

THE SCRAWLER
GRAHAM MASTERTON

Peter was standing on the westbound platform of Piccadilly Circus tube station, eating a Mars Bar, when he noticed the words HOW ARE YOU FEELING TODAY, PETER? scratched into a Wonderbra poster on the opposite side of the track.

He glanced right and left, embarrassed, as if everybody else on the crowded platform knew that his name was Peter. But everybody else was talking, or eating, simply staring tiredly at nothing at all. After a minute there was a warm rush of wind and his train arrived, and he stepped aboard. The carriage was jam-packed, but he elbowed his way to the window on the other side of the train so that he could look at the inscription more closely.

The letters were nearly two feet high, irregularly spaced, and they had been gouged so deeply into the poster that they had gone right through to the brick underneath. He couldn't imagine how anybody could have managed to cut them, especially since the poster was more than ten feet above the track, and the track itself carried 650 volts of alternating current.

But there they were: HOW ARE YOU FEELING TODAY, PETER? And he couldn't help feeling that somehow the message was meant for him.

The train pulled away with a jolt, and he staggered into the bosom of a large middle-aged black lady who didn't complain but gave him a smile and a wink. He said, "Sorry...sorry." He didn't want her to think that he had done it on purpose.

He got out at West Kensington and walked south on North End Road. It was only 5:30 but it was already dark, and the streets were glistening with home-going traffic. As he passed the Seven Stars pub, he noticed that somebody had scrawled a message on its cream-colored tiles, in the same kind of jagged, scratchy lettering that he had seen on the tube. ARE YOU SURE YOU CAN TRUST HER, PETER?

He went back a few paces and stared at it. This was ridiculous. The message was cut right into the ceramic surface of the tiles, as if it had been inscribed with a narrow-bladed chisel. But it couldn't refer to him, surely. There must be hundreds of Peters in West Kensington. Thousands.

But how many of them would have been likely to pass first one message, in Piccadilly, and then a second one, here? And what was the writer trying to say about “trusting her”?

He turned into Bramber Road, a narrow street of Victorian terraced houses, opposite the scrubby little triangle of Normand Park. It was starting to rain again, and he began to hurry. He reached No. 19 and forced open the wrought-iron gate, which sagged on its hinges, and made it to the shelter of the porch. He took out his key and was just about to insert it in the lock when the lights went on inside the hallway and the door opened. A tall young man with dark curly hair and a leather jacket stepped out, and said, “Hi. Thanks.”

Peter stood and watched the young man as he went out through the gate and walked down the street, his collar turned up against the rain. He was sure that he recognized him, but he couldn't think why, or how. He stepped into the hallway and closed the door behind him, just as the time-switch plunged him into darkness.

He climbed the steep staircase. There was a strong smell of frying onions on the first-floor landing. Mr Chowdery was cooking one of his curries again. He passed Flat 3, where *Neighbours* was playing at top volume on Mrs Wigmore's television. Then he went up to the top floor and let himself into Flat 4.

Peter had lived here for seven months before Gemma had moved in with him, and it still looked like a single man's flat, even though it was cluttered with feminine debris like shopping bags and make-up and hair-brushes and discarded bras. The floors were carpeted in plain oatmeal carpet, and the furniture was mostly Ikea, pale pine and chrome. All of Peter's CDs were neatly arranged in a pine tower, next to his Sony stereo equipment, and all of his paperback books were shelved in alphabetical order.

The only decoration on the walls of the living-room was a poster for The Smiths.

Peter went through to the kitchen. It was in darkness, with Gemma's white cotton bodies hanging up in the windows like ghosts. He opened the fridge because all men open the fridge as soon as they come home, but there was nothing in it except for last night's pizza, its cheese turned to yellow plastic and its box spotted with grease.

“Gemma?” he called. He went into the bedroom. The bed was still unmade, the brown durry dragged to one side and the pillows on the floor.

“Gemma?”

"In here," she called, from the half-open bathroom door. There was a wet towel on the floor and he had to push the door hard to get in. Gemma was standing in the bathtub, behind the green plastic shower-curtain.

"You're early," she said.

"Yes..." he said, bending over to pick up the towel. "There was a fire-alarm so they canceled the last lesson."

She turned off the water and drew back the curtain. She was a tall, thin girl, almost antelope-like, with a long oval face and enormous brown eyes. Her cheeks were flushed pink and she smelled of Body Shop mint shampoo. "Hand me that towel, will you?"

"Didn't you go to work?" he asked her.

"No...I had a headache. Besides, there's never anything much to do on Fridays."

