

PICTURES

This is not a novel. There is no plot to speak of. There's no playing silly buggers with chronology. There are no wizards. Alright, just one, but he's a minor character and only around long enough to scratch out a few magic runes (which work by the way).

What you have in your hands is a logbook, or a diary, if you prefer. The precise classification is not so very important; that can be left to some graduate student of the future. It is just a story; boy meets girl, basically.

I call this a logbook because it is a tale of love told in context. It is the account of a journey. A description of the course taken, the rapids navigated, the mountains climbed: geography, climate, quaint folk and customs, discoveries and disasters. Some might even call it a travelogue. Call it what you will, it is never dull. A record of romance is followed by jottings on the latitude and longitude of heaven. An argument is ended by the arrival of a hurricane. The natives turn hostile. Love hurts.

The best way to read this book is without expectations. Life, love and death, as far as I've been able to determine, rarely roll out like a novel. I write like a photographer; this is how the journey appeared to my lens. So it is that this work resembles a slide show; except that it's better because you get to make your own pictures from my words. Clinical trials have proven that 99% of readers stay awake while reading this book. Yet another improvement on a real slide show, where 99% of viewers doze off after the third slide.

Sean MacGillycuddy
Paris, August, 2001

All composite things
Are like a dream, a phantasm, a bubble, and a shadow,
Are like a dew-drop and a flash of lightning;
They are thus to be regarded.

Diamond Sutra, verse 32

HEIMAT

I drive with the window open. I don't like air-conditioning.

I drink lots of water. I know the desert is a dangerous place. I am an explorer. Explorers know these sorts of things. I drive carefully, keeping my eye on the road and my hands on the wheel. My driving instructor was a former military policeman. He had a very short fuse. If I had no good reason to not have both hands on the wheel he blew up.

'Wot you think this is?! A bloody dodgem?! You crash this car you'll be answerable before God and before me but *not* in that ordah! Bowf ands!'

Both hands. I drive with both hands.

The salt flats shine and shimmer before moon-grey ranges. Earlier, as the sun came up, they had been moon-gold and pink. My travelling companion says the mountains are green not grey. It seems I'm partially colour-blind. I never knew. This discovery makes me thoughtful.

'What are you thinking of?'

'This colour thing. I'm thinking about some of my projects.'

My companion laughs.

'Well, I won't say I didn't wonder,' she says.

Yesterday, the front-right tyre blew out. My companion took her foot off the gas and steered to a rolling stop. Good driving technique saved the day. She had both hands on the wheel and wasn't going too fast. Just enough to pull a good breeze without rushing. We didn't want our visit to the desert to be over too soon.

We like deserts or at least the ones you can enjoy in

relative safety. This desert has a long highway right down the middle of it. A scenic highway. The landscape is beautiful and very impressive.

The massive geological story-lines put you firmly in your little human place. Here is plot development that can make racy viewing only for immortals. The rest of us gawp briefly at the still and then fall over dead. With our puny life-spans we have no hope of seeing the big picture.

If you want to spend your little span gawping at this particular natural wonder, you can. There is an oasis. A couple of hundred souls live there not counting those passing through for a quick gawp. We of course are visiting for the quick version. The no-hardship version what's more. We're not in this valley to re-enact the tribulations of the first visitors to stumble through here in 1849. No ice-cold beer waiting for them at the water-hole.

We overnighted at the oasis after a long drive through remote and little-travelled country. The blow-out could just as easily have happened in the hot hills we passed through. If you haven't visited these hills think huge tumbledown stone ovens. You are the pizza still doughy. Your future is crusty. But the tyre decided to blow less than a mile out from the oasis. Explorer's luck.

Explorers need luck. If you and your logbooks go down with your canoe you can't play been-there-done-that when you get home and somebody else will have to write your memoirs; that's if somebody else thinks it worth the bother. Explorers prefer to tell their own version of events for good reason. There are reputations to make and credits to confer. If you are listed as missing in some far-off land, rumoured to have climbed this mountain or discovered that source, the homeland will, at best, erect a plaque; in rare cases, a statue. Mostly the homeland will forget. If indeed it ever knew.

Explorers are often unsure about the direction of home.

Many of them are looking for home or somewhere they can call such. The perfect spot. Heimat, sweet Heimat.

Some say home is where the heart is. Even if true this does little to keep explorers put. They tend to leave their hearts all over the place.

ALBION

Our complicated relationship had lasted five years. In our last months together she had found me as sexually intriguing as a supermarket trolley. She went off with the one man in the universe I was certain she wasn't sleeping with.

That was my terrific start to 1979, a personal annus horribilis. A hell made worse by April's frequent phone calls. Her new lover was not fulfilling all her needs; never talked about anything except rugby and astrophysics. She missed my love of languages and pontification. She even claimed to miss my body. Sometimes we met in a pub and she would dangle the prospect of a reunion. This always ended with me fleeing in tears.

But time is the great healer. Despite the torment I floundered through my finals and somehow made the cut. The ink on my diploma not yet dry I took a job as a draughtsman at an architectural office in Marylebone. By Christmas I had saved enough money to make my move. The new year would be a new decade, a new start. I was done with dreary England.

The fountains of Trafalgar Square had barely been cleaned of empties, confetti and dead revellers when I set my departure for New York.

April got word of my plans and summoned me to her bed. Our little reel around the fountain of unhappiness was about to end. She asked me to delay my leaving to give her a little more time. No dice. In the morning I left, a free man.

My coolness in the face of her entreaties had impressed even April. The blubbering boy was gone. In his place stood a Free Man with a willy of steel. I suppose that is why I was suddenly so much more attractive to my former lover. If you study those steamy romances that are popular

with millions of female readers the world over the pattern is clear. The male object of female fantasy is a pirate, rover or warrior prince; rough and tough on the outside, soft and sweet as a warm marshmallow on the inside. The heroine tames her wild man and he signifies his submission by giving her a good licking and then making babies with her. Well, I'm partial myself (if not to making babies) and I have no doubt April appreciated this but somewhere along the way she became uninterested and went looking for new tongue.

It was for the best, even if I didn't understand this immediately. The truth was we didn't want the same from life. April dreamed of a gentle English green and a cottage with roses growing over the door. A gaggle of adorable little tykes ran shrieking joyfully from little room to little room. Little Bo Peep grazed her fluffy sheep in the meadow at the bottom of the cottage garden.

April had not domesticated this wild rover, all the licking notwithstanding. I wanted major metropolises and untamed landscapes. City apartments with noisy neighbours and traffic and dodgy people on street corners. Forget the sheep, I wanted to see the wolves.

If you had asked me two years before where I was headed I would have said Australia and the dreaming towers of Sydney. I had wept on leaving that beautiful city when my year was up. I was sure I would return to make it my home. Ah, fickle me; that was before I met New York. On the airport bus leaving my new-found love all I could do was talk about coming back. April was cranky and spent the flight home ignoring me. I ignored the signals and returned to New York a few months later for three weeks of thesis research, beer drinking, pot smoking and fucking around. When I got back to London I found that April had been doing much the same with the exception of the pot which made her sick. A couple of weeks later she moved out because she was sick of me.

And now, just over a year from that painful day, it was my turn to move. I was going a little further than Pimlico.

Stoopid Cupid, stop picking on me.

It was my own fault. I went to Billy's Valentine's party of my own free will. As for all that happened as a consequence, there was no way of knowing. That at least is my excuse. I sensed bad timing but I couldn't resist the urge to know more. It was the explorer of course. My fascination with the new and the uncharted.

