

'And then I'll be able to write about it and go into all the details,' I said.

'Your own funeral?' he said. 'You want to write it up?'

'Yes,' I said.

'But,' said he, 'you're only human. Nobody reports on their own funeral. It's got to be abstract.'

'You see my predicament?' I said.

'I see it,' he replied. 'I get off at this stop.'

This notion of a soldier alighted. Once more the train put on speed. Out of the window I chuckled all my eight and sixpence worth of abstract funeral. I watched it fluttering over the fields and around the tops of camouflaged factories with the sun glittering richly upon it, until it was out of sight.

In the summer of 1944 a great many people were harshly and suddenly killed. The papers reported, in due course, those whose names were known to the public. One of these, the famous poet, had returned unexpectedly to his home at Swiss Cottage a few moments before it was hit direct by a flying bomb. Fortunately, he had left his wife and children in the country.

When I got to the place where my job was, I had some time to spare before going on duty. I decided to ring Elise and thank her properly, as I had left in such a hurry. But the lines were out of order, and the operator could not find words enough to express her annoyance with me. Behind this overworked, quarrelsome voice from the exchange I heard the high, long hoot which means that the telephone at the other end is not functioning, and the sound made me infinitely depressed and weary; it was more intolerable to me than the sirens, and I replaced the receiver; and, in fact, Elise had already perished under the house of the famous poet.

The blue cracked bathroom, the bed on the floor, the caked ink bottle, the neglected garden, and the neat rows of books – I try to gather them together in my mind whenever I am enraged by the thought that Elise and the poet were killed outright. The angels of the Resurrection will invoke the dead man and the dead woman, but who will care to restore the fallen house of the famous poet if not myself? Who else will tell its story?

When I reflect how Elise and the poet were taken in – how they calmly allowed a well-meaning soldier to sell them the notion of a funeral, I remind myself that one day I will accept, and so will you, an abstract funeral, and make no complaints.

JOHN FOWLES

THE ENIGMA

Who can become muddy and yet, settling, slowly become limpid?

Tao Te Ching

The commonest kind of missing person is the adolescent girl, closely followed by the teenage boy. The majority in this category come from working-class homes and almost invariably from those where there is serious parental disturbance. There is another minor peak in the third decade of life, less markedly working class, and constituted by husbands and wives trying to run out on marriages or domestic situations they have got bored with. The figures dwindle sharply after the age of forty; older cases of genuine and lasting disappearance are extremely rare, and again are confined to the very poor – and even there to those, near vagabond, without close family.

When John Marcus Fielding disappeared, he therefore contravened all social and statistical probability. Fifty-seven years old, rich, happily married, with a son and two daughters; on the board of several City companies (and very much not merely to adorn the letter-headings); owner of one of the finest Elizabethan manor-houses in East Anglia, with an active interest in the running of his adjoining 1,800-acre farm; a joint – if somewhat honorary – master of fox-hounds, a keen shot . . . he was a man who, if there were an -arium of living human stereotypes, would have done very well as a model of his kind: the successful City man who is also a country land-owner and (in all but name) village squire. It would have been very understandable if he had felt that one or the other side of his life had become too time-consuming . . . but the most profoundly anomalous aspect of his case was that he was also a Conservative Member of Parliament.

At 2.30 on the afternoon of Friday, July 13th, 1973, his elderly secretary, a Miss Parsons, watched him get into a taxi outside his London flat in Knightsbridge. He had a board meeting in the City; from there he was going to catch a train, the 5.22, to the market-town

headquarters of his constituency. He would arrive soon after half-past six, then give a 'surgery' for two hours or so. His agent, who was invited to supper, would then drive him the twelve miles or so home to Tetbury Hall. A strong believer in the voting value of the personal contact, Fielding gave such surgeries twice a month. The agenda of that ominously appropriate day and date was perfectly normal.

It was discovered subsequently that he had never appeared at the board meeting. His flat had been telephoned, but Miss Parsons had asked for, and been granted, the rest of the afternoon off – she was weekending with relatives down in Hastings. The daily help had also gone home. Usually exemplary in attendance or at least in notifying unavoidable absence, Fielding was forgiven his lapse, and the board went to business without him. The first realization that something was wrong was therefore the lot of the constituency agent. His member was not on the train he had gone to meet. He went back to the party offices to ring Fielding's flat – and next, getting no answer there, his country home. At Tetbury Hall Mrs Fielding was unable to help. She had last spoken to her husband on the Thursday morning, so far as she knew he should be where he wasn't. She thought it possible, however, that he might have decided to drive down with their son, a postgraduate student at the London School of Economics. This son, Peter, had talked earlier in the week of coming down to Tetbury with his girlfriend. Perhaps he had spoken to his father in London more recently than she. The agent agreed to telephone Mrs Fielding again in half an hour's time, if the member had still not arrived by then.

She, of course, also tried the London flat; then failing there, Miss Parsons at home. But the secretary was already in Hastings. Mrs Fielding next attempted the flat in Islington that her son shared with two other LSE friends. The young man who answered had no idea where Peter was, but he 'thought' he was staying in town that weekend. The wife made one last effort – she tried the number of Peter's girlfriend, who lived in Hampstead. But here again there was no answer. The lady at this stage was not unduly perturbed. It seemed most likely that her husband had simply missed his train and was catching the next one – and for some reason had failed, or been unable, to let anyone know of this delay. She waited for the agent, Drummond, to call back.

He too had presumed a missed train or an overslept station, and had sent someone to await the arrival of the next trains in either direction. Yet when he rang back, as promised, it was to say that his deputy had

had no luck. Mrs Fielding began to feel a definite puzzlement and some alarm; but Marcus always had work with him, plentiful means of identification, even if he had been taken ill or injured beyond speech. Besides, he was in good health, a fit man for his age – no heart trouble, nothing like that. What very tenuous fears Mrs Fielding had at this point were rather more those of a woman no longer quite so attractive as she had been. She was precisely the sort of wife who had been most shaken by the Lambton-Jellicoe scandal of earlier that year. Yet even in this area she had no grounds for suspicion at all. Her husband's private disgust at the scandal had seemed perfectly genuine . . . and consonant with his general contempt for the wilder shores of the permissive society.

An hour later Fielding had still appeared neither at the party offices nor Tetbury Hall. The faithful had been sent away, with apologies, little knowing that in three days' time the cause of their disappointment was to be the subject of headlines. Drummond agreed to wait on at his desk; the supper, informal in any case, with no other guests invited, was forgotten. They would ring each other if and as soon as they had news; if not, then at nine. It was now that Mrs Fielding felt panic. It centred on the flat. She had the exchange check the line. It was in order. She telephoned various London friends, on the forlorn chance that in some fit of absentmindedness – but he was not that sort of person – Marcus had accepted a dinner or theatre engagement with them. These inquiries also drew a blank; in most cases, a polite explanation from staff that the persons wanted were abroad or themselves in the country. She made another attempt to reach her son; but now even the young man who had answered her previous call had disappeared. Peter's girlfriend and Miss Parsons were similarly still not to be reached. Mrs Fielding's anxiety and feeling of helplessness mounted, but she was essentially a practical and efficient woman. She rang back one of the closer London friends – close also in living only two or three minutes from the Knightsbridge flat – and asked him to go there and have the block porter open it up for him. She then called the porter to give her authority for this and to find out if perhaps the man had seen her husband. But he could tell her only that Mr Fielding had not passed his desk since he came on duty at six.

Some ten minutes later the friend telephoned from the flat. There was no sign of Marcus, but everything seemed perfectly as it should be. He found and looked in the engagements diary on Miss Parsons's desk, and read out the day's programme. The morning had been

barred out, it seemed; but there was nothing abnormal in that. It was the MP's habit to keep Friday morning free for answering his less pressing correspondence. Fortunately Mrs Fielding knew a fellow director of the company whose board meeting was down for three o'clock. Her next move was to try him; and it was only then that she learnt the mystery had started before the failure to catch the 5.22 train; and that Miss Parsons had also (sinisterly as it seemed, since Mrs Fielding knew nothing of the innocent trip to Hastings) disappeared from the flat by three o'clock that afternoon. She now realized, of course, that whatever had happened might date back to the previous day. Marcus had been at the flat at nine on the Thursday morning, when she had spoken to him herself; but everything since then was uncertain. Very clearly something had gone seriously wrong.

Drummond agreed to drive over to the Hall, so that some plan of action could be concerted. Meanwhile, Mrs Fielding spoke to the local police. She explained that it was merely a precaution . . . but if they could check the London hospitals and the accident register. Soon after Drummond arrived, the message came that there had been no casualties or cases of stroke in the last twenty-four hours that had not been identified. The lady and Drummond began to discuss other possibilities: a political kidnapping or something of the sort. But Fielding had mildly pro-Arab rather than pro-Israeli views. With so many other more 'deserving' cases in the House, he could hardly have been a target for the Black September movement or its like; nor could he – for all his belief in law and order and a strong policy in Ulster – have figured very high on any IRA list. Virtually all his infrequent Commons speeches were to do with finance or agriculture.

Drummond pointed out that in any case such kidnappers would hardly have kept silent so long. An apolitical kidnapping was no more plausible – there were far richer men about . . . and surely one of the two Fielding daughters, Caroline and Francesca, both abroad at the time, would have been more likely victims if mere ransom money was the aim. And again, they would have had a demand by now. The more they discussed the matter the more it seemed that some kind of temporary amnesia was the most likely explanation. Yet surely even amnesiacs were aware that they had forgotten who they were and where they lived? The local doctor was called in from in front of his television set and gave an off-the-cuff opinion over the line. Had Mr Fielding shown forgetfulness recently? Worry, tenseness? Bad temper, anxiety? All had to be answered in the negative. Then any

sudden shock? No, nothing. Amnesia was declared unlikely. The doctor gently suggested what had already been done regarding hospital admissions.

By now Mrs Fielding had started once more to suspect some purely private scandal was looming over the tranquil horizon of her life. Just as she had earlier imagined an unconscious body lying in the London flat, she now saw a dinner for two in Paris. She could not seriously see the prim Miss Parsons's as the female face in the candlelight; but she had that summer spent less time in London than usual. At any moment the telephone would ring and Marcus would be there, breaking some long-harboured truth about their marriage . . . though it had always seemed like the others one knew, indeed rather better than most in their circle. One had to suppose something very clandestine, right out of their class and normal world – some Cockney dolly-bird, heaven knows who. Somewhere inside herself and the privacies of her life, Mrs Fielding decided that she did not want any more inquiries made that night. Like all good Conservatives, she distinguished very sharply between private immorality and public scandal. What one did was never quite so reprehensible as letting it be generally known.