She wound the towel around her and went through to the bedroom, where she stood in front of the dressing-table mirror and brushed out her wet hair. He followed her and stood behind her, watching her. ARE YOU SURE YOU CAN TRUST HER, PETER?

"So, what have you been doing all day?"

"Nothing. Sleeping, mostly."

"I thought we could go for a Chinese tonight."

"I don't know. I'm not really hungry."

"Well, I'll get a take-away then."

"Whatever."

He started to straighten the bed. "Who was that guy I saw downstairs?"

"What guy?"

"He was just coming out when I came in. Tall guy. Dark curly hair."

"I don't know."

"It's just that he didn't look like the sort of person that Mr Chowdery would have for a friend. Nor Mrs Wigmore, either."

Gemma shrugged, with hair-grips in her mouth.

Peter went through to the kitchen again, and this time he switched on the light. Gemma's keys were lying sprawled on the kitchen-counter, next to her purse.

"You went out?" he asked her.

"What?"

"I just wondered if you went out at all."

She came into the kitchen, wearing her knee-length nightshirt. “No. I told you. I had a headache.”

In the middle of the night, with the amber streetlight shining across the ceiling, he put his arm around her. She murmured irritably and pushed him away. After that he lay awake for hours, listening to the soft, ceaseless thunder of London at night, feeling as if his world had changed into somewhere that he didn’t recognize – somewhere anxious and threatening and insecure.

On Saturday morning they went shopping along the North End Road market. Gemma was unusually distant, as if she had something on her mind, and she hardly ever seemed to look at him, or talk to him, or smile. Peter followed her through the clutter of newspaper and broken tomato boxes, and there was an ache in his throat that couldn’t be swallowed away.

At lunchtime they went for a sandwich and a drink at The Colton Arms, and sat in the darkest corner at the back. Gemma was silhouetted against the window, and wreathed in cigarette smoke.

“What do you want to do this afternoon?” Peter asked her. “I thought we could go to Holland Park.”

“What for?”

“Nothing. Just for a walk.”

“I don’t know. I was thinking of going to see Kelley and June.”

“All right, then. We’ll go to see Kelley and June.”

“Just me, I was thinking. I feel like a good old girlie natter.”

“All right. What time will you be back?”

“I don’t know. I’ll call you.”

“What about supper?”

“It’s only pork chops, isn’t it? I’ll do it when I get back.”

Peter didn’t know what to say. With the light behind her, he couldn’t see her eyes. He laid his hand on top of hers, and although she didn’t move it away, he could feel how tense she was. No twining of fingers. Her hand just crouched there, underneath his, rigid, like a small animal waiting for its chance to escape.

“I’m going for a leak,” he told her, taking his hand away.

The gents was cramped, and he had to wait while a white-haired old man with a cigarette in his mouth coughed and peed at the same time, and made an elaborate performance of wagging himself afterward, and grunting while he did up his buttons.

When he stood in front of the urinal, Peter saw letters cut into the wall. They were so large that he couldn't read them at first. They were nearly half-an-inch deep, and formed in the same scratchy style as the messages he had seen on the tube wall at Piccadilly, and on the side of the Seven Stars.

DON'T YOU THINK SHE'S LYING TO YOU?

He went back into the bar. Gemma was talking on her mobile phone, but as soon as she saw him she said, "No – I've got to go now. I'll talk to you later," and quickly flipped it shut.

"Who was that?" he asked her.

"Who was what?"

"Who were you just talking to?"

"Erm, Tricia."

"Tricia? I thought Tricia was spending the weekend in Wales."

"She is. It *is* possible to talk on the phone to people in Wales, you know."

Peter said nothing. He was quite convinced now that the wall-messages were meant for him. How anybody could know where he was going to be, and how they could cut the letters so deeply, he had no idea. But what disturbed him most of all was the questions they were asking him.

He picked up his glass and swirled the last of his lager around and around. "You do still love me?" he said.

"What do you mean? Of course I love you."

"If there was something wrong, you'd tell me, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would."

He looked up at her. He still couldn't see her eyes. DON'T YOU THINK SHE'S LYING TO YOU?

He was dozing in front of *Eurotrash* when the phone rang on the table beside him. Frowning, he picked it up and pressed the mute button on the TV remote.

"Peter? It's Gemma. I'm sorry I didn't call you earlier but I lost track of the time."

He peered at his watch. "It's five past twelve. Where are you?"

"I'm still round at Kelley and June's. I'm sorry. We had a couple of bottles of wine and, you know."

"For Christ's sake, Gemma, you were supposed to come back for supper."

"Look, I've said I'm sorry, haven't I? It's not like we're married or anything."

"We're supposed to be engaged, aren't we? Come on, Gemma, think what you'd feel like if I did the same to you."