I look back now and I wonder at the delicacy of the connection that set it all in train. If not for this one festivity, this one mutual acquaintance and a misunderstanding about geography, we would never have met.

Billy introduced us. He thought we came from the same country. I had told him more than once that I was in fact from the islands a couple of thousand kilometres to the east of Australia but it was all Down Under as far as Billy was concerned.

Kate was beautiful. Dark hair and elfin-large brown eyes in a face too young for a woman. She had a way of looking at you from under a slightly tilted forehead; a look that would later be patented by the Princess of Wales. Kate's eyes were merry and ever so slightly naughty.

She pegged me for a pom.

'No, um...'

'You're not Australian.'

'No, I'm a New Zealander.'

She laughed.

'Streuth. Kiwi-pom. Dole-bludger to the power of two!'

Kate noticed my distress. I didn't mind the dole-bludger but I really didn't like being called a pom even if it was half-way true. She patted my arm soothingly.

'No worries. I like Pommyland, and I like poms as it happens.'

'You don't actually sound all that Australian, yourself,' I said. 'How'd that happen? Pommy parents or something?'

She smiled at my little crack.

'No, I just like English accents. As a kid I used to watch Coronation Street. I'd try to imitate them.'

The picture of the little Queensland girl sitting under a Moreton Bay palm tree trying to wrap her tongue around broad Mancunian was too precious for words. I think it was then that I became aware that I was being swept slowly out to sea.

'You been here long?' she asked.

'Too long. I don't share your enthusiasm for this green and pleasant land. I'm moving to New York next month.'

'Oh,' she said. 'Exciting.'

Kate was a graphic designer and I could tell I had scored big points when I told her my dad was a painter.

'But you didn't follow in his footsteps?'

'No, he didn't advise it. Difficult to make a living at. To bring home the family bacon he worked as a teacher which was hard. All he really wanted to do was paint.'

'Is he good?'

'Oh, yes. Very talented. Least I think so, but I would I suppose. Your da an artist too?'

Kate scowled.

'No, he's a judge.'

'Ooh.'

The party pulled us apart. No matter, I spent the rest of the evening watching Kate from across the room and liking the long curves of her Lycra-wrapped body.

As the party was breaking up, I went over to Kate and asked her out for the Friday night. I don't know what made me do it. A new life over the pond but days away and me letting the beautiful brown eyes of a pommy-lover get the better of my judgement.

Kate and I met at a pub in Covent Garden. She was half an

hour late. I stood at the bar drinking a pint watching the evening rush on James Street. I pondered my dilemma. Albion, Albion, you sly bastard.

Kate arrived looking flustered.

‘Can I get you a drink?’

‘Oh, *yes*. A large G and T please.’

I watched, impressed, as she chugged it down like a lemonade.

‘Guess you needed that. Bad day?’

She grinned, slightly red in cheek.

‘Yeah.’

She proceeded to relate a tale of office intrigue and upset to which I lent only half an ear. I was more interested in watching her. The gin had put a sparkle in her eye which, along with the flush on her cheeks, made her look especially desirable.

With that little tale ended we gossiped about our lives as people do when sniffing each other out. We swapped tales of tropical childhoods. We spoke of red-backs and funnel-webs, taipans and puff adders, cockatoos and cattle egrets; the whole colourful and lethal menagerie. We remembered the smell of red dust settled by the afternoon storm and the night song of insect choirs.

The dates over the next few days were each a little warmer than the last.

Kate shared my love of nature, the birds and the beasties. Some contrast to April who had only appreciated nature when she was driving over it in a Land Rover. I could talk painting with Kate and, unlike April, her favourite works were not fox-hunting scenes. April had refused to speak French even though she knew it from books because she feared making a fool of herself with her inadequate subjunctive. Kate cheerfully engaged a French waiter in passable Frog and quite charmed him, her lack of most tenses notwithstanding.

Kate quite charmed me what's more. She had the huge advantage of coming from Australia, a country I adored. Her family, like mine, had Irish antecedents. In some vague way I felt this to be significant. Geography was everything. I felt Kate understood me in a way no English woman ever could. And I felt I understood her. Kate might have been a bit soft on the Poms but she was kith and kin. The waters of that old island neither of us had ever been to ran in our veins.

On the seventh night I went to bed with my kith and kin. It was not a bells and whistles affair. Kate was shy and nervous. The following day she explained.

'When I saw your bed I couldn't help thinking about how many women you must have shared it with.'

'God! Have I slept with so many women? In my dreams perhaps.'

'I thought you were a lady's man. Billy told me.'

'I'm not sure Billy ever listens to a word I say to him. It's another bum steer I'm afraid.'

'He said you had several girlfriends.'

'Um... well, last summer was a little unusual but lady's man is still well wide of the mark. And, in the last several months I've been to bed with precisely two women, and one of them doesn't count since it was just the once and it wasn't any fun.'

'You mean... last night!'

'No! I mean the last time I saw April.'

'Oh, right... It's just... that bed seemed to be full of ghosts.'

After that we spent most of our nights together at her place, where fortunately neither the ghosts of Kate's old boyfriends nor my own memories were to be found. Even the bed was new. Kate quickly overcame her shyness and I came to appreciate her Sacred-Heart education. She left tokens of her affection on my body after each round of

hungry love-making. As for her predilections they were, one might say, catholic.

It is something of a cliché that Catholic-school girls are hot. The more the repression the hotter they get. Kate was very hot and, sure enough, the sisters' repression had been commensurate. She told me what wearing a habit in an Australian summer could do to a woman.

'They were *cooked* in all that clobber.'

'That would make them cranky.'

'That, and the fact they weren't getting any.'

'Ooh, I wouldn't like that either. Imagine... no sex, for life.'

Kate gave a theatrical shudder of horror at the idea. Her small, dark-pointed breasts wobbled attention to themselves. She saw me looking and shook them again but this time coquettishly. Then she leaned over and took my penis in her loving mouth. Aah, who was I to argue with religion?

Kate loved England. She loved it for its green, for its, Yes, please, and its, After you. She loved the way the English said, Sorry, when it was the other person's fault. She loved the Old Country for the Houses of Parliament and Stonehenge, its teapots and umbrellas. Red double-deckers and swinging London, the world's most stylish metropole. Not least she loved it because living in England put a very large amount of blue water between her and The Judge.

His Most Catholic Judgeness as Kate put it. Kate was the youngest of The Judge's five children and he had failed to note the fact that his baby daughter had slipped into adulthood. He saw only that his little girl had grown free-spirited and impudent. He couldn't understand what had led to this. Had he not given her a good Christian upbringing? When Kate brazenly moved in with a boyfriend she experienced the wrath of God up close and personal.

'My parents wouldn't talk to me the whole year. They disowned me.'

‘How old were you?’

‘Twenty one.’

‘It was none of his business. You’re an adult. You can do what you want.’

Kate smiled wanly.

‘Yes, I thought so too, but it wasn’t so easy. I hated being cut off from them.’

‘Emotional blackmail, I call that.’

When Kate talked about her father she appeared nervous. And this despite the fact that she had put 18,000 kilometres between them in her quest for emancipation.

‘Well, he can’t reach you here,’ I said. ‘You’re a free woman. He never knew about you and Mike did he?’

‘Thank God, no.’

It seemed to me I’d been here before. To see the world with me, April had broken off her engagement to some stuffy son of a stuffy Bury St Edmunds dignitary. She too had fought her domineering father and breaking up with Stuffy had been part of the campaign.

