

LATECOMER

*A Shavian Conversation-piece about sex, Love, Gay
Liberation and hypocrisy in three Acts*

by
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Autumn 1975

CAST

- Derek A junior lecturer. Late twenties. detached attitude, slightly sarcastic, certainly patronising. An air of world-weariness, physically unremarkable.
- Colin Same age. Small, wiry, graceful in his movements. Quick to the point of brusqueness.
- Simon 19, affected in voice and mannerisms, public school accent. This is not the same thing as traditional camp. He is according to the law 'illegal', so there is something defiant about this. The manner drops under stress, and he appears younger than his years.
- Axek Any age under 40. Bluff and extrovert, preferably physically big. Magnetic but not necessarily conventionally dishy.

SET

The play is set in the dining room of a very small and delapidated country cottage in Suffolk near Ipswich at the present time [1975]. There are entrances to hall and kitchen. For staging purposes all that is needed is a table and three chairs - the rest is created by the dialogue. It is late at night, and to suggest this, and the physical smallness of the room, lighting should be very tight. leaving areas of blackness on the edge of the stage.

PLAYING

Although the play is naturalistic in style and should be low-key for most of the action, there are a number of 'set pieces', which should be given their full weight almost operatically. It is important that the piece should not be weighted in favour of one character; they should all be attractive and sympathetic people as far as the audience is concerned, and each of their attitudes and arguments should be equally convincing at the time that they speak. The play is a comedy.

ACT ONE

[A dining table and chairs. On the table dirty dishes and the remains of a meal. DEREK is standing holding his head, COLIN looking at him sympathetically, holding his arms. The position is sexually ambiguous. They hold the freeze for a second, then break, as DEREK staggers around the room clutching and rubbing his head. He protests a bit too much.]

COLIN: Should've warned you about the beam. Sorry.

DEREK: Oooh!

COLIN: Does it hurt?

DEREK: Oh no, I always walk around rubbing my head like this. This place must have been built tor midgets.

[He continues rubbing his head, playing for sympathy.]

COLIN: It was. It's very old. They were all midgets then. No National Health. No Cod Liver Oil. *[Suddanly annoyed.]* Cut it out. It wasn't that bad.

DEREK: I'll have a lump the size of a cannonball tomorrow.

COLIN: Bullshit.

DEREK: All right, a blliard ball. *[Pause.]*

COLIN: I'm sorry about the mess. *[Joking]* It's the servants' night off.

[DEREK is watching him closely. No response.]

COLIN: Simon wanted to go out this evening, we thought we'd leave it till morning. We didn't know you'd be coming. *[Pause, then pointed.]* We didn't expect you.

DEREK: Yes. Even I didn't expect me.

COLIN: You're lucky we did go out. You'd never have found us otherwise. You'd have been dossing in the bus station.

DEREK: I doubt it. Something always turns up. Like you, for example. A pleasant surprise. *[Relaxing]* I mean that. Thanks. And don't worry about the Fanny Craddock droppings. *[Indicating leftovers on plate.]* No sweat. *[Jabs at food with a knife, curiously.]* What on earth was it? The original mess of potage?

COLIN: Sweetbreads.

DEREK: Can't say I ever fancied them. Those parts of the beast associated with bowel movements hold no charms for me. Or is that tripe?

COLIN: You always talk tripe. *[They both smile.]*

COLIN: *[Patiently]* Sweetbreads are the pancreas. I got the recipe out of one of Mum's books. You boil it for twenty minutes in water flavoured with lemon-juice and white wine, then batter with egg, breadcrumb. and mixed herbs, and fry till golden brown. More to the point, it's cheap as chips.

DEREK: Mmmm.

COLIN: It's revolting. We should have stuck to chips. Just shove it on one side.

[Pause. They both survey the room.]

DEREK: It's – very nice here.

COLIN: Small. All we could afford.

DEREK: Intimate. As the estate agents say. Just like Cottrell Road, remember?

COLIN: Could I forget?

DEREK: An intimate country cottage with period charm in secluded surroundings.

COLIN: In other words, we all keep hitting our heads on beams, the bog's at the bottom of the garden and the bus comes once

a week on market days. Thank Christ I hired a car. You be OK in here?

DEREK: Sure... *[Doubtful]* I can manage.

COLIN: If you'd let us know...

DEREK: I didn't know you were in the area. You didn't tell me.

COLIN: Didn't I? *[Careless]* I thought I did.

DEREK: *[Reproachful.]* No. I thought you were in Brighton with Dave.

COLIN: *[Suddenly evasive; walking round the room clearing things.]*
Well, I'm not.

DEREK: Obviously.

COLIN: I don't have to tell you everything I do. I wanted to keep it a secret. Christ, we're not married.

DEREK: You mean you didn't want Dave to find out about your dirty weekend.

COLIN: Dirty? At this rate it won't even be shop-soiled. *[With finality]* Goodnight.

[He turns to go.]

DEREK: *[Abruptly]* Why Simon?

COLIN: What?

DEREK: If you wanted to keep your extra-curricular activities a secret, why did you go away with Simon? You know he's got a mouth a mile wide?

COLIN: *[Turning quickly]* Did he tell you?

DEREK: Oh, come off it. It's one up to him that he knows something about you that I don't.

COLIN: Are you jealous?

DEREK: Of course not! It's just that Simon sees himself somehow as in competition with me for your - ah – favours.

COLIN: I don't understand you, I really don't. Your mind makes Hampton Court maze look like the Great North Road.

DEREK: It's obvious. He's very hung up on you.

COLIN: No!

DEREK: Sure. It sticks out a mile.

COLIN: *[Seriously]* Jesus, not another one!

DEREK: 'Oh, why do all these people keep falling in love with me? Why am I so irresistible?'

COLIN: You know I hate people falling for me.

DEREK: *[After a fractional pause, quiet.]* I know. *[Voice up]* The trouble with you is you're paranoid.

COLIN: No I'm not, I'm persecuted.

DEREK: Poor Dave... You know, he'll find out in the end that you've been lying to him. This way just makes it look worse.

COLIN: He'd have wanted to come. He'd have gone all funny and quiet. I'd have given in. There's no talking to him sometimes.

DEREK: I don't think it's unreasonable to want to spend a lot of time with someone you love. Don't you love him?

COLIN: Yes. No. I don't know. I don't like him much. Not most of the time. Always having to explain, it's a bit like being a kid again. *[Suddenly blazing]* Why the fuck do people keep making you feel guilty?

DEREK: You make yourself feel guilty.

COLIN. I don't.

DEREK: And you do spread yourself a bit thin. Your idea of visiting someone is a quick fag, a quick fuck and off into the blue horizon.

COLIN: Not with you...

DEREK: No. I don't get the fuck because I'm straight. But you're hardly likely to make Dave feel secure, now are you?

COLIN: Who's side are you on?

DEREK: Me? I'm on nobody's side but my own.

COLIN: Look, I will not answer to anyone. that's all there is to it, OK?

DEREK: OK.

COLIN: Then lay off. I came down here to enjoy myself.

DEREK: Among others. "I can love both fair and brown, him whom abundance melts and him whom want betrays..."

COLIN: Come again?

DEREK: Nothing. We've been doing Donne this week. doing, doing, Donne.

COLIN: Never read him.

[Voice offstage, coy Scandinavian accent, calls "Colin!"]

COLIN: [Calling] Coming.

DEREK: Not on the carpet, please, I've got to sleep here.

[COLIN turns to go, DEREK talks quickly to hold his attention.]

DEREK: I know what you mean, actually. You know, about Dave. You get trapped so easily. You trap yourself.

COLIN: Yeah?

DEREK: Whatever you do, don't live with anybody. Look what happened to me and Jane. There's an awful warning if ever there was one.

COLIN: [Shrugs] So? You came together, you stayed together, you split. Happens all the time.

DEREK: I still haven't got over it. I used to get so uptight about even looking at anybody else. The sins of the heart and all that. The guilt machine still works, even when you think you've put all that behind you. Look at you, you're acting guilty as hell.

COLIN: That's what Dave would like me to feel. Guilty. You too.

DEREK: The silly thing was that Jane didn't mind at all herself. She even thought it could be a good thing.

COLIN: What's good or bad about it? It's only gonads.

DEREK: You know, ever since we split, I keep discovering people she was screwing. *[Ironic]* Both sexes, You'll be glad to hear. What's so humiliating is, I never knew about it at the time. She never told me because she thought that *I'd* mind, and I'd never had the guts to do anything because I thought she'd mind.

COLIN: Why'd you want to know? What difference would it make? Your trouble is, you can never settle for what you've got.

DEREK: And what have I got?

[Pause]

COLIN: Are you sure you'll be OK in here?

DEREK: Sure.

COLIN: I'd better get back to Axel, he's getting impatient. I'm sorry about this... Shit, what am I being sorry for?

- DEREK: Don't worry. I'm big enough and ugly enough to look after myself, I don't need you to hold my hand. My lullaby shall be the sound of you two fucking the daylights out of each other.
- COLIN: Not out of each other, I don't think. Axel is what they call all man.
- DEREK: It is more blessed to give than to receive: "Love's passives are his activ'st part." That's not very liberated of you. You should be renouncing sex-roles, oppressive stereotypes of male and female, active and passive, butch and femme, searching for new ways to develop relationships. Isn't that the party line?
- COLIN: Who's talking about 'relationships'? This is a good screw.
- DEREK: And there speaks every boss who ever groped his secretary.
- COLIN: Don't preach at me, I've done my bit. I was going on demos with GLF when you were farting around with the debating society, remember? But I'm not gonna turn down something like Axel for that. I know which side my body's buttered on. Which reminds me...
- [COLIN picks up the remainder of the packet of butter from the table.]*
- DEREK: I knew I shouldn't have taken you to see '*Last Tango*'.
- COLIN: It's the last thing left in the house.
- DEREK: What's wrong with honest-to-god spit? You've had enough practice.
- COLIN: This is different.
- DEREK: Don't tell me. Your piles are playing up again.
- COLIN: *[Embarrassed]* Well, yes.
- DEREK: I've told you not to sit on cold radiators.

COLIN: I wasn't planning to.

DEREK: No, I know what you're going to sit on. *[COLIN is slightly shocked.]* Sorry. *[Pause]*

COLIN: Yea, well, we'll try not to disturb you.

DEREK: Don't worry. If I can't sleep, I've brought plenty of work with me. *[He indicates his bag in the corner.]* Twelve essays to mark on – quote – “The Ring and the Book: Browning's unreadable masterpiece, question mark.” I haven't even read the bugger myself. Not that it'll show. They haven't read it either. We're all getting quite good at academic camouflage. Okay, then. You in your small corner and I in mine. It'll make an interesting sort of counterpoint. Are the walls very thin here? I imagine so.

COLIN: Well, don't get carried away.

DEREK: Do I ever?

COLIN: We'll try to put on a good show for you. Keep in rhythm.

DEREK: Iambic pentameter? Thanks for the thought, but I'm not really a voyeur.

COLIN: Pity. I could get into being an exhibitionist.

DEREK: I'm sure you could, but I'm not going to encourage it.

COLIN: The end of a beautiful friendship. Hey-ho.

DEREK: Idiot!

[A short pause, then voice offstage as before, now slightly annoyed:]

AXEL: Colin!

COLIN: Yeah. I'd better go.

[He turns and exits abruptly. DEREK stares after him.]

DEREK: *[Softly]* "Since you will be true, you will be true to them that are false to you".

[He starts to clear furniture and plates to make room for himself.]

You bastard! "Didn't know you were coming." Maybe not, but you still picked those two up after you'd met me. You needn't have done that. I nearly fell for that one. You little shit!

[Cynical laugh. COLIN re-enters, stops awkwardly]

COLIN: [Hesitating] I didn't say goodnight properly. [Quickly] It
Is nice to see you. Really. Quite like old times.

DEREK: No Jane.

COLI: We've got Simon.

DEREK: Much the same thing, true. *[Remembers]* 17a, Cottrell
load. Den of vice –

COLIN: Drugs –

DEREK: Sex –

COLIN: For you and Jane –

DEREK: Wild abandon – parties –

COLIN: Christ, those parties!

DEREK: The three of us –

COLIN: One for all –

DEREK: Good times, good times. "The days we have seen, Master
Shallow." *[Pause]* Well, "goodnight. sweet prince, and
flights of angels hymn thee to thy rest." I give you my
blessing – not that you need it.

COLIN: Don't be sarky.

DEREK: I'm not being sarky. I just find it amusing, the lengths to which you go to get a screw. I was watching you working on Axel and Gerry – *after* I met up with you.

COLIN: They didn't need much working on. *[Laughs.]*

DEREK: All the same, all the lies, all the small talk. Getting drunk. You're still a little slurred, you know, It hasn't quite worn off yet.

COLIN: It's worn off enough, that's just tiredness.

DEREK: Sorry, I'm keeping you up. But it *is* interesting. Slitting around in bars, listening to music you don't really like, talking to people you have nothing in common with, apart from being gay - and for what? To deposit a spoonful of fluid somewhere. It sounds like a sinister plot by the Keep Britain Tidy campaign. Kindly Deposit Your Sperm in the Receptacle Provided. As if any of it mattererd.

COLIN: You're making the big deal, not me. I don't mind, it's one way of living. Goodnight.

[He turns to go again.]

DEREK: *[Hurriedly]* You know, it was rather strange, meeting like that, in the pub. I was just passing through on my way to Cambridge. I thought I could make the connection, but the bastards have switched over to the winter timetable.

COLIN: You told me.

DEREK: You were the last person I thought I'd meet.

COLIN: You said tha' too.

DEREK: But it's true. I didn't even know it was a gay pub.

COLIN: *[Laughing]* That's what they all say. Didn't your mother ever tell you? Gay pubs are always close to the bus station. It makes life easier. Then you don't have to spend hours

searchomg through your gay guide or ask a policeman the nearest place you can pick up a leather boy. And the locals can find all the fresh meat too. *[Pause]* It *is* strange, though finding you like that.