"I wouldn't mind if you wanted a night out with the boys. Why should I?"

"So when are you coming back?"

"Tomorrow morning. I'm too pissed to drive."

"Call a minicab. We can go back and get your car in the morning."

"I want to stay here. We're having a good time."

"Gemma – "

But Gemma had hung up, and Peter was left with the dead receiver in his hand, and the flickering image on the TV screen of a Belgian orgy. A young blonde woman with bright red lips was gasping with ecstasy in the arms of a muscular naked man. The man turned around and looked directly into the camera, and gave a long, self-satisfied leer.

Peter switched off the television and went to the bathroom. He saw it as soon as he opened the door, and he stood staring at it with a cold crawling sensation that worked its way slowly up his back and into his scalp.

In the mirror over the washbasin, eight scratchy words had been engraved right into the glass.
DON'T YOU THINK SHE DESERVES TO BE PUNISHED?

Peter approached the basin and traced the letters with his fingertips. How could anyone have cut letters as deep as these? They must have used an industrial diamond, or a glasscutter. But who was it, and how had they got in here, and *when* had they done it? He had been sleeping for nearly an hour, but only fitfully, and cutting letters as deep as this would have made an appalling scratching noise.

He looked through the letters at his own face. Thin, beaky-nosed, with dark rings under his eyes. A young Pete Townshend, from The Who. *Hope I die before I get old*. He heard a banging noise outside and he gave a silly, girlish jump, knocking his elbow against the washbasin. It was only Mr Chowdery slamming the lid back on his dustbin, but somehow nothing seemed the same

any more. If people could walk through locked doors and cut your deepest anxieties into your bathroom mirror, then what else could happen?

Peter slept badly that night. By the time the key turned in the lock at 7:35, and Gemma came in, he was sitting on the couch drinking a large mug of instant coffee and eating a folded-over Kraft cheese sandwich without a plate.

“Oh, you’re back, then,” he said.

She walked across the room and drew back the thin cotton curtains. It was a gloomy, gray day, and the window was speckled with rain.

“You look terrible. You’re not getting one of your colds, are you?”

“No. I just didn’t sleep, that’s all.”

“You’re not sulking, are you, just because I stayed out?”

“Why should I? Like you keep on telling me, we’re not married yet. You can do what you like.”

“Oh God, you *are* sulking.”

She went into the kitchen and put the kettle on. He followed her and stood in the doorway watching her.

“What?” she said.

“You didn’t go to see Kelley and June, did you?”

She took down her coffee-mug and spooned coffee into it. She was betraying him, he was sure of it. The graffiti were right. She poured boiling water into her mug and stirred it, and he kept on watching her as if she was going to make some insignificant gesture that would give her away.

As she tried to leave the kitchen he barred her way. “Come on, I want to know the truth. You didn’t go to see Kelley and June, did you?”

“Peter, for God’s sake.”

“I want to know his name, Gemma. I want to know what the hell you think you’re doing to me.”

“I’m not doing anything to you. I just need some space, that’s all. You’re always *there*. I go into the living-room and you’re there. I go into the bedroom and you follow me into the bedroom. I can’t even go to the toilet without you coming in.”

“We live together, don’t we?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean we can never go more than two inches away from each other. You give me claustrophobia, if you must know.”

He stared at her. He didn’t know what to say. In the end she said, “*Excuse me,*” and pushed past him into the living-room. He didn’t know whether to follow her or not.

At eleven o'clock she went out to the corner shop for milk and cigarettes.

"You can come if you want to," she said, winding her red woolen scarf around her neck.

"I'm watching the football," he said. "Besides, I wouldn't want you to feel more claustrophobic than you do already."

"Oh, Peter."

She hadn't been gone longer than three or four minutes when the phone rang. He picked it up and a man's voice said, "*Gem?*"

"Who wants her?"

"*Rick.*"

"Rick who?"

"*Look, man, is she there or not?*"

"She's not, as a matter of fact. Rick who?"

The man put the phone down without answering. Peter sat frowning at the receiver as if he couldn't understand what it was.

As they walked up North End Road toward the tube station, Peter said, "Who's Rick?"

"Rick?" she said. She thought for a moment and then she shook her head. "I don't know any Rick."

"Well, Rick knows you. In fact, Rick knows you well enough to call you '*Gem*'."

"Oh, *that* Rick. Little bald chap. I met him at one of our promotions at work."

They crossed the street. On the other side of the road a shop had been converted into a dentist's surgery, its front window painted blue. Below the gilt letters that read I. Wartawa, Dental Surgeon, somebody had scratched the message YOU DON'T SERIOUSLY BELIEVE HER, DO YOU?

