D'you want to say anything, Jimmy?'

Ah couldnae think of anythin so ah just says 'naw'.

She rung the wee bell and we closed wer eyes. Ah started followin ma breaths, countin inside as the lama'd taught me. And it was an easy wan this meditation, just seemed right. Efter whit seemed like a very short time ah heard her ringin the bell again and opened ma eyes. It was fully dark ootside noo, and for a few minutes ah watched the lights in the flats opposite, the trees bathed in weird blue light fae the streetlamps.

Later, in the kitchen, Barbara was checkin the food while ah stood leanin on the counter, feelin light and relaxed.

'Ah could nip oot for a wee bottle of wine if you like. Make it mair of a celebration.'

'If you want some yourself, Jimmy. Don't bother for me.'

'Sure?'

'I don't drink alcohol.'

'Oh, right.'

'Don't let me stop you.'

'Naw it's OK. It's no really worth it – ah'd only have the wan if ah'm drivin. Can ah dae sumpn . . . set the table?'

'Sure – place mats and napkins are in that drawer.'

Ah opened the drawer, started takin oot stuff. Ah really wanted tae ask her about no drinkin though. The only folk ah knew that didnae drink were alkies, reformed wans.

'Do you no like the taste or . . . ?'

She stirred sumpn, put the lid on it and sat down at the table.

'I gave up a few years ago when I got more into the meditation. It seemed a bit strange to be getting clarity

in one way and fuddling up my brain in another. I mean I wasn't a heavy drinker, just a few glasses of wine with a meal kind of thing, but it definitely interfered, made me a bit hazy.'

'Was it hard?'

'Not really, occasionally I missed it at the start, maybe at a party or something, or if I'd had a hard day but I just found other ways of unwinding . . . like the yoga.'

'Right. Ah've never really gied anythin up masel . . . Liz gave up smokin years ago and that was hellish for her, and for the resty us and all, she was that moany-faced, but ah've never smoked, so ah don't know whit it's like.'

'I stopped smoking ten years ago. It is harder than stopping drink certainly. Smoking is more of an addiction.'

'So, ah mean, the Buddhism . . . is that how you gie things up . . . ah mean, is that part of it? Ah mean, ah presume you've gied up meat?'

'Maybe giving up isn't the right way to think of it. You just choose something else. If you don't drink you get clearer; eating vegetables instead of meat, well, it seems lighter somehow, that's all. And it's just my choice . . . I mean I wouldn't try to persuade anyone else.'

'So you wouldnae expect your boyfriend tae be a vegetarian, then?'

'My boyfriend?'

'Ah mean if you had wan . . . or husband or that?'

'No I wouldn't, though it's unlikely that I'd have one.'

'Ah'm sorry, didnae mean tae be cheeky.'

'It's OK, I just mean that I'm not into having sexual relationships with anyone at the moment.'

'Gettin over somebuddy?'

'No, it's just like the not drinking. I find I have more clarity if I just . . . abstain from these things.'

'Right.'

'I'm sorry. I must sound like a real bore. It's just . . . what I feel is best for me now, you know.'

'Ah see. Sorry, Barbara, ah didnae mean tae pry intae yer private life. It's nane ae ma business. It's just, what wi us bein thegither here and the meditatin and that, ah kind of feel we're . . . well no friends exactly, but, ah suppose we are friends.'

'I hope we are friends, Jimmy. I'd like for us to be friends.'

'Good.'

'So what about your process?'

'Ma process?'

'You know, the meditation . . . I mean how is it working with the rest of your life?'

Ah sat there, wi a fork fulla food haufway between ma mooth and the plate.

'Well, you know, ah just dae the meditation. A lot of the time ah'm in the dark aboot how it affects anythin really. It just seems tae make other folk mad at me ah think.'

'Your wife and family don't approve?'

'Anne Marie's quite interested in it — she wants tae know whit it's aboot. John thinks ah'm aff ma heid but he's ma brother so he's always thought that anyway. And Liz . . . aye, ah think Liz doesnae really approve.'