I’d enjoyed my role as a source of scandal in April’s family. That Gypsy! I felt I was doing something positive and useful. When I’d realised that April was utterly bored by Stuffy I set about her seduction with a real sense of mission. I didn’t have to seduce too hard. April was ripe for scandal. A wild rover was just what she needed, at the time.

With Kate I felt the call again. I’d been raised to despise tyrants and father dearest was an Old Testament classic. That old boy could badly use some scandal, I thought. Maybe Kate would like to run away with me to America. That would show him. Ah, but the old cause and effect never works the same way twice. I thought I knew scandal. With educated hindsight it is obvious I had no idea.

Having begun my dalliance with Kate I now understood what my little warning voice had been trying to tell me. Don’t start something you can’t finish. I was tempted to

stay in Blighty and see what might come of our affair. But between that little fantasy and me there stood four-square my primary imperative: a very important expedition.

Vasco da Gama went off to look for spice in India. Columbus headed in the opposite direction for Chinese gold. These guys were thinking small. My mission was to find the location of nothing less than Heaven On Earth. With this vital matter of longitude and latitude to investigate the explorer's plans could not include stopping for damsels.

At the beginning of March I quit my job. It was time to pack.

I wasn't sorry to be leaving my boarding-house in Finsbury Park. I wouldn't miss the flea-infested cats, nor the smell of decay and dead things that lingered in the hall. Never again would I see Mike who had a room next to mine and whose rancid feet left a pong in the bathroom that sulphuric acid wouldn't shift. Norm, our landlord, seemed sorry to be losing me. I'd given him considerable amusement over the years with my fastidious habits. Taking a daily shower and smothering his moggies with insecticide were acts of such potty eccentricity that he had to love me.

My father came down to London to take me and my kit to Birmingham. Kate helped us load the car. I made my dry-eyed farewells to Norm and Mike and off we went.

Kate came along for her big meet-the-folks weekend. Mum was puzzled by this one. She knew I was off to America but it was clear to her that I was in love. She asked no questions. Just let me know that she thought Kate was a lovely girl with perfect manners. Which was the plain truth.

My last few days in London were spent at Kate's place. Before dawn we took a last bath together, hot tears streaming down our cheeks. My moment of triumph had turned

into a walk to the scaffold. In the frosty March morning we walked together to the tube. The doors glided shut between us and I set off miserably on my big adventure.

And then I was in Manhattan. I had one suitcase, nine hundred dollars and a transatlantic bungee cord tied to my heart. I headed for my rendezvous with Peter, an acquaintance from architecture school. As I sat in the taxi I tried to focus on the skyscrapers zooming by but all I could think of was Kate.

I thought how happy she looked when we bantered in the pub or splashed in the tub. How she made me laugh. How very endearing her lust for oral sex; *soixante and neuf* were Kate's favourite French words. Oh, and how sad she'd looked at the station. Fate had played me a cruel trick. Freeing me from English bondage only to ensnare me in long-distance love. Was I ever going to be rid of that country? The bungee cord strained at my heart. It hurt like hell.

Peter had come over a couple of months previously and had got in touch to suggest that I go in on an apartment on Houston Street. There was some catch however, and we were going to be staying for a short while in temporary accommodation on White Street.

The loft was three thousand square feet of unrenovated factory floor. A crude kitchen had been installed. A lonesome water closet stood out in the open. There were a couple of dubious looking sofas and a coffee table in peeling, orange Formica. Assorted wooden boxes, probably containing body parts, were piled against one wall. The big sash-windows were original; the wired-glass, dressed with the grime of ages, admitted a soupy light.

Peter thought it was wonderful.

'This is the real thing. Scorsese's New York!'

I agreed absolutely and went out to make a phone call. I

got in touch with a woman with whom I had had a brief liaison when visiting New York doing my thesis research. This was cheeky of me since the previous time she'd seen me was when she'd visited London during my last term. Distracted as I was by finals and the lurking April I hadn't given her the attention and affection she had counted on. To be more exact, I'd behaved like a selfish swine. Still, desperate situations call for desperate measures.

She was, surprisingly, happy to hear from me, and, even more surprising, was cool about me staying on her couch. I got my bag, wished Peter a pleasant stay in his set from Taxi Driver, and took the subway uptown.

Susan met me at the door all smiles. She rolled a joint and we caught up on each other's news. She was intrigued to hear about Kate. I'm sure I talked too much. The flight, Taxi Driver, the pot, and simply being befuddled by love: I was ready to talk. There was only one theme.

'Sounds like it's serious.'

'Oh God... it is.'

Susan was amused by my predicament. The lad-about-town was now the love-struck fool. She quickly ascertained that I intended to remain faithful. This amused her even more. She had her fun during the two weeks I stayed there flirting aggressively with me. Laughing as I cowered in the armchair when she swooped in to kiss me on the mouth. I guessed this was her idea of revenge.

My first priority was to find work.

I had no contacts in New York other than a couple of acquaintances and the few architects I had met while doing research. None of them had any work for me, so there was nothing for it but to get out the Yellow Pages. Being the methodical type, I started at A.

The big problem was to get past the receptionists. New York receptionists were trained in a special boot camp from which they only graduated when their indifference

had made a stone cry. This meant that most of my enquiries were short.

‘Hello, I wonder if I might speak with whomever at your firm is responsible for hiring?’

‘Why?’

‘Er... because I’m an architect, and I would be interested in knowing if your firm is hiring at present.’

‘We’re not. Have a nice day.’

Click.

Still, on occasion, somebody would make a mistake and, thinking I was probably some royal asking about an extension to the palace, they would put me through to one of the partners. By this means I wangled a couple of interviews.

The interviews were not successful. After having leafed through my portfolio, the boss-man looked puzzled.

‘Are you design or technical?’

This was my first experience with the Taylorisation of the creative process; it had never occurred to me to specialise in the manner of a drone or worker bee. I thought for a second.

‘Well, both I guess.’

He looked at me pityingly.

‘You can’t be both. You’re either design *or* technical.’

‘Buzz, buzz,’ I said to myself.

There were more interviews but I was too much of an exotic. My portfolio was full of drawings that were definitely not technical. Nor were they recognisable as design to the average business-minded New York practice.

‘What’s that?’ my interviewer would say, pointing to a moody bit of scribble.

‘That? That’s an atrium.’

‘Why doesn’t it say atrium then?’

I didn’t know why it didn’t say atrium. We didn’t like to get too specific at the Architectural Association.

By the middle of my second week in the city I was into the

W's. This was alarming since there were not too many architects whose name began with X, Y or Z. Even in New York.

I called Wyatt and Partners. A Long Island accent answered the phone. I gave my usual speech, bracing for the inevitable brush-off.

'You sound like you're British,' she said.

'Er... right. Yes, I am.'

'Okay. I know *exactly* who you should talk to.'

She put me on hold. When she came back she said, 'Can you come in this afternoon? Three o'clock?'

'Yes, three's fine.'

'You'll be meeting one of the partners, Charlie Patterson. Okay? You and him will get on just great.'

Her tone was friendly. She must have flunked boot camp.

When I arrived later in the day she was at the reception desk. I knew right away that she liked makeup. Big glasses; impressive hair. I followed the hair to the partner's office.

Charlie Patterson gave a painfully man-sized handshake.

'Soo... Jeannie tells me you're a Brit.'

'That's correct.'

'Where'd you go to school?'

'The Architectural Association.'

'Hey, *man!* That's far out. The AA's my Alma Mater!'

I was in.