Peter stopped and stared at it, while Gemma kept on walking. He felt so helpless and angry and jealous that he could have smashed the window with his fist. How could she think that he was going to swallow her explanation about Rick being a little bald chap she had met at work? A hundred to one Rick was the curly-headed guy in the leather jacket. A hundred to one.

Somehow, Gemma's betrayal of him must be so terrible that it had actually caused this graffiti to etch itself spontaneously, in the same way that the likenesses of dead people appeared on the

walls of the rooms they had died in; or stigmata appeared on the hands and feet of people who experienced spasms of religious ecstasy.

He caught up with her by the entrance to the tube station and she hadn't even noticed that he wasn't walking beside her. "What?" she asked, as he took hold of her arm.

"I'm all right. I'm fine. So tell me about this Rick."

"There's nothing to tell," she said, as he bought their tickets. "He works for some computer company in Milton Keynes."

"You gave him your number at home?"

"I don't know. I must have done."

They went down the stairs to the eastbound platform. West Kensington station was open to the iron-gray afternoon clouds, and the tracks were shining with wet. There were only five or six other people on the platform with them, including a drunk in a torn brown raincoat who was performing a mesmerizing one-man foxtrot just to stay upright.

"Listen – what you said about space."

"I didn't mean to upset you, Peter. It's just that I do like to have a few moments on my own, now and again. I'm sorry I called you claustrophobic."

He looked down at the concrete edging on the platform. There were fourteen letters chiseled into it, jagged and awry. PUNISH HER, PETER.

In the distance, he heard the next train approaching. Soon he could see its headlights gleaming on the rails. He stood close to Gemma and put his arm around her waist. She glanced at him uncomfortably, but after what she had just said, she obviously didn't feel that she could pull herself away.

The train suddenly appeared from underneath the bridge. Peter didn't even hesitate. He shouted out, "*Be careful!*" and at the same time pushed Gemma forward as hard as he could.

Gemma toppled, lost her balance, nearly caught it again, but then Peter pushed her again, gripping her coat-collar so that it looked as if he was trying to save her. She tumbled over the edge of the platform right under the train's front wheels.

There was a deafening bang of emergency brakes, followed by a long, hideous screeching, like the grand finale to some cacophonous opera. The train seemed to take forever to come to a stop. Its wheels locked, so that Gemma was dragged almost thirty yards along the track.

Then, for one long moment, there was quiet. Only the traffic from North End Road, and the sound of a 747 rumbling overhead, on its way to Heathrow.

More like a wooden marionette than a man, Peter walked stiff-legged to the front of the train. He felt shocked and breathless, but wildly exhilarated, too. The driver was just climbing out of his cab. He had left the rest of the doors closed, so that the train's passengers were trapped inside, staring anxiously out to see what had happened. The drunk had lost his battle to stay upright, and was reclining on the platform on one elbow like a man at a picnic, saying, "Shit...I don't believe it. Shit."

Peter went up to the driver. He was gray-faced, and his voice shook. "I've only just gone back to work after the last one," he blurted. "I've only just gone back."

Peter peered down onto the track. Gemma was lying underneath the front platform-side wheel. Her face was covered in red bruises and her dress was soaked in blood. She was staring up at the clouds with an expression of bewilderment, rather than terror. Her right arm had been torn off at the shoulder and the lower part of her right leg was missing.

One of the station staff came running up. "Ambulance is on its way," he announced. Then, "You can't stay here, sir. You'll have to stand well back."

"That's my fiancée," said Peter.

"I'm really sorry, sir, but you'll have to stand well back."

Peter retreated to the bench at the end of the platform while two more station staff appeared and then, at last, an ambulance crew. The power was switched off and they climbed down onto the tracks. Peter began to wish that he hadn't given up smoking.

As he sat on the bench waiting, he saw some words scratched into the side of the train. HAPPY NOW, PETER? And he began to think that, yes, in a way, he was.

It suddenly started to rain very hard.

Later that evening, after he had talked for two hours to a sympathetic, sandy-haired detective, he went back to Bramber Road and let himself into his flat. It was cold and dark, and the first thing he saw when he switched the light on was Gemma's red angora sweater lying on the couch.

"Hallo," he said, under his breath. "Anybody home?"

He went into the kitchen. Gemma's white bodies were still hanging in the windows where she had left them yesterday, and he systematically took them down, one after the other, and folded them up. Then he went through to the bedroom and opened the wardrobe. It was crowded with jumpers and skirts and jeans and jackets, and the bottom was heaped with dozens of pairs of shoes from Shelley's and Ravel.