As if to confirm her decision, the local police inspector now rang to ask if he could help in any other way. She tried to sound light and unworried, she was very probably making a mountain out of a molehill, she managed the man, she was desperately anxious not to have the press involved. She finally took the same tack with Drummond. There might be some natural explanation, a lost telegram, a call Miss Parsons had forgotten to make, they should at least wait till the morning. By then Peter could also have gone to the flat and searched more thoroughly.

The Filipino houseboy showed Drummond out just after eleven. The agent had already drawn his own conclusions. He too suspected some scandal, and was secretly shocked – not only politically. Mrs Fielding seemed to him still an attractive woman, besides being a first-class member's wife.

The errant Peter finally telephoned just after midnight. At first he could hardly believe his mother. It now emerged that his girlfriend Isobel and he had had dinner with his father only the evening before, the Thursday. He had seemed absolutely normal then; had quite definitely not mentioned any change of weekend plan. Peter soon appreciated his mother's worry, however, and agreed to go round to

the Knightsbridge flat at once and to sleep there. It had occurred to Mrs Fielding that if her husband had been kidnapped, the kidnappers might know only that address; and might have spent their evening, like her, ringing the number in vain.

But when Peter telephoned again – it was by then a quarter to one – he could only confirm what the last visitor had said. Everything seemed normal. The in-tray on Miss Parsons's desk revealed nothing. There was no sign in his father's bedroom of a hurried packing for a journey, and the suitcases and valises had the complement his mother detailed. There was nothing on any memo pad about a call to the agent or to Mrs Fielding. In the diary sat the usual list of appointments for the following week, starting with another board meeting and lunch for midday on the Monday. There remained the question of his passport. But that was normally kept in a filing-cabinet in the office, which was locked – Fielding himself and Miss Parsons having the only keys.

Mother and son once more discussed the question of alerting the London police. It was finally decided to wait until morning, when perhaps the secondary enigma of Miss Parsons could be solved. Mrs Fielding slept poorly. When she woke for the fifth or sixth time, just after six on the Saturday, she decided to drive to London. She arrived there before nine, and spent half an hour with Peter going once more through the flat for any clue. None of her husband's clothes seemed to be missing, there was no evidence at all of a sudden departure or journey. She tried Miss Parsons's home number in Putney one last time. Nobody answered. It was enough.

Mrs Fielding then made two preliminary calls. Just before ten she was speaking to the Home Secretary in person at his private house. There were obviously more than mere criminal considerations at stake, and she felt publicity was highly undesirable until at least a first thorough investigation had been made by the police.

A few minutes later the hunt was at last placed firmly in professional hands.

By Saturday evening they had clarified the picture, even if it was still that of a mystery. Miss Parsons had soon been traced, with a neighbour's help, to her relatives in Hastings. She was profoundly shocked – she had been with the Fieldings for nearly twenty years – and completely at a loss. As he had gone out the day before, she remembered Mr Fielding had asked if some papers he needed for the board meeting were in his briefcase. She was positive that he had

meant to go straight to the address in Cheapside where the meeting was to be held.

The day porter told the police he hadn't heard the address given the taxi-driver, but the gentleman had seemed quite normal – merely 'in a bit of a hurry'. Miss Parsons came straight back to London, and opened up the filing cabinet. The passport was where it should be. She knew of no threatening letters or telephone calls; of no recent withdrawals of large sums of money, no travel arrangements. There had been nothing the least unusual in his behaviour all week. In private, out of Mrs Fielding's hearing, she told the chief superintendent hastily moved in to handle the inquiry that the idea of another woman was 'preposterous'. Mr Fielding was devoted to his wife and family. She had never heard or seen the slightest evidence of infidelity in her eighteen years as his confidential secretary.

Fortunately the day porter had had a few words with the cab-driver before Fielding came down to take it. His description was good enough for the man to have been traced by mid-afternoon. He provided surprising proof that amnesia could hardly be the answer. He remembered the fare distinctly, and he was unshakeable. He had taken him to the British Museum, not Cheapside. Fielding hadn't talked, he had read the whole way – either a newspaper or documents from the briefcase. The driver couldn't remember whether he had actually walked into the Museum, since another immediate fare had distracted his attention as soon as Fielding paid him. But the Museum itself very soon provided evidence on that. The chief cloakroom attendant produced the briefcase at once – it had already been noted that it had not been retrieved when the Museum closed on the Friday. It was duly unlocked – and contained nothing but a copy of *The Times*, papers to do with the board meeting and some correspondence connected with the constituency surgery later that day.

Mrs Fielding said her husband had some interest in art, and even collected sporting prints and paintings in an occasional way; but she knew of absolutely no reason whatever why he should go to the British Museum . . . even if he had been free of other engagements. To the best of her knowledge he had never been there once during the whole of her life with him. The cloakroom porter who had checked in the briefcase seemed the only attendant in the Museum – crowded with the usual July tourists – who had any recall at all of the M.P. He had perhaps merely walked through to the north entrance and caught another taxi. It suggested a little the behaviour of a man who knew he

was being followed; and strongly that of one determined to give no clue as to his eventual destination.

The police now felt that the matter could not be kept secret beyond the Sunday; and that it was better to release the facts officially in time for the Monday morning papers rather than have accounts based on wild rumours. Some kind of mental breakdown did seem the best hypothesis, after all; and a photograph vastly increased chances of recognition. Of course they checked far more than Mrs Fielding realized; the help of Security and the Special Branch was invoked. But Fielding had never held ministerial rank, there could be no question of official secrets, some espionage scandal. None of the companies with whom he was connected showed the least doubt as to his trustworthiness . . . a City scandal was also soon ruled out of court. There remained the possibility of something along the Lambton-Jellicoe lines: a man breaking under the threat of a blackmailing situation. But again there was nothing on him of that nature. His papers were thoroughly gone through; no mysterious addresses, no sinister letters appeared. He was given an equally clean bill by all those who had thought they knew him well privately. His bank accounts were examined – no unexplained withdrawals, even in several preceding months, let alone in the week before his disappearance. He had done a certain amount of share-dealing during the summer, but his stockbrokers could show that everything that had been sold had been simply to improve his portfolio. It had all been re-invested. Nor had he made any recent new dispositions regarding his family in his will; cast-iron provisions had been effected many years before.

On the Monday, July 16th, he was front-page news in all the dailies. There were summaries of his career. The younger and only surviving son of a High Court judge, he had gone straight from a First in law at Oxford into the Army in 1939; had fought the North African campaign as an infantry officer and gained the MC; contracted kalaazar and been invalided home, finishing the war as a lieutenant-colonel at a desk at the War Office, concerned mainly with the Provost-Marshall department. There had followed after the war his success as a barrister specializing in company and taxation law, his giving up the Bar in 1959 for politics; then his directorships, his life in East Anglia, his position slightly right of centre in the Tory Party.

There were the obvious kinds of speculation, the police having said that they could not yet rule out the possibility of a politically motivated kidnapping, despite the apparently unforced decision not to

attend the scheduled board meeting. But the Fieldings' solicitor, who had briefed the press, was adamant that there was categorically no question of unsavoury conduct in any manner or form; and the police confirmed that to the best of their knowledge the MP was a completely law-abiding citizen. Mr Fielding had not been under investigation or surveillance of any kind.

On the assumption that he might have travelled abroad with a false name and documents, a check was made at Heathrow and the main ports to the Continent. But no passport official, no airline desk-girl or stewardess who could be contacted could recall his face. He spoke a little French and German, but not nearly well enough to pass as a native – and in any case, the passport he had left behind argued strongly that he was still in Britain. The abundant newspaper and television coverage, with all the photographs of him, provoked the usual number of reports from the public. All were followed up, and none led anywhere. There was a good deal of foreign coverage as well; and Fielding most certainly did not remain unfindable for lack of publicity. He was clearly, if he was still alive, hidden or in hiding. The latter suggested an accomplice; but no accomplice among those who had formerly known the MP suggested himself or herself. A certain amount of discreet surveillance was done on the more likely candidates, of whom one was Miss Parsons. Her telephone at home, and the one at the flat, were tapped. But all this proved a dead end. A cloud of embarrassment, governmental, detective and private, gathered over the disappearance. It was totally baffling, and connoisseurs of the inexplicable likened the whole business to that of the *Marie Celeste*.

But no news story can survive an absence of fresh developments. On Fleet Street Fielding was tacitly declared 'dead' some ten days after the story first broke.

Mrs Fielding was not, however, the sort of person who was loth or lacked the means to prod officialdom. She ensured that her husband's case continued to get attention where it mattered; the police were not given the autonomy of Fleet Street. Unfortunately they had in their own view done all they could. The always very poor scent was growing cold; and nothing could be done until they had further information – and whether they got that was far more in the lap of the gods than a likely product of further inquiries. The web was out, as fine and far-flung as this particular spider could make it; but it was up to the fly

to make a move now. Meanwhile, there was Mrs Fielding to be placated. She required progress reports.

At a meeting at New Scotland Yard on July 30th, it was decided (with, one must presume, higher consent) to stand down the team till then engaged full-time on the case and to leave it effectively in the hands of one of its junior members, a Special Branch sergeant hitherto assigned the mainly desk job of collating information on the 'political' possibilities. Normally, and certainly when it came to meeting Mrs Fielding's demands for information, the inquiry would remain a much higher responsibility. The sergeant was fully aware of the situation: he was to make noises like a large squad. He was not really expected to discover anything, only to suggest that avenues were still being busily explored. As he put it to a colleague, he was simply insurance, in case the Home Secretary turned nasty.

He also knew it was a small test. One of the rare public-school entrants to the force, and quite obviously cut out for higher rank from the day he first put on a uniform, he had a kind of tight-rope to walk. Police families exist, like Army and Navy ones, and he was the third generation of his to arm the law. He was personable and quick-minded, which might, with his middle-class manner and accent, have done him harm; but he was also a diplomat. He knew very well the prejudices his type could only too easily arouse in the petty-bourgeois mentality so characteristic of the middle echelons of the police. He might think this or that inspector a dimwit, he might secretly groan at some ponderous going-by-the-book when less orthodox methods were clearly called for, or at the tortured, queasy jargon some of his superiors resorted to in order to sound 'educated'. But he took very good care indeed not to show his feelings. If this sounds Machiavellian, it was; but it also made him a good detective. He was particularly useful for investigations in the higher social milieux. His profession did not stand out a mile in a Mayfair gaming-house or a luxury restaurant. He could pass very well as a rich, trendy young man about town, and if this ability could cause envy inside the force, it could also confound many stock notions of professional deformation outside it. His impeccable family background (with his father still a respected country head of police) also helped greatly; in a way he was a good advertisement for the career – undoubtedly a main reason he was picked for an assignment that must bring him into contact with various kinds of influential people. His name was Michael Jennings.