DEREK: Kismet. Fate.

COLIN: I didn't want to go out tonight, there was a flick on telly. But Simon was getting all steamed up...

DEREK: Probably trying to broaden his limited horizons. Shame his sex life's so unsatisfactory.

COLIN: Is it?

DEREK: Isn't everybody's? But Simon... well, he's very new to the mating game.

COLIN: You're wrong there.

DEREK: Sure he is. Only came out this term at college. Drab little thing he was before that, the sort who carries around one of those free plastic clipboards that the banks give you. But now the moth has become a butterfly. I wish he was in my department sometimes. I seem to be stuck with the clipboards still.

COLIN: God! And the stories he's been telling me...

DEREK: Simon is blest with a vivid imagination and a wide reading from the restricted shelves of the Bodleian Library.

COLIN: Well, well, well.

DEREK: Still, I'm sure he's an asset to the local gay scene.

COLIN: He hasn't done too well so far. I don't understand it. He's young.

DEREK: I would have thought the locals were hungry for new blood.

COLIN: Not everyone's into teen queens.

- DEREK: Teen queens? [Aesthetic grimace] What a vile phrase. Even so, there can't be much doing in a small town. That's probably why they gravitate to the bus station. Like Dracula - new blood to keep them young.
- COLIN: It's not bad here. I like coming down. At least it's a port. There's a lot of people about for a town this size.
- DEREK: Lucky you.
- COLIN: You sound bitter.
- DEREK: Of course I'm not. I'm straight, I keep telling you'. Count me out. I'm strictly an accredited observer.
- COLIN: *[Adopting dreadful Irish accent]* And 'tis a terrible waste to be sure.
- DEREK: *[Jokey also]* That's the trouble with you militants, always looking for converts.
- COLIN: And that's the trouble with you straights, you think that because I'm gay I'll go for anything in trousers and no man's virtue is safe. I remember we leafleted The Pewter Pot in Osney Mead a while back, and there were all these little old men with trousers up to their chests and fag ash down their ties, leaning over the bar like this... And as soon as they read the leaflet they stood bolt upright like they'd been shot up the arse. The three of us had a good six feet clear all round us – and this was a crowded pub. What a cheek, eh? As if I'd fancy any of them.
- DEREK: Doesn't blue serge turn you on?
- COLIN: Not when there's twenty yards of it covered in beer stains, and smelling of incontinence, no. Same with kids, too. When there's a demo, Mums drag their kids away – "Don't go anywhere near those nasty men." What are they frightened of? Who the fuck's into chapped thighs and teeth braces?
- DEREK: There are some...

COLIN: Count me out. People like that give us a bad name. I can earn my own bad name, thank you.

DEREK: You need all the support you can get.

COLIN: It's people like you we need support from, you're in a position to do something.

DEREK: Junior lecturer, Grade One? Come off it...

COLIN: You teach, you write. You could say something. But all you do is stand back and admire your own cleverness.

DEREK: *[Stung]* Now who's trying to make who feel guilty? You seem to think that everyone who isn't homosexual is somehow abnormal. It's such a small world you live in, with nothing but your gay friends. Gay meetings, gay pubs, gay clubs. You see everything upside down. Everyone has to be involved in the gay cause. As if there weren't a hundred and one other things worth fighting for. No, keep your obsessions to yourself, don't work out your hang-ups on me.

COLIN: That's balls and you know it.

[Embarrassed pause. They have been too heated.]

COLIN: Yeah... well... *[He makes to go.]*

DEREK: You remember *The Importance of Being Earnest*?

COLIN: Sure. You came to see it in Cowley when we were doing it at work.

DEREK: God, yes. 'The Oxford Co-operative Society Amateur Dramatic Society presents...' *[Laughs]* It was the most bloody awful show I'd seen in my life.

COLIN: It was fun when the set fell down.

DEREK: And there you were behind it with a hammer in one hand and a can of Newcastle Brown in the other. You were the best thing about the evening.

COLIN: Why do you ask?

DEREK: I was just trying to remember that routine we worked out.

COLIN: Oh, that. *[Assumes Lady Bracknell voice]* I have always been of the opinion that a man who desires to get married should screw everything or nothing. Which do you screw?

DEREK: "I screw nothing." You bastard! This is definitely not my part.

COLIN: Just say your lines. "And what are your sexual politics?"

DEREK: "I'm afraid I really have none. I'm an uncommitted bisexual."

COLIN: "Oh, they count as homosexuals. They sleep with us. Or *come* in the evening, at any rate."

[They both laugh. Tension gone.]

DEREK: Oh, Colin. You're great. I do love you.

[He tousles COLIN's hair, as they hug. COLIN pulls away.]

COLIN: Listen, Derek. You only have one life, ever. And I'm not going to have an ounce of fat on mine.

DEREK: *[Still bantering]* Ah, you will "burn with a hard, gem-line flame." Come back Walter Pater, all is forgiven.

COLIN: Don't give me all that stuff. The fact is, I know what I want and you don't. And right now what I want is lying upstairs and is very hot and steamy.

[Enter SIMON in a towelling dressing gown.]

SIMON: If someone doesn't go and throw a bucket of cold water over that Swedish meatball, I shall go up the wall. It's quite enough having to cope with one raving sex maniac who hasn't hit port for three months, without having another

one standing in the doorway making helpful suggestions. I thought I'd left the gym instructor behind at school. *[To COLIN]* I didn't know you were into leather, Colin. *[General]* He used to treat us like performing dogs.

COLIN: Who did?

SIMON: The gymn instructor. Gave us lumps of sugar as we vaulted over the horse.

DEREK: *[Interested]* Are you really into leather, Colin?

COLIN: No. Not really.

SIMON: Well, all I can say is that's a very interesting piece of apparatus which Axel is wearing, and he says he found it in *your* cupboard.

DEREK: Maybe his dad left it behind when he went abroad.

COLIN: Shit!

[He exits furiously. Sound of steps going upstairs, door slamming, then argument. SIMON and DEREK burst out laughing.]

DEREK: Well, well, well. Colin into leather. You live and learn. I wonder why he's ashamed of it.

SIMON: He's just ashamed being found out. Honestly, though, you should have seen him. Just standing there, with this thing with all these straps on, waving around like some sort of manic elephant's trunk, saying, *[Swedish accent, imitating AXEL]* "Up – down – why don't you move this way, Simon?" It was like he was posing a wedding photograph. Or maybe directing traffic. When he started to get excited I thought he'd have my eye out. I mean, the size of it! I couldn't get over it. I had to squeeze round the end. I never knew he was such a size queen.

DEREK: And to think of the times he's gone on at me about "relating to the whole person" when I was rowing with Jane. What a hypocrite!

SIMON: Oh yes, they're all the same. They talk about soldarit but you won't find them in the pubs talking to the frustrated old men reduced to watching from the sidelines over their overpriced halves of lager. I'm surprised you hadn't cottoned on to Colin before.

DEREK: I didn't know you felt like that. I thought that for you, the sun shone out of Colin's arse.

SIMON: I've learnt better these last few days.

DEREK: Don't you trust him?

SIMON: Let's just say, if he gave me a pound note, I'd ask him to write his name on the back of it.

DEREK: At the time he believes what he says. He's not being deliberately dishonest.

SIMON: Neither are most people. No, his honesty's never been questioned - it's never even been mentioned. Well, good luck to him while the fleet's in. *[Mock Horror]* You should have seen it, though... *[He makes a size gesture]*

DEREK: *[Distancing]* Really?

SIMON: It's all right for you and Colin, you're older than I. I'm just the new boy.

DEREK: Like hell.

SIMON: I mean, as a practising homosexual. One day I may get it right too.

[Pause. He looks at DEREK hopefully. No response.]

SIMON: I must say that my encounter with Nancy with the laughing dildo has quite put me off my share of the Horlicks.

DEREK: Horlicks?

SIMON: Stops night starvation.

DEREK: I wish you'd get a new joke book. Max Miller's been dead nearly twenty years, you know.

[A laugh from upstairs, and the sound of two bodies falling on the bed.]

DEREK: I think, they've made it up.

[He gets his books out of his bag, and turns pointedly to them. Pause.]

SIMON: [Chattily] What's the news from the wicked city, then? How are the dreaming spire? Still dreaming, I trust? And the screaming choirs? Still screaming?

DEREK: You've only been away three days.

SIMON: Still, things happen very fast during termtime.

DEREK: Oh, the usual. "Camp candle-carrying choirboy cruises proctor at professor's requiem"; "ex-Lord Chancellor solicits undergraduate at homosexual nudist colony." Same old headlines. *[Pause]* What's it like round here? I couldn't see in the dark.

SIMON: Oh, OK. Very flat, Norfolk.

DEREK: We're in Suffolk.

SIMON: It's still very flat. You can see for miles - if there's anything you want to see. Can't say that I do. *[Suddenly annoyed]* Would you mind looking at me when I'm talking to you? It's one of your most annoying habits.

DEREK: That, my lad, is no way for an undergraduate to talk to a lecturer.

SIMON: Precocious undergraduate - junior lecturer.

DEREK: *[Looking up]* Sorry. You were saying?

SIMON: I can't remember. You've confused me.

[DEREK returns to his book. Pause.]

SIMON: It seems I'm to sleep with Gerry tonight. I'm sorry...

DEREK: That's not a very Swedish name, is it?

SIMON: English mother. Colin's been arranging things again. I think he's trying to kiss and make up. Every time I've been out with him here, he picks up two and insists that I have one.

DEREK: Oh, come on, that's not making things up. It's clearing the way for the one he fancies, isn't it?, It's pure selfishness.

SIMON: *[Crestfallen]* Oh. I thought he was trying to be friendly.

DEREK: Too likely. Look, hadn't you better go? The leftovers will start to get restless.

SIMON: Leftover? That's no way to talk about a Petty Officer. Petty in *every* way, I might add. Still, I suppose it'll broaden my mind, if nothing else.

[Sound of a pair of shoes hitting the floor. More laughter.]

DEREK: They're not wasting much time. And if you'll take my advice, neither will you, or else Gerry will go off the boil.

SIMON: I think he was tepid at the best of times. *[Looking up]* Axel's very nice. A credit to the navy. I can't say I blame Colin.

DEREK: And where Colin leads...

SIMON: I know, I know. I must follow. *[Whispered]* He isn't even circumcised, you know.

[Pause]

SIMON: Why were you so funny in the car tonight? Axel was trying ever so hard to be friendly, and you virtually cut him dead.

DEREK: Oh, For Christ's sake, go and get on with it. You allowed yourself to get into this situation, I'm not going to get

you out of it. I'm tired, and I've got to teach this thing to twelve spotty freshers on Tuesday who think that, Browning is something to do with gravy. "Go practise if you please. Leave a child alone."

SIMON: Child!

DEREK: It's a quote from the 'Ring and the Book'. Book Three. That'd as far as I've got.

SIMON: I suppose I really ought to get more experience. There's nothing more depressing than an aging ingenue, is there?

DEREK: I wouldn't know.

SIMON: Sometimes I feel like Bette Davis in whatever happened to Baby Jane?

DEREK: Don't worry, if the worst comes to the worst, people will always love you for your mind.

SIMON: Oh, I know, I know. I get it all the time. "Simon, you're one of the few people I can talk to." "It's so nice to find someone who isn't just interested in sex." "I think of you as my friend, Simon." From Colin, for example. I am Colin's friend. Big deal. He pops in on a flying visit between beds, moaning because he's got the clap, or he can't keep up with it all and he's double-booked for Thursday. Oh, the privileges of being Colin's friend!

DEREK: It all sounds very familiar. [*Gently*] You have got it bad, haven't you?

SIMON: It's all over now.

DEREK: Sounds like it.

SIMON: It just takes time to get used to; it was OK being friends while I wanted to be lovers. Now I can't do that, I'm not so sure I even want to be friends. Not after - Derek...

DEREK: In that case, why don't you just plunge into a life of debauch? Like Lord Byron? Very romantic and could be quite fun.

SIMON: Who, me? The original nature's wallflower? I don't know why it is, but I always end up at discos, standing at the bar pontificating about the Liebestod with some opera queen, while the bodies on the dancefloor sway temptingly in the corner of my vision. I see people sitting on their own in corners, and I go and talk to them because I think they must be shy, only to find that the reason they're on their own is (a) because they're with someone that they're waiting for, (b) that they're so boring they could turn you to stone like the Gorgon at twenty paces. Or (c) that they've got breath like a charnel house. It's always my luck. And everyone says, "Oh Simon, he's such a nice steady boy. So friendly. He's not like all the rest." So they stop and have a chat, when there's no-one else they can bitch with, or fancy. And you really can't say, "Excuse me, I want to stand on my own so that dish with the blond moustache can pick me up" - I mean, it's hardly polite, is it? But I just wish for once that somebody, youngish and prettyish nothing special, mind - would talk to me, not out friendship, or boredom, or because he 'liked my mind', but purely and simply because he wanted this rather skinny and angular body of mine.

Pardon the unaccustomed bout of gravity; it must be the country air.

DEREK: But Simon, you like being a loser. You're a masochist.

SIMON: No I'm not. It just always happens to me. I'm the only person I know who can fight a duel and come third. I just can't do it. Some people - well, Colin for instance - can just exchange casual glances, and five minutes later he's off hand in hand for a quick romp through the sex manuals.

[Bed creaking upstairs, a little cry of pain, then more laughs.]

DEREK: I think Colin's winning on points.