We talked of professors, past and present; of all-nighters before hand-in; of bumping pints in the pubs of Bloomsbury. The reminiscences stirred something deep in Charlie's soul. It was with reluctance that he turned from the days of his youth to the matter at hand.

Wyatt and Partners were working on a big shop-fitting project. They had already done stores all over the States and were now about to open pilot-stores in Europe.

I let him know about my language skills.

‘Oh! That’s great, man! It’s perfect. We hired a French guy last week to head up the team for the European operation but I don’t think he speaks any German, so you’ll fit right in.’

I smiled.

‘I take it I have the job then?’

‘You betcha, mate.’

He filled me in on the details. Since I had no work permit (a fact that didn’t seem to trouble him in the least) I would be paid an hourly rate, at a not to exceed figure of \$1800 a month. It doesn’t sound like much now but compared to what I had been able to earn in London it was a lot of dosh.

He wanted to get back to our trip down memory lane but Jeannie called him to let him know that his next appointment had arrived. He gave me an extra-painful handshake. He was very pleased with his find. I was very pleased to have been found.

Back at reception Jeannie cocked her massed curls at me.

‘So?’

‘You were right. I start Monday.’

‘Told ya.’

The following weekend Peter and I moved into our loft. The couple who owned it were gone for six months to Los Angeles. They didn’t want to leave the apartment empty; we were there to keep it homey and water the plants. The rent was very reasonable.

The building had once been a sausage factory. Abbruzzi’s Sausage and Hams, it said across faded pictures of giant salsciccia and a two-storey prosciutto. The loft was a standard renovation: wood floors and exposed brick. The rooms were flooded with light from windows that faced Houston and a huge downtown view. In one corner was the original open-car freight elevator and it still worked. We boys thought this a lot of fun. The lumpy brown fur-

niture was not to my taste but I wasn't going to quibble.

It had been a scary few weeks but I'd made it. The two essentials of life secured: shelter and income. From the roof of my shelter on a glorious spring day I had a sweeping view across the rooftops of SoHo. An ocean of tar and brick as far as the eye could see. Water-towers bobbed like ungainly galleons gathered in a great harbour. And, holding down the horizon, the giant silver masts of the WTC. Boy, did I feel pleased with myself. At long last, this was now my city. I had taken possession. No longer merely a visitor, a wannabe New Yorker, I was Sean MacGilycuddy, Zip Code 10012.

I thought constantly of Kate in WC1.

Monday morning, sharp at nine, I arrived for my first day of work in America.

My job was to change the project documentation from American to metric units. The fact that I knew what a metre was had been decisive in my securing the position. The most technologically advanced nation on earth was sending up spaceships whose dimensions were based on the pinky length of some long-dead potentate. Americans were nervous around centimetres.

I made sure not to let on how laughably simple it in fact was. When talking of metres I adopted a look serious and distant, like a man lost to the unfathomable complexities of quantum physics. I felt this little subterfuge to be necessary since I was convinced that if they found out how easy it was they would give my job to someone with a legal entitlement to it.

American units, on the other hand, were brutal. A system that operates with parts that can be variously a sixteenth, a twelfth, an eighth, a quarter, a third or a half of the whole is simply too quaint.

The metrification work was not exactly fascinating but it was easy and moved quickly.

It became evident that we needed visits to sites and more information on European products. Charlie decided it would be a good idea if I went over to collect the relevant data. I would visit London and Cologne. Two months after my arrival in New York I was being sent back to Europe; all expenses paid.

I so badly wanted to see Kate that I was tempted to see the hand of divine intervention. My divine city, not content with providing me with accommodation, work and more disposable income than I'd ever had in my life, throws in a Business Class ticket to visit my girlfriend. Tab's on us, kid! How could I not love this city that loved me so well?

When I flew in, the morning light at Heathrow was suitably grey and misty. I sat in the taxi looking at the now unfamiliar bricky landscape of London go by. I felt I'd been gone for a century.

Kate now shared an apartment with her friend Liz in a tenement near King's Cross. Its main charm was that it was very cheap, the council charging a nominal fiver a month. It was better than the rent might suggest. Although from the outside the building was an imposing hulk of soot-darkened brick, its interiors, while Spartan, had decent daylight, were dry and surprisingly well sound-proofed.

Kate came running out through the entry arcade. She kissed me and then took my bag and led the way upstairs. A bath awaited me. I let the hot water soak away the pain of jet-travel. As I luxuriated we chatted. When I had dried off she had a cup of tea waiting for me. She hadn't forgotten. Lapsang Soo Chong with lemon. I was touched.

The cup was but half empty when Kate rather brusquely took it from my hand.

'You're not here to drink tea.'

She was quite right.

Afterwards, as Kate lay asleep at my side, I looked out the window and watched the slow dance of steely clouds.

English clouds.

There was a cloud in me: my little cloud of mixed feelings. I was very happy to be with Kate but right outside her bedroom window was London. I had had bad dreams about being trapped under London's cloud and that while sleeping safe and sound in my apartment on Houston Street. And here I was wide awake under that very same grey. But with one all-important difference: I had a return ticket from New York City right on the bedside table. With Kate lying next to me this was a happy dream.

The next day the weather changed for the better. At lunchtime we sat outside a pub. I leaned against the sun-warmed brick wall. The sky was bonny blue. The bitter was good; one of the few things I'd missed about England, along with porkpies and pickled onions.

'You know,' I said, squinting up at the strong sun, 'London really should've been located some five to ten degrees further south... There's not a lot between Barcelona and Valencia; why didn't they put it there?'

Kate shunted over on the bench, put her arms around me and kissed me.

'You're a fuck-wit, you know that?'

A few days later our brief idyll reached its not-to-be-denied end. We made our teary farewells in Kate's apartment; she didn't want the sad solo return from the airport.

When I got back to New York, spring was in top gear. I'd almost missed it. Unlike the hesitant blooming I'd known in London, New York spring came on in a big rush. Almost overnight the trees gained a mossy bush of fluorescent green. It was a beautiful time. The city had a softness and sweetness that were not a normal part of its persona.

I was often alone in my shared apartment. Peter had a girlfriend.

I first met Rosy about a week after arriving in the city. I

was at the Taxi Driver apartment with Peter when she announced her arrival outside with her car horn. I met a smallish woman wearing a gold head scarf and red PVC raincoat. Pretty face and tough eyes. She looked me over in the manner of a hangman trying to estimate the client's weight and shook my hand.

'Hi... Peter, we're gonna hafta hustle. I wanna get the dog dropped off on the way.'

'Hope ya like dogs,' she said to me. We squeezed into her little Japanese car.

My companion for the journey was already aboard. Doggy's name was Bronx, perhaps because he was approximately the size of that section of the city. Bronx was a cross between a St Bernard and an alpaca. As soon as Bronx and I had got ourselves cosy in the back seat we were off.

Rosy liked to drive fast. We shot through the dark streets as if the hounds of hell were on our tail. Each of the many times we smashed over a pothole the back of my head slammed against the roof.

I was more dead than alive by the time we reached our destination on the Lower East Side. Bronx looked even bigger outside the car than in it. Rosy took the dog over to an anonymous steel door and both disappeared inside.

'Where're they going?' I asked.

'She's dropping the dog off at her husband's place.'

'Oh... her husband's place. Of course.'

Peter tittered.

'Yes, I forgot to mention that. Rosy's married.'

'I imagine they're very happy together.'

'They live apart. Rosy has her own place in the Village.'

'Her husband know about you?'

'No. Still a secret.'