'Doe she not approve of Buddhism or is it because she feels you're changing?'

'You know, Barbara, ah don't really know whit she thinks.'

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All the way along the motorway it was beautiful. Even in the daurk you could feel the cleanness of the night, then, just ootside Glesga a smirr of rain started and ah pit on the windscreen wipers. Rain, hame. Ah sterted tae smile tae masel. Rain, hame. The lights on the other side of the motorway were blurrin in the drizzle. Thon big metal horse loomin up at the side. Then the gasworks, painted blue – ‘Glasgow for it’. Ah wanted tae laugh. Glasgow for it. That’s the gemm. Embra’s lovely, a great place for a day oot or a wee break but Glesga’s hame.

Ah arrived back at the hoose tae find oor John staundin at the close door.

‘Just round tae see if you wanted tae go oot for a pint wi the birthday boy.’

‘It’s no your birthday tae the morra.’

‘Aye, but a man’s only forty the wanst – ah’m gonnae make the maisty it. Ah was supposed tae be gaun oot for a meal wi Tricia the night but she’s no feelin brilliant.’

‘Whit’s up?’

‘Nothin really, she’s just had the cold, but she thought she’d rather save hersel for the party the morra.’

We went in the hoose. Anne Marie was in the livin room playin wi her playstation.

‘Hiya, Da. Hiya, Uncle John.’

‘Hi, hen. Is yer mammy in?’

‘Aye, she’s in the bedroom – workin oot whit tae wear for the party the morra night.’

Liz came in tae the livin room.

‘Hi, John. How are you?’

‘Ah’m fine. Just here tae get your man oot for a pint – is he’s allowed oot the night?’

‘Oh, you know Jimmy, does his ain thing.’



She sat doon on the airm of the couch.

'Job all finished noo, Jimmy?'

'Aye, all done – got the cash in ma pocket.' Ah patted ma jaicket pocket.

'Gie you cash, did she? Ah had her doon as wanny the cheque brigade.'

'Aye, me too, but she just haunded me a wad a notes.'

'Must of been pleased wi the job.'

'Nae wonder, the hours it's taken him. He's no been hame tae nine a'clock at night this week. Ah hope it was worth it.' There was an edge tae her voice.

John looked at me, wi a big brother kind of look.

'It was a big job, right enough,' he says. 'Thon cornice – she wanted it painted three different colours and a bit a gold leaf at the corners and all. And she looked like the pernickety kind. Wouldnae fancy gaun hame tae her wi an empty pay packet. Raither strip woodchip. Right, son, are we on for this pint?'

'Awright. Just a couple, mind. Ah'm knackered and ah want tae enjoy masel the morra.'

'Want sumpn tae eat afore you go oot, Jimmy?'

'Naw, thanks hen, ah've had sumpn.'

'Barbara make yer tea again?'

'Aye.'

'Must of been really pleased wi the work efter aw.'

'Well, this boy is the David Beckham of the gold leaf. And ah promise ah'll no keep him oot late, Liz. We'll see you the morra night, eh?'

'Aye, John. See yous.'

'Night, Anne Marie. Liz, ah'll see you later.' Ah went tae kiss her and she turned her cheek tae me but didnae kiss me back.

As soon as we were oot the hoose John says. 'Jimmy, am ah mistaken or are things a bit chilly between yous two?'

'How d'you mean?'

'Well, Liz seems tae think that there's sumpn gaun on between you and thon Barbara wumman.'

'You know that's shite, John.'

'Ah know that's shite but it's what Liz thinks that's the point.'

Ah didnae reply.

'Is there sumpn you want tae tell your big brother aboot?'

'Look, ah swear tae God, John, there is nothin gaun on between me and Barbara.'

'What about you stayin late and her makin yer dinner? Whit's that all about.'