- SIMON: See what I mean? But me? I can get to the stage of having someone actually sitting there in my room, in front of me, having coffee three feet away, and we talk and talk, and then we talk some more, and we both know what's meant to happen, but I can't make it happen. The bed's only six feet away, but for all that I do about it, it might as well be on the other side of the Grand Canyon. I just sit there babbling away - I've been known to be still at it at four in the morning, still postponing the crucial moment. Once I just fell asleep in an armchair in mid-sentence. Woke up a couple of hours later, freezing cold with a stiff neck. He'd gone, of course. I don't understand any of it.
- DEREK: What you need is a boost of confidence. You're just scared of being rejected when you make the first decisive move. That's why you stay at the bar, because it's safer. That's why you fell for Colin, because you want to be like him. Sex doesn't happen by spontaneous combustion, you know. What you really need is someone to fall desperately in love with you for a change, get that wilting little ego back into shape.
- SIMON: *[Derisively]* The love of a good woman maybe? No thanks. I had that once, when I was sixteen. A friend of mama's. An ageing theatrical harridan of the provincial school who thought Grand Guignol was a kind of liqueur. Thick as the proverbial brace of planks. It was the silicon injections. They'd gone to her brain instead of her tits –
- DEREK: Simon! –
- SIMON: I know, I shouldn't. But they were obstinately unalluring.
- DEREK: That has nothing to do with silicon. Are you saying that this poor woman made you the affected little fairy you are today?
- SIMON: No. I was always an affected little fairy, I think. At least, inside the fat grubby schoolboy I used to be, there was an affected little fairy struggling to swish out. I don't know why I'm telling you all this. Probably because *[hesitating]* I'm getting rather fond of you. *[Looks for a reaction]*

DEREK: *[Ignoring this]* People always tell me things. I'm Pisces – "intuitive, emotional, secretive, easily influenced by company, good listeners". We hold a very flattering mirror up to people. In fact, we don't exist in our own right at all. Pour water on us and we vanish in a puff of green smoke, like the Wicked Witch of the West.

SIMON: *[Disappointed]* Oh.

DEREK: And you're trying to avoid going back upstairs. Oh, buzz off, there's a good chap.

[Pause]

SIMON: How does he do it?

DEREK: *[Exasperated]* Who do what?

SIMON: Colin. always gets what he wants. And he's not even pretty.

DEREK: He knows what he wants, he shows people he wants it, without apology.

SIMON: *[Pointedly]* I show people what I want.

DEREK: You ask for it. You don't take it as of right. It's an aura of certainty.

SIMON: I suppose it depends on whether you were taught sex or manners first. I learnt manners too early and sex too late. I find it all faintly distasteful. It's too pushy. He's always the one who takes his shirt off first at a hot disco. He pushes in front of people in queues and muscles in on conversation.. He's one of nature's Australians.

DEREK: Keep going, you may convince yourself. *[Pause]* Actually, you're wrong, you know. He is rather pretty. Not in any obvious way but - definitely attractive. If you like that sort of thing. And now I really must get on.

SIMON: I'm sorry. [He turns to go] Er - you won't tell Colin any of this, will you?

DEREK: Why should I?

SIMON: You're very close. You tell him most things.

DEREK: Not everything. I didn't know about the leather, now did I?

SIMON: He has a rather different impression of me, you see. I've told him – well, never mind what I've told him. I'd just hate him to think I was so – innocent.

DEKEKL I Understand. I won't say anything. You can trust me.

SIMON: Do you promise?

DEREK: Cross my heart and hope to die. Hope to be eaten by a crocodile.

SIMON: I'm serious.

DEREK: Doesn't suit you.

SIMON: Don't be so bloody patronising.

DEREK: Look, what makes you think your affairs are so interesting to everybody? In a few years' time, they won't even interest you. I'm only twenty-eight, but already most of the surprise element has worn off in my life. Pretty well anything I ever say to anybody I've said before. It's all déjà vu. That's what comes of hanging around a university for any length of time. First year students always sound like first year students, finalists like finalists, and dons, God help us, like dons. Sooner or later you run out of original insights into the world, so you start repeating the old ones, though only the ones that sound good, and even those with decreasing conviction. The only fun left is in observing the smallest changes in a few very basic behaviour patterns. You'll have to accept that everything that seems so new and exciting and horrible and impossible and unique now, has been said and done and felt a thousand times before, and is happening all over the world at this very moment in a hundred and one different places to millions of different

people. There's no reason I should tell anybody about you, Simon. There's no reason they would be interested.

[Pause.]

SIMON: Golly. That's depressing.

[DEREK tries to read again.]

SIMON: Derek... *[More sharply.]* Derek! *[DEREK looks up, SIMON looks down again.]* I'm sorry... about this evening, and Colin's arrangements and everything.

DEREK: Thanks. That's good to know.

SIMON: I couldn't help it, honestly. He gave me no choice. I'd much rather be with you.

DEREK: How touching.

SIMON: I just wanted to say, I know why you're here, and we can work something out, I'm sure.

DEREK: What are you talking about?

SIMON: I thought you'd come because...

DEREK: I didn't know anyone was down here.

SIMON: Oh, stop it. Accidental meeting, my arse! Little Mister Innocent just happens to walk into the only gay pub within fifteen miles of where we're staying, just happens to be passing through, just happens to find us there. Come off it. I'm not that naïve.

DEREK: No-one told me you were away.

SIMON: What are you playing at? There's no point in pretending. As you would say in your role of Marge Proops, you've absolutely nothing to gain from it.

DEREK: To gain from what?

- SIMON: *[Suddenly very emphatic]* The scene is set in a typical student party as brought to you by *The News of the World*. Note the authentic pool of Party Four Double Diamond through which the guests wade in the kitchen, and the tasteful garnish of vomit round the toilet seat. From the living room we hear the eloquently mind-blowing strains of 10cc, and glimpse the stoned bodies going through the motions which they imagine are suggestive of abandon. Time – 1 am. Date – Saturday 27th May 1975. Exactly one week ago, to be precise.
- DEREK: Okay.
- SIMON: *[Continuing relentlessly]* But who is this hunched and supercilious figure sitting on the stairs so assiduously getting drunk on the wine he brought himself, which he has been careful to hide all evening? Can it be our own beloved junior dean, whom everyone calls by his Christian name, and nobody knows anything about?
- DEREK: I said, Okay.
- SIMON: *[Remorseless]* And who is this who chats to him because he feels so sorry for this lonely figure? Who but big-hearted gullible Simon, as usual?
- DEREK: I was not lonely. I'd been talking to Colin all evening.
- SIMON: Until Colin went off with that boy from the Poly. Remember?
- DEREK: Of course I remember, but that was just the...
- SIMON: And I suppose you remember me virtually carrying you back to my room, and dosing you with enough black coffee to give you caffeine poisoning?
- DEREK: So?
- SIMON: But for heaven's sake, you stayed the night. You made love to me.
- DEREK: You made love to me. And I was drunk.

SIMON: I thought that at least I'd ... I mean, I told you everyth1ng... and then you turned up here, I tbought that we'd...that we were... Derek, look at me, please -

DEREK: We weren't. We aren't.

[SIMON bursts into tears. DEREK grabs and holds him.]

DEREK: Oh Simon, I'm sorry. But it's really not on. OK, it was all very nice. But I really am straight, you know. That scene's just not me. You'll have to get used to it. There's no point carrying a torch for someone who isn't available. You've got nothing to gain from it. I'm – well – 95% straight, shall we say?

SIMON: There it goes again, those damned percentages. The quantity theory of bisexuality. Little sex tanks inside you, so many gallons for your own sex, so many gallons for the other, and don't masturbate or you'll use it all up. *[Turns on DEREK]* Well, let me assure you, last Saturday you were 100% homosexual, a fully paid-up card-carrying faggot, and don't go fooling yourself that it wouldn't happen again under similar circumstances.

DEREK: *[Gently]* That's better. Get it out of your system. Look, I'll tell you something I haven't even told Colin, so you're very priveleged. Know where I' vew been the last couple of days? Staying with Jane - no, it's true. She's teaching in Norwich now. It was a bit awkward at first, but we got on O.K. Anyway, I think rows with her were much more fun than connubial bliss with anyone else. So it looks as if she might be moving back to Oxford if things work out. She'll have to find another job, of course, I can't afford to keep her, but it's definitely on the cards. So that rather rules out anything else, you see. I really am straight after all.

SIMON: Thanks a million. That's a great help. I hope you'll be very happy – can I be bridesmaid? *[Pause, seriously]* I always liked Jane. She was the only girl I could talk seriously to about sex. *[Recovering his manner]* She's the only woman I ever found who didn't treat me with ostentatious tolerance. You know so called 'fag hags', of course? I

always seem to end up as a 'het pet'. But, Jane, well – Jane was different. We seem to share the same taste in men. *[A grimace]*

DEREK: 'She sent her regards.

SIMON: That's nice.

DEREK: She says she hopes to see you soon.

SIMON: Perhaps I could go and visit her too... Norwich isn't far...

DEREK: *[Quickly]* No, better wait 'till she moves to Oxford. If it comes off. Then you can tell her all your troubles. Perhaps she'll fix you up with someone gorgeous.

SIMON: Oh my God, not another one. Not after these last few days with Colin.

[They both laugh]

DEREK: All gone? All better?

SIMON: A little better. Definitely not gone. But thanks anyway.

DEREK: In that case, dry your eyes, powder your nose, and get off upstairs. Bed thy pickup and walk.

SIMON: *[Pulling himself together]* You're right, of course. With any luck he'll have gone to sleep by now. After all these dramas I don't think I'm fit for a tintack, let alone a screw.

DEREK: In any case, give me a big sloppy goodnight kiss, and I'll see you in the morning.

[They kiss. Enter AXEL in a pair of briefs, tall and magnificently healthy. He speaks with a heavy Swedish accent, which I haven't produced here. He has a very hearty manner, laughing loudly at his own jokes. He looks at them for a second with wry amusement before coming in.]

AXEL: And what is that? *[They spring apart]* What is wrong with Gerry? You don't like him, Simon? Or maybe you want

more? For some men, sex is like Chinese food. Half an hour later you are hungry again.

SIMON: Oh dear, the fleet's in again. Axel and his amazing nuclear knickers.

DEREK: Nuclear knickers.

SIMON: High risk of fall-out, my dear

AXEL: You want a party, Simon? We all join together, one big happy family, yes? You like that?

SIMON: Any experience which remotely reminds me of the parental bosom is likely to be as aphrodisiac as a pensioners' matinee of *The Sound of Music*. What brings you down here? Man overboard?

AXEL: We have no grease left.

SIMON: What, no 'Axel Grease'?

DEREK: *[Groans]* Oh, God!

AXEL: It is a disaster. Colin is hurting. We must not have that. Do you have anything? Vaseline? Baby lotion? Simon?

SIMON: Sorry. My nappy rash is not what it used to be.

DEREK: What happened to the butter? Colin took it with him.

AXEL: He trod in it. *[They all laugh.]* It is all on the carpet. No good. Derek?

DEREK: Not something I carry, I'm afraid.

AXEL: Oh, I thought –

DEREK: You thought wrong. Are you sure you haven't got anything, Simon?

SIMON: All I've got is Head and Shoulders.

DEREK: It would give you inner cleanliness, I suppose.

SIMON: It would certainly give you a new experience. Like stinging nettles up your bottom, I imagine.

DEREK: *[Mocking]* But Simon, you know how important it is to avoid hurting Colin.

AXEL: Are you sure you have nothing left, Derek?

DEREK: I don't use it. I don't need it. Perhaps there's some cooking oil in the kitchen, Axel – why don't you go and look?

AXEL: You look. I do not know where.

DEREK: Neither do I. I'm a stranger here too.

AXEL: A stranger?

DEREK: Could you have a look, Simon. You know your way around.

SIMON: I suppose so. The things I do for European Unity.
[SIMON exits. AXEL beams at DEREK, who turns back to his books.]

AXEL: You stay here long, Derek? *[Pause]* Me, I go back to my ship tomorrow. Tomorrow? Today! Do you have the time? *[Pause]* It is very nice here. Very quiet. Do you like it? *[Pause]* Why behave like this for me, Derek? Why don't you say Hello tonight? Why are you not more friendly?

[No response. AXEL shrugs, whistles a disco tune from earlier in the evening. He sees DEREK's rucksack over in the corner, looks curious, glances at DEREK, then tiptoes over to it, and very quietly lifts the flap. He carefully feels inside the bag, and smiles broadly as his hand touches something. He slowly pulls it out. It is a scarcely-used tube of KY. He continues whistling or humming and anointing his finger, creeps round the back of DEREK. When behind him he quickly makes the sign of the cross on DEREK's forehead.]

AXEL: "I faderns och sonens och den heliga andens namn..."

[DEREK cuts him off by lungeing furiously and grabbing the tube from him, AXEL putting up token resistance and laughing loudly.]

DEREK: Bastard! You great cock-sucking -

[Re-enter SIMON with bottle of olive oil, which cuts DEREK off. DEREK quickly hides the tube of KY in his lap under the table.]

SIMON: *[Oblivious]* It seems such a terrible waste with the precious fluid the price it is these days. Just think how many delicious omelettes you could make from it too. Well, go easy on it, Axel, my dear, that's positively the last oleaginous compound left in the house. No – more – left. Verstehen?

AXEL: Thank you, Simon. You are a gentleman, an English gentlemen. I have not met so many gentlemen...

[This is pointed at DEREK. He puts his arm round SIMON's shoulder, but he slips away.]

SIMON: Ooops! Golly, look at the time. Half past one already. I must go and repair the ravages. Having done my good deed, I'm going to be a good little wolfcub, leave the camp fire, and climb the wooden hill to Bedfordshire. *[To AXEL]* Goodnight, Bagheera. *[To DEREK, pointed but good-natured.]* Goodnight, Kaa,

[He exits. DEREK smiles in spite of himself. Tension drops.]

AXEL: What is Bagheera? What is Kaa?

DEREK: They're animal names. Bagheera is a panther?

AXEL: Panther?

DEREK: A big black cat.

AXEL: Ha! Yes! I like that. That is sexy. And what us Kaa?

DEREK: *[Reluctant]* A snake.

AXEL: *[Roaring with laughter]* You? A snake? That is good. Very good. You are in his bad odours, ja?

DEREK: Not really... Well, a little bit, ja. But we made it up.

AXEL: Why?