He spent the day following the secret decision in going through the

now bulky file on Fielding, and at the end of it he drew up for himself a kind of informal summary that he called *State of Play*. It listed the possibilities and their counter-arguments.

1. Suicide. No body. No predisposition, no present reason.
2. Murder. No body. No evidence of private enemies. Political ones would have claimed responsibility publicly.
3. Abduction. No follow-through by abductors. No reason why Fielding in particular.
4. Amnesia. They're just lost, not hiding. Doctors say no prior evidence, not the type.
5. Under threat to life. No evidence. Would have called in police at once, on past evidence.
6. Threat of blackmail. No evidence of fraud or tax-dodging. No evidence of sexual misbehaviour.
7. Fed up with present life. No evidence. No financial or family problems. Strong sense of social duties all through career. Legal mind, not a joker.
8. Timing. Advantage taken of Parsons's afternoon off (warning given ten days prior) suggests deliberate plan? But F. could have given himself longer by cancelling board meeting and one with agent – or giving Parsons whole day off. Therefore four hours was enough, assuming police brought in at earliest likely point, the 6.35 failure to turn up for his surgery. Therefore long planned? Able to put into action at short notice?

The sergeant then wrote a second heading: *Wild Ones*.

9. Love. Some girl or woman unknown. Would have to be more than sex. For some reason socially disastrous (married, class, colour)? Check other missing persons that period.
10. Homosexuality. No evidence at all.
11. Paranoia. Some imagined threat. No evidence in prior behaviour.
12. Ghost from the past. Some scandal before his marriage, some enemy made during wartime or legal phases of career? No evidence, but check.
13. Finances. Most likely way he would have set up secret account abroad?
14. Fox-hunting kick. Some parallel, identification with fox. Leaving hounds lost? But why?

15. Bust marriage. Some kind of revenge on wife. Check she hasn't been having it off?
16. Religious crisis. Mild C of E for the show of it. Zero probability.
17. Something hush-hush abroad to do with his being an MP. But not a muck-raker or cloak-and-dagger type. Strong sense of protocol, would have consulted the FO, at least warned his wife. Forget it.
18. Son. Doesn't fit. See him again.
19. Logistics. Total disappearance not one-man operation. Must have hide-out, someone to buy food, watch for him, etc.
20. *Must* be some circumstantial clue somewhere. Something he said some time to someone. Parsons more likely than wife? Try his Westminster and City friends.

After some time the sergeant scrawled a further two words, one of which was obscene, in capitals at the bottom of his analysis.

He began the following week with Miss Parsons. The daughters, Francesca and Caroline, had returned respectively from a villa near Malaga and a yacht in Greece and the whole family was now down at Tetbury Hall. Miss Parsons was left to hold the fort in London. The sergeant took her once more through the Friday morning of the disappearance. Mr Fielding had dictated some fifteen routine letters, then done paperwork on his own while she typed them out. He had made a call to his stockbroker; and no others to her knowledge. He had spent most of the morning in the drawing-room of the flat; not gone out at all. She had left the flat for less than half an hour, to buy some sandwiches at a delicatessen near Sloane Square. She had returned just after one, made coffee and taken her employer in the sandwiches he had ordered. Such impromptu lunches were quite normal on a Friday. He seemed in no way changed from when she had gone out. They had talked of her weekend in Hastings. He had said he was looking forward to his own, for once with no weekend guests, at Tetbury Hall. She had been with him so long that their relationship was very informal. All the family called her simply 'P'. She had often stayed at the Hall. She supposed she was 'half-nanny' as well as secretary.

The sergeant found he had to tread very lightly indeed when it came to delving into Fielding's past. 'P' proved to be fiercely protective of

her husband's good name, both in his legal and his political phases. The sergeant cynically and secretly thought that there were more ways of breaking the law, especially in the City, than simply the letter of it; and Fielding had been formidably well equipped to buccaneer on the lee side. Yet she was adamant about foreign accounts. Mr Fielding had no sympathy with tax-haven tricksters – his view of the Lorrho affair, the other Tory scandal of that year, had been identical to that of his prime minister's. Such goings-on were 'the unacceptable face of capitalism' to him as well. But at least, insinuated the sergeant gently, if he *had* wanted to set up a secret account abroad, he had the know-how? But there he offended secretarial pride. She knew as much of Mr Fielding's financial affairs and resources as he did himself. It was simply not possible.

With the sexual possibilities, the sergeant ran into an even more granite-like wall. She had categorically denied all knowledge before, she had nothing further to add. Mr Fielding was the last man to indulge in a hole-in-the-corner liaison. He had far too much self-respect. Jennings changed his tack.

'Did he say anything that Friday morning about the dinner the previous evening with his son?'

'He mentioned it. He knows I'm very fond of the children.'

'In happy terms?'

'Of course.'

'But they don't see eye to eye politically?'

'My dear young man, they're father and son. Oh they've had arguments. Mr Fielding used to joke about it. He knew it was simply a passing phase. He told me once he was rather the same at Peter's age. I know for a fact that he very nearly voted Labour in 1945.'

'He gave no indication of any bitterness, quarrel, that Thursday evening?'

'Not in the least. He said Peter looked well. What a charming girl his new friend was.' She added, 'I think he was a tiny bit disappointed they weren't going down to the Hall for the weekend. But he expected his children to lead their own lives.'

'So he wasn't disappointed by the way Peter had turned out?'

'Good heavens no. He's done quite brilliantly. Academically.'

'But hardly following in his father's footsteps?'

'Everyone seems to think Mr Fielding was some kind of Victorian tyrant. He's a most broad-minded man.'

The sergeant smiled. 'Who's everyone, Miss Parsons?'

'Your superior, anyway. He asked me all these same questions.' The sergeant tried soft soap: no one knew Mr Fielding better, she really was their best lead.

'One's racked one's brains. Naturally. But I can still hardly believe what's happened. And as for trying to find a reason . . .'

'An inspired guess?' He smiled again.

She looked down at the hands clasped over her lap. 'Well. He did drive himself very hard.'

'And?'

'Perhaps something in him . . . I really shouldn't be saying this. It's the purest speculation.'

'It may help.'

'Well, if something broke. He ran away. I'm sure he'd have realized what he had done in a very few days. But then, he did set himself such very high standards, perhaps he would have read all the newspaper reports. I think . . .'

'Yes?'

'I'm only guessing, but I suppose he might have been . . . deeply shocked at his own behaviour. And I'm not quite sure what . . .'

'Are you saying he might have killed himself?'

Evidently she was, though she shook her head. 'I don't know, I simply don't know. I feel so certain it was something done without warning. Preparation. Mr Fielding was a great believer in order. In proper channels. It was so very uncharacteristic of him. The method, I mean the way he did it. If he did do it.'

'Except it worked? If he did mean it to?'

'He couldn't have done it of his own free will. In his normal mind. It's unthinkable.'

Just for a moment the sergeant sensed a blandness, an impermeability in Miss Parsons, which was perhaps merely a realization that she would have done anything for Fielding – including the telling, at this juncture, of endless lies. There must have been something sexual in her regard for him, yet there was, quite besides her age, in her physical presence, in the rather dumpy body, the pursed mouth, the spectacles, the discreetly professional clothes of the lifelong spinster secretary, such a total absence of attractiveness (however far back one imagined her, and even if there had once been something between her and her employer, it would surely by now have bred malice rather than this fidelity) that made such suspicions die almost as soon as they

come to mind. However, perhaps they did faintly colour the sergeant's next question.

'How did he usually spend free evenings here? When Mrs Fielding was down in the country?'

'I'll be usual things. His club. He was rather keen on the theatre. He dined out a lot with friends. He enjoyed an occasional game of bridge.'

'He didn't gamble at all?'

'An occasional flutter. The Derby and the Grand National. Nothing more.'

'Not gaming clubs?'

'I'm quite sure not.'

The sergeant went on with the questioning, always probing towards some weak point, something shameful, however remote, and arrived nowhere. He went away only with that vague hint of an overworked man and the implausible notion that after a moment of weakness he had promptly committed hara-kiri. Jennings had a suspicion that Miss Parsons had told him what she wanted to have happened rather than what she secretly believed. The thought of a discreetly dead employer was more acceptable than the horror of one bewitched by a chit of a girl or tarred by some other shameful scandal.

While he was at the flat, he also saw the daily woman. She added nothing. She had never found evidence of some unknown person having slept there; no scraps of underclothes, no glasses smudged with lipstick, no unexplained pair of coffee-cups on the kitchen table. Mr Fielding was a gentleman, she said. Whether that meant gentlemen always remove the evidence or never give occasion for it in the first place, the sergeant was not quite sure.

He still favoured, perhaps because so many of the photographs suggested an intensity (strange how few of them showed Fielding with a smile) that gave also a hint of repressed sensuality, some kind of sexual-romantic solution. A slim, clean-shaven man of above average height, who evidently dressed with care even in his informal moments, Fielding could hardly have repelled women. For just a few minutes, one day, the sergeant thought he had struck oil in this barren desert. He had been checking the list of other persons reported missing over that first weekend. A detail concerning one case, a West Indian secretary who lived with her parents in Notting Hill, rang a sharp bell. Fielding had been on the board of the insurance company at whose London headquarters the girl had been working. The nineteen-year-old sounded reasonably well educated, her father was a

social worker. Jennings saw the kind of coup every detective dreams of – Fielding, who had not been a Powellite, intercepted on his way to a board meeting, invited to some community centre do by the girl on behalf of her father, falling for black cheek in both senses . . . castles in Spain. A single call revealed that the girl had been traced – or rather had herself stopped all search a few days after disappearing. She fancied herself as a singer, and had run away with a guitarist from a West Indian club in Bristol. It was strictly black to black.

With City friends and Parliamentary colleagues – or what few had not departed for their holidays – Jennings did no better. The City men respected Fielding's acumen and legal knowledge. The politicians gave the impression, rather like Miss Parsons, that he was a better man than any of them – a top-class rural constituency member, sound party man, always well-briefed when he spoke, very pleasant fellow, very reliable . . . they were uniformly at sea over what had happened. Not one could recall any prior hint of a breakdown. The vital psychological clue remained as elusive as ever.