'Huh? They're separated aren't they?'

'Well, yes, but it's a sort of trial separation. Officially they're still together, just living apart.'

'Glad we got that straight.'

I looked up and down the street. Grubby brownstones mixed with the odd factory building. Roll-down steel shutters with much art. Across the street a razor-wire topped, chain-link fence cordoned off a company truck park. The razor-wire hadn't stopped the kids; the trucks glowed a riot of bubble-gum colours under the sodium light.

The steel door clanged open and Rosy appeared. I realized I hadn't once seen her smile. I wondered if perhaps she had suffered a tragic accident that had permanently set her facial muscles at down.

We got back in the car and set off at light speed for Chinatown. Rosy knew of a good restaurant. On the way she lit a joint. She maintained velocity and Peter took over the steering from the passenger side. I decided that now was probably as good a time as any to die.

The Chinese don't consider the dining experience complete unless conducted under very bright fluorescent lamps. Rosy's pick, the Lucky Snake Restaurant, had all the charm of a municipal swimming pool. Lucky Peking Ducks lined up like leathery lifeguards behind the steamed glass.

Inside, large round tables were packed with noisy groups of diners. We had to wait but Rosy said it was worth it. We selected a carp from the fish-tank by the door. When it came to table the bright eye that had begged me for mercy twenty minutes earlier was now milky and hanging forlornly from its socket.

We drank Tsing Dao. Perhaps it was the joint or the beer or the tasty carp but, quite suddenly, Rosy smiled. It suited her.

'How's the job hunting, Sean?'

I told her all about the bees and the buzzing thereof. And then I told her about my desperate bid for work at a modelling agency, which had taken place that very morning. This had been Susan's idea. I had fled the interview upon reading the job description. It was not explicit but I

was worldly enough to realise that they were looking for a cute boy to spread. I was not so desperate that I was willing to take a drilling before rolling cameras. Rosy had a good chuckle at this story.

‘Well, Sean, yeah, these uh, *agencies*, are kinda dime-a-dozen. I could’ve told ya.’

‘Well, I didn’t know you this morning. But next time I’ll call you first.’

‘And I’ll be happy to give you the low-down. I know a lotta people in this town.’

Something in the way Rosy looked at me told me not to doubt it.

As for Peter, his public-school grapevine gave him a few contacts of his own in the city. One of them had landed him well and truly on his feet with a job at SOM. He was in the technical wing of that particular beehive.

‘Any openings there?’ I asked.

‘No, I’m afraid not. To tell you the truth I’m not sure how much longer I’m going to have work. There are rumours of imminent layoffs.’

‘Ouch.’

‘Jeez!’ said Rosy. ‘You guys should start your own fucking company.’

‘If only it were that easy,’ I said. ‘As a rule illegal aliens need more than two weeks to make the necessary contacts. Even in this Land of Opportunity.’

I asked Rosy what she did. I knew she was a student and worked part-time as a receptionist. I had no difficulty imagining her graduating from boot camp.

‘I’m studying at Hunter College. I’m working on getting my diploma in psychotherapy. I’m gonna work with nuts.’

‘Are you referring to your future colleagues or your prospective clients?’

She choked on her Szechuan Pork.

‘From what I’ve seen so far it would be both. I tell ya

there are some fucking screwballs in this business.'

'You don't look like a screwball to me.'

'I'm not. I'll be the only sane one in the joint.'

Peter and Rosy got into a conversation of their own. Something about Rosy's cats. I drifted off and dreamed of Kate. I took out the silly photos we had taken of ourselves in a booth in King's Cross station. In one shot though, Kate forgot to be silly. She was simply wide-eyed beautiful. Peter saw the photos and got curious.

He took a look and then looked harder.

'Whaa! You're in love!'

'Fraid so.'

'When did this start?'

'Shortly before I got on the plane.'

Peter studied me.

'This is the real thing isn't it?'

'Fraid so again.'

He shook his head in wonder.

'You silly clot.'

Rosy wanted to know what this was all about. I told my tale of meteorite love. She nodded approvingly.

'That's nice.'

If I wasn't wining and dining with colleagues from the office I mostly hung out alone. After dinner I often wandered over to Washington Square the better to enjoy the summer nights.

Late one hot evening, after buying a dime-bag, I sat on a bench near the chess players and rolled a joint. I lit up and took a big puff. As I exhaled I looked up to see, not twenty yards away, a policewoman observing me. As nonchalantly as possible I dropped my spliff hand between my knees. Out of sight out of mind, I hoped.

With just the hint of a smile on her face police lady strolled over. She stood in front of me, saying nothing, hands on hips. I think the pose was supposed to be intimi-

dating but she looked simply cute as a button. She put out her hand. I gave her the still glowing evidence. She let it fall to the ground and proceeded to grind it into the tarmac under her big shiny black shoe. One last look as if to say, Okay, buddy? and she walked away.

She had gone only a few steps when she stopped and turned back to me.

‘Enjoy the rest!’

With a cheery smile she carried on her law-enforcement way.

Fact was, New York liked me.

Peter’s love started to get bumpy and he began to spend more time at the apartment.

One night I came home to find him at his mirror. It seemed to me that this had been happening rather more of late.

‘You carry on like that and your nose’ll fall off.’

He took a deep and quite disgusting snort.

‘Uh don gib a fug.’

‘Is José back in the picture or what?’

‘Shis lifd im.’

At first I couldn’t see the problem. Rosy was a free woman, hallelujah. But Peter got sufficient mastery of his passages to explain that this was not nearly as good as it seemed. Rosy wanted to marry him.

‘She wants a commitment.’

‘Oh, help, the commitment... Er, doesn’t shacking up together count? I mean, this is the eighties, nobody gets married anymore.’

‘Rosy wants more security than that.’

I had visions of a bank vault; the massive steel door slamming shut on Peter’s panicked face.

‘What happens if you say no to marriage?’

‘Then,’ he sighed... ‘Then she wants to break off the relationship.’

‘Setting aside the question of the commitment thing,

how do you feel?’

Peter dropped his head into his hands.

‘I love her... I think.’

‘Is that the answer you gave Rosy?’

‘Er, yes, pretty much.’

‘Oh, man! Don’t you know anything about women? There’s not a woman on the planet who appreciates being told, I love you... I think. Women want men to be decisive. It’s either I love you or I don’t love you but I want to fuck your brains out. Both are okay, but never, duh, I think!’

‘Yes, I know, but...’

‘Why don’t you two take a time-out? Maybe if you don’t see her for a couple of weeks you’ll have a clearer picture of what’s at stake here.’

He considered this for a minute.

‘That’s a good idea. Give myself some time to think.’

‘Not think, *feel!*’

‘Right, feel.’

Four days later Peter gave me the happy news. He and Rosy would be getting married at the end of September. He seemed very pleased with his commitment. I offered my heartfelt congratulations. He at least had made up his mind.

My visit with Kate only fuelled the flames. We wrote to each other regularly. We made love by mail; exchanging heated missives stained with the emissions of desire.

Kate had never been to New York and I decided it was time she visited. I suggested this to her and the return letter was an enthusiastic, Yes. A fortnight later she was on her way.

Peter was kind and made sure to spend that week at Rosy’s. No real effort for him since he was there most of the time anyway. The pair of them were now happy love-birds again.

I met Kate at JFK and brought her home by taxi. We took a shower and tumbled into bed. We skipped the cup

of tea. It was late July and, as we didn't like the air-conditioner, we were soon very wet and slippery in each other's arms. Afterwards we fell asleep on the soaked sheets, then woke up and did it all over again.