DEREK: Nothing important. Not very interesting. Doesn't concern you. *[Pause]* The animals are from *The Jungle Book*. About British India. It's very sad, about growing up, loss of innocence. Then Baden Powell adopted the characters –

AXEL: You do not like me, Derek?

DEREK: Look, hadn't you be better getting back to Colin? He'll be wondering what happened. He's worked hard on this, he'll be terribly disappointed.

AXEL: Ach, that! *[Shrugs. Approaches closer.]* Why don't you like me any more, Derek?

DEREK: I do like you, Axek, Honestly. Quite a lot.

AXEL: You liked me last night.

DEREK: You mustn't talk like that. The others –

AXEL: You can stop hiding, Derek. You can take the lubricant out of your lap. There's no-one else here. The room isn't bugged. Just the two of us.

DEREK: Look, Axel, for God's sake, this really isn't the time –

[AXEL's voice gradually assumes a gentle hypnotic quality. DEREK drops his gaze, his objections weaker.]

AXEL: Just the two of us, Derek. Ha! You try to fool the others, ja? But you cannot fool me. I know.

DEREK: Axel, please... The others...

AXEL: I like you, Derek. I like you very much. You do not like yourself so much, I think.

[AXEL stalks round behind DEREK during this speech, and slowly massages his shoulders, gradually working his hands down DEREK's body. The seduction is playful.]

AXEL: You make me laugh, Derek. You make me laugh with your little lies. They are so simple. I know you, Derek. I see you with your little lies. And I still like you. I liked you last night. You liked me too, I think. You liked me a lot. I think you still like me. I "turn you on", ja? Ach, last night! Very good night.

DEREK: OK, Axel, what do you want me to do? Put up a plaque? But keep it quiet please. I couldn't stand the others knowing.

AXEL: Knowing what? You sleep with me. So what? You think Colin cares? He does not. *[Loud]* Hey, Colin! I fuck Derek last night. Twice.

DEREK: For Christ sake, you'll wake everybody.

AXEL: *[Stepping back as DEREK tries to grab him]* It was a very good night, Colin. Derek like it very much. *[DEREK tries to get closer]* I get tired, but Derek says, "No, more, please Axel. Fill me, fill me again, please, Axel. Please, Axel, please Axel."

DEREK: Fuck you!

[DEREK leaps at AXEL. AXEL grabs his arms, laughing.]

AXEL: Uh-huh. Careless.

[DEREK struggles. AXEL pushes him, bending him over the table.]

AXEL: You see? Colin does not come. He does not hear. Or maybe he hears, but he does not care.

DEREK: *[Weakly]* Please, Axel. That's enough, huh?

AXEL: Oh, my poor little Derek. So frightened. You should be happy. I want to make you happy. We make love again, ja? You like that? Here? Now?

DEREK: Look, be reasonable. If anyone comes down now...

[AXEL kisses him hard. DEREK struggles for a second, then pulls AXEL to him. The kiss fervently. AXEL breaks off.]

AXEL: That's better.

[A long embrace. Enter COLIN.]

COLIN: What's all this noise? Oh. *[Pause, then lightly]* You two getting to know each other?

QUICK BLACKOUT

END OF ACT ONE

Act Two

[Tableau. Exactly the same positions as the end of Act One.]

COLIN: You two getting to know each other.

[COLIN attempts to get up, but AXEL insists on finishing the kiss in a leisurely manner.]

COLIN: Well, don't let me interrupt anything.

AXEL: Ja, we get to know each other good.

COLIN: Well. Know each other well.

AXEL: Very good.

[He kisses again. COLIN takes out his fury by clearing the plates into the kitchen.]

COLIN: I was going to ask if you'd found anything, but there doesn't seem any point now.

AXEL: Don't be so – so... We still have fun, you'll see.

DEREK: I wish you'd keep your Great Dane under control.

AXEL: *[Hurt]* Swede, not Dane.

DEREK: He's absolutely indiscriminate. He started making passes at me, and when I wasn't having any of it, he attacked me.

COLIN: *[Drily]* And you were defending yourself?

AXEL: What is the matter, Colin? Derek is my friend.

COLIN: Obviously. *[Pause, then abruptly]* I'm sorry I came down. I just thought I'd invited you back to spend the night with me, My mistake, I suppose. I just wish you didn't have to go shouting the odds all over the house. Simon's squealing like a stuck pig is bad enough. The least you can do is let me get some sleep.

AXEL: Hey, I have a great idea. We three together, ja? Is very sexy idea. I get the oil, we have Lucky Pierre, eh? It's very simple. Then everybody happy. *[Yawns]* Then maybe I get some sleep too...

[COLIN and DEREK speak simultaneously:]

COLIN: Come off it, Axel, I wouldn't have Derek after –

DEREK: Axel, you've got it all wrong, I didn't mean –

[DEREK and COLIN stare at each other]

DEREK: *[Sensing advantage]* What's this? Someone making you an offer you *can* refuse? Never thought to see the day...

COLIN: It's too late to play musical beds. I'm getting tired.

DEREK: Oh dear, poor Colin's starting to get a hangover. Or could it be that you actually care?

COLIN: What makes you think I care tuppence for a one-night stand. One more or less, it's all sperm under the bridge.

AXEL: Colin, that is not nice. I am a person too.

COLIN: I'm sorry, Axel. I really am.

DEREK: So you do care! You've gone up in my estimation, Colin.

COLIN: Why am I taking this from you? *[Slow realisation, then laugh]*. Hey, that was a good one. You almost had me there. Get me to lose my rag and hope I won't notice. Well haven't you got a bit of explaining to do too? *[Working himself up]* I mean, Christ, yes. It's a bit thick, isn't it? I go to all the trouble of setting myself up for the night, and then it's bugged up by some trendy two-bit bisexual who claims he's straight.

DEREK: I am straight. I told you –

COLIN: You? Straight? OK, well, if you're straight, what's all this about then? If Axel attacked you, and you're not interested – can I have my ball back please?

DEREK: Sure. That's nothing to do with me. It just amuses me to see –

COLIN: I'm fed up with "amusing you"

DEREK: It's just Axel seems to prefer –

AXEL: Hey, hey. You don't know what I want. I go where I go. You do not tell me. Either of you.

COLIN: *[To AXEL]* I bought you five gins too, you turd.

AXEL: Turd? What is turd?

COLIN: Can't trust anybody. Not that I should have expected anything else.

AXEL: King Gustav the Turd?

COLIN: Shit!

AXEL: Ah! Schitte! You call people that? That is not friendly.

COLIN: I'm not feeling friendly. Five gins! Two pounds twenty-five!

DEREK: Complain to the Price Commission.

AXEL: *[To COLIN]* You did not have to. I did not ask you.

COLIN: *[To DEREK]* What do you know about it?

AXEL: *[To COLIN]* You buy me a drink, you do not buy me.

COLIN: Stick to what you know. Impressing spotty undergraduates with the Ring and the Bloody Book.

AXEL: *[To COLIN]* Some people want to pay me. They must pay before sex. It is safer. I say no, you must not pay, we are friends.

COLIN: *[To AXEL]* What are you talking about?

- AXEL: Do you feel safer if you buy the drinks, Colin?
- DEREK: Sure he does. No involvement.
- COLIN: *[To DEREK]* You can't begin to understand. Yet. It'll come, sure. Oh, I've watched more of your type coming out than I can remember – yeah, and had them too. Taking your girlfriends down the clubs to protect you. But you still eye up the other blokes in the bar, don't you? It gives you a sense of power to know that some bloke fancies you, but you are the untouchable. For a time. Yeah, and your girls get panicky too because they can't compete.
- AXEL: Women like men to go with other men. In their hearts.
- COLIN: *[To AXEL]* What do you know about women?
- DEREK: *[To COLIN]* What do you know about women?
- COLIN: I may not know about women but I know about Jane. I know what you've put her through. One for all and all for one? Like the GLF discos, remember? God, the number of times I was left holding her hand while you were off dancing with all and sundry.
- DEREK: Dancing. Only dancing.
- COLIN: Hello, Roger, kiss, kiss. Clive, my dear, haven't seen you I ages, hug, hug. Mario, my darling. Dance? No thanks, I have my heavy underwear on, and if they put one more person on that floor, I swear it will collapse. People have been known to be trapped out there for weeks, you know; search parties find them dead of starvation, still jammed upright. Oh Charles, you know I can't, I'm straight, honestly. And just when you get to the sticking point, when something might happen, "I really must get back to my girlfriend." The girlfriend. The shield. Don't preach to me about involvement.
- DEREK: What I was doing was showing a little affection, Even straights can do that, you know. That's where you fuck yourself up, because every look, every gesture has to be sexual.

- COLIN: It is whether you like it or not. That's where it starts.
- DEREK: You fall for the same bullshit straights fall for. The mythology of sex. Rituals and gestures. Why do all looks, touches, kisses lead to bed, Colin? Why? Because they do to you. Can't you see affection in any other terms? I'm talking about male tenderness...
- COLIN: You make it sound like a steak.
- DEREK: I suppose to you it is.
- AXEL: Oy, oy. Ssh.
- COLIN: And what do you think Jane was doing while you were showing your 'male tenderness'?
- DEREK: I always hoped she'd get something of her own together.
- COLIN: What? At a gay club where all the girls that do go are into each other and look like oil riggers or air hostesses and nothing like real women she knows at all, and she doesn't know where to start talking to anybody, let alone pick them up; if that's what she wants, and she doesn't know if she wants, because that's not what women are meant to want, and nobody's ever taught her how to do it. And is she only trying to keep up with you, or get back at you, or something. Of course she was very good at hiding her feelings – well, she had to be with you around, didn't she?
- DEREK: I didn't want to tie her down. I was under a lot of strain. Exams...
- COLIN: You're always 'under a lot of strain'. I know all about that. At the time you were 'taking a course in creative alcoholism' – wasn't that how you put it? It's no excuse for what you did to that girl, you know. But you wouldn't know.
- DEREK: Poor Axel. This must seem very strange to you. I must apologise for my friend's bad manners.
- AXEL: Derek, you do not have to fight for me. You neither, Colin.

COLIN: We're not.

DEREK: It's nothing to do with you. It's all history. Old scores.

AXEL: I understand. You are very old friends, ja? So you fight. But you do not hurt, please. I would not like that.

COLIN: Why not? He's hurt enough people in his time, he ought to have a taste of his own medicine. But it is over now, ja?

COLIN: You weren't there. You didn't see what he did to her. I did. I used to pick up the pieces and put them together again every night, so you [*To DEREK*] could take them apart again next day. It was me who persuaded her to go along to a women's meeting; me, not you. Though once she was there, you were quite pleased about it, because there was quite a lot of status having a bird who was into women's lib and it reflected well on you. Until one day you couldn't get at her any more, and then you came running to me to find out what you could do about it. As if I'd tell you, even if I knew.

[Pause]

DEREK: You must hate me very much.

AXEL: [*Putting arm around DEREK's neck*] Don't worry, Derek. I like you.

DEREK: Thanks.

COLIN: No I don't hate you.

DEREK: What else could I do? Jane was something. All there was. You settle for what you get.

AXEL: You settle when it is not what you want? I don't understand. I want – I get.

DEREK: Your trouble, you always want.

AXEL: Yours too.

COLIN: You couldn't just have given her up? No, you have to be in control, pulling the strings.

DEREK: It's not that easy.

COLIN: It never is. What makes you think you're so special? It would at least have been honest.

DEREK: It's all right for you, you've never been involved with anyone.

COLIN: Says who?

DEREK: No, not really. Your instinct for self-preservation is too strong. But if you are involved, you can't just change gear like that. Somebody's going to be hurt. Disappointed at least. It's a matter of expectations.

COLIN: And it doesn't matter who it is as long as it isn't you.

DEREK: No! Yes, dammit, yes! That's only natural. Well, it matters a bit, because you worry about it, but even that's a bit of a luxury. Anyway, do you think I didn't get hurt?

AXEL: *[Yawns]* I am sorry. I try very hard, but I have to go to my ship tomorrow. I must sleep. I sleep alone, is OK. I sleep with Colin is better. I sleep with you both is best.

COLIN: Hang on a bit, Axel. I want to get to the bottom of this.

AXEL: I do not understand. This is not my fight. I go.

COLIN: Please...

AXEL: I cannot help you. I wait upstairs.

COLIN: I'll be right up.

AXEL: For either of you. *[He looks hard at DEREK]*

COLIN: Oh, yeah, sure. Sorry, I forgot Derek had just decided he wasn't so straight after all.

DEREK: I never denied it!

COLIN: And you never did anything about it either. They never do. God, if I'd had a quid for every straight who'd said, "Of course I'm bisexual really. Aren't we all? But they never change, do they? One sentence. One simple sentence which kicks two thousand years of history up the arse. Admit it, make it safe, wrap it up in words and hang it up in the closet with the rest of the unfinished business.

DEREK: I could do something about it now.

COLIN: Yeah, by pinching my trade, great. Oh go on, have him. It might do you a bit of good. There's plenty more where he came from.

AXEL: *[Ironic]* Oh thank you. Thank you very much. Is nice, that.

COLIN: Well...

AXEL: Is all right. Mine, yours, his – is all the same.

DEREK: I don't know...

COLIN: Have him. It's what you want, isn't it?

DEREK: I just don't know.

COLIN: I'm not arguing.

DEREK: I'm sorry, Colin.

COLIN: I'll sleep down here.

AXEL: You don't mind?

COLIN: Of course I mind. But I'm not going to play Derek's games. Anyway, I don't want the cleaning woman to find you two sprawled over the floor in the morning. It might get back to my folks. Can I use your sleeping bag, Derek?

DEREK: Sure.

COLIN: ThYeanks.

DEREK: It's only an experiment, you understand? Nothing may happen.

COLIN: *[Ironic]* Yeah...

DEREK: Well, see you in the morning.

COLIN: Yeah.

[DEREK and AXEL go towards the door.]

DEREK: Look, can't we talk about –

COLIN: No. All you ever do is talk.