'Christ, ah thought ah was daein the right thing. If ah hadnae stayed late the job would of taken up haufy next week when we're supposed tae be startin on Macintosh's. And it made sense tae work through the rush hour and then come hame when the traffic's quieter. The wumman offered tae make me ma dinner – she was just bein decent. Ah mean look at that auld dolly up Kelvindale last spring – the wan that was bringin us rolls and sausage at lunchtime and home-made scones. Ah didnae see you refusin it.'

'Aye but she was aboot ninety-three, Jimmy. Ah cannae see even Boabby tryin tae get his end away wi her.'

'But ah don't fancy Barbara. I like her but that's it. Ah mean, you've seen her John, she's no . . . ah mean she just isnae the sorta wumman you would fancy. Ah mean she's OK ah suppose but she's just too . . . Embra.'

'So are you sayin you couldnae ever fancy anybody

fae Embra? Ah know whit you mean. Actually ah think she's a dyke.'

'Really?'

'Ah don't know, mibbe . . . who cares? Anyway the point is, Liz hasnae met her. For all she knows Barbara could be this gorgeous sexy wumman wi her eye on you and you could of been up tae all sorts wi a six-incher and a sheepskin roller. Look at it fae her point of view – you're comin hame at nine a'clock at night efter spendin a whole day alone wi this wumman. Suppose she was workin late every night wi some guy? If it was the other way roond, would you no be a bit jealous?'

'Ah know whit you're sayin, but ah just don't feel that way. Ah trust Liz.'

'Ah trust Tricia but ah still wouldnae want her tae be daein the late shift wi thon new doctor at the practice.'

'The wan that looks like thon guy oot *ER*, the foreign wan?'

'Aye. Look, all ah'm sayin, is, why don't you just make sure you spend a bit mair time on yer ain wi Liz? Take her oot for a nice meal, go tae the movies. Buy her some flowers.'

'Then she'll definitely think ah'm up tae sumpn.'

'Naw, she'll no. Anyway, the job in Embra's finished. You'll no be seein Barbara again.'

'Ah said we'd dae her wee back room later, mibbe efter Christmas.'

'Well, we can make sure that we baith go through. Surely Liz'll no think we're havin a threesome.'

Ah'm watchin Liz on the dance flair and she's lookin fantastic. She's up wi Alex, ma brother-in-law, a baw-faced guy who leaps around the flair wi nae sense of rhythm but loadsa

enthusiasm. He got her up for 'Brown Sugar' and even when ah was young that song was ancient. Liz is a brilliant dancer, but – she's tall and slim and the night she's wearin a kinda lacy skirt and a crop top that shows a bit of her belly when she's dancin. Her hair's usually quite smooth, doon tae her shoulders but the night she's messed it up and put loads a make-up and glitter on her cheeks. She said she was daein a kinda early Madonna look, black lacy gloves and net skirts, and it reminds me a bit of how she looked when we first went oot thegither. Ah'd went round tae Paul's hoose for the first time. We were still tryin tae be punk rockers though it was 1981 by this time, and we were just sittin in the livin room when Liz came in wi her pal, all dressed up tae go oot, dead pale make-up and loads a black eyeliner, dressed in a ruffled shirt wi big shouders, tight black troosers and they wee ankle boots ah always liked. She looked a lot aulder than fourteen then, dead sophisticated. Ah used tae get slagged stupit when ma mates fund oot she was only fourteen, but she seemed aulder, was always mair mature. Then, as ma da said, it didnae take a lot tae be mair mature than me. S'funny, ah think she's got younger lookin as the years have passed.

Ah'd decided tae re-create ma punk look for the party though ah didnae have the gear noo and ah don't think it'd fit me any mair anyway. No that ah'm fat or that. Ah mean oor John's put on the beef big style since he turned thirty. Tricia's a nurse and she's aye on at him tae loss some case he takes a hert attack. Ah've been quite lucky that way – seem tae just burn it all up – but ah'm no a skinny teenager any mair.