'Aah,' said Kate, dreamily, 'Airmailed ejaculate is no substitute for the real thing.'

'It's the thought that counts.'

I gave Kate some options for our meal out. I knew I'd picked the right woman when she settled on John's. She wasn't disappointed.

'This is fantastic!'

'Brick oven. Those flabby things you get in London are a waste of time.'

'And money! This is so cheap... any more Polly?'

I filled her glass. The Valpolicella at John's was the only drinkable beverage on offer. The beer was liquid-oxygen cold and tasted vaguely of soap.

After dinner we walked the streets of the Village, smoking a spliff as we went. Kate was astonished.

'You can smoke on the street here, nobody cares?'

'Do you see anybody caring?'

She had to admit that she did not.

'Are you still doing the karate?' she asked. Then giggled. 'Don't think I need to ask really.'

'Um, aikido. Yes, still training; although perhaps not with quite the same dedication I did in London. There are a lot of distractions in Babylon.'

I told her about my dojo on 18th Street. It was smaller than the one I'd attended in London, but space was at a premium in Manhattan so most accommodations tended to the miniature.

'I like the fact that you do aikido. Makes me feel safe with you.'

'Hmm. Well, don't hang up your six-shooter just yet. I'm still only a fourth Kyu.'

'How many koos are there?'

‘Six, with sixth being the lowest.’

‘I see what you mean... Well, hurry up and get your spurs gallant gentleman, this damsel might have need of your services.’

‘What! This afternoon wasn’t enough? You’ll be the death of me, madam.’

I made sure to show Kate the key features of my island. Central Park was included. I skipped the Met but took her to MOMA. Chinatown was a must and dinner at the Lucky Snake.

To get ourselves oriented in North America we went up to the Observation Deck of the World Trade Center. Unfortunately, the weather was cloudy.

‘On a clear day you can see all the way to the Mississippi,’ I said. ‘It’s just over there...’

Kate laughed and squeezed me tight.

‘The view is amazing... scary, too. The way it moves.’

‘They say you can get sea-sick when there’s a high wind.’

‘God. It’s safe though?’

‘Oh, sure. It can withstand a hurricane, just flexes like a giant tree.’

Then down from the dizzy treetops to Battery Park to enjoy the harbour and its nautical goings-on. And on to the Brooklyn Bridge. I took photographs of Kate looking pensive by the East River in her little sleeveless dress with the big blue-on-white polka-dots.

I introduced Kate to the delights of ordering a deli-sandwich.

‘Two times prosciutto with lettuce, roasted red-pepper and mayo on rye-toast,’ I said to the big man behind the counter. His stomach squeezed from under his T-shirt like a hairy mortadella.

‘Want anything else?’ I asked Kate.

She was watching wide-eyed as the sandwiches grew

rapidly monstrous on the prep-counter.

‘Hardly necessary. Who else is coming to lunch?’

The American sandwich was one of my happiest discoveries.

‘Yes, I know. I don’t miss shrimp paste.’

We took the Circle Line; a circumnavigation of my New World. Kate enjoyed it, studying the architecture intently as it floated by. She was quiet and thoughtful, watching and taking photographs.

‘You okay?’ I asked.

The boat was passing through Spuyten Duyvil and turning south towards the George Washington Bridge. A light rain was spitting.

‘Yes, I’m fine. I’m just trying to take it all in. It’s a bit overwhelming.’

‘We can reduce the itinerary if you want.’

‘No, no. That’s not it. I want to see your city... It’s just that I don’t know if I could live here. I mean, it’s wonderful. It’s just... so much.’

I felt a chilly stab of disappointment. I hadn’t raised the question yet but then I hardly needed to. It hung over us like a fog.

‘Takes some getting used to,’ I said.

Although, this had not been the case for me. On my first ever visit I had flown over with April. A relative of hers met us that evening at the airport. We cruised windows-down in his Chevy Impala through warm summer rain. He took us the roundabout way: along the JFK, skirting Brooklyn via the BQE. My first sight of Manhattan was from the pointy end, the muscular and glittering towers of Wall Street pushing back an indigo sky. In that moment, I knew.

‘It’s not that simple,’ Kate said. ‘If I move here... then my father’ll know I’m living with you. There’ll be hell to pay. I can’t face that again.’

I said nothing. I stared, without seeing, at the passing

waves. I saw no water, only Father. A face in shadow under a judge's peruke. A black square of cloth sat atop the wig.

Kate put her arm around me and rested her cheek on my shoulder.

'I'm sorry,' she said, in a little-girl voice.

On her last night in town I took Kate to Japonica's. We hardly noticed the fishy delicacies arranged artistically on the board between us. Before I took her to the airport the next day we made love; clinging to each other like the survivors of a shipwreck.

At the airport she didn't cry. Her eyes were simply great pools of longing. After she had disappeared through the gate I could barely find my way to the taxi for the water in my eyes.

Peter was at home when I got back.

'I say! You look like you've seen a ghost, old boy!'

'Perhaps it was.'

I went down to the Stinky Bar and drank till they closed.

Peter was right. I'd seen a ghost. This trans-Atlantic love affair was the stuff of spirits. Kate had been corporealized from the ether for a few days through the magic of the jet engine. Now she was back to ghost. Poltergeist. If I closed my eyes I could hear her voice, her laughter, as easily as the traffic outside. When I looked she wasn't there.

But Manahatta was there and she was no spirit. She was concrete and tar, grit and granite; as real as it gets. My tangible love said, Honey, it's summer in my city and my streets are looking pretty. I heard her husky whisper and in the afternoon sun I tramped her pretty streets.

Not very far from my apartment was the old elevated West Side Highway, a legacy from the times when roads were not merely traffic engineering but statements of pride and principal. It lay like the carcass of a great black

centipede along the Hudson's edge. Section by section it was falling to the demolition crews.

From the cracks in its road and the accumulated detritus along its verges grew ailanthus, grasses and wild flowers. Small mammals and birds nested in the nooks of its steel frame. The old highway was a marvellous waterside promenade. The sandy desert of landfill that was not yet Battery Park City made a broad riverside beach.

The West Side Highway was representative: New York City was falling apart at the seams. Water lines regularly burst, causing floods worthy of the Yangtze. Bridges constantly closed for do-or-die maintenance. The subway was a quite unspoiled example of an early-American transportation system. The streets were a patchwork quilt of tarmacadam and metal plate; somebody, usually Con Edison, was always digging a hole or filling one in. New York had a permanently improvisational air.

I once met an elderly professor of architecture who had first come to the city as a young man in the 1940's. Then, New York was the epitome of everything modern. Its public transport, its skyscrapers, its highways, bridges and tunnels, its steam-heating, all a gleaming affirmation of its status as the city of now and tomorrow.

'It was beautiful then,' the tears welling in his eyes. 'In the hands of the barbarians and savages it was allowed to collapse into *ruin*. Now it's all filth, mayhem, and graffiti...'

A Roman patrician must have felt this way, crying into his toga as the Goths stabled their horses in the Forum.

I rather liked the decay. It had a distinct, moody charm and gave the lie to the notion that America was a country without history. Admittedly, being stuck in a subway tunnel as the carriage filled with smoke from yet another track-fire was not at all charming.

August passed steamily by. When I was not playing explorer I would go to Jones Beach. In New York summer

was a certainty, like the going up and going down of the sun. It began officially on Memorial Day and ended, just as officially, on Labor Day. In Britain no such time-tabling was possible, since summer was no sure thing. It was often cancelled due to lack of interest, the British always complaining if the weather got too hot.