DEREK: I'm sorry you feel like this about it.

COLIN: Oh no, I'm over the bloody moon, I am. Well, how would you feel? Oh, sod off, the pair of you. I'm tired.

DEREK: There must be a better way. I hate to think of you down here, freezing.

COLIN: I'm sure your heart's bleeding for me.

DEREK: If that's the way it is ...

COLIN: It is.

DEREK: I did try, Axel.

COLIN: I'm sure you'll manage to forget about me. If you try.

DEREK: Look, Colin, why don't you come in with us?

COLIN: Come off it.

DEREK: It's Axel's idea, I know, but I don't mind.

AXEL: Is good idea, ja?

COLIN: How generous!

DEREK: No, seriously.

COLIN: No thanks.

DEREK: Why not?

COLIN: Let's say I don't like sitting in with learner drivers. Might scratch the paintwork. Christ, half an hour ago you were pretending to be the innocent, now you're trying to seduce me –

DEREK: Hardly seduce...

COLIN: You'll be wanting to take on the band of the Coldstream Guards next.

DEREK: It's the best way out of this.

COLIN: I don't need your charity. Anyway, there isn't room. And I want some sleep.

DEREK: Why not?

COLIN: I've told you why not.

DEREK: Not really, you haven't/

COLIN: I don't want to. That's reason enough.

DEREK: What are you scared of, Colin?

COLIN: Me? Scared? You must be joking.

- AXEL: You don't want, Colin?
- DEREK: He's scared.
- COLIN: Why should I be scared?
- DEREK: He's hiding something.
- COLIN: *[Vehemently]* I'm not. I just don't feel like it tonight.
- DEREK: Why not? Headache? Stomach upset? Time of the month? Or perhaps it was some words you ate.
- COLIN: Why should I if I don't want?
- DEREK: Because, Colin, you are the one who is always going on about breaking down stereotypical monogamous patterns; you are the one who is always preaching about full and varied patterns of sexual activity.
- COLIN: Not all the time.
- AXEL: You turn an offer down, you regret it later. You should be grateful. Me, I'm superstitious. You refuse somebody, somebody refuse you later. Every time. Me, I always take. Is rude refusing. The whole world, I take it in my arms. *[Laughs]* Is liberation, ja?
- COLIN: No it's not. Liberation is relating to whole people. Sex is only part of it. You could have five people a night, and still be just where you are now. Christ, I don't go to bed with people just for the sex –
- AXEL: What is wrong with the sex?
- COLIN: I'm telling you. It's not enough. It's part of a whole lot of things. Friendship or something. But you don't relate to anything except your cock, Axel.
- AXEL: Oh yes. Me and my cock, we are very good friends.

- COLIN: Oh yes, you're all man, aren't you? Dragged around by a lump of gristle like a – a – bloody great water diviner. "I know there's some around here somewhere... Tweak, tweak. And you're off being all man again, showing you're the greatest lover in the world. Always having to prove something. And what happens when you're getting fat and old. Or you lose an arm at sea? How do you cope then? You'll turn into one of those sad old men in the cottages. Some of them started just like you. And end up offering 50p to kids.
- AXEL: Not me. I die young.
- DEREK: And give your body to medical science?
- AXEL: The way I live, when I die medical science give my body back to me. No, Colin. I never end like that. I treat people like I want them to treat me. I give now, they will give then.
- COLIN: How touching. What a nice simple faith! No, you'll end up just the same. You're too stupid to do anything else. You don't control it. There's just this strange stick poking out in front of you which drags the rest of you along with it.
- DEREK: I didn't notice you complaining.
- AXEL: It does not matter. It is fun. I like it. You like it. Where is your problem? What more do you want? You have not the right. You should be grateful. I get no complaints. Oh, you English are all the same, you never have any fun. I go down one of your toilets – cottages? – yes, cottages. All those grey faces..
- DEREK: Corporation lighting's hardly flattering.
- AXEL: No, I am serious. Don't make jokes, Derek, please. All those scared eyes. They never had any fun.
- COLIN: What do you expect with the law as it is?

- AXEL: It is more than that. Change the law, you will not change the English. I want to shake them, and scream at them, go and enjoy yourself. I want to take them all to the park by the hand, all of them, fat, thin, young, old, roll them down hills in the grass, take off their clothing
- DEREK: *[Drily]* In England? You must be joking.
- AXEL: Yes, even here. Cold is good for you. Stretches the skin, stimulates the blood.
- DEREK: Oh, this passion for outdoor sport.
- AXEL: I want orgies everywhere. Parks, streets, houses, parks, schools, everywhere. Warm bodies all over all rolling and stroking and touching and kissing and sucking; legs, arms, heads, all together mixed up. No differences. Everyone has fair shares. Pretty, ugly, all have same chance. Cripple, beautiful hunchback, all sweat together under the blanket.
- COLIN: Three is not an orgy. Why don't you go and wake up the local farmers? They'd be tickled to death to be dragged out into a wurzel-field for a quick romp.
- AXEL: There is work here. Just think, Colin, all thousands and thousands of people, lonely people in little boxes every night, all sleep cold and alone, no-one to care. And why? Because they say no. No, I don't like him, he's too fat, he's too old, he doesn't have nice face. No, I wouldn't have anything to say to him. No, he wouldn't like me. Always you people say No, because you believe in beauty. Believe in beauty, you have envy, bad feeling about yourself, fighting. Me, I say YES. Yes to you, yes to Derek, yes to life. Have orgies, no envy, no fighting, no bad feeling. Everyone accept each other. It is sin to sleep alone with so much unhappiness, Colin.
- COLIN: It doesn't work and you know it.
- AXEL: How do you know? You never try it for all your talk.

COLIN: Oh, I've tried all right. Screwed people because I felt sorry for them, or thought they needed it, or something. Someone you can't talk to, didn't really fancy very much, but it seemed the only thing to do and it was expected, or something. Know the feeling.

DEREK: Yes...

COLIN: Well, of course you do. You're straight, aren't you?

DEREK: Don't.

COLIN: And afterwards you lie there not touching, listening to the breathing, and it comes from far away, a different world almost. And the night creeps on, and you start getting the dark dawn thoughts, and then a double bed becomes the loneliest place in the world. That's what happens when you don't know someone properly.

AXEL: You know me? No. We just meet tonight. I don't know you, I don't know Derek. I go back to sea, I fall off my ship, I drown. You care? No. *[To DEREK]* You care? No. But I care. Here, now, I care.

COLIN: And in the morning? What do we talk about over cornflakes? I bet you wouldn't even recognise me if we met again.

DEREK: That's rich, coming from you. I can just see you discussing Swedenborg over the All Bran. When did you ever stay for breakfast? From what I've heard from your admirers, they're lucky if you star long enough to take your coat off. Hide the sausage, fine. Eat the sausage next morning – forget it. Oh, let's get out of this, Axel.

[Enter SIMON at a run, clutching his neck hysterically.]

SIMON: He bit me! He bit me! Look at that! *[Shows his neck for inspection.]* I'm marked for life. The brand of Cain. My God, I'll be a laughing stock at college.

COLIN: Why?

SIMON: What will they all say? I'll have to go round wearing a choker for the rest of my born days.

COLIN: It's a status symbol. One below the clap and one above crabs.

SIMON: *[To AXEL]* Does it show? Is it bleeding?

AXEL: No. It suits you.

SIMON: I thought you two were Swedish, not Transylvanian. *[To COLIN]* He just wouldn't let go, you know. Like being worried by a terrier, the –

[SIMON registers that AXEL has his arms round DEREK.]

SIMON: But – but – you told me – I thought that – have I missed something?

AXEL: Derek decided he is gay, I think.

DEREK: Bisexual, I think. A bit, anyway.

COLIN: He's been hiding things from us. His light under a bushel. It took the Swedish navy to uncover this.

AXEL: Please, what is a bushel?

DEREK: A barrel of grain.

SIMON: You – lying – after all we said – after all you said about Jane. What's she going to say about this?

DEREK: *[Covering quickly]* Yes, we've been talking about her too.

SIMON: *[Recovering – airily]* Of course, I knew anyway. I hate to disappoint you, Colin, but the British got there first. The Union Jack is firmly planted on Derek's slopes, and three cheers for the red, white and blue.

COLIN: What do you mean?

SIMON: Derek has been promoting the cause of inter-faculty relations.

- COLIN: *[To DEREK]* Christ, you don't waste much time, do you? For someone who's straight you don't half put it about.
- DEREK: OK, OK, you've made your point. So maybe I have been a little – less than candid. But only because I didn't want to hurt anybody. I've been naïve, okay, I've refused to face up to things inside me. But now I want to.
- AXEL: Why would you hide a light under a barrel of grain? It is very silly.
- DEREK: I have been suitably abashed, and Colin has been suitably outraged. But now I want to.
- SIMON: And I have been very hurt.
- AXEL: It would go out, I think.
- DEREK: Now, Axel has made what I take to be a very sensible and clever suggestion –
- AXEL: *[Pleased]* What? Oh – tak. Mange tak.
- DEREK: That we should celebrate my 'coming out', as you so eloquently express it, by having a little get-together, the three of us. Since you now appear free, Simon, I suggest we revise that figure to four.
- AXEL: That is good idea, Derek. *[Yawns]* But quickly, please.
- DEREK: Axel wants a good time. That is what he came here for. He's had precious little of it so far from our so-called liberated friend, and I think it would be hospitable if we gave it to him.
- COLIN: I don't know what you're up to, Derek, but it's something, I'm sure.
- DEREK: What about it, Simon?
- SIMON: Me? A foursome? I wouldn't know where to put myself.
- DEREK: You've got to start somewhere.

SIMON: What, like you? Why? I'm happy as I am.

DEREK: But there's so many undercurrents here among us. We have to purge them out of our system.

SIMON: You make it sound like sennapods. No thanks, I prefer to keep my inhibitions to myself, I can live with them quite nicely, thank you. I don't need you trampling your big boots all over my psyche. You never know what skeletons you may find; skeletons which are quite happily gathering cobwebs in the cupboard.

Take my mother, for example. She's always tried to be 'with-it' and she got into a group therapy scene a few years' back. That's what comes of reading the Sunday Supplements. She'd always had a fear of white beards, for some reason; when I was akid, she used to run across the street if she saw an old bearded man coming towards us. Anyway, this group devoted a whole therapy session to her, and they traced it back to an incident when she was three years old. She was bitten by a pet white mouse, you see, and she'd generalised that into a fear of white beards. You see?

DEREK: *[Curiously]* Was she cured?

SIMON: No. She just acquired an additional terror of white mice. See what I mean? I think it's safer not to know too much about yourself.

COLIN: You needn't worry about that. You don't know anything at all in the first place.

SIMON: *[Bitchy]* But you seem intent on exposing me.

DEREK: You still haven't answered my question.

SIMON: Forget it, Derek. Colin's not interested, I'm not interested, so why don't you just take your Horlicks up to bed like a good Boy Scout and leave me and Colin to fight over the sleeping bag.

DEREK: And Gerry? What about him?

SIMON: If you think I'm going to allow myself to be savaged by the Malmo Mauler, you've got another think coming. Whatever he was invited back for, so far as I'm concerned it was not to go fifteen rounds.

DEREK: But what interests me is why? You I can understand. But Colin? It doesn't make any sense. After all the stuff he's handed out. Think of the scenes he's got going back in Oxford. It just doesn't add up. He's got to be frightened of something. Otherwise, why doesn't he have the courage of his erections.

SIMON: Why is it so important to you?

DEREK: Let's just say I'm trying to make up for lost time.

COLIN: If you think you can wipe out all the crap you've given yourself for the last ten years in one night, then baby, you've got trouble. You don't stop hating yourself just because you can screw well. All your life, the worm's there, tunnelling in your brain. They way you won't be able to talk to anyone – but anyone – without asking whether you might fancy them. Yet you won't be able to make passes at those you fancy if you think they might be straight – no, not even in the most liberated circles. Because a wall comes down inside you. And you never touch anyone in public, or kiss, or anything, without bracing yourself inside for the shit to fly. There's no way you can do it naturally. You breathe oppression, you can't get away from it.

DEREK: So you hide away from it in your own little world. Gay discos, gay switchboard, gay groups, gay pubs. Occasionally you may make a little foray into the real world, to preach to it, but then you scuttle back to your shell. If you live in a het. World, you've got to go out and meet it. If you chat straights up, you force them to recognise that they can be sex objects too. For a man that can be quite a revelation. Do you think I'd be here now if I hadn't found out that people like Simon fancied me?

SIMON: *[Cutting]* Glad I've been useful to you.

DEREK: But that's the whole point, isn't it? Colin's just preaching to the inverted.

AXEL: Like they say in America, it pays to advertise. I have many straights this way.

COLIN: *[Weary]* Oh, go back to sleep. You don't understand.

SIMON: You two really amuse me, you know that? Can't you see the obvious? When will you realise that it's too late. It all happened years ago, there's nothing you can do about it now. Nothing we do will alter the way I have to feel or have to behave. That was all decided for me. In the womb, maybe. In the pram. In the classroom. The prep-school master with his damp, heavy hand on my shoulder in extra prep. I can still smell the talcum powder clinging to his fat red neck. It rose in little clouds when he turned his head.

The awful sense of being something apart, something different. He called it scholarship material. "You're mine, Simon," he used to say. "I'll make you, I'll shape you, you won't have a single thought, you won't write a single sentence in your whole life which isn't shaped by me, looking over your shoulder as I am now. And his hand would move down my back, as he'd cross out a sentence which began with a preposition. He's here now. He's always here. He was right. It's too late.

AXEL: I understand. I have one like this. He takes me in the forest, he kiss me all over. Take photographs too. I make a lot of money.