Only one MP was a little more forthcoming – a Labour maverick, who had by chance co-sponsored a non-party bill with Fielding a year previously. He had struck up some kind of working friendship, at least in the precincts of the House. He disclaimed all knowledge of Fielding's life outside, or of his reasons for 'doing a bunk'; but then he added that 'it figured, in a way'.

The sergeant asked why.

'Strictly off the record.'

'Of course, sir.'

'You know. Kept himself on too tight a rein. Still waters and all that. Something had to give.'

'I'm not quite with you, sir.'

'Oh come on, laddie. Your job must have taught you no one's perfect. Or not the way our friend tried to be.' He expanded. 'Some Tories are prigs, some are selfish bastards. He wanted to be both. A rich man on the grab and a pillar of the community. In this day and age. Of course it doesn't wash. He wasn't all that much of a fool.' The MP drily quizzed the sergeant. 'Ever wondered why he didn't get on here?'

'I didn't realize he didn't, sir.'

'Safe seat. Well run. Never in bad odour with his whips. But that's not what it's all about, my son. He didn't fool 'em where it matters. The Commons is like an animal. You either learn to handle it. Or you

don't. Our friend hadn't a clue. He knew it. He admitted it to me once.'

'Why was that, sir?'

'The Labour MP opened his hands. 'The old common touch? He couldn't unbind. Too like the swindler's best friend he used to be.' He sniffed. 'Alias distinguished tax counsel.'

'You're suggesting he cracked in some way?'

'Maybe he just cracked in the other sense. Decided to tell the first grand joke of his life.'

Jennings smiled; and played naïve.

'I let me get this right, sir. You think he was disillusioned with Tory politics?'

The Labour MP gave a little grunt of amusement.

'Now you're asking for human feeling. I don't think he had much.

I'd say just bored. With the whole bloody shoot. The House, the City, playing Lord Bountiful to the yokels. He just wanted out. Me, I wish him good luck. May his example be copied.'

'With respect, sir, none of his family or close friends seem to have noticed this.'

The MP smiled. 'Surprise, surprise.'

'They were part of it?'

The MP put his tongue in his cheek. Then he winked.

'Not a bad-looking bloke, either.'

'*Cherchez la femme*.'

'We've got a little book going. My money's on Eve. Pure guess, mind.'

And it really was a guess. He had no evidence at all. The MP concerned was a far more widely known figure than Fielding – a pugnacious showman as well as professional Tory-hater – and hardly a reliable observer. Yet he had suggested one thwarted ambition; and enemies do sometimes see further than friends.

Jennings next saw the person he had marked down as theoretically a key witness – not least since he also sounded an enemy, though where friend was to be expected. That was the son, Peter. The sergeant had had access to a file that does not officially exist. It had very little to say about Peter; little more indeed than to mention who he was the son of. He was noted as 'vaguely NL (New Left)'; 'more emotional than intellectual interest, long way from hardcore'. The 'Temporary pink?' with which the brief note on him ended had, in the odd manner of those so dedicated to the anti-socialist cause that they are prepared to

spy for it (that is, outwardly adopt the cause they hate), a distinct air of genuine Marxist contempt.

The sergeant met Peter one day at the Knightsbridge flat. He had something of his father's tall good looks, and the same apparent difficulty in smiling. He was rather ostentatiously contemptuous of the plush surroundings of the flat; and clearly impatient at having to waste time going over the same old story.

Jennings himself was virtually apolitical. He shared the general (and his father's) view that the police got a better deal under a Conservative government, and he despised Wilson. But he didn't like Heath much better. Much more than he hated either party he hated the general charade of politics, the lying and covering-up that went on, the petty point-scoring. On the other hand he was not quite the fascist pig he very soon sensed that Peter took him for. He had a notion of due process, of justice, even if it had never been really put to the test; and he positively disliked the physical side of police work, the cases of outright brutality he had heard gossip about and once or twice witnessed. Essentially he saw life as a game, which one played principally for oneself and only incidentally out of some sense of duty. Being on the law's side was a part of the rules, not a moral imperative. So he disliked Peter from the start less for political reasons than for all kinds of vague social and games-playing ones . . . as one hates an opponent paradoxically both for unfairly taken and inefficiently exploited advantage. Jennings himself would have used the simple word 'phony'. He did not distinguish between an acquired left-wing contempt for the police and a hereditary class one. He just saw a contempt; and knew much better than the young man opposite him how to hide such a feeling.

The Thursday evening 'supper' had arisen quite casually. Peter had telephoned his father about six to say that he wouldn't be coming home that weekend after all. His father had suggested they had a meal together that evening, to bring Isobel along. Fielding wanted an early night, it was only for a couple of hours. They had taken him to a new kebab-house in Charlotte Street. He liked 'slumming' with them occasionally, eating out like that was nothing new. He had seemed perfectly normal – his 'usual urbane man-of-the-world act'. They had given up arguing the toss about politics 'years ago'. They had talked family things. About Watgate. His father had taken *The Times* line on Nixon (that he was being unfairly impeached by proxy), but didn't try seriously to defend the White House administration. Isobel had

talked about her sister, who had married a would-be and meanwhile impoverished French film director and was shortly expecting a baby. The horrors of a cross-Channel confinement had amused Fielding.

They hadn't talked about anything seriously, there had been absolutely no hint of what was to happen the next day. They had all left together about ten. His father had found a taxi (and had returned straight home, as the night porter had earlier borne witness) and they had gone on to a late film in Oxford Street. There had been no suggestion of a final farewell when they said goodnight to him.

'Do you think you ever convinced your father at all? In the days when you did argue with him?'

'No.'

'He never seemed shaken in his beliefs? Fed up in any way with the political life?'

'Extraordinary though it may seem, also no.'

'But he knew you despised it?'

'I'm just his son.'

'His only son.'

'I gave up. No point. One just makes one more taboo.'

'What other taboos did he have?'

'The usual fifty thousand.' Peter flicked his eyes round the room.

'Anything to keep reality at bay.'

'Won't it all be yours one day?'

'That remains to be seen.' He added, 'Whether I want it.'

'Was there a taboo about sex?'

'Which aspect of it?'

'Did he know the nature of your relationship with Miss Dodgson?'

'Oh for God's sake.'

'I'm sorry, sir. What I'm trying to get at is whether you think he might have envied it.'

'We never discussed it.'

'And you formed no impression?'

'He liked her. Even though she's not quite out of the right drawer, and all that. And I didn't mean by taboos expecting his son –'

The sergeant raised his hand. 'Sorry. You're not with me. Whether he could have fancied girls her age.'

Peter stared at him, then down at his sprawled feet.

'He hadn't that kind of courage. Or imagination.'

'Or need? Your parents' marriage was very happy, I believe.'

'Meaning you don't?'

'No, sir. I'm just asking you.'

Peter stared at him again a long moment, then stood up and went to the window.

'Look. All right. Maybe you don't know the kind of world I was brought up in. But its leading principle is never, never, never show what you really feel. I *think* my mother and father were happy together. But I don't really know. It's quite possible they've been screaming at each other for years behind the scenes. It's possible he's been having it off with any number of women. I don't think so, but I honestly don't know. Because that's the world they live in and I have to live in when I'm with them. You pretend, right? You don't actually show the truth till the world splits in half under your feet.' He turned from the window. 'It's no good asking me about my father. You could tell me anything about him and I couldn't say categorically, that's not true. I *think* he was everything he outwardly pretended to be. But because of what he is and . . . I just do not know.'

The sergeant left a silence.

'In retrospect – do you think he was deceiving you all through that previous evening?'

'It wasn't a police interrogation, for Christ's sake. One wasn't looking for it.'

'Your mother has asked in very high places that we pursue our inquiries. We haven't very much to go on.'

Peter Fielding took a deep breath. 'Okay.'

'This idea of a life of pretence – did you ever see any awareness of that in your father?'

'I suppose socially. Sometimes. All the dreadful bores he had to put up with. The small-talk. But even that far less often than he seemed to be enjoying it.'

'He never suggested he wanted a life without that?'

'Without people you can use? You're joking.'

'Did he ever seem disappointed his political career hadn't gone higher?'

'Also taboo.'

'He suggested something like it to someone in the House of Commons.'

'I didn't say it wasn't likely. He used to put out a line about the back benches being the backbone of parliament. I never really swallowed that.' He came and sat down again opposite the sergeant. 'You can't understand. I've had this all my life. The faces you put on. For an

election meeting. For influential people you want something out of. For your old cronies. For the family. It's like asking me about an actor I've only seen on stage. I don't know.'

'And you've no theory on this last face?'

'Only three cheers. If he really did walk out on it all.'

'But you don't think he did?'

'The statistical probability is the sum of the British Establishment to one. I wouldn't bet on that. If I were you.'

'I take it this isn't your mother's view?'

'My mother doesn't have views. Merely appearances to keep up.'

'May I ask if your two sisters share your politics at all?'

'Just one red sheep in the family.'

The sergeant gave him a thin smile. He questioned on; and received the same answers, half angry, half indifferent – as if it were more important that the answerer's personal attitude was clear than the mystery be solved. Jennings was astute enough to guess that something was being hidden, and that it could very probably be some kind of distress, a buried love; that perhaps Peter was split, half of him wanting what would suit his supposedly independent self best – a spectacular breakdown of the life of pretence – and half wishing that everything had gone on as before. If he was, as seemed likely, really just a temporary pink, his father's possible plunge into what was the social, if not the political, equivalent of permanent red must be oddly mortifying; as if the old man had said, 'If you're really going to spit in your world's face, then this is the way to do it.'

When the sergeant stood to go, he mentioned that he would like to see the girlfriend, Isobel Dodgson, when she returned to London. She had been in France, in Paris, since some ten days after the disappearance. It had seemed innocent enough. Her sister had just had the expected baby and the visit had apparently been long agreed. Even so – someone else's vision of a brilliant coup – Miss Dodgson and the comings and goings of her somewhat motley collection of French in-laws had been watched for a few days – and proved themselves monotonously innocent. Peter Fielding seemed rather vague about when exactly she would return. He thought it might not be for another week, when she was due back at her job at a publisher's.

'And she can't tell you anything you haven't heard ten times already.'

'I'd just like to see her briefly, sir.'

Jennings went on his way then, with once more next to nothing,

beyond the contemplation of an unresolved Oedipus complex, for his pains.