Jones Beach was always available through the designated summer season; along with its regular bus service from the city, its vast parking lots and its pavilion where you could take a whiz and buy weak beer. There was also a plentiful supply of hot sand and Atlantic rollers with a vicious undertow. Needless to say, Jones Beach was no South Sea paradise; just yourself and your lover, sashaying palms and the odd pelican swooping low over the waves.

At a rough guess the entire planet went to Jones Beach on Sundays in August. They brought with them frisbees and footballs, barbecues and boom-boxes. It was fine by me. I could grill myself under the murky sun, I could get sand in my sandwiches and I could drown myself in the pounding surf.

Manahatta, Manahatta. She had it all. Nearly.

I was in love with two women at the same time which is rarely a good idea. Most books on courtship advise against it. They also urge giving up the one to keep the other. I had to make a choice. Maybe I was a case of arrested development because I really didn't want to make a choice. I wanted it all. Why couldn't I have it all?

Then Kate turned the screw. My love, my love, she wrote, I cannot wait for ever. I want you in my life. Not just letters from far away but you, beautiful you. Can you understand? It is too painful.

I understood. It was painful for both of us. I knew too that Kate was just passing, soon to leave my world if I wasn't careful. I would have to follow her if I didn't want to

spend the rest of my life wondering what I'd passed up.

I had discovered the longitude and latitude of Heaven On Earth. According to my log they were 40° 46' N, 73° 55' W. These coordinates marked the centre of the island the natives called Duhburrovmanhadan. I had assumed that where paradise lay there too I would find Eve. But Eve turned out not to be a resident of heaven and had no plans to move there. I hadn't counted on this.

It was back to the underworld in early October. Sly Albion had a good chuckle but I pretended not to hear.

I made my preparations. The words of the Vorticist manifesto clanged loudly in my head: Blast first (from politeness) England, Curse its climate for its sins and infections. I would take my New York mementoes with me to protect me in the dank underworld. Manahatta would be far away but not forgotten.

I had scores of slides blown up to big Cibachromes. My favourite views, the spidery watertowers, blurry shots of smoky bars, the Empire State against the amber of a Jersey sunset, the natural blonde on the roof below mine who worshipped the sun with her skin, all of it.

I ate out a lot. Putting on fat for the lean times. The thought of no longer having John's in my life was killing me and as for sandwiches...

At the end of September Peter and Rosy celebrated their nuptials. The ceremony, if one could call it such, was conducted at City Hall. I've been more moved getting my driver's licence renewed. The reception was given at our apartment on Houston.

Champagne flowed. Peter made his famous and ruinous Margaritas. The wedding-cake was from The Erotic Bakery. The design featured a pattern of interweaving genitalia; the icing-labia looked like little pink angel's wings.

Many lines of cocaine were drawn into nasal passages

and rubbed onto gums. Feral reefers from Jamaica passed from hand to hand and lip to lip. All the neighbours had been invited, or warned, depending on how you looked at it. We turned the music up and shook the building down to the bedrock.

Helter Skelter! Nanana, na, na! with Siouxsie and teenage kicks with Feargal. Oh, what a sweet sensation! I was off on Night Flight, when I noticed that I was no longer dancing alone. Something sinuous and blond was moving very close to me. Her long hair had fallen across her face and I didn't recognise my neighbour immediately. When we made eye contact she laughed.

It was too loud for conversation. She moved ever closer, bumping me with her hip. So that there be no misunderstanding her intentions she held me close and ground her crotch on my thigh. I had flashbacks to sticky evenings at the St Agnes Youth Club reggae night.

The party finished late. We saw off Peter and Rosy into the freight elevator which we had decorated with white lace and flowers for the occasion. I took photographs of them embracing in the steel bower of the cab. We rained rice and champagne after them as they descended.

By strange coincidence my pretty neighbour was the last to leave. She was sprawled invitingly on the couch. I sat at what seemed like a safe distance.

'Whatcha doin all the way over there, Sean? It's much more comfy here.'

'I'm being good.'

'Oh, yeah? Why?'

I didn't have an adequate answer. The coke was wreaking havoc with my judgement.

She pulled herself off the couch and walked over. On the way she took off her clothes. When she lowered herself onto my lap she was naked. A warm aroma of arousal wafted up between us. She nuzzled my neck and, with no great difficulty, persuaded me that life was too short for the

ignoring of such miracles.

I had five nights left in New York. All of them were spent in her bed. I was making love with a woman called Jane but in fact she was Manahatta descended as avatar.

Jane and I went out for dinner on my last night in the city. It was a peculiar sensation. I was looking forward to being with Kate. I was sad to be leaving Manahatta. What a tangled web we weave.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t act sooner,’ she said.

‘Might have been *too* soon.’

‘Yeah. I hear ya... do you think you’ll get married?’

‘Whoah! Not so hasty... I think I’ll be taking it one day at a time.’

‘It’s cute that you’re going back.’

‘Right this minute I’m not feeling as sure about this as I did a week ago. Leaving New York just got a lot more difficult.’

‘That’s very sweet of you.’

Leave I did though. I got to the airport late. My two suitcases were packed to bursting with books, blue-jeans and records. There was a tearing sensation in my neck muscles. I had missed the check-in deadline and had to be put onto another flight that was leaving from the other side of JFK in exactly forty minutes. The aircraft door snapped shut on my heels.

I slumped into my seat and looked out morosely at the airport.

I had meant to watch for Manhattan’s bright lights as we took off. Somewhere down there Jane would be getting ready for her Friday night at the Mudd Club. I was asleep before we even got onto the runway.

I arrived back in time for England’s season of mellow fruitfulness.

It is a simple accident of geography and climate that the

British and Irish islands are the windiest and wettest places in Europe, quite possibly the world. It is my contention that the so-called invasions of the Germanic tribes were no more than a lot of hapless Frisian fishermen blown against Britannia's boggy edge by North Sea gales. The first Anglo-Saxon settlement in Britain was at Sodding Fishing not far from present-day Clacton-on-Sea. If you have ever been to Sodding Fishing, or indeed present-day Clacton-on-Sea, you will quite understand why this settlement cannot have been intentional.

I had bad dreams. I was under the great vault of Grand Central Station. The ceiling was cracked and water dripped down. The marble floor was awash. From the fish swimming past the arched windows I knew that the building was underwater. When the ocean poured in I awoke and stared into the night, listening to the rain driving against the glass.

Kate had painted her rooms bright white and decorated the old furniture with artfully arranged printed fabrics in strong designs. The effect was colourful and cosy. If I didn't look out the window I was very happy to be there.

She made no objection to me plastering one wall of the living room with photographs of New York. The Shrine, as she dubbed it. Although Kate had admired my Roof View With Sun Lady I still thought it best not to include it in the display.

We shared the apartment with Kate's friend Liz who was a laid-back and easy flat-mate. Things were quieter around there since my last visit. She had a new boyfriend and had given up the speed. Magic mushrooms were the ticket now.

Saturninely handsome, very hairy and a practitioner of white magic, the new boyfriend always wore a baggy black shirt and matching leggings and carried a tall staff. In wintertime a wool cloak, also black, seemed to suffice. No matter what the weather he went barefoot. Gandalf probably

looked like this as a young man.

Liz and the Shaman often argued. Often they split. If one of these splits went on too long the Shaman would turn up at our front door in the middle of the night. We would hear strange scrapings and thumpings and, in the morning, find mysterious runes carved into the wood.