He slid open one of the drawers and picked out a pair of white lacy panties. He pressed them against his face and took a deep breath. They smelled of nothing but Comfort softener. She's gone, he thought. She's really gone. It just goes to show you that you *can* make a difference in your own life, you *can* take control, if you're brave enough. All you have to do is open your eyes, take your blinkers off, and see that the people all around you are screwing you rotten. They may smile and clap you on the back and pretend to be your friends, but they're not. And women are the worst.

He went into the bathroom and stared at his face in the mirror. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, does this look like a murderer to you? No, it looks like a man who was grievously betrayed by the woman who was supposed to love him, and simply started to ask himself the right questions.

He took off all of his clothes and weighed himself. Then he cleared all of Gemma's cosmetics from the bathroom shelf – her cleansing lotion, her Clearasil, her toothpaste, her shampoo. He put them in a cardboard wine box, along with her make-up and everything else in her dressing-table drawers.

After that, he emptied her wardrobe, stuffing all of her clothes into black plastic dustbin-bags. He even went through the kitchen cupboards, removing her Weight Watchers soups and her sachets of green Japanese tea.

The phone rang. He picked it up and said, "Who is it?"

"Rick. Is Gem back yet?"

"Gemma's never coming back, Rick."

"What do you mean? Where can I get in touch with her?"

"She's dead, Rick. There was an accident."

"Oh my God. What happened?"

"Justice caught up with her, Rick. Justice."

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Of course you do. Fucking her behind my back."

"What?"

"Don't try to pretend that you're innocent, Rick. It was carved in stone, what you two were doing together. Etched in glass, chiseled in brick. You can't get evidence much more concrete than that, can you?"

"I don't know what on earth you mean. Tell me what happened to her."

But Peter hung up, and sat back in his chair, smiling smugly. Let him find out for himself, the bastard. Gemma's death would be in all the papers tomorrow. Then everybody would know that all deceitful women have to pay the price.

A week went past and it rained every day, ceaselessly. The following Saturday morning he went to Gemma's funeral at West London Crematorium. He saw a lot of her friends there – Kelley and June and David and all of the people from work – but he didn't see the tall curly-headed Rick. He had probably had the sense to stay away.

After the ceremony – as he walked back along the puddly asphalt path toward the crematorium gates – a young man with short blond hair and glasses caught up with him.

"We've met before, haven't we?" he said. Then – seeing Peter frown -- "Robin Marshall, we met at Bill and Gillian's party in Kew."

"Oh, yes. How are you?"

"I've been great, actually. I've just come back from three months in San Francisco. Such a tragedy, Gemma being killed like that. You must be devastated."

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"She was such a sweet girl...always so *graceful*, I thought. I never saw her do anything awkward or clumsy, ever. I saw her fall off a stepladder once, when she was putting up some Christmas decorations. Somehow she managed to turn it into a *jeté*. Landed on her feet -- *ta-da!* -- light as a fairy."

Peter nodded. He was struck by the intense blueness of Robin Marshall's eyes. They were almost unreal, like sapphires. He had good cheekbones, a straight nose, and rather sensual lips. His suntan had faded so that he looked as if he were made-up for a television appearance.

"Listen, do you fancy a coffee?" Peter asked. "I haven't really had anybody to talk to since Gemma."

"Of course. That'd be nice. There's an Italian restaurant just around the corner. The food's only fit for regurgitation but they do a terrific espresso."

They sat in the steamed-up window of Florentino's with two large espressos, only two feet away from a hugely fat man in jeans and a squeaky leather jacket who was forking up a bowlful of spaghetti Bolognese.

"You're bound to be feeling disoriented now that Gemma's gone," said Robin. "After all, your choice of partner defines who you are. What you see in your partner, that's you."

“I don’t know. It sounds heartless, and I miss her like anything, but I feel relieved, in a way. I don’t really think that we were meant for each other. I just wish I could have found out some other way.”

Robin watched him from over the rim of his cup. Those deep blue eyes were almost alien, an Atreides from *Dune*. “When you say you weren’t meant for each other – what do you think was wrong?”

The fat man tore off a piece of bread and pushed it into his mouth to join his churning spaghetti. Peter said, “She was absolutely beautiful...and graceful, like you say. Everybody else used to say that she was gorgeous, and she was. I loved going out with her and showing her off. But when it came down to it...”

“When it came down to it, what? What was wrong? What was missing?”

Peter didn’t know why he felt able to confide in Robin, but he did. He seemed to be one of those few people who instinctively understand what you’re feeling, because they’ve felt the same way.

“When it came down to it, she didn’t – well, she didn’t, you know, *excite* me. She didn’t turn me on.”