Anyway, ah got an auld black perra breeks and a tee shirt and ah ripped it up a bit wi a razor blade and stuck a few

safety pins roond. Ah bought chains oot a B&Q and hung them roond ma neck. While ah was puttin gel on ma hair and makin it aw spiky, Anne Marie sat and watched me.

'Da, did you really used tae look like this when you were young?'

'Aye, sort of, hen. Except ah used tae dye ma hair as well – ah'd purple bits in it at wan time.'

'But, ah mean, did you actually go oot like that?'

'Of course, that's the whole point – nae use sittin round the hoose where naebdy can see you, is there?'

'You look mental.'

'That's the idea – ah mean if you're a punk you're supposed tae look mental.'

Ah started jumpin around the room.

'I am an antichrist – I am an anarchist . . .'

'Gies a break, Da – hope you're no gonnae dae that the night. Some of ma mates'll be there.'

Tricia tellt Anne Marie tae bring along a coupla pals so's she widnae be on her ain. All the other girls in the faimly are either a bit aulder or a good bit younger than her.

'Mibbe ah'll ask them tae dance, then.'

'Puh . . . leeze . . . Ah'm away tae get ready.'

Ah turnt tae Liz. 'Would ye listen tae her? Sounds like sumpn oota *Friends* . . .'

'Aye, she's growin up.'

'Last year she was still just a wee lassie, intae Barbie and that.'

'No quite last year, Jimmy . . .'

'Two year ago she still believed in Santa.'

'Naw ah didnae,' Anne Marie's voice came fae the lobby. 'Ah just kidded on so's you wouldnae be disappointed.'



'You're no supposed tae be listenin tae this. Yer mammy and me were havin a private conversation.'

'Well you shouldnae be bawlin it oot, should you?'

Anne Marie appeared at the door. For a minute ah hardly recognised her; she was wearin a slinky wee frock and black tights and silvery shoes wi big platforms.

'Hen, you look gorgeous. Right, Cinderella, ready for your carriage?'

At first ah'd no been too sure about this idea of John's tae have fancy dress for his fortieth. Ah've been tae a coupla fancy dress parties but they were never up tae much. No everybuddy dressed up and the wans that did were always a bit hauf-hearted about it. You know, cairry a brush and stick on a witch's hat, or wear a dinner suit and kid on you were Bryan Ferry even if you're baldy and three feet tall. That kind of thing. But whether it was because Tricia'd been round twistin folk's airms or whether they just wanted tae dae it for John ah don't know but ah've never seen anythin like the outfits that walked through the door.

Everybuddy'd really made an effort. Wan wumman had done a Carmen Miranda and had made hersel a headdress wi real fruit. She could hardly walk it was that heavy. Another guy had hired a bear suit. Ah still don't know who he was as he refused tae even take the heid aff all night – he must of been roasted. Angie and Paul came as Barbie and Ken – and there was Dracula, Little Red Riding Hood and God knows whit all. It really broke the ice; everybuddy was up and dancin right away, no sittin roond hauf the night, and folk were mixin really well. John had hired the function room at the back of the Hielander and ah think he and Tricia just invited everybuddy either of them knew – neighbours, auld pals fae where they used tae stay, folk they'd been at school

wi, a hale team fae Tricia's work, no tae mention the faimly. Even oor ma came alang for a coupla hours though John got her a taxi booked for ten o'clock. She's just no up tae it any mair since ma daddy's passed on. Anyway, the place was jumpin.