SIMON: And that's what's made you what you are today. That's my point. It's all decided there in the forest. Or by the teachers, or the parents. They just make you feel awful, and you don't know what you're feeling awful about because nobody tells you and there aren't any models. And then it's public schools and long country walks talking Plato, and maybe you hold hands, and maybe you even kiss, but chastely, because your love is pure and deep and eternal. Christ, how pure it is. David and Jonathan, the prefect and

the fag, forever mooning around in a dream with golden youths who will always be winning the match in the last over.

DEREK: Cheer up Simon, it doesn't seem to have done you much harm.

SIMON: How can you or Colin expect me to achieve the blessed state when I was brought up on the principle that you look but don't touch? David Pugh touched. He was the school queer. A fat unlovely boy with cricket flannels like a limp parachute. He beat boys with a ruler under the shower – which he could, because he was prefect. So of course none of us was really queer. We didn't want to be like David Pugh.

AXEL: This David Pugh - you have his address? I like this mind.

COLIN: Why are you so negative, Simon?

SIMON: Because I'm very good at it.

COLIN: You think your situation is worse than any other? You think it's easier when you're standing in a bog scared shitless at the age of twelve, and you hear a rustle in one of the cubicles, and you find there's a little hole, and you look through it, and a fierce little iris is staring right back at you. And you run for your life, all the way back to Mummy and Daddy. But your fear is exciting, you're interested in spite of yourself, so you go back, you force yourself back, but this time there's no lights, and it's night, and you can hear the same rustle, and you try to see, but you can't you can only hear and feel, and you go back into that sweaty hole, and the place stinks of stale piss, and your heart's almost tearing you apart and suddenly you get something warm and stiff thrust in your hands, and you're so excited you feel dizzy, and you don't know what to do with it, and you're so worked up you come in your pants, and you run away with a little trickle of shame running down your trouserleg. And you go back and back and back, and you get seen, and word gets round and you get known as the school queer – Colin? He's the school bike, everybody rides him – and the other kids rough you over, the ones that haven't had you,

and the head finds out and tells your parents who take you to a shrink, but it doesn't matter a bit because you keep going back for more, over and over, because you don't know anything else. Till one day an old wino smelling of Special Brew came up to me in the park in broad daylight and said, "Come on son, I'll give you a shilling this time..." And I ran into the bushes and threw up.

Stop feeling so bloody sorry for yourself, Simon. Of course you can change it. It's not your attitude to sex your precious public school gave you. It's your attitude to authority. You still think the prefect's going to keep you in.

DEREK: Of course you can change yourself. You can change the way you behave by an act of will.

COLIN: What have you been reading, Dererk. Suddenly you're a walking manifesto.

DEREK: They were you're books. I spent enough time sitting around in your room waiting for you to come home.

COLIN: Well, you're beginning to talk the talk but you still don't know how to walk the walk.

DEREK: All right, then. What, exactly does 'gay' mean?

SIMON: That at least has never given me any problem.

DEREK: Well?

SIMON: You like men, silly.

DEREK: And what does that mean? Blokes give you erections? Some gays don't get erections. You like a penis pushing your prostate? Straight men like their prostates massaged too. You have emotional relations with blokes? Straights have emotional relations with blokes. And I'm sure Axel could have a lot of straights off in two minutes flat.

[SIMON looks at AXEL, who has gone to sleep.]

SIMON: Not right now I think. Bless'!

DEREK: So what does the word 'gay' actually mean?

SIMON: Alright, Magnus, I pass. I'm sure you're going to tell me.

DEREK: Sex is a physical phenomenon, right? Strip away the mythology and it's a mechanical act. If I like getting screwed –

[SIMON and COLIN exchange glances]

I mean, if one person likes getting screwed, the chances are most men would, given the opportunity. Christ, men's bodies are all more or less the same. It's a simple matter of biology. Why do men clench their buttocks when they're fucking? Because it stimulates the prostate gland, right? And they contract their sphincters too, when they come, like woman's orgasm. So that's exactly what happens when you get screwed. I imagine. You tell me.

COLIN: No, you tell me, since you know so much.

DEREK: The point is, surely, that all these things – sucking off, wanking off, being fucked and so on – can happen whether you fancy someone or not. After all, one pair of lips is pretty much the same as any other. I don't know why more people don't suck off simply out of common politeness. And it would certainly change their way of looking at things. People need new experiences to jog their prejudices, That's why Colin's so wrong about his ghetto. All it does is turn feelings in on themselves.

COLIN: Which is better that trying to hide them or lying to people.

DEREK: Take Martin, for instance.

SIMON: Martin?

COLIN: Derek, please –

DEREK: Derek was a stunning and delicate little blond covered in paint who turned up to make the set for the Co-op's epic production of *Murder at the Vicarage*, in which Colin had a

meaty part – not, I hasten to add, that of Miss Marple. At the sight of this vision, Colin's lines went clean out of his head, and he remained in a state of shock until the cherub had finished his work and departed. And though for one delicious moment at the cast party he felt that something might happen, he ignored the opportunity, because he wasn't on gay territory, and so the moment slipped by. And how many people since then, Colin, have you made love to, fantasising that they were Marti ?

[AXEL snores loudly]

SIMON: Poor Axel. What a way to spend a holiday. Give the poor man a break, Derek. Wake him up, get him to bed, and let this wait until morning.

DEREK: Sure. It just amuses me seeing Colin's ideas in action. He's got all the words off pat, too, but revolutions occur when people change the way they behave.

SIMON: Revolution, revolution. I'm sick of hearing about the bloody revolution. Which nine times out of ten means planning the date of the next OGAG dance. And even if it comes, will your revolution cure shyness? Will it take away warts and bad breath, spots and sweaty feet? Loneliness? Ugliness? Do you think it's going to be any easier to reach out and touch, to risk rejection, to commit the terrible, unforgiveable indiscretion of leaving yourself vulnerable by saying 'I love you'? It's all very well for people like Colin with their good looks and their certainties to give them confidence. The radicals are always the ones who've had it handed to them on a plate. The students can talk about coming out and telling everyone they're gay because they've got nothing to lose. They're maybe hundreds of miles from home among like-minded liberals. They can afford to take risks, because there are no important risks to take at all. At least now, for all the oppression, people are forced together for their own protection. Quite unlikely people. *[To COLIN]* You wouldn't know them, they're not the sort of people you talk to at discos. But I tell you, take those pressures swsy, take away guilt and insecurity and all the threats, and what are you left with? The survival of the prettiest, *Rampant* sexual Darwinism. And I suppose you'd

be quite happy with that because you stand to gain from it. There. End of lecture. The Gospel according to Saint Simon, Chapter One. Thank you for listening, now will you kindly go away. I don't give a monkey's who does what to who, but somebody please get something together and leave me in peace, or I shall go mad.

[Pause]

DEREK: Anyone for coffee?

SIMON: Oh for God's sake...

DEREK: Just a quick one.

SIMON: That's what they all say.

DEREK: I mean it. I'll take it upstairs if you prefer, with Axel. But I really could do with a drink.

SIMON: *[Mock despair]* Who do you have to fuck to get out of this?

DEREK: The same person you fucked to get into it.

[SIMON looks daggers at him, then laughs]

SIMON: Okay, okay.

DEREK: Colin? Oh come on, it won't take long.

COLIN: Oh, fuck off.

[DEREK pauses, then exits to the kitchen. SIMON looks steadily at COLIN as the lights slowly fade.]

BLACKOUT

END OF ACT TWO

Act Three

[Scene tableau as end of Act Two. AXEL asleep, COLIN slumped in the chair, SIMON looking at him. Pause.]

SIMON: He's getting to you, isn't he? That last one was a bit below the belt. *[Pause.]* Do you still see Martin?

COLIN: He came off his bike on the M4.

SIMON: Does it still hurt?

COLIN: No, not really. Only when I scratch it.

SIMON: I'm sorry.

COLIN: What've you got to be sorry for? Stop bloody apologising.

SIMON: Sorry. I mean -

COLIN: Oh, forget it. Right bloody weekend this is turning out.

SIMON: Well, look, why don't you just wake Axel up, take him upstairs, and forget about Derek? I can deal with him.

COLIN: I dunno. I don't want to face him tomorrow. He'll be worrying at it for weeks.

SIMON: He'll do that anyway. Derek. and worry were made for each other.

COLIN: He'll just have to worry about someone else, then,

[Pause. They look at the sleeping AXEL.]

SIMON: Doesn't he look a picture?

COLIN: Yeah. Poor Axel.

SIMON: Nothing poor about Axel. He can take care of himself.

COLIN: Would you like him?

SIMON: I wouldn't know what to do with him.

COLIN: He'd show you. D' you fancy him?

SIMON: Mmm. A bit. But I'm what you'd call the monogamous type.

COLIN: Nobody's that.

SIMON: D'you think?

COLIN: Sure. Everyone'd be unfaithful, in the right circumstances. They just never get the chance. And everyone has fantasies. Straights too. Half the anti-gay feeling around is pure envy, nothing else.

SIMON: He is nice.

COLIN: Wake him up.

SIMON: Oh, I couldn't.

COLIN: Why not?

SIMON: What would I say to him?

COLIN: 'Axe1. I'm going to bed. Do you want to join me?' It's easy.

SIMON: Oh, no. I couldn't. He wouldn't want to know.

COLIN: He's not that fussy.

SIMON: Thanks very much.

COLIN: Well, what are you waiting for?

SIMON: Oh, it's so difficult being gay.

COLIN: It's difficult being alive. That's why people get married. Something to hide behind.

SIMON: But it's especially difficult being gay.

COLIN: No more difficult than you make it.

SIMON: I mean, what about tonight? None of this would happen in the straight world.

COLIN: Wanna bet? No, it just happens inside, cos they won't let it out. If they'd got as far as we have, they'd have scenes like this too. Some do. Go on, wake him up.

SIMON: But, it's so - predatory.

COLIN: No. it's not. It's how you treat him upstairs that matters, not how you get him there. If you fancy him, wake him up. Do something about it.

SIMON: *[Hesitating]* Oh...

COLIN: Well, don't come whining to me that nobody fancies you, then.

[SIMON still hesitates, but takes a deep breath. He taps AXEL gently.]

SIMON: Axel...

[He taps him on the shoulder harder. No response.]

SIMON: Axel...

[Again no response. SIMON shakes him quite roughly.]

SIMON: Axel...

[AXEL wakes up.]

AXEL: What?

[SIMON panics]

SIMON: What? Oh, - er -

COLIN: He wants to sleep with you

AXEL: [Still half asleep] Oh, ja. OK.

SIMON: Don't be absurd, Colin. Of course I don't, Axel. No, I – er - came to ask how many sugars you take.

AXEL: Oh, Two spoons, please.

SIMON: None. Right. Good. And one for you, Colin. Right.

DEREK: *[Off]* Simon!

SIMON; *[With relief]* There we are, right on cue. *[To COLIN]* I could murder you.

DEREK: *[Off]* I can't find the coffee.

SIMON: I know. The range of baked bean tins is quite dazzling, and very difficult to negotiate. Now, behave yourselves, you two.

[SIMON exits. AXEL and COLIN look at each other.]

AXEL: He really wants to sleep with me?

COLIN: Yeah, he's just scared shitless. So he has to 'fall in love' first.

[AXEL grimaces]

COLIN: I know. Do you want to? Fuck with him?

AXEL: Not really.

COLIN: You said earlier -

AXEL: I know. That is just a game.

COLIN: You'd be very good for him.

AXEL: I am tired of being good for people. So tired.

COLIN: I know the feeling.

- AXEL: You want to go now?
- COLIN: No.
- AXEL: You don't like me now? You change your mind.
- COLIN: Course I do. Derek'd find a way of breaking it up, though. I know he would. He's not getting his hands on my life again.
- AXEL: Oh, you English. s much talking. Always you talk. So polite. This English politeness is the death of you. Why don't you just do it, instead of this endless diplomacy? No wonder you never have any fun.
- COLIN: It's not the English, it's the English middle class. It's their way of having fun, talking about having fun.
- AXEL: But it is all about nothing. It does not matter.
- COLIN: If you talk about it, you make it matter. You make yourself important.
- AXEL: Those two... They make an affair, yes?
- COLIN: Not yet... Maybe one day.
- AXEL: They are suited.
- COLIN: Yeah. Teacher and student. Going hand in hand through life like one long tutorial.
- AXEL: You know Derek for long?
- COLIN: Yeah, a few years. I used to work for Leyland at Cowley - BMC it was then. We met when he was squatting in the Council place next to mine. He came round to borrow a lawnmower one day, and we never looked back.
- AXEL: And you are fond of him?
- COLIN: Was. No, he's OK. He talks too much, but - yeah, we're good mates.

AXEL: He likes you very much.

COLIN: He tells me a lot, it's not the same thing. I'm his – confessor, he calls it. Sort of emotional dustbin. I don't mind.

AXEL: I didn't mean like that –

[SIMON pops his head round the door.]

SIMON: We're out of milk but there's some sugar. I've forgotten how many you said, Axel.

AXEL: Two, please.

SIMON: And one for Colin. Good. We've only got three lumps.

[His head pops back into the kitchen.]

COLIN: *[Calling]* I'll walk into the village tomorrow morning.

SIMON: *[Off]* You? Walk? You'd catch a bus to the toilet if you could.

COLIN: *[After a pause, to AXEL]* We've made a hell of a balls-up tonight.

AXEL: We?

COLIN: I. I –

SIMON: *[Off]* No, correction. You'd hitch a lift off someone who was going that way.

COLIN: Can't bear to be left out, can he?

AXEL: *[Shrugs]* He is very young.

COLIN: I'm sorry we didn't get it together earlier. It, would have been fun.

AXEL: There is the other way too. Derek has offered.