“Hm,” said Robin, and sipped his coffee. “And why do you think that was?”

Peter shrugged. “I loved her, as a person. I really did. I was jealous if any other man tried to flirt with her. I mean, like, *burningly* jealous. In the last few days I’ve been worrying that she’s been seeing somebody else, and that’s been depressing the hell out of me. But I -- ah -- ”

“You didn’t find her sexually arousing, is that what you’re trying to say?”

“I suppose it is, yes. I really don’t know why.”

Robin was thoughtfully silent, peering down into his coffee-cup. Then he said, “What about other women? Do you find *any* woman sexually arousing?”

Peter didn’t answer, couldn’t. He had always liked women, and he had always been curious about women. He had bought jazz mags when he was younger, and masturbated over them. But Robin had come dangerously close to something that he had never dared to ask himself.

“I, er, yes. Some women. Some particular types of women. Not *all* women. But some women.”

Robin still didn’t look up from his coffee-cup. “Do you think it would be a good idea if you and I were to meet and discuss this some more? You could come to my flat for supper, if you liked.”

“I’m not sure.”

“The truth is, Peter, I’m on my own at the moment. The reason I came back from San Francisco – well, I’ve just broken up with somebody who was very close to me. I’d really appreciate some company. You know – just someone to talk to.

Peter didn’t know what to say, but Robin took a business card out of his wallet and said, “Think about it. My home number’s on here, too. Next Thursday would be a good day for me.”

“Thank you,” said Peter. The fat man sniffed yet again, and let out a loud, ripping burp.

He decided to walk home, even though it was nearly three miles and it was raining harder than ever. He needed to think, and he felt that he deserved some punishment, too. He kept his umbrella furled, so that the icy rain lashing against his face, and he couldn’t stop thinking about Robin and his Atreides eyes, and those bow-shaped, slightly-parted lips.

He reached the junction with Charleville Road. There was a public lavatory in the middle of the traffic island, surrounded by black cast-iron railings. On the side of it, engraved into the brickwork, were the same jagged letters that he had seen before. WHAT ARE YOU, PETER?

He crossed over the busy road and went right up to the wall. Again, the letters were nearly half-an-inch deep. He pressed his hand against the wet bricks and wondered if he was suffering the first symptoms of schizophrenia. But schizophrenic people hear voices. They don’t see messages chiseled into solid stone.

He wiped his dripping nose with the back of his hand. He needed a pee so he walked around to the steps that led down to the Gents. As he went down them, a gray-haired man in a damp-shouldered raincoat passed him on the way up, and gave him a wink.

The toilet was smelly and the floor was wet. A thin young man in a threadbare overcoat was washing his hair in one of the basins, while a painfully ribby Jack Russell stood shivering beside him. “Spare some change, mate?” he asked, huskily, his hair still soapy and his head still immersed.

Peter was about to open one of the cubicle doors. He found £3 in his trouser pocket and put it down on the counter next to the young man’s dirty green plastic comb. The young man didn’t thank him so Peter simply said, “There, buy yourself a cup of tea or something,” and went back to the cubicle.

He locked the door behind him. There was no seat on the lavatory and somebody had unraveled all of the toilet-paper onto the floor. The walls were covered in drawings and poems and telephone numbers. If you want the suck of your life meet me here 7:30 Tues 9. I like young black boys with

really tight holes. O seasons, O castles! What soul is without fault? Spurs are crap. There were crude felt-tip drawings of naked women and dozens of disembodied penises with semen flying out of them like machine-gun fire. And then – as Peter looked higher up the wall – he felt a cold, crawling sensation around the back of his neck. Hacked into the tiles was the message WHY DON'T YOU TRY IT, PETER?

He finished and flushed the toilet. He stood in the cubicle for a long time with his hand pressed over his mouth, thinking. Robin had disturbed him deeply, and he had been tempted to say yes when he had asked him around for supper. But he wasn't at all sure of himself yet. Supposing he wasn't really gay at all? Supposing he was grieving for Gemma more than he consciously realized, and was simply looking for help and sympathy and a shoulder to cry on? Supposing – for all of her grace and all of her beauty – Gemma simply hadn't been his type of woman?

He would need to be sure before he saw Robin again. It would be too embarrassing to accept Robin's invitation and then discover that he had made a terrible mistake.

He stayed in the cubicle for three or four minutes, not knowing what to do. But finally he opened the door and stepped outside. The young man in the shabby overcoat was still bent over the basin, almost as if he had been waiting for Peter to emerge. The dog yawned and shook itself.

Peter went up to the young man and stood close behind him.

"I – ah – I don't suppose you need any more money?"