He descended next, by appointment, on Tetbury Hall itself; though before he gave himself the pleasure of seeing its beamed and moated glory, he called on a selected handful of the neighbours. There he got a slightly different view of his subject, and an odd consensus that something thoroughly nasty (if unspecified) had happened. Again, there was praise without reservation for the victim, as if *De mortuis* was engraved on every county heart. Fielding was such a good master of hounds, or would have been if he hadn't been so often unavoidably absent; so 'good for the village'; so generally popular (unlike the previous member). The sergeant tried to explain that a political murder without any evidence for it, let alone a corpse, is neither a murder nor political, but he had the impression that to his listeners he was merely betraying a sad ignorance of contemporary urban reality. He found no one who could seriously believe for a moment that Fielding might have walked deliberately out of a world shortly about to enter the hunting and shooting season.

Only one person provided a slightly different view of Fielding, and that was the tweed-suited young man who ran his farm for him. It was not a world Jennings knew anything about, but he took to the laconic briskness of the thirty-year-old manager. He sensed a certain reflection of his own feelings about Fielding – a mixture of irritation and respect. The irritation came very clearly, on the manager's side, from feeling he was not sufficiently his own boss. Fielding liked to be 'consulted over everything'; and everything had to be decided 'on accountancy grounds' – he sometimes wondered why they hadn't installed a computer. But he confessed he'd learnt a lot, been kept on his toes. Pressed by Jennings, he came up with the word 'compartmentalized'; a feeling that Fielding was two different people. One was ruthless in running the farm for maximum profit; another was 'very pleasant socially, very understanding, nothing snobbish about him'. Only a fortnight before the 'vanishing trick' happened, he had had a major planning get-together with Fielding. There had not been the faintest sign then that the owner knew he would never see the things they discussed come to fruition. Jennings asked finally, and discreetly, about Mrs Fielding – the possibility that she might have made her husband jealous.

'Not a chance. Not down here, anyway. Be round the village in ten minutes.'

Mrs Fielding herself did not deny the unlikelihood. Though he had mistrusted Peter, the sergeant had to concede some justice to the jibe about keeping up appearances. It had been tactfully explained to her that Jennings, despite his present rank, was 'one of our best men' and had been working full time on the case since the beginning – a very promising detective. He put on his public-school manner, made it clear that he was not out of his social depth, that he was glad of the opportunity to meet her in person.

After telling her something of what he had been doing on the case, he began, without giving their origins, by advancing the theories of Miss Parsons and the Labour MP. The notion that her husband might have realized what he had done and then committed suicide or, from shame, remained in hiding, Mrs Fielding found incredible. His one concern would have been for the anxiety and the trouble he was causing, and to end it as soon as possible. She conceded that the inevitable publicity might irreparably have damaged his political career – but then he had 'so much else to live for'.

She refused equally to accept that he was politically disappointed. He was not at all a romantic dreamer, he had long ago accepted that he lacked the singleminded drive and special talents of ministerial material. He was not good at the cut-and-thrust side of parliamentary debate; and he spent rather too much time on the other sides of his life to expect to be a candidate for any Downing Street list. She revealed that Marcus was so little ambitious, or foolishly optimistic, that he had seriously considered giving up his seat at the next election. But she insisted that that was not out of disillusionment – simply from a feeling that he had done his stint. The sergeant did not argue the matter. He asked Mrs Fielding if she had formed any favourite theory herself during that last fortnight.

'One hardly seems to have talked of anything else, but . . .' she made an elegant and seemingly rather well-practised gesture of hopelessness.

'At least you feel he's still alive?' He added quickly, 'As you should, of course.'

'Sergeant, I'm in a vacuum. One hour I expect to see him walk through that door, the next . . .' again she gestured.

'If he is in hiding, could he look after himself? Can he cook, for instance?'

She smiled thinly. 'One hardly lives that sort of life, as you must

realize. But the war. No doubt he could look after himself. As one does if one has to.'

'No new name has occurred to you – perhaps someone from the distant past? – who might have been talked into hiding him?'

'No.' She said. 'And let me spare you the embarrassment of the other woman theory. It was totally foreign to his nature to conceal anything from me. Obviously, let's face it, he could have fallen in love with someone else. But he'd never have hidden it from me – if he did feel...'

Jennings nodded. 'We do accept that, Mrs Fielding. I actually wasn't going to bring it up. But thanks anyway.' He said, 'No friends – perhaps with a villa or something abroad?'

'Well of course one has friends with places abroad. You must have all their names by now. But I simply refuse to believe that they'd do this to me and the children. It's unimaginable.'

'Your daughters can't help in any way?'

'I'm afraid not. They're here. If you want to ask them anything.'

'Perhaps later?' He tried to thaw her with a smile. 'There's another rather delicate matter. I'm terribly sorry about all this.'

The lady opened her hands in an acquiescent way – a gracious martyrdom; since one's duty obliged.

'It's to do with trying to build up a psychological picture? I've already asked your son about this in London. Whether his political views weren't a great disappointment to his father?'

'What did he answer?'

'I'd be most grateful to have your opinion first.'

She shrugged, as if the whole matter were faintly absurd, not 'delicate' at all.

'If only he'd understand that one would far rather he thought for himself than... you know what I mean.'

'But there was some disappointment?'

'My husband was naturally a little upset at the beginning. We both were. But... one had agreed to disagree? And he knows perfectly well we're very proud of him in every other way.'

'So a picture of someone having worked very hard to build a very pleasant world, only to find his son and heir doesn't want it, would be misleading?'

She puffed.

'But Peter does want it. He adores this house. Our life here. Whatever he says.' She smiled with a distinct edge of coldness. 'I do

think this is the most terrible red herring, sergeant. What worst there was was long over. And one does have two daughters as well. One mustn't forget that.' She said, 'Apart from Peter's little flirtation with Karl Marks, we really have been a quite disgustingly happy family.'

The sergeant began to have something of the same impression he had received from Miss Parsons: that the lady had settled for ignorance rather than revelation. He might be there because she had insisted that investigation went on; but he suspected that that was a good deal more for show than out of any desperate need to have the truth uncovered. He questioned on; and got no help whatever. It was almost as if she actually knew where her husband was, and was protecting him. The sergeant had a sudden freakish intuition, no more founded on anything but frustration than those Mrs Fielding herself had had during that first evening of the disappearance, that he ought really to be searching Tetbury Hall, warrant in hand, instead of chatting politely away in the drawing-room. But to suppose Mrs Fielding capable of such a crime required her to be something other than she so obviously was... a woman welded to her role in life and her social status, eminently poised and eminently unimaginative. The sergeant also smelt a deeply wounded vanity. She had to bear some of the odium; and in some inner place she resented it deeply. He would have liked it much better if she had openly done so.

He did see the two daughters briefly. They presented the same united front. Daddy had looked tired sometimes, he worked so fantastically hard; but he was a super daddy. The younger of the two, Caroline, who had been sailing in Greece when the event took place, added one tiny new – and conflicting – angle. She felt few people, 'not even Mummy', realized how much the country side of his life meant to him – the farm, it drove Tony (the farm manager) mad the way Daddy was always poking round. But it was only because Daddy loved it, it seemed. He didn't really want to interfere, he 'just sort of wanted to be Tony, actually'. Then why hadn't he given up his London life? Caroline didn't know. She supposed he was more complicated 'than we all ever realized'. She even provided the wildest possibility yet.

'You know about Mount Athos? In Greece?' The sergeant shook his head. 'Actually we sailed past it when I was out there. It's sort of reserved for monasteries. There are only monks. It's all male. They don't even allow hens or cows. I mean, I know it sounds ridiculous, but sort of somewhere like that. Where he could be alone for a bit, I suppose.'

But when it came to evidence of this yearning for a solitary retreat, the two girls were as much at a loss as everyone else. What their brother found hypocritical, they had apparently found all rather dutiful and self-sacrificing.

A few minutes later, Mrs Fielding thanked the sergeant for his labours and, although it was half-past twelve, did not offer him lunch. He went back to London feeling, quite correctly, that he might just as well have stayed there in the first place.

Indeed he felt near the end of his tether over the whole bloody case. There were still people he had down to see, but he hardly expected them to add anything to the general – and generally blank – picture. He knew he was fast moving from being challenged to feeling defeated; and that it would soon be a matter of avoiding unnecessary work, not seeking it. One such possible lead he had every reason to cross off his list was Isobel Dodgson, Peter's girlfriend. She had been questioned in detail by someone else during the preliminary inquiry, and had contributed nothing of significance. But he retained one piece of casual gossip about her at the Yard; and a pretty girl makes a change, even if she knows nothing. Caroline and Francesca had turned out much prettier in the name than in the meeting.

She came back from Paris on August 15th, in the middle of one of the hottest weeks for many years. The sergeant had sent a brief letter asking her to get in touch as soon as she returned, and she telephoned the next morning, an unbearably sultry and humid Thursday. He arranged to go up to Hampstead and see her that afternoon. She sounded precise and indifferent; she knew nothing, she didn't really see the point. However, he insisted, though he presumed she had already spoken with Peter, and was taking his line.

He fell for her at once, in the door of the house in Willow Road. She looked a little puzzled, as if he must be for someone else, though he had rung the bell of her flat and was punctual to the minute. Perhaps she had expected someone in uniform, older; as he had expected someone more assured.

'Sergeant Mike Jennings. The fuzz.'

'Oh. Sorry.'

A small girl, a piquant oval face, dark brown eyes, black hair; a simple white dress with a blue stripe in it; down to the ankles, sandals over bare feet . . . but it wasn't only that. He had an immediate impression of someone alive, where everyone else had been dead, or

playing dead; of someone who lived in the present, not the past; who was, surprisingly, not like Peter at all. She smiled and nodded past him.

'I suppose we couldn't go on the Heath? This heat's killing me. My room doesn't seem to get any air.'

'Fine.'

'I'll just get my key.'

He went and waited on the pavement. There was no sun; an opaque heat-mist, a bath of stale air. He took off his dark blue blazer and folded it over his arm. She joined him, carrying a small purse; another exchange of cautious smiles.

'You're the first cool-looking person I've seen all day.'

'Yes? Sheer illusion.'

They walked over the little climb to East Heath Road; then across that, and over the grass down towards the ponds. She didn't return to work until the next Monday; she was just a general dogbody at the publisher's. He knew more about her than she realized, from the checking that had been done when she was temporarily under suspicion. She was twenty-four years old, a graduate in English, she had even published a book of stories for children. Her parents were divorced, her mother now lived in Ireland, married to some painter. Her father was a professor at York University.

'I don't know what on earth I can tell you.'

'Have you seen Peter Fielding since you got back?'

She shook her head. 'Just talked over the 'phone. He's down in the country.'

'It's only routine. Just a chat, really.'

'You're still . . . ?'

'Where we started. More or less.' He shifted his blazer to the other arm. One couldn't move without sweating. 'I'm not quite sure how long you've known the Fieldings.'