And ah was jumpin, too. Liz looked brilliant and the DJ played loadsa records fae when we were aw young and nickin about thegether. Ah cannae sit still when 'New Rose' comes on – as soon as that, 'Is he really going out with her?' and that mental di-di-di-di riff sterts that's me away and of course the DJ had that on dead early requested by John, 'for ma wee brother'. The two ae us were pogoin thegether. Ah finally managed tae grab Liz away fae mad Alex and got the DJ tae put on 'Shake Some Action' for us. Anyhow, dancin and talkin tae folk ah hadnae seen for years is thirsty work so ah was knockin back the pints. Then 'Vicious' came on. Lou Reed – John's favourite of all favourites. It's a bit afore ma time really but he loves it and the two ae us used tae put it on and jump about the livin room when we were teenagers. So he grabbed me and the pair ae us got up on the dance flair, and ah think we were takin up that much room that everybuddy moved oot tae gie us space. There we were, beltin it oot, John shakin that great big arse of his as if he was some New York pop star and everybuddy laughin and shoutin us on and cheerin; then the two ae us kind of fell intae each ither and hauf collapsed and John's haudin on tae me, sayin over and over, 'Look at this man – this is ma fuckin brother and ah fuckin love this big guy – d'you hear that? Ah fuckin love you, son.'

'And ah fuckin love you, too.'

Then everythin sterted spinnin roond me and ah fund masel on the flair.

Next day ah cannae move oot ma bed tae two o'clock in the efternoon. Ah'd woke up at eleven feelin as if somebuddy'd beat me up – the back of ma heid was like a football and ah'd pains in ma legs and airms. Ma throat was like a desert, dry and prickly. Liz wasnae in bed beside me but she must of heard me groanin or sumpn cos the next minute she stuck her heid roond the door.

'You still alive?'

'Don't think so. Christ, much did ah have last night?'

'Don't ask me. Ah wisnae countin.'

'Ah cannae mind feelin this rough since . . . ah don't know . . .'

'Want a cuppa tea?'

'No the now, hen . . . mibbe later.'

'Irn Bru and a coupla Resolve?'

'That's mair like it.'

A few minutes later she was back wi a glass a Resolve and a bottle a 'Bru. Ah knocked back the Resolve and took a wee slug ae the ginger. Ma mooth started tae feel a bit better.

'Thanks, Liz. How are you?'

'No bad, actually. Ah drank a big glass a watter and a had coupla paracetamol when we came in. Seemed tae dae the trick.'

'Ah cannae even remember comin in.'

'Ah'm no surprised.'

'Christ, was it that bad?'

'Aye. But ah wouldnae worry about it. The state maisty them were in they'll no remember anythin aboot it.'

She got up and went tae the door.

'Anne Marie and me are away tae mass the now. Ah'll pick up ma mammy and go round tae hers for a wee while efter. Will you be OK?'

'Aye – ah'm beginnin tae feel a wee bit mair human already – that ginger's magic stuff so it is. Ah'll mibbe have slept off the worst by the time yous get back.'

'Right. See you later.'

About five a'clock our John came on the phone.

'So how are you? Recovered fae last night yet?'

'Never better.'

'Have you eaten anythin yet?'

'No much. Bit a toast. But ah could murder a curry noo.'

'That's just whit ah was thinkin. Tricia and me could get a cairry-oot and come round if you like.'

'Sounds good. Ah'll go and ask Liz whit she's wantin.'

'And ah'll bring the video. We havenae watched it wersels yet.'

'The video?'

'Aye. Of the party.'

Ah'd completely forgot there was a video. Wannu Jimmy's pals has a wee fancy camcorder and he'd been leppin about the hale night stickin it intae folk's faces and askin them tae say a few words about John.

'Ah didnae think you'd have it already.'

'You just connect it tae the TV. You don't need tae dae anythin tae it.'

'Oh, right.'

'Did you think ah was gettin Martin Scorsese tae edit it or sumpn?'

'Naw, just didnae realise you could watch them that quick.'

'Aye, it's nearly the twenty-first century noo, son.'

It was worse than ah could of ever imagined. There we were sittin round in our livin room watchin me and John

make complete eejits out wersels. Ah could remember us up dancin tae Lou Reed and him tellin me he loved me and then us fallin doon thegither but it got worse efter that. Ah must of been completely oot ma box for ah didnae remember the next bit. The DJ had put on that Pretenders' record 'Brass in Pocket' and John and me had stayed up dancin tae it, posin and prancin around like right chookies. When it got tae the bit in the lyrics when she's singin, 'ah'm gonna make you notice me, gonna use ma fingers' and all that, we'd mimed the actions, then ah'd started singin 'gonnae use ma arse' and pulled doon ma breeks and mooned at the camera. And there it was, in close up; ma arse wi two big spots on the left cheek. And John pauses the video at that point and the others are all laughin their heids aff.