The young man stopped rinsing his tousled hair, but said nothing.

"It's just that – well, I've never done anything like this before. Just come up to a total stranger and asked him if he's interested. So I'm not sure if this is the way to go about it."

Still the stranger said nothing, and remained with his head bent over the gray, soapy water.

"If you're not interested, just say the word and I'll go."

At last the young man stood up straight, his shoulders bony under his coat. Peter couldn't see his face properly because the mirror was all steamed up.

"Well?" said Peter. He was growing anxious and impatient, and he was right on the edge of turning around and leaving.

"You ask far too many questions," said the boy, in a dry, whispery voice.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Exactly that. You never stop doubting yourself. You never stop doubting other people. You don't have any faith."

“Faith? What does faith have to do with it?”

“Faith has everything to do with it,” the young man replied. He lifted his right hand, which was very thin and very long-fingered, and unfolded it. To Peter’s horror, he had curved gray fingernails that were almost three inches long.

He reached up to the mirror, and used the nail of his index finger to scratch the glass. With a gritty scraping noise that set Peter’s teeth on edge, he scrawled NO FAITH, NO FUTURE. Then he turned around.

To Peter’s shock, he wasn’t a young man at all. His face was leathery and deeply-wrinkled, and his eyes were as black and glittery as beetles. His mouth was almost lipless, as if somebody had made a deep horizontal cut with a very sharp knife.

Peter took one step back, and then another.

“Where are you going, Peter?” the man asked him, in the same whispery voice. “You can’t run away from your own lack of faith.”

“Who are you?” said Peter.

“They used to call me the Scrawler, in the East End, during the Blitz, when they were hiding in the tube stations. I used to scratch their worst nightmares on the tunnel walls. HALLO, SIDNEY, EVER WONDERED WHAT YOUR WIFE’S UP TO? That used to put the wind up them!”

“Get away from me. I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, and I don’t want to know, either.”

“You can’t get away from me, Peter. Once I’ve sniffed you out, there’s no getting away from me. I’ve been living in London for longer than you can even imagine, mate. I’ve been scrawling and scratching my way through the East End slums, and the sex-clubs of Soho, and Holborn, and Notting Hill, and Brixton. I have a very keen nose for fear, Peter. I can smell it on people, like body odor. Toffs, drunks, newspaper reporters, bank clerks.” He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep, appreciative breath.

“Who the hell are you? Leave me alone.”

The Scrawler’s eyes popped open again. “How can I leave you alone when you won’t leave *me* alone? You’re always doubting yourself, that’s your trouble. You’re always afraid that you’re going to be alone. You thought it was your mind that carved all of those questions, didn’t you? Or maybe some holy miracle. But it wasn’t you and it wasn’t a miracle. It was me.”

“Get away from me, will you?”

“Every city holds the same terrors, Peter. And what’s the greatest terror of all? The terror of not being loved. The terror of living amongst millions and millions of people and having nobody.

“That’s who I am, mate, and that’s *what* I am. I’m nothing more than the terror of loneliness, come to life. And if you ask me where I come from, and how I came to be wandering the streets sniffing out people’s insecurity, then all I can say is, I’ve always been here. You look at Rowlandson’s etchings, my friend. You look at *Punch* engravings of the London mob. You look at photographs of Piccadilly in the 1920s. That fellow by the ginhouse door; that fellow sitting on the top deck of the open omnibus; that face in the crowd on Waterloo Bridge. That’s me, Peter, looking for people like you.”

Peter . “You’re mad. You’re just mad. Get away from me.”

“I can’t do that, Peter. So long as you doubt yourself, mate, I will follow you everywhere, wherever you go, and I will never, ever, ever give you peace.”

Peter stared at the Scrawler for a very long time, his chest rising and falling like a man who’s been running. He *did* have faith. He *did* believe in himself. But what did he really believe in? And why did he always feel that he never fitted in? At work, he suspected that his colleagues didn’t like him, and that they talked about him behind his back. And he couldn’t even walk along the street without thinking that people were staring at him, and thinking what a misfit he was. He had never been able to believe that Gemma had really loved him and really wanted to marry him, and maybe that was why he had never been able to trust her.

But if he could get rid of his doubt – if he could stop asking himself so many questions – if he could *kill* his lack of faith –

He lifted his umbrella and struck the Scrawler on the shoulder. The Scrawler instantly snatched the umbrella and hurled it across to the other side of the toilet. Peter struck him with his fist, but he felt as if he had nothing beneath that flapping raincoat but a cage of bare bones. Without a word, the Scrawler opened out the index-fingernails of both hands and slashed Peter across his face, first one cheek, then the other. The nails cut right through to his tongue, leaving his cheeks wide open, like extra mouths. Blood sprayed everywhere, all over the basins, halfway up the walls.