- SIMON: *[Off]* I hope you too aren't doing anything you shouldn't in there. Uncle Derek is feeling very paranoid tonight.
- COLIN: What are you doing, growing the fucking stuff out there?
- SIMON: Good coffee takes time and care.
- COLIN: Bloody hell, we've got a connoisseur here. Look, at this time of night I'd drink elephant's piss.
- SIMON: , Good. The way Derek's making it, that's what it's going to taste like.
- COLIN: Then what's he doing, milking the elephant?
- AXEL: Like I say, it does not have to be your way.
- COLIN: It does. We both know too much. Derek and me. Anyway, Simon's not interested. And I'm tired. I'm not one of your bourgeois kids who gets his rocks off on talking.
- AXEL: Then it is true you do not want me.
- COLIN: I've told you I want you. Why else did I ask you back? Look, can't we try again, or something? When d'you absolutely have to go back to sea?
- AXEL: Tomorrow. Today. When we finish refuelling. Forty eight hours shore leave, that is all.
- COLIN: Pity.
- AXEL: Ja, is pity. Is life.
- COLIN: If only the others weren't, here...
- AXEL: Oh ja, if only, if only, if only... *[Pause]*
- COLIN: When do you come back to Ipswich again?

- AXEL: *[Shrugs]* Six months, maybe. When they send me. I don't know. We stop in Portsmouth after exercises, and then back to Sweden.
- COLIN: Well, Portsmouth's not far from Oxford. I could hitch down and see you - that is, if you wanted. Do you get shore leave there? If I wasn't doing anything. I might.
- AXEL: I think I should like that very much.
- COLIN: I could slip away for the weekend.
- AXEL: Slip away? You have someone else?
- COLIN: No. Just Dave. He's just a guy I share a flat with. When d'you get to Portsmouth?
- AXEL: We go to Scotland first, then Ireland, then to the Atlantic.
- COLIN: I thought Sweden was a neutral country.
- AXEL: Some countries are more neutral than others. We can do favours, ask favours...
- COLIN: Where do you go in Scotland? I could write too.
- AXEL: Ach, Edinburgh. *[Makes a sour face]* The Reykjavik of the South.
- COLIN: *[Laughs]* No good, huh?
- AXEL: Ten o'clock, everyone fighting drunk. No good for anything else. Toilets smell of carbolic soap. The Scots are like the Swedes, but with more hang-ups. No, Dublin is much better.
- COLIN: Well, I'll write you there. *[Tentative]* Maybe you could drop me a line too.
- AXEL: Ach, nothing to write. Life on ships is very boring.
- COLIN: That's not what it's like in the porn movies. I saw one once with this bloke and this boathook...

AXEL: You must not believe the movies. No, it's all scrubbing and cleaning, all the day.

COLIN: Still, it would be cool to know you hadn't fallen overboard.

AXEL: Me? Never. If I fall overboard, the fish throw me back. I'm too tough.

COLIN: It would be nice to know, though. I'll give you the address. Remind me tomorrow.

AXEL: If I fall overboard - you care?

COLIN: Sure I care.

AXEL: Thank you. I meet many people. Few days, maybe. Not many care.

COLIN: Family?

AXEL: Sister. Mm, maybe. She doesn't matter.

COLIN: Look, I could take you for a walk in the morning. There's a little wood about half a mile away. Nothing big like you got in Sweden, but - well, big enough. Get away from the others.

AXEL: No. I must get back. Early. They are very strict.

COLIN: Shame.

.AXEL: Ja, shame.

COLIN: But - you're still sleeping with Derek?

AXEL: I think so. I don't know. What happens in the kitchen?

COLIN: If I know Derek, he's giving Simon a lecture on the significance of coffee in romantic literature.

AXEL: Soon I shall be lucky to sleep anywhere. [*Looks up.*]

COLIN: He's fast asleep by now. Must be. At least there hasn't been, a mutiny. By the way, you won't. mention any of what we've just talked about to Derek. Will you?

AXEL: Any of what?·

COLIN: All. this - about me writing, and stuff.

AXEL: Why not?

COLIN: He'd think I'd been plotting against him.

AXEL: You are plotting against him.

COLIN: No I'm not. He just wouldn't understand.

[Pause]

COLIN: You know, I like it here. It's very peaceful.

AXEL: Ja, is very nice. Like Sweden in the South. Very flat.

COLIN: I think I' d like to settle out here. One day. Split from Oxford.

AXEL: You? But you are a city boy. No sex here, you'd miss it.

COLIN: Withdrawal symptoms? Well, that'd depend on who I was with, wouldn't it?

AXEL: When I get out of the navy. I must visit England properly. See everything. You take me round, show me Oxford and Stratford and the Tower of London, yes?

COLIN: I've never been to the Tower.

AXEL: Then you must go, it is very good for you, very educational. I'll be proper tourist with a little camera like the Japanese. And a guide book -

COLIN: Spartacus?

AXEL: Not this time, I think. Then maybe I settle down somewhere.

COLIN: I'd like to show you round. There's some places in the Cotswolds tourists never see. Little villages.. Minster Lovell. Ewelme. When d'you get out? Or have you signed your life away?

AXEL: No., it is not like that now. You can get out after three months. If you give twelve months' notice. So, a year. If I want. If I have somewhere to go when I come out.

COLIN: You must write to me.

AXEL: I have seen the world. It is enough.

[Re-enter DEREK and SIMON with four mugs of coffee.]

SIMON: Here we are, the cup that cheers.

DEREK: You didn't say you were on well-water here, Colin. The true, the blushful Nescafé, with beaded pond scum winking at the brim. Your health

SIMON: Cheers!

COLIN: What are you so happy about?

DEREK: Why should one not be happy? It's a beautiful night. *[Sings]* "This is the night, it's a beautiful night" -

COLIN: Why don't, you just drink your coffee and shut up?

[Pause. Silence.]

DEREK: So. Here we are. One big happy family.

SIMON: Yes. The Borgias.

DEREK: Boom-boom.

AXEL: Please, Derek. You hurt my ears.

- DEREK: Oh Axe1, I was forgetting. What a way to spend an evening, eh? *[Pause]* By the way, Colin, Simon' changed his mind.
- COLIN: That's nothing new. What about this time?
- DEREK: He wants to play dirty. like the grown-ups do.
- SIMON:.. Well., it seems the only sensible thing to do. You want Axel, Derek wants Axel, I want Derek.. The only way that any of us are going to get a particle of' what we want seems to be some kind of communal arrangement. As for myself, I'm trying to learn how to settle for what I can get. *[To DEREK:]* Wasn't that how you put it? As that seems to be the only way I can prove I'm not "scared shitless"_and the only way I can reach Derek, I shall have to accept that half an oaf is better than none.
- AXEL: Good for you, Simon. It is time to run away from school, ja?
- COLIN: *[To SIMON, accusing]* You, were listening.
- SIMON: My, dear Colin, if you're going to insult people, it's better to wait till they're out of earshot.
- COLIN: And don't I have any say in this?
- DEREK: Of course; you have the choice of staying down here while the revelry continues overhead.
- COLIN: Well, tough shit.
- DEREK: If you want to play the wallflower...
- SIMON: Who's scared shitless now?
- COLIN: Don't. you two come the raw prawn with me. *[To DEREK]* You've fixed this, it's another of your little games.
- DEREK: Me? I merely pointed out to him what might be in his own interests.

COLIN: You mean you conned him. Like you always do people.

DEREK: You've just been doing your share of conning, I think.
Right, Simon?

SIMON: Right.

COLIN: I know how you work. Tight little boxes, everything in its place. Everything has to move round you, under control, with you sitting superior in the middle. Nobody knows anything about you - I mean, what, the fuck do you know about him, Simon, except what chooses to tell you?

SIMON: I don't know. I like what he chooses to tell me.

COLIN: But it didn't work out tonight, did it? Axel gave the game away. So you run round rearranging things so you stay in control.

DEREK: Nobody is forcing you to do anything you don't want.

COLIN: Too right, but you're trying bloody hard., Christ! Two hours ago, you were an uptight little poser looking at us all with such a sarky smile. What's happening inside your head, Derek? You're up to something. You've got to be.

DEREK: Me? I'm just trying to be sensible.

COLIN: Bullshit. You're still hiding something, I know you are.

DEREK: You're the one who's hiding something, otherwise why so violent?

COLIN: I'm not hiding anything.

DEREK: Put it this way, what have you got to lose? Your virginity? Hardly.

COLIN: I haven't got anything to lose, what have you got to gain?

DEREK: This is getting stupid.

COLIN: Well, what? See, I knew you were hiding something.

DEREK: I'm not.

COLIN: You are

DEREK: I'm nat.

SIMON: Ooooh yes he is. Ooooh no, he isn't. I hate to tell you, but the panto season finished ages ago. Of course he's hiding something. Aren't we all? But does it matter?

COLIN: If he's not hiding something, why's he so keen?

DEREK: If he's not hiding something, why's he so anti? And with your track record too, Colin.

SIMON: Whoever is hiding what, I don't think either of you has much room to complain about the other. I would say in the deception stakes you're running about even.

COLIN: I never deceived you.

SIMON: Maybe not. Perhaps I deceived myself.

DEREK: For a change.

SIMON: *[To DEREK]* And as for you, I think we've had quite enough lies from you for one evening.

DEREK: I don't lie.

SIMON: Impersonating a straight with intent to deceive and demanding sex with menaces both sound like criminal offences to me. They ought to be.

DEREK: I do not lie. Not really. I mean, no more than most. How do you make sense of anything unless you impose a pattern on it. When you say you understand someone, you impose a pattern on them. It's called civilisation. It's all more or less lies – simplification if you like. We need it as a weapon against the chaos inside and out. I believe in all those things, like good manners and being tolerant of one's inferiors -

SIMON: Really? Where do you find them?

DEREK: Don't, be flip, Simon. I believe in them because the alternatives are so horrible.

SIMON: I am not flip. But don't you think you're getting a teeny bit pretentious?

COLIN: And creating a smokescreen as usual. "Civilisation"? Cobblers. Civilisation doesn't mean that you lead people up the garden path. People like poor Simon here.

SIMON: Poor Simon is quite capable of looking after himself, thank you. Does Dave know where you are this weekend?

COLIN: Well, no.

SIMON: In that case I think you should keep out of this argument. Pots and kettles?

COLIN: That's different, isn't it? That's not giving in to emotional blackmail. You don't know what he's like, Simon, you don't have to live with him. He's always worrying about where I am, what I'm doing. He'll stay up all night., worrying. In the end you have to tell lies. For his sake. You can understand that, can't you?

AXEL: So Dave you just share a flat with?

COLIN: *[Quick excuse]* I don't love him.

DEREK: He shares a flat, shares a bed, when he's at home. They've been living together for over a year, and he's made Dave's life hell.

COLIN: That's not true.

DEREK: Really? Perhaps Dave should be the judge of that.

COLIN: Why don't you just fuck off up to bed. Take that Swedish meatball with you and bugger off. That's what you want, isn't it?

DEREK: I do not mind, Colin.

DEREK: [To SIMON] Well, you can't say I didn't try.

COLIN: Get out. Go on, get out, you smug little –

SIMON: Ah-ha. Naughty.

COLIN: Well, coming down here like this, out of the blue, landing on me, then ruining everything. Who the hell does he think he is? You're a guest in this house, remember that, and not a very welcome one at that.

DEREK: And therefore have to do everything you say? You're just ashamed your little secret about Dave is out, that's all there is to it. Guilty as hell.

COLIN: Me?

DEREK: Yes, you.

COLIN: Look, I don't have to take any of this from you. If you don't like it like it, you can always go. There's always the bus station at Ipswich. It's only a three hour walk. Yeah, why don't you do just that? Clear out, go on. Coming in here, throwing your weight around. Giving me all this shit. Well what are waiting for? Pack your books, take Sally of the Saunas here with you, go on. I've had quite enough of this. I mean, it's a bit thick, isn't it? Christ, yes. This is my house, right -

SIMON: Mummy and daddy's –

COLIN: Same thing. Go on, Sod off. What are you standing there gaping for? Didn't you hear? You've got your marching orders, mate. You too, Axel. You got the boot, Sailor ok? Come on, out, savvy? I've had enough, right?

AXEL: Colin?

DEREK: We're getting turfed out. Colin can't take the pressure; poor sensitive little soul, isn't he?

COLIN: Bastard.

AXEL: Out?

SIMON: He does seem to be taking it rather to heart,. If only you didn't rub it in so much, Derek.

COLIN: That's got nothing to do with it.

DEREK: Look, Colin, this is ridiculous. It's half-past two.

COLIN: You should have thought of that before.

DEREK: All right, you've made your point. What do you want me to do, grovel?

AXEL: Don't argue. I'll go, get dressed.

DEREK: OK, OK. *[To COLIN:]* You can wait five minutes, can't you? I mean, will it kill you Axel puts some clothes on?

AXEL: Calm yourself, Derek.

DEREK: *[Packing]* Christ. Ten miles, that's exactly what I needed.

AXEL: We can hitch-hike.

DEREK: What, on this road? At this time of night. You must be joking.

AXEL: Something will come. It always does.

DEREK: Too likely. Go and get dressed, huh?

SIMO: *[Curiously, to AXEL]* You must be frozen.

AXEL: I do not feel the cold. I am accustomed to it

COLIN: Will you just get. a move on, you two?

DEREK: Eight miles. This time of year, too. It's bloody freezing out there, I hope you realise that.

AXEL: Ach, what's the use, Derek? Just think. We find that nice little hotel again.

DEREK: *[Warning]* Axel...

AXEL: They say the have rooms again tonight, remember? Maybe we get same one, ja?

[COLIN and SIMON turn and stare at AXEL, then at DEREK.]

SIMON: Passing through...

DEREK: Just Axel's joke.. He's trying to cheer me up...

SIMON: There always did seem a certain tenuousness in that story of yours.

AXEL: Derek -

DEREK: *[Speaking rapidly]* I really don't know why you're trying to read anything into this.

COLIN: What are you doing here, Derek?

DEREK: It was just a throwaway remark...

COLIN: Derek -

DEREK: ...but you have to make some big deal –

COLIN: Derek, what are you doing here?

DEREK: You invited me back.

COLIN: You, know what I mean.

DEREK: You know what I'm doing here...

SIMON: I think we both do.

DEREK: I happened to run into you.-

COLIN: Tell the truth for once. What were you doing in town?