They walked very slowly. It was true, though meant as a way of saying he liked her dress, in spite of the heat she seemed cool beneath the white cotton; very small-bodied, delicate, like sixteen; but experienced somewhere, unlike sixteen, certain of herself despite those first moments of apparent timidity. A sexy young woman wearing a dark French scent, who tended to avoid his eyes, answering to the ground or to the Heath ahead.

'Only this summer. Four months. Peter, that is.'

'And his father?'

'We've been down two or three times to the grand baronial home. There was a party in London at the flat. Occasional meals out. Like that last one. I was really just his son's bit of bird. I honestly didn't know him very well.'

'Did you like him?'

She smiled, and for a brief moment said nothing.

'Not much.'

'Why not?'

'Tories. Not the way I was brought up.'

'Fair enough. Nothing else?'

She looked at the grass, amused. 'I didn't realize you were going to ask questions like this.'

'Nor did I. I'm playing it by ear.' She flashed him a surprised look, as if she hadn't expected such frankness; then smiled away again. He said, 'We've got all the facts. We're down to how people felt about him.'

'It wasn't him in particular. Just the way they live.'

'What your friend described as the life of pretence?'

'Except they're not pretending. They just are, aren't they?'

'Do you mind if I take my tie off?'

'Please. Of course.'

'I've spent all day dreaming of water.'

'Me too.'

'At least you've got it here.' They were passing the ladies' pond, with its wall of trees and shrubbery. He gave her a dry little grin, rolling his tie up. 'At a price.'

'The lezzies? How do you know about them?'

'I did some of my uniformed time up the road. Haverstock Hill?'

She nodded; and he thought, how simple it is, or can be . . . when they don't beat about the bush, say what they actually think and know, actually live today instead of fifty years ago; and actually state things he had felt but somehow not managed to say to himself. He had grown not to like Fielding much, either; or that way of life. Just that one became brainwashed, lazy, one swallowed the Sunday colour-supplement view of values, the assumptions of one's seniors, one's profession, one forgot there are people with fresh minds and independence who see through all that and are not afraid . . . Suddenly she spoke.

'Is it true they beat up the dirty old men there?'

He was brought sharply to earth; and was shocked more than he showed, like someone angling for a pawn who finds himself placed in check by one simple move.

'Probably.' She had her eyes on the grass. After a second or two he said, 'I used to give them a cup of tea. Personally.' But the pause had registered.

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked that.' She gave him an oblique glance. 'You're not very police-y.'

'We're used to it.'

'Something I heard once. I'm sorry, I . . . ' She shook her head.

'It's okay. We live with it. Over-react.'

'And I interrupted.'

He hitched his coat over his back, and unbuttoned his shirt. 'What we're trying to discover is whether he could have got disillusioned with that way of life. Your friend told me his father hadn't the courage – either the courage or the imagination to walk out on it. Would you go with that?'

'Peter said that?'

'His words.'

She didn't answer for a moment.

'He was one of those men who sometimes seem to be somewhere else. You know? As if they're just going through the motions.'

'And what else?'

Again that pause. 'Dangerous isn't the word – but someone – very self-controlled. A tiny bit obsessive? I mean someone who wouldn't be easily stopped if he'd argued himself into something.' She hit her head gently in self-remembrance. 'I'm not putting this very well. I'm just surprised that Peter –'

'Don't stop.'

'There was something sort of fixed, rigid underneath. I think that could have produced courage. And this abstracted thing he showed sometimes. As if he were somewhere else. And that suggests a kind of imagination?' She grimaced. 'The detective's dream.'

'No, this is helpful. How about that last evening? Did you get that somewhere-else feeling then?'

She shook her head. 'Oddly enough he was much jollier than usual. Well . . . I say jolly. He wasn't that kind of person, but . . . '

'Enjoying himself?'

'It didn't seem only politeness.'

'Someone who's made up his mind? Feels good about it?'

218 She thought about that, staring down. They walked very slowly, as if at any moment they would turn back. She shook her head.

'I honestly don't know. There certainly wasn't any buried emotion. Nothing of the farewell about it.'

'Not even when he said goodbye?'

'He kissed me on the cheek. I think he touched Peter on the shoulder. I couldn't swear about the actual movements. But I'd have noticed if there'd been anything unusual. I mean, his mood was slightly unusual. I remember Peter saying something about his getting mellow in his old age. There was that feeling. That he'd put himself out to be nice to us.'

'He wasn't always?'

'I didn't mean that. Just . . . not simply going through the motions. Perhaps it was London. He always seemed more somewhere-else down in the country. To me, anyway.'

'That's where everyone else seems to think he was happier.'

Again she thought, and chose her words. 'Yes, he did enjoy showing it all off. Perhaps it was the family situation. Being *en famille*.'

He said, 'I've got to ask you something very crude now.'

'No. He didn't.'

The answer came back so fast that he laughed.

'You're my star witness.'

'I was waiting for it.'

'Not even a look, a . . . ?'

'I divide the looks men give me into two kinds. Natural and unnatural. He never gave me the second sort. That I saw.'

'I didn't mean to suggest he'd have made a pass at you, but whether you felt any kind of general . . .'

'Nothing I could describe.'

'Then there was something?'

'No. Honestly not. I think it was just me. Psychic nonsense. It's not evidence.'

'Do I get on my knees?'

Her mouth curved, but she said nothing. They moved up, on a side-path, towards Kenwood.

He said, 'Bad vibes?'

She hesitated still, then shook her head. The black hair curled a little, negligently and deliciously, at its ends, where it touched the skin of her bare neck.

'I didn't like being alone with him. It only happened once or twice. It may have just been the political thing. Sympathetic magic. The way he always used to produce a kind of chemical change in Peter.'

'Like how?'

'Oh, a kind of nervousness. A defensiveness. It's not that they used to argue the way they once apparently did. All very civilized, really. You please mustn't say anything about this. It's mostly me. Not facts.'

'The marriage seemed okay to you?'

'Yes.'

'You hesitated.'

She was watching the ground again as they mounted the grassy hill. 'My own parents' marriage broke up when I was fifteen. I sort of felt something . . . just the tiniest whiff. When the couple know and the children don't. I think in real relationships people are rude to each other. They know it's safe, they're not walking on ice. But Peter said they'd always been like that. He told me once, he'd never once heard them have a row. Always that façade. Front. Perhaps I just came in late on something that had always been there.'

'You never had chat with Mrs Fielding?'

'Nothing else.' She pulled a little face. 'Inch-deep.'

'This not wanting to be alone with him -'

'It was such a tiny thing.'

'You've already proved you're telepathic.' She smiled again, her lips pressed tight. 'Were these bad vibes sexual ones?'

'Just that something was suppressed. Something . . .'

'Let it come out. However wild.'

'Something he might suddenly tell me. That he might break down. Not that he ever would. I can't explain.'

'But an unhappiness in him?'

'Not even that. Just someone else, behind it all. It's nothing, but I'm not quite making it up after the facts.' She shrugged. 'When it all happened, something seemed to fit. It wasn't quite the shock it ought to have been.'

'You think the someone else was very different from the man everyone knew?' She gave her slow, reluctant nod. 'Nicer or nastier?'

'More honest?'

'You never heard him say anything that suggested he was changing his politics? Moving leftward?'

'Absolutely not.'

'Did he seem to approve of you as a future daughter-in-law?'

She seemed faintly embarrassed at that.

'I'm not interested in getting married yet. It's not been that sort of relationship.'

'Which they understood?'

'They knew we were sleeping together. There wasn't any separate room nonsense when we stayed down there.'

'But he liked you in some way you didn't like? Or is that oversimplifying?'

Suddenly she gave him a strange look: a kind of lightning assessment of who he was. Then she looked away.

'Could we go and sit down a moment? Under that tree? She went on before he could say anything. 'I'm holding out on you. There's something I should have told you before. The police. It's very minor. But it may help explain what I'm trying to say.'

Again that quickness: a little smile, that stopped him before he could speak.

'Please. Let's sit down first.'

She sat cross-legged, like a child. He took a cigarette packet out of his blazer pocket, but she shook her head and he put it away. He sat, then lay on an elbow opposite her. The tired grass. It was totally airless. Just the white dress with the small blue stripes, very simple, a curve off her shoulders down above her breasts, the skin rather pale, faintly olive; those eyes, the line of her black hair. She broke off a stalk of dry grass and fiddled with it in her lap.

'That last meal we had.' She smiled up. 'The last supper? Actually I was alone with him for a few minutes before Peter arrived. He'd been at some meeting at the LSE, he was a tiny bit late. Mr Fielding never was. So. He asked me what I'd been doing all week. We're doing a reprint of some minor late Victorian novels – you know, those campy illustrated ones, it's just cashing in on a trend – and I explained I'd been reading some.' She was trying to split the grass-stalk with a nail. 'It's just this. I did mention I had to go to the British Museum reading-room the next day to track one down.' She looked up at the sergeant. 'Actually in the end I didn't. But that's what I told him.'

He looked down from her eyes. 'Why didn't you tell us?'

'I suppose "no one asked me" isn't good enough.'

'Not from someone of your intelligence.'

She went back to the grass-stalk. 'Then sheer cowardice? Plus the knowledge that I'm totally innocent.'

'He didn't make a thing of it?'

'Not at all. It was just said in passing. I spent most of the time telling him about the book I'd been reading that day. That was all. Then Peter came.'

'And you never went to the Museum?'

'There was a panic over some proofs. I spent the whole of Friday in the office reading them.' She looked him in the eyes again. 'You could check. They'd remember the panic.'

'We already have.'

'Thank God for that.'

'Where everybody was that afternoon.' He sat up and stared away across the grass to Highgate Hill. 'If you're innocent, why keep quiet about it?'

'Purely personal reasons.'

'Am I allowed to hear them?'

'Just Peter. It's actually been rather more off than on for some time now. Since before. The real reason we didn't go down to Tetbury that weekend was that I refused to.' She glanced up at the sergeant, as if to see whether she had said enough; then down again into her lap. 'I felt the only reason he tried to get me down there was to put me in what you just said – the future daughter-in-law situation? Using something he pretends to hate to try and get me. I didn't like it. That's all.'

'But you still wanted to protect him?'

'He's so desperately confused about his father. And I thought, you know . . . whatever I said, it would seem fishy. And Mrs Fielding. I mean, I *know* I'm innocent. But I wasn't sure anyone else would. And I couldn't see, I still can't, that it proves anything.'

'If he did go to see you, what could he have wanted?'