'There you are, Jimmy, a movie star at last – got your best feature, too.'

'Aye, his posterior recorded for posterity.'

'Turn that pause button aff, John. Ah've seen his arse often enough – ah don't need a film of it.'

'D'you no remember any of this?'

Ah shook ma heid.

'Thank God the weans had went hame by then. Ah mean, video nasties is all very well, but Jimmy's arse . . .'

Anne Marie. Ah'd forgotten aboot Anne Marie. She hadnae seen me, but noo there was this video – how was ah gonnae make sure she didnae watch it? She'd remember there was a video – if ah said, 'Naw, you cannae see it,' she'd really think there was sumpn up. And it wasnae just the showin ma bum – she'd just think that was funny. It was everythin, the humiliation of it. Ah was pissed oot ma heid, crawlin around on a flair that drunk ah could hardly speak and it was all recorded on a video camera. That's the



thing aboot gettin steamed – you don't remember it and if you dae it's through a fog so it doesnae seem that bad, and everybuddy else has had a few so it doesnae matter.

But this. Twelve year auld and you see yer daddy lookin like a complete tosser. Ah couldnae bear it. And the resty them just seemed tae think it was a laugh. Even Liz.

'Whit's up Jimmy? You're lookin very serious.'

'He's wishin the make-up artist had put on a bit mair powder, covered ower they plukes a bit.'

'It's no funny.'

'Aw come on, son, a dab of thon Clearasil and they'll be away like magic.'

'It's no funny.'

'Have you lost yer sense a humour, man? You were pissed. We all were.'

'It's humiliatin.'

'Aw, come on, we all make fools ae wersels when we're pissed. Ah've seen you worse. Ah've seen masel worse.'

'Aye, but it's different, seein it on a screen.'

'It's just us that are watchin it, though, ah mean it's no gettin broadcast on Sky, is it?'

'If Anne Marie had been here the night she'd of seen this.'

'If she'd stayed a bit later last night she'd of seen you daein it in the flesh, if you'll pardon the pun.'

'You don't need tae remind me. Ah feel sick.'

'It's just yer stomach gettin back tae normal. You'll be fine the morra.'

Ah stood up.

'Ah cannae believe this. Yous are actin as if nothin has happened.'

Ah pressed the eject button and pulled the tape oot. Ah held it in ma haund.

'Is this the only copy?'

'Aye, Peter's gonnae make us a couple mair this week but he gied me the master so's we could watch it right away.'

There was a perra scissors sittin on tap of the mantelpiece. Ah broke open the tape, pulled it oot the casin, the long black strip a film fanklin as it fell ontae the flair. Then ah lifted the scissors and started cuttin the film tae bits.

John jumped up and tried tae get it oot ma haund but it was too late. Ah held it high in the air above his heid as he started tae wrestle it oot ma haund.

'John, watch yersel on they scissors.'

Tricia tried tae pull him away. Liz just sat there stunned.

'Whit the fuck dae you think you're daein? That's ma tape you're wreckin.'

'Ah don't want ma wee lassie seein me like that. And ah don't want anybuddy else tae see it ever again.'

Ah pushed him away fae me and continued cuttin, pullin mair tape oot and cuttin till there was nae way it could be repaired.

John was sittin on the flair, Tricia's airm round him.

'Come on, John, let's go.'

'Ah'm really sorry, John, Tricia, ah don't know whit's got intae him the night.'

'It's OK. Talk tae you later.'

Liz showed them oot the door while ah went through tae the kitchen and stuck the tape in the bin. Liz came through once they were away.

'Whit was all that about?'