Peter tried to seize the Scrawler’s neck. He was too shocked to speak, and in any case he couldn’t feel his tongue, but he let out a fierce and bloody *hhuurrrhhhhhh!* and hit the Scrawler’s head against the mirror, cracking it in half.

“Now you’ve fucking done it,” the Scrawler breathed into his ear. He locked his left arm around Peter’s neck and pushed the hard, sharp nail of his right up against Peter’s groin. He grunted, and pushed even harder, and his nail pierced Peter’s black funeral trousers, punctured his shirt-tail and his underpants, and then plunged deep into subcutaneous fat, puncturing his body cavity with an audible exhalation of gases. Peter felt the fingernail slide inside him, right inside, and it was the most indecent invasion of his body that he could have imagined, a single long fingernail cutting through intestines and muscle and connective tissue.

He didn’t utter a sound as the Scrawler slowly dragged his hand further and further up, so that his fingernail cut into his stomach, right up to his breastbone. His shirt-front was suddenly soaked with blood. The Scrawler stepped back, breathing harsh and hard. Peter swayed and coughed and then sank slowly to the wet tiled floor, pressing his forehead against it like a religious penitent.

Right in front of his eyes, he saw the words HOW ARE YOU FEELING TODAY, PETER? They were cut deep into the ceramic, and they were slowly filling up with blood.

A month later, on a cold, brilliant day, Robin Marshall was called to the inquest at West London Coroner’s Court, so that he could give evidence about Peter’s apparent state of mind on the day that he died.

He stood in the witness-box with the mid-morning sun shining on his blond hair. “I had the impression that Peter was confused.”

“Confused about what?” asked the coroner.

“He had just attended his fiancée’s funeral. I think he had very mixed feelings about her.”

“In what way?”

“He felt guilty that he may not have loved her as much as he ought to have done.”

“Can you elaborate?”

Robin looked serious. “I think he felt uncertain about his sexual orientation, apart from other things.”

“I see. Anything else?”

“Even though he said that his fiancée hadn’t really – well, excited him – he was still very jealous if he thought that she was seeing other men.”

“Did he think that she *was* seeing other men?”

Robin nodded. “He said that it was making him very depressed. And of course he was very depressed about her death, too; and still in shock, if you ask me.”

Richard Morton, a 35-year-old computer salesman from Milton Keynes, gave evidence that he had talked to Peter on the telephone just after Gemma's accident, and that Peter had seemed to believe that he and Gemma had been having an affair. "He was beside himself with rage. I simply couldn't understand why."

Dr George Protter, Peter's GP, said that Peter had been reasonably healthy, although he had suffered from several mild allergies, and had once consulted him after an anxiety attack at work. "As far as the matter of his late fiancée seeing other men is concerned, this was more than likely a figment of his imagination. She was a patient of my colleague Dr Carpenter, and three weeks before she died he had diagnosed a lump in her left breast. Under the circumstances it would hardly have been surprising if she had acted toward the deceased in a preoccupied manner. As Dr Carpenter will testify at *her* inquest next week, the evening before she fell beneath the train at West Kensington Station he had been to make a house-call to tell her that she would have to have exploratory surgery."

Dr Vikram Pathanda, the senior pathologist at Hammersmith Hospital, then described how Peter had died. "There were two deep diagonal wounds, one to each cheek, that went right through to the mouth cavity. There was a deep penetrative wound to the lower abdomen, followed by an invasive section of the abdomen, in an upward direction, right up to the sternum. The injuries were such that death would have occurred within two or three minutes.

"The wounds were caused by a specially-sharpened quarter-inch stonemason's chisel which was found at the trauma scene. There is no question at all in my mind that they were self-inflicted."

The coroner took off his glasses. "Thank you, Dr Pathanda. And now, I think, we could all adjourn for a spot of lunch."

Robin Marshall sat on the top deck of the No. 15 bus, one hand raised to shield his eyes from the late-afternoon sun. Next to him, a black boy in enormous cargo pants was listening to rap on his stereo and joining in the beat with an occasional, "*unh-a-unh-a*."

The bus stopped outside Paddington Station. As it did so, another bus drew alongside. Robin looked at a handsome young Asian sitting near the front of the bus. Then he looked down at the side, where there was a large advertisement for Pepsi-Cola.

Somebody had scratched letters in the side of the bus – high, jagged letters that went right through the paint and exposed the bare aluminum. They said, HOW ARE YOU FEELING TODAY, ROBIN?