She uncrossed her legs, and sat sideways to him, hands clasped round the knees. 'I thought at first something to do with me being in publishing. But I'm just a nobody. He knew that.'

'You mean some kind of book? Confession?'

She shook her head. 'It doesn't make sense.'

'You should have told us.'

'The other man didn't explain what he wanted. You have.'

'Thanks. And you've still been wicked.'

'Duly contrite.'

The head was bowed. He pressed a smile out of his mouth.

'This feeling he wanted to tell you something – is that based on this, or something previous?'

'There was one other tiny thing. Down at Tetbury in June. He took

me off one day to see some new loose-boxes they'd just had put up. It was really an excuse. To give me a sort of pat on the back. You know. He said something about being glad Peter had hit it off with me. Then that he needed someone with a sense of humour. And then he said: *Like all us political animals.* She spoke the words slowly, as if she were listing them. 'I'm sure of that. Those words exactly. Then something about, one sometimes forgets there are other ways of seeing life. That was all, but he was sort of trying to let me know he knew he wasn't perfect. That he knew Tetbury wasn't my scene. That he didn't despise my scene as much as I might think.' She added, 'I'm talking about tiny, very faint impressions. And retrospective ones. They may not mean anything.'

'Peter obviously didn't know about the Museum thing?'

'It didn't come up. Fortunately. Something in him always liked to pretend I didn't earn my own living.'

He noted that past tense.

'And he wouldn't have believed you – if he had known?'

'Do you?'

'You wouldn't be here now, otherwise. Or telling me.'

'No, I suppose I wouldn't.'

He leant back again, on an elbow, and tried to calculate how far he could go with personal curiosity under the cover of official duty.

'He sounds very mixed-up. Peter.'

'The opposite really. Unmixed. Like oil and water. Two people.'

'And his father could have been the same?'

'Except it's naked with Peter. He can't hide it.' She was talking with her head bent, rocking a little, hands still clasped around her knees. 'You know, some people – that kind of pretentious life, houseboys waiting at table and all the rest of it. Okay, one loathes it, but at least it's natural. Peter's mother.' She shrugged. 'She really believes in the formal hostess bit. Leaving the gentlemen to the port and cigars.' She glanced sideways at him again. 'But his father. He so obviously wasn't a fool. Whatever his political views.'

'He saw through it?'

'But something in him was also too clever to show it. I mean, he never sent it up. Apologized for it, the way some people do. Except for that one thing he said to me. It's just some kind of discrepancy. I can't explain.' She smiled at him. 'It's all so tenuous. I don't even know why I'm bothering to tell you.'

'Probably because you know I'm torn between arresting you for

conspiracy to suppress evidence and offering you a cup of tea at Kenwood.'

She smiled and looked down at her knees, let three or four seconds pass.

'Have you always been a policeman?'

He told her who his father was.

'And you enjoy it?'

'Being a leper to most of your own generation?'

'Seriously.'

He shrugged. 'Not this case. No one wants it solved now. Sleeping dogs and all that. Between ourselves.'

'That must be foul.'

He smiled. 'Not until this afternoon, anyway.' He said quickly.

'That's not a pass. You're just about the first person I've seen who makes some kind of sense of it all.'

'And you're really nowhere nearer . . . ?'

'Further. But you may have something. There was someone else. Saying more or less what you've said. Only not so well.'

She left another pause.

'I'm sorry I said that thing just now. About police brutality.'

'Forget it. It does happen. Coppers also have small daughters.'

'Do you really feel a leper?'

'Sometimes.'

'Are all your friends in the police?'

'It's not that. Just the work. Having to come on like authority. Officialdom? Obeying people you don't always respect. Never quite being your own man.'

'That worries you?'

'When I meet people I like. Who can be themselves.'

She stared into the distance.

'Would it ever make you give it up?'

'Would what?'

'Not being your own man?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Just . . . ' she shrugged. 'That you should use that phrase.'

'Why?'

She said nothing for a moment, then she looked down at her knees. 'I do have a private theory. About what happened. It's very wild.' She grinned at him. 'Very literary. If you want to hear it, it will cost you one cup of tea.' She raised the purse. 'I didn't bring any money.'

He stood and held out a hand. 'You're on.'

They walked towards the trees of Kenwood House. She kept obstinately to her bargain. Her 'theory' must wait till they had their tea. So they talked more like the perfect strangers, hazard-met, that they were; about their respective jobs, which required a disillusioning on both sides as to very much of the supposed glamour and excitement attached to them. She admitted, when he revealed that he knew about the children's stories, to a general literary ambition – that is, a more adult one. She was trying to write a novel, it was so slow, you had to destroy so much and start again; so hard to discover whether one was really a writer or just a victim of a literary home environment. He felt a little bit the same about his own work; and its frustrations and endless weeks of getting nowhere. They rather surprisingly found, behind the different cultural backgrounds, a certain kind of unspoken identity of situation. He queued up behind his witness at the tea-counter, observing the back of her head, that tender skin above the curve of the dress, the starched blue stripes in its mealy whiteness; and he knew he had to see her again, off-duty. He had no problems with girls. It was not a physical thing, a lack of confidence sexually; not even a class or a cultural thing; but a psychological thing, a knowledge that he was – despite the gaffe, but even the gaffe had been a kind of honesty – dealing with a quicker and more fastidious mind in the field of emotions and personal relationships . . . that, and the traditional ineligibility of his kind for her kind, with the added new political bar, if the intelligence was also progressive, that he had referred to as a leprosy. Something about her possessed something that he lacked: a potential that lay like unsown ground, waiting for just this unlikely corn-goddess; a direction he could follow, if she would only show it. An honesty, in one word. He had not wanted a girl so fast and so intensely for a long time. Nevertheless, he made a wise decision.

They found a table to themselves in a corner. This time she accepted a cigarette.

'So let's have it.'

'Nothing is real. All is fiction.'

She bit her lips, lips without make-up, waiting for his reaction.

'That solves the case?'

'Lateral thinking. Let's pretend everything to do with the Fieldings, even you and me sitting here now, is in a novel. A detective story. Yes? Somewhere there's someone writing us, we're not real. He or she decides who we are, what we do, all about us.' She played with her

teaspoon; the amused dark eyes glanced up at him. 'Are you with me?'

'By the skin of my teeth.'

'A story has to have an ending. You can't have a mystery without a solution. If you're the writer you have to think of something.'

'I've spent most of this last month –'

'Yes, but only in reality. It's the difference between I haven't many facts, so I can't decide anything – and I haven't many facts, but I've simply got to decide something.'

He felt a little redressment of the imbalance – after all a fault in this girl, a cerebral stillness. It would have irritated him in someone less attractive in other ways; now it simply relieved him. He smiled.

'We play that game too. But never mind.'

She bit her lips again. 'I propose to dismiss the *deus ex machina* possibility. It's not good art. An awful cheat, really.'

'You'd better . . .'

She grinned. 'The god out of the machine. Greek tragedy. When you couldn't work out a logical end from the human premises, you dragged in something external. You had the villain struck down by lightning. A chimney-pot fell on his head. You know?'

'I'm back on my feet.'

'Of course the British Museum thing may have been pure coincidence. On the other hand the vanished man might have been really determined to see that girl. So I think the writer would make him – when he found she wasn't in the reading-room after all – telephone the publishers where she works. There's a blank in her day. Between just after half-past five, when she left work, until about eight, when she met Peter Fielding to go to a rather ghastly party.'

And suddenly he felt more seriously out of his depth. He was being teased – which meant she liked him? Or he was being officially mocked – which meant she didn't?

'They met then?'

She raised a finger.

'The writer *could* have made them meet. He'd have to make it a kind of spur-of-the-moment thing. Obviously it could have been much better planned, if the missing man had had it in mind for some time. He'd have to say something like . . . I've just broken under all the hidden pressures of my life, I don't know who to turn to, you seem quite a sympathetic and level-headed girl, you –'

'This level-headed girl would be telling me all this?'

'Only if she was quite sure it couldn't be proved. Which she might be. Given that at this late date the police have apparently never even suspected such a meeting.'

'Correction. Found evidence of.'

'Same thing.'

'All right.'

'So he might just have made her pity him? This seeming hollow man pouring out all his despair. A hopelessness. Terribly difficult to write, but it could be done. Because it so happens the girl is rather proud of her independence. And her ability to judge people. And don't forget she really hasn't any time at all for the world he's running away from.' The real girl played with her plastic teaspoon, looked up at him unsmiling now; trying him out. 'And there's no sex angle. She'd be doing it out of the kindness of her heart. And not very much. Just fixing up somewhere for him to hide for a few days, until he can make his own arrangements. And being the kind of person she is, once she'd decided it was the right thing to do, nothing, not even rather dishy young policemen who buy her cups of tea, would ever get the facts out of her.'

He stared at his own cup and saucer. 'You're not by any chance . . . ?'

'Just one way the writer might have played it.'

'Hiding people isn't all that easy.'

'Ah.'

'Especially when they've acted on the spur of the moment and made no financial arrangements that one can discover. And when they're not spur-of-the-moment people.'

'Very true.'

'Besides, it's not how I read her character.'

'More conventional?'

'More imaginative.'

She leant away on an elbow, smiling.

'So our writer would have to tear this ending up?'

'If he's got a better.'

'He has. And may I have another cigarette?'

He lit it for her. She perched her chin on her hands, leant forward.

'What do you think would strike the writer about his story to date – if he re-read it?'

'He ought never to have started it in the first place.'

'Why?'

'Forgot to plant any decent leads.'

'Doesn't that suggest something about the central character? You know, in books, they do have a sort of life of their own.'

'He didn't mean evidence to be found?'

'I think the writer would have to face up to that. His main character has walked out on him. So all he's left with is the character's determination to have it that way. High and dry. Without a decent ending.'

The sergeant smiled down. 'Except writers can write it any way they like.'

'You mean detective stories have to end with everything explained? Part of the rules?'

'The unreality.'

'Then if our story disobeys the unreal literary rules, that might mean it's actually truer to life?' She bit her lips again. 'Leaving aside the fact that it *has* all happened. So it must be true, anyway.'

'I'd almost forgotten that.'

She set out her saucer as an ashtray.

'So all our writer could really do is find a convincing reason why this main character had forced him to commit the terrible literary crime of not sticking to the rules?' She said, 'Poor man.'

The sergeant felt the abyss between them; people who live by ideas, people who have to live by facts. He felt obscurely humiliated, to have to sit here and listen to all this; and at the same time saw her naked, deliciously naked on his bed. Her bed. Any bed or no bed. The nipples showed through the thin fabric; the hands were so small, the eyes so alive.