She didnae sound angry, just confused, but ah couldnae talk about it then.

'Ah'm gaun oot for a walk.'

'Jimmy, watch yersel . . .'

'Ah'm OK. Ah'm just gaun oot for a walk. Ah'll be back later. See you.'

At first ah started tae walk, just walk, no thinkin about where ah was gaun. Everythin was a blur. Ah kept ma heid doon watchin the pavement, grey wi rain, and the smudged headlights a motors rushin by. Ah kept walkin, doon Maryhill Road past the pubs, lookin that welcomin in the daurk night, the sound a folk laughin and talkin. But it was the drink that made me dae whit ah done last night. Ah'd destroyed the tape, made sure naebuddy would see it again, but ah couldnae erase it fae ma heid. It kept runnin and rerunnin itsel ower and ower again tae ah stopped, put ma haunds roond ma heid and pressed against it, tryin tae press it away. Ah was staundin, hauf leanin against a wall and a wee wifie came up tae me, put her haund on ma airm.

'Are you OK, son?'

'Aye, ah'm fine.'

'You sure? You better away hame the noo.'

'Aye, right, missus.'

Hame. Ah couldnae go hame the noo. Couldnae face Liz, didnae know whit tae say tae her. She'd want tae talk about how ah'd reacted tae the video, mibbe she'd take John's side. She didnae seem that bothered about it, that's whit ah couldnae unnerstaund. As if it was sumpn ordinary. But, naw, ah couldnae face that the now. Ah kept walkin, heidin intae toon, and ah knew at the back of ma mind that ah'd end up at the Centre.

Ah knew it wasnae open on Sunday nights but ah wanted tae see the Rinpoche, needed tae be wi him, somewhere quiet, somewhere away fae all this. Ah rung the buzzer and it was him answered.

'Come on up, Jimmy.'

As soon as ah got up the stair and inside the lobby ah felt a great weight drain away fae me. It was that quiet and peaceful. Ah untied ma laces and took aff ma shoes.

'Ah'm sorry tae disturb you, Rinpoche, ah just couldnae think of anywhere else tae go.'

'You are very welcome. Please come through. Would you like a cup of tea?'

'Aye, that'd be brilliant.'

Ah went intae the kitchen wi him and he started fillin the kettle, settin oot mugs. Ah sat on the chair just watchin him. He done everythin that carefully, placin the mugs on a tray, layin tea biscuits in a fan shape on a plate, as if he'd aw the time in the world. When the tea was made, he smiled at me.

'I think we'll go through to the other room where we can talk.'

There was a room where folk could see the Rinpoche privately, just big enough for a coupla cushions and a coffee table. He put the tea-tray doon and sat cross-legged on the flair. He waved at the cushions.

'Make yourself comfortable, Jimmy.'

Ah hauf-sat, hauf-knelt, and lifted ma tea fae the tray. The Rinpoche sipped his and smiled at me. Noo ah was here ah didnae really know whit tae say. It seemed totally oot of place tae start tellin the Rinpoche aboot me gettin steamed and smashin the video, so ah sat for a minute, sippin ma tea and just bein there wi him.

'So, Jimmy, you have something on your mind?'

'Aye, don't know where tae stert. It's just, well, ah done sumpn really stupid, made a right fool of masel, and it's no even that really – it's just that everybuddy else thinks it's no that bad and ah feel as if ah don't unnerstaud them any mair.'

'Your family?'

'Aye, Liz and ma brother John maistly, but it's everybuddy really. Ah mean, we had this big party last night and it was brilliant and ah was havin a great time and everybuddy was celebratin, and noo . . . ah'm just totally confused.'

'Would it help to meditate with me, Jimmy?'

'Ah don't know, Rinpoche, ah feel as if ah've been kiddin masel on. Ah've been daein aw this meditation and tryin tae get clear and ah'm just nae further forward. See ah got pissed oot ma heid last night, know, drunk and ah just . . . well, how come ah can dae the meditation and then it has nae effect on the resty ma life? It seems tae be makin it worse, no better.'