DEREK: Look, do we have to go into all this? Come on, Axel. Let's clear out.

AXEL: Oh, Derek, Derek. Why pretend?

DEREK: Pretend? I don't know what you mean. I'd been to Norwich to see Jane -

COLIN: You didn't tell me you'd seen Jane.

DEREK: I don't have to tell you everything - we "re not married.

AXEL: Oh, Derek. What is the point any more? It's too late.

DEREK: I really don't see what you're getting at. I came to Ipswich yesterday.

AXEL: Shall I make it easy for you?

DEREK: Axel, you promised...

AXEL: Derek was not passing through. I meet him Friday, day before yesterday.

DEREK: You didn't have to -

AXEL: It is better you finish it,. We have a long walk. You tell, you feel better. He was in town two days. At least.

SIMON: Oh, Derek, you lying sod.

COLIN: So... you were just passing through after seeing Jane, just happened to meet Axel, just happened to stay on.

DEREK: Yes.

SIMON: A quick tour of the scenic beauties of the fish factories, no doubt.

DEREK: If you'd met Axel, you'd have stayed on.

COLIN: Yes, I would have. But you're not me. I don't believe it.

AXEL: He was looking for you. He said he had lost you. He said, Simon and Colin. I did not know he was stranger here. Tonight, I thought he had found you. *[Wearily]* What does it matter, Derek? I'm going to get dressed.

[AXEL exits. Pause]

SIMON: *[To himself]* So you did come to see me , But why didn't you say something. Oh, I know how angry you must be, what with Gerry and everything, but how was I to know? We could have fixed something up, you know.

DEREK: *[Very soft]* No, not you.

SIMON: What?

COLIN: *[Also soft]* There doesn't seem to be much choice left.

DEREK: You knew all along, of course.

COLIN: Yeah, s'pose I did. Hoped I was wrong. It's the sort of thing you hope'll go away.

DEREK: It doesn't. Sorry, Simon. You seem to have missed the boat again.

COLIN: There's no need for that, Derek.

DEREK: *[To SIMON]* I would have told you before, but there didn't seem much point, the way you felt. You see, for two years I shared a flat with this creature. 11a Cottrell Road. Colin, me and Jane. One for all, blah, blah. Two long, infuriating frustrating happy years. We. used to go for long walks at the weekends. Over the Berkshire Downs, knee-deep in wet grass. It nearly always rained. A hard, bracing, gusty gutsy rain.

Endless games of monopoly, which Colin always won. For a revolutionary he was a pretty good capitalist. Followed by

cocoa and talk. God, how we talked. Politics, religion, sex; I used to get so furious with him because I could never beat him in an argument yet I was always so much more logical than he was.

Long fierce physical summers. Tennis matches with her lasting into the twilight, his arms brown and soft in the setting sun. Punting down the Isis through avenues of elms, watching the green shadows falling on his face, as she lay with eyes closed, smiling. Crumpets in the autumn, chestnuts in winter - strawberries and syllabub and Pimm's Number One in the summer. We had a real fire then. I can still see him lying naked on the rug, his face dissolved in the glow. And those sweet melancholy small-hour confessionals. Slow and lingering like a Tchaikovsky symphony. Self-doubt, self-pity, self indulgence. I trusted him. I gave her myself. And he even gave me some of herself in return. Good times, good times. I told him all about my tussles with Jane, of course. But that was just an excuse to tell him things. It was just the fact of being honest with someone. Honesty's too difficult to use on everybody.

SIMON: *[Viciously]* You proved that tonight.

DEREK: You get out of the habit of honesty. It's a leisure activity.

SIMON: Just let me make sure I've got this right. You haven't been to see Jane this weekend.

DEREK: No, that's all over. She's been used enough.

COLIN: Christ, you're just another boring bleeding romantic like Simon. You sound just like him.

DEREK: You always idealise what you've never had. I expect I could lose my illusions in time.

COLIN: You know something?, You thrive on guilt. You're never happy unless you think you're a shit. And Christ, you don't half try to spread it around.

DEREK: It, wasn't like that. We needed each other. You're the

only person I've ever needed. Or needed to be needed by. Look, I'm sorry, Simon. I didn't want to say any of this, I really didn't. Not like this.

SIMON: Don't mind me - it's all in the noble cause of Honesty, I'm sure. Actually, I'm agog for your revelations, I wouldn't miss it for the world.

DEREK: *[To COLIN]* When you told me you were gay, I thought it was the worst thing in the world that could happen to anyone. I was appalled that a friend of mine could turn out to be queer. I felt so sorry for you. But I was proud that you'd told me, that you felt you could come to me and nobody else. If you were in trouble, I knew you'd come to me, and when you did, when you were really upset" somewhere I was glad, because it gave me the chance to prove myself to you.

COLIN: So? I had a shoulder to cry on. Big deal. There were others. *[Angry]* Big fucking patronising deal.

DEREK: It was when you moved out, I put it all together. And when you finished that motorway contract, and came back to Oxford. I wanted to be like you so much. It's a kind of freedom, a sort of instinctive rightness about every movement, every gesture. 'Grace', I suppose you'd call it, though it's not a very fashionable word. But you've got it. But somehow I couldn't get to you any more; that year away had broken it.. Too many memories round Oxford, I suppose. I just thought - I dunno - I just thought here, away from it all - in our own time - I might reach you again. Differently. Stupid, I suppose.

COLIN: *[To SIMON]* So you did tell him about the weekend. You and your big mouth.

SIMON: I never said a word, honestly. Cross my heart.

DEREK: *[Smiling]* It's not Simon's fault. He talks in his sleep.

SIMON: Oh God, I don't, do I?

- DEREK: Fraid so. I knew you were somewhere round here. I realised all this fresh air would kill you, and sooner or later you'd head for the nearest gay watering-hole. So I got, a copy of *Gay News*, worked out that it had to be the 'Turks Head', and came down. I got into town and just waited. Silly, wasn't it?
- SIMON: The way your mind works! How can you live with a head like that?
- DEREK: With difficulty. Sometimes I wish I could get a transplant.
- COLIN: And that's how you met Axel.
- DEREK: Last night. I had hoped to meet someone who'd seen you. But Axel was on his first night of leave. And tonight, when I'd given up hope almost, and was about to head home feeling I'd given away to a very foolish impulse, I met you. I don't quite know what I expected to happen. I just wanted to be able to put my arms round you, and say, I still need you. It didn't seem much to ask. You can imagine how I felt when I saw you picking up Axel.
- SIMON: Yes. Found out.
- DEREK: That too. So, now you know. Does it make you feel any better, getting your pound of flesh? Can we go now? I'll nip up stairs and collect Axel.
- COLIN: Don't bother. You aren't worth throwing out. Christ, I remember Cottrell Road. I'd almost managed to forget it. Nasty, nosy, prying atmosphere. Never out of each other's sight, never a moment's peace, You made me say I thought things I never thought at all. No privacy, even in your dreams. It was obscene. Yes, that's the word, obscene. "Where have you been, how are you feeling, what are you thinking." You're just like Dave, only you're after my mind. Pin it out on the coffee table like a dead frog. That's what your "understanding" is about - possession. You led me into more and more lies - I got to the stage of inventing fuck-ups I didn't feel just to try and give us both something to feed on. You

didn't have to invent them, of course - you've got enough to last a thousand years.

There was a time - there was a time, if only you'd unzipped your flies and offered me that instead of tea and sympathy and a shoulder to cry on. That's what I wanted, whatever you thought you were after. Oh yes, I used to come up to your room, pour my little heart out, cry even. But the real tears came later, afterwards, when I used to lie awake cursing myself for falling for someone who was straight, cursing myself for not being able to do anything about it, for not saying something, for not moving out, for moving in in the first place, for feeling so fucking uptight and trapped. Simon's right, it's too late. For us, anyway. I don't believe in the kind of love you're still on about. I've been on the scene too long. *[Thinking of AXEL]* A different kind, maybe. Take my advice, stick to Simon. You were made for each other. As for me, forget it. It was a narrow escape as it was.

[DEREK sits with his head bowed. There is a long pause. Suddenly his shoulders convulse violently as he cries silently. Colin watches calmly for a few seconds, then walks to the door, turns.]

COLIN: I'm not buying that one, Derek. I played that game three years ago. You don't get me that way. I hope you'll be comfortable on the floor. Sleep well. I'll see you in the morning.

SIMON: What about Axel?

COLIN: I'll - er - see if I can persuade him to stay. You?

SIMON: I'll stay down here a bit. I'll be up shortly.

COLIN: No doubt.

SIMON: That kind of cheap joke is quite unnecessary.

COLIN: You can stop now, Derek. You're not impressing anyone.

[The shoulders stop heaving]

COLIN: I'll just look in on Gerry before I turn in. See he's OK. I'll leave you two to sort yourselves out. Goodnight. Goodnight, Derek. *[No response.]*

SIMON: Game, set and match to you, I think.

COLIN: It's not like that.

SIMON: That's how he'll see it.

COLIN: Yeah. Pity.

SIMON: Well., give my love to Axel. Oh, if you want to see how Gerry is, you'll have to unlock the door. Here's the key.

[Produces it from his dressing gown.]

COLIN: What?

SIMON: *[Giving him the key]* I locked him in. I thought he might chase me.

COLIN: You're mad, Simon. Quite mad.

[COLIN exits laughing]

[DEREK looks up slightly during this exchange. looks down again as SIMON turns back. His shoulders start to heave again. SIMON looks on in distressed bewilderment. DEREK slowly reaches out and takes his hand. There is a pause, then SIMON comes to a sudden decision, and pulls DEREK gently to him. They kiss.]

SIMON: Do you think we can get two in that sleeping bag?

DEREK: We can always try.

[They kiss again.]

SIMON: So, they all live happily ever after. *[No reply from DEREK]* Here.

[SIMON starts to undress DEREK, but gets caught on the trousers. DEREK waves him impatiently away, and takes them off himself. While he completes undressing, SIMON gets out sleeping bag.]

DEREK: What do you think Colin meant when he said I wanted. to own people? I don't think that's true, do you? Why should he feel that? It must be some kind of fixation he's got. He's just the same with Dave.. Even the simplest gesture of affection and he runs a mile.

[SIMON is struggling with the zip.]

SIMON: It's stuck. How do you open this thing?

DEREK: What? Oh, here. I'll do it. Mind you, I'm not surprised if he came out in the way he said he did. Christ, yes. I'd be exactly the same. It must be awful. I' e. never want to feel anything for anybody. So he just uses sex as a sort of shield. Can't say I blame him. And he's young enough to get away with it. Christ, this floor's freezing.

SIMON: There's a horrible draught from somewhere too.

[Takes off his dressing gown. He is wearing rather bright underpants. DEREK sees them, and laughs.]

DEREK: You didn't go to bed with Gerry in those, did you?

SIMON: When the going got tough in the second round, I picked up my maiden modesty and fled. I put them on in the loo.

DEREK: [Laughing] Oh, Simon, you are the limit.

SIMON: Shall I turn the light off!?

DEREK: Why? Why do you want the light off?

SIMON: I usually put the light off. when I go to bed.

DEREK: You're not feeling guilty, are you?

SIMON: No, it's just that I thought - well, it's natural...

- DEREK: It's not natural. Lights aren't natural in the first place.
- SIMON: All right, it hurts my eyes.
- DEREK: You don't think I feel guilty about this, do you? You're not suggesting that?
- SIMON: Of course not.
- DEREK: Because there's nothing to feel guilty about, is there?
- SIMON: All right, I'll leave it on, if that' s what you want.
- DEREK: Who says that's what I want? I don't care.. It doesn't make any difference to me. But if you want it on -
- SIMON: I don't want it -
- DEREK: Or are you an exhibitionist? If you feel more comfortable, if it helps you get off or something -
- SIMON: I don't mind.
- DEREK: Of course you mind, one way or the other, otherwise you wouldn't have suggested it. You must have wanted it off for a reason.
- SIMON: When I want to go to sleep, I do not want to have to get out of a nice warm sleeping-bag, cross the frozen lino, and switch the light off, and I will not be able to get to sleep with the lights on. Though of course if you really want them left on, I'll leave them on. Provided you promise to switch them off later.
- DEREK: I don't want them left on. I'm not like that.
- SIMON: Will - you - shut - up? [*He kisses DEREK gently, but firmly.*] Now, get in there.

[SIMON strlps, switches off the light. DEREK gets into the sleeping bag. SIMON, joins him. Noises of adjusting to small confines.]

DEREK: God, this floor is hard. And I'm freezing. I'll never get to sleep like this.

SIMON: Come here. God, you're cold. Your bum's freezing.

DEREK: You've got all the sleeping bag.

SIMON: Ssh. You'll warm up.

[Sounds of kissing, gradually more passionate. then SIMON works his way down DEREK's body. Sound and outline of SIMON sucking DEREK off. Over DEREK's following speech, there are interruptions from SIMON in the form of grunts, slurps, etc.]

DEREK: Mind you, he was right about one thing. Colin and me could never have worked. Do you think it would have worked, Simon? I suppose it might have, if we'd both tried harder. You can make anything work if you try hard enough. Oxford's probably the wrong town for it. Encourages too much introspection. Self-analysis can be a terribly destructive thing, cuts you off from any kind of: immediate feeling. But somewhere else, one day, who can say? I mean, never work? That's silly. 'Never' is a stupid word. Like 'always'. 'I'll always love you'. How can you tell? I mean, how do you know what you're going to feel tomorrow, or next week, or next Oh... aaaaah... ooh oh... oh... oh oh uh, uh aaaaaaaah.

[After DEREK has come, silence and stillness. Door opens. AXEL creeps in softly.]

AXEL: *[Whispers]* Simon... Simon... Colin is asleep – I -

[He sees the two figures in the sleeping bag. Exclamation of suppressed Surprise, then he starts to laugh. He laughs uproariously as lights fade.]

BLACKOUT

END OF ACT THREE

THE END