'And you happen to have it?'

'There was an author in his life. In a way. Not a man. A system, a view of things? Something that had written him. Had really made him just a character in a book.'

'So?'

'Someone who never put a foot wrong. Always said the right thing, wore the right clothes, had the right image. Right with a big r, too. All the roles he had to play. In the City. The country. The dull and dutiful member of parliament. So in the end there's no freedom left. Nothing he can choose. Only what the system says.'

'But that goes for –'

'Then one has to look for something very unusual in him. Since he's

done something very unusual?' The sergeant nodded. She was avoiding his eyes now. 'All this dawns on him. Probably not suddenly. Slowly. Little by little. He's like something written by someone else, a character in fiction. Everything is planned. Mapped out. He's like a fossil – while he's still alive. One doesn't have to suppose changes of view. Being persuaded by Peter politically. Seeing the City for the nasty little rich man's casino it really is. He'd have blamed everything equally. How it had used him. Limited him. Prevented him.'

She tapped ash from her cigarette.

'Did you ever see his scrapbooks?'

'His what?'

'They're in the library down at Tetbury. All bound in blue morocco. Gilt-tooled. His initials. Dates. All his press cuttings. Right back to the legal days. *Times* law reports, things like that. Tiniest things. Even little local rag clippings about opening bazaars and whatnot.'

'Is that so unusual?'

'It just seems more typical of an actor. Or some writers are like that. A kind of obsessive need to know . . . that they've been known?'

'Okay.'

'It's a kind of terror, really. That they've failed, they haven't registered. Except that writers and actors are in far less predictable professions. They can have a sort of eternal optimism about themselves. Most of them. The next book will be fabulous. The next part will be a rave.' She looked up at him, both persuading and estimating. 'And on the other hand they live in cynical open worlds. Bitchy ones. Where no one really believes anyone else's reputation – especially if they're successful. Which is all rather healthy, in a way. But he isn't like that. Tories take success so seriously. They define it so exactly. So there's no escape. It has to be position. Status. Title. Money. And the outlets at the top are so restricted. You have to be prime minister. Or a great lawyer. A multi-millionaire. It's that or failure.' She said, 'Think of Evelyn Waugh. A terrible Tory snob. But also very shrewd, very funny. If you can imagine someone like that, a lot more imagination than anyone ever gave him credit for, but completely without all the safety valves Waugh had. No brilliant books, no Catholicism, no wit. No drinking, no impossible behaviour in private.'

'Which makes him like thousands of others?'

'But we have a fact about him. He did something thousands of others don't. So it must have hurt a lot more. Feeling failed and trapped. And forced – because everything was so standard, so

conforming in his world – to pretend he was happy as he was. No creative powers. Peter's told me. He wasn't even very good in court, as a barrister. Just specialized legal knowledge.' She said, 'And then his cultural tastes. He told me once he was very fond of historical biography. Lives of great men. And the theatre, he was genuinely quite keen on that. I know all this, because there was so little else we could talk about. And he adored Winston Churchill. The biggest old ham of them all.'

A memory jogged the sergeant's distracted mind: Miss Parsons, how Fielding had 'nearly' voted Labour in 1945. But that might fit. He said, 'Go on.'

'He feels more and more like this minor character in a bad book. Even his own son despises him. So he's a zombie, just a high-class cog in a phony machine. From being very privileged and very successful, he feels himself very absurd and very failed.' Now she was tracing invisible patterns on the top of the table with a fingertip: a square, a circle with a dot in it. The sergeant wondered if she was wearing anything at all beneath the dress. He saw her sitting astride his knees, her arms enlacing his neck, tormenting him; and brutality. You fall in love by suddenly knowing what past love hadn't. 'Then one day he sees what might stop both the rot and the pain. What will get him immortality of a kind.'

'Walking out.'

'The one thing people never forget is the unsolved. Nothing lasts like a mystery.' She raised the pattern-making finger. 'On condition that it stays that way. If he's traced, found, then it all crumbles again. He's back in a story, being written. A nervous breakdown. A nutcase. Whatever.'

Now something had shifted, little bits of past evidence began to coagulate, and listening to her became the same as being with her. The background clatter, the other voices, the clinging heat, all that started to recede. Just one thing nagged, but he let it ride.

'So it has to be for good?'

She smiled at him. 'God's trick.'

'Come again.'

'Theologians talk about the *Deus absconditus* – the God who went missing? Without explaining why. That's why we've never forgotten him.'

He thought of Miss Parsons again. 'You mean he killed himself?'

'I bet you every penny I possess.'

He looked down from her eyes.

'This writer of yours - has he come up with a scenario for that?'

'That's just a detail. I'm trying to sell you the motive.'

He was silent a moment, then sought her eyes. 'Unfortunately it's the details I have to worry about.'

His own eyes were drily held. 'Then your turn. Your department.'

'We have thought about it. Throwing himself off a night-ferry across the Channel. But we checked. The boats were crowded, a lot of people on deck. The odds are dead against.'

'You mustn't underrate him. He'd have known that was too risky.'

'No private boats missing. We checked that as well.'

She gave him a glance under her eyebrows; a touch of conspiracy, a little bathing in collusion; then looked demurely down.

'I could tell you a suitable piece of water. And very private.'

'Where?'

'In the woods behind Tetbury Hall. They call it the lake. It's just a big pond. But they say it's very deep.'

'How does he get there without being seen?'

'He knows the country round Tetbury very well. He owns a lot of it. Hunting. Once he's within walking distance from London, he's safe.'

'And that part of it?'

'Some kind of disguise? He couldn't have hired a car. Or risked the train. By bus?'

'Hell of a lot of changing.'

'He wasn't in a hurry. He wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere near home before nightfall. Some stop several miles away? Then cross-country? He liked walking.'

'He still has to sink himself. Drowned bodies need a lot of weight to stay down.'

'Something inflatable? An air mattress? Car-tyre? Then deflate it when he's floated far enough out?'

'You're beginning to give me nightmares.'

She smiled and leant back and folded her hands in her lap; then she grinned up and threw it all away.

'I also fancy myself as an Agatha Christie.'

He watched her; and she looked down, mock-penitent.

'How serious are you being about all this?'

'I thought about it a lot in Paris. Mainly because of the British

Museum thing. I couldn't work out why he'd have wanted to see me. I mean if he didn't, it was a kind of risk. He might have bumped into me. And you can't walk into the reading-room just like that. You have to show a pass. I don't know if that was checked.'

'Every attendant there.'

'So what I think now is that it was some kind of message. He never meant to see me, but for some reason he wanted me to know that I was involved in his decision. Perhaps because of Peter. Something for some reason he felt I stood for.'

'A way out he couldn't take?'

'Perhaps. It's not that I'm someone special. In the ordinary world. I was probably just very rare in his. I think it was simply a way of saying that he'd have liked to talk to me. Enter my world. But couldn't.'

'And why Tetbury Hall?'

'It does fit. In an Agatha Christie sort of way. The one place no one would think of looking. And its neatness. He was very tidy, he hated mess. On his own land, no trespassing involved. Just a variation on blowing your brains out in the gun-room, really.'

He looked her in the eyes. 'One thing bothers me. Those two hours after work of yours that day.'

'I was only joking.'

'But you weren't at home. Mrs Fielding tried to telephone you then.'

She smiled.

'Now it's my turn to ask how serious you're being.'

'Just tying ends up.'

'And if I don't answer?'

'I don't think that writer of yours would allow that.'

'Oh but he would. That's his whole point. Nice people have instincts as well as duties.'

It was bantering, yet he knew he was being put to the test; that this was precisely what was to be learnt. And in some strange way the case had died during that last half-hour; it was not so much that he accepted her theory, but that like everyone else, though for a different reason, he now saw it didn't really matter. The act was done; taking it to bits discovering how it had been done in detail, was not the point. The point was a living face with brown eyes, half challenging and half teasing; not committing a crime against that. He thought of a ploy, some line about this necessitating further questioning; and rejected it. In the end, he smiled and looked down.

She said gently, 'I must go now. Unless you're going to arrest me for second sight.'

They came to the pavement outside the house in Willow Road, and stood facing each other.

'Well.'

'Thank you for the cup of tea.'

He glanced at the ground, reluctantly official.

'You have my number. If anything else . . .'

'Apart from bird-brained fantasy.'

'I didn't mean that. It was fun.'

There was a little silence.

'You should have worn a uniform. Then I'd have remembered who you were.'

He hesitated, then held out his hand. 'Take care. And I'll buy that novel when it comes out.'

She took his hand briefly, then folded her arms.

'Which one?'

'The one you were talking about.'

'There's another. A murder story.' She looked past his shoulder down the street. 'Just the germ of an idea. When I can find someone to help me over the technical details.'

'Like police procedure?'

'Things like that. Police psychology, really.'

'That shouldn't be too difficult.'

'You think someone . . . ?'

'I know someone.'

She cocked her left sandal a little forward, contemplated it against the pavement, her arms still folded.

'I don't suppose he could manage tomorrow evening?'

'How do you like to eat?'

'Actually I rather enjoy cooking myself.' She looked up. 'When I'm not at work.'

'Dry white? About eight?'

She nodded and bit her lips, with a touch of wryness, perhaps a tinge of doubt.

'All this telepathy.'

'I wanted to. But . . .'

'Noted. And approved.'

She held his eyes a moment more, then raised her hand and turned

towards the front door; the dark hair, the slim walk, the white dress. At the door, after feeling in her purse and putting the key in the lock, she turned a moment and again raised her hand briefly. Then she disappeared inside.

The sergeant made, the next morning, an informal and unsuccessful application to have the pond at Tetbury Hall dragged. He then tried, with equal unsuccess, to have himself taken off the case, indeed to have it tactically closed. His highly circumstantial new theory as to what might have happened received no credence. He was told to go away and get on with the job of digging up some hard evidence instead of wasting his time on half-baked psychology; and heavily reminded that it was just possible the House of Commons might want to hear why one of their number was still untraced when they returned to Westminster. Though the sergeant did not then know it, historical relief lay close at hand – the London letter-bomb epidemic of later that August was to succeed where his own request for new work had failed.

However, he was not, by the time that first tomorrow had closed, the meal been eaten, the Sauvignon drunk, the kissing come, the barefooted cook finally and gently persuaded to stand and be deprived of a different but equally pleasing long dress (and proven, as suspected, quite defenceless underneath, though hardly an innocent victim in what followed), inclined to blame John Marcus Fielding for anything at all.

The tender pragmatisms of flesh have poetries no enigma, human or divine, can diminish or demean – indeed, it can only cause them, and then walk out.