'How do you mean exactly?'

'Well if ah hadnae been meditatin ah'd probly have got pissed and we'd all have had a good laugh aboot it the next day. But noo ah've had a big fight wi ma brother. Ah destroyed the tape of his party.'

'Why did you do that?'

'Ah didnae want embdy tae see it – didnae want Anne Marie tae see her daddy like that.'

'I see. Jimmy, you know in your job when you are painting people's houses how do you prepare the room?'

Ah looked at him. 'Prepare the room?'

'Tell me the steps you go through.'

'Well you start strippin the auld wallpaper.'

'And when you've started doing that, does it look better or worse than before?'

'Worse usually, you mean when the paper's hauf stripped and that, aye?'

'That's right. And then when the room is all decorated and finished . . . it looks better again, yes?'



'Yeah.'

'The mind is like a house, with many rooms. And some people's houses are very clean and tidy and clear while other people's houses have lots of junk in them. But our minds are very clever – we can keep some parts of our minds tidy by pushing the junk into other rooms. The meditation process is one of clearing. We need to clear the junk from the rooms we don't use, to pull it out, look at it. And it can get very messy for a while. But if we don't do it we don't ever get clear. I think you are just starting, Jimmy.'

Ah sat quiet for a minute, thinkin about whit he said. It made so much sense. Ah could see it that clear; ah minded a cartoon in a comic we used tae get when we were wee, called the Numskulls, ah think. Each picture was of a heid cut doon the middle so you could see inside. It was just like that, as if there was wee hooses inside the brain. Each section had a wee guy in it, controllin whit was happenin. When the person was sleepin the eyes would be havin a kip and when he was eatin the mouth would start workin overtime.

'Jimmy, let's go into the meditation room.'

We sat doon in fronty the Buddha, just me and him. It was the first time ah'd ever meditated alone wi him.

'Instead of doing the mindfulness of breathing I want you to sit and observe yourself. Observe your breath, observe your body, what it feels like. Take your attention round your body and just note how it's feeling; don't correct, don't judge, just feel. Then try to think of each of the people in your life that mean the most to you; your daughter, your wife, your brother. Take each of them into your consciousness and allow yourself to be conscious of how you feel about them. Don't try to force a feeling, don't try to feel good about them if you don't – just

let the feelings come and go as they wish, but without judgement.'

So ah done what he said. At first when he was tellin me it sounded dead complicated but he helped me, talked me through each part. It was as if ah'd never felt ma body afore; felt the tightness in ma airms and legs, the openness of ma chest, the wee niggles that ran aboot inside me that usually ah never even think aboot. Then as ma breathin slowed doon and ah sterted tae feel mair relaxed he took me through each person in turn. That was the really hard bit because as each feelin came up he tellt me no tae judge it. Wi Anne Marie ah just felt that ashamed that ah'd let her doon, even though she'd no seen me. Ah mean here she is, nearly a teenager, wi a daddy that acts like an eejit and all the time he's gaun tae meditation classes. Then Liz. That was haurd too cos ah love her – always have – but somehow ah cannae get her tae unnerstaund how this is that important tae me. There's a gap openin up between us. Ah can feel it and ah'm scared. Ah don't want it tae be like this but ah don't know whit tae dae. And John, ma brother. There we are pissed oot wer heids sayin how much we love each other and we cannae dae it when we're sober.

The tears sterted tae come, right runnin doon ma cheeks, and ma body was heavin, don't think ah've grat like that since a was a wee boy. Ah sat on the cushions, shudderin wi sobs and these big snotters runnin doon ma face. The Rinpoche handed me a great big white hanky; ah blew ma nose and it sounded like a car backfirin in the quiet of the meditation room. And ah fund masel startin tae laugh, hauf-laughin, hauf-greetin. The Rinpoche put his haund on ma airm and said very quietly. 'Good work, Jimmy. Good cleaning.'