Whatever the spells were they seemed to work. A day or two after one of these nocturnal markings Liz was usually to be heard keening happily on the other side of the living room wall.

So much for accommodation, now I had to find work. The situation was not encouraging. The market was slow. I signed on with an agency. I answered advertisements and went on precisely one interview. Weeks went by. I called the agency regularly. They advised patience.

Despite this worry I made the pleasant discovery that London with Kate was a good life. We made the most of each other; enjoying the simple pleasure of waking up together without an imminent departure lurking close by.

In November I received the call. My agency had an interview lined up for me with a firm in Richmond. I had been summoned for appraisal by what was, I was told, the most excellent firm of Duff, Trumble, St. John, Parks and Todd. The interview was a runaway success. For some reason the partner thought I would fit very nicely. I called the agency.

‘They like me,’ I said.

‘Yes, we heard. The job’s yours. Congratulations!’

‘Well, yes, but, I don’t like the office. I’m not going to do well there, I can tell.’

‘Nonsense. Your qualifications and experience are exactly what they’re looking for.’

‘But, I don’t like the place. I would prefer something more... suitable.’

There was a short silence.

‘Listen, you can take this position or you can wait another few months until we get you another interview.’

The message was clear.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ the voice said, soothingly, ‘Take the job and see how it goes for a couple of months. If it doesn’t work out give us a call and we’ll find something else. Fair enough?’

‘Fair enough,’ I said, with a deep sense of foreboding.

Duff, Trumble, St. John, Parks and Todd had plenty of work. Hospital renovations and extensions. I would be serving the good old National Health. Not exactly a spell at Taliesin but the employment conditions were good.

My drawing board had all sorts of levers and cranks allowing me to set the height and angle to avoid back strain. My chair was a model of ergonomic correctness.

There were regular tea-breaks. At the appointed times a secretary would have the steaming mugs lined up, each precisely dosed with the milk and sugar requirements of their respective owners. Lemon was no problem.

The pay was very reasonable, and the organisation was first class, if you liked that sort of thing.

Construction details were thoroughly standardised; the last one having been developed in honour of Queen Elizabeth’s Coronation.

Meaningful advancement prospects were nil. The partners had all attended the same public school. Mies van der Rohe could have worked there his entire career and never made it past Elderly Draughtsman. I was not sure if some of the old-timers had twigged this yet.

After a month of changing ceiling plans I was starting to lose it. I called the agency. They’d never heard of me. I gritted my teeth and toughed it out.

The day-to-day management of the office was overseen by Mr Todd, who was not at all stuck up and had assumed first-name terms from the get-go. About a week after I

joined the firm he stopped by my desk.

‘So, Sean, how’s life aboard ship?’

I wondered if he knew I had been shanghaied.

‘Plain sailing so far, thank you, James.’

‘That’s the ticket. It’s good to have some young blood aboard, liven up the place a bit... Very good. Well, till Wednesday then!’

‘Wednesday?’

‘Ah! Nigel hasn’t informed you yet. Site meeting.’

He gave me a significant look. I realized that this was quite a break for me.

‘Talk to Nigel. Keep up the good work or rather... good rowing.’

My rum job brought two bonuses. I had money and I had the free time to enjoy it with Kate. There is a lot to do in London if you have money. I highly recommend the Big Smoke to the better off.

My life there wasn’t all play. I tried to be serious about my career development and signed on for architect’s registration exams. The tutor at the Polytechnic snuffled through my logbook of professional experience.

‘Hmm. We seem to have been getting around. Let’s see... Newcastle, Birmingham, Paris, Sydney, London, New York and lately of London again.’

‘Yes, I do seem to have a problem staying in one place too long.’

‘You said it, not me. Now, what were you doing in Sydney? Hmm... draughtsman... Telecom Australia. I’ll wager that was challenging.’

‘It wasn’t what you’d call stimulating, no. I drew up telephone exchanges, which are basically big boxes full of switches.’

‘Paying your dues, indeed. However, the real problem here is that you’ll need to catch up on your British experience for Part Three.’

‘Yes, I know. I am presently working for a local practice.’

‘Good, let’s see, what do they do? Ah, hospitals, very good.’

Once a week I attended the evening lecture. This was conducted by a big, grey-haired man of florid complexion in a chalk-striped double-breasted. In a pleasing basso profundo Professor Campbell explained that if the client so much as cut themselves shaving the architect was responsible and was obliged to immediately donate something major in the way of a body part.

‘Needless to say my little chickens, you lose the lot. Car, house. Your children will be sold into bondage and your spouse will be forced to earn a living in a house of ill-repute.’

He took a thoughtful drag on his cigar.

‘You all already work in one of course so that will hold no terrors for *you*, but think of your loved ones! And be *very* thoughtful when putting pen to vellum.’

We laughed nervously.

In theory I was supposed to be boning up in my free time on building law and practice management. However, I never seemed to get around to Codes of Practice and contracts and where to stick your building permit and my interest in career development waned. It was a lot more fun to go rolling in the dojo and drinking in the pub.

Christmas came. The last one now seemed an age away. We spent the holidays with my family in Birmingham.

‘Well, it’s great to have you here! I’m just sorry it couldn’t have been both of you... you boys always seem to be off somewhere.’

My mother gave a little moue of disappointment.

‘Mum, you know as well as I do where we got our taste for the peripatetic from.’

‘Yes, I know, we’re reaping what we’ve sown. Still, it

would be nice if you could both arrange to be here together sometimes.'

I gave her a hug. My family had started moving when I was just a nipper. We took ship from New Zealand on my fifth birthday.

For the Christmas dinner Dad roasted a brace of pheasant. I warned Kate.

'Watch out for the pellets.'

'You mean, they were shot?'

'A pheasant's life usually ends in a hail of gunfire.'

She liked the meat though.

'Reminds me of guinea-fowl but stronger.'

'That,' my father said, 'Is due to the hanging.'

He paused to let the image sink in.

'The meat is best after it's decomposed a bit. The butcher told me that these had been hanging for a good ten days. When it's ready the bird's skin should be bluish in patches.'

A warning look flashed from my mother. Kate hesitated a second.

'Ever had witchetty grubs?'

My father laughed.

'No, I've not had the pleasure. What are they like?'

'I only had them roasted. They tasted a bit like satay chicken.'

'Are those the caterpillars?' said my mother.

'Yes,' said Dad. 'In this case the larvae of the ghost moth.'

'We had roasted locusts. Very nutritious... Kate, would you like some more stuffing?' said Mum.

'Yes, please!'

'Remember the ants?' my father asked.

'Oh, yes,' Mum said, 'They were tasty.'

'Let me see... if it moves, eat it. Is that right?' said Kate.

Dad brought out the brandy-flaming plum pudding with carbonising holly to general oohs and aahs. Kate was

thrilled when she found the sixpence. I thought it was sweet of Dad to slip it under her slice.

Kate told us about her Christmases in the Australian summer.

‘Actually, they weren’t everything they could’ve been. Father thought going to the beach was frivolous on Christmas. It was after all Jesus’ birthday.’

‘Sean, you did that, right?’ said Mum.

‘Mmm! That was a great barbie. Connor did carpetbag steaks. Maybe it was the sunshine or something but that is still the best steak I ever had. Good Aussie wine too I remember... Cracking hangover.’

‘Do you miss Australia, Kate?’ asked my mother.

‘I miss friends and family but I have no strong pull to go back, no.’

‘Would you prefer to stay in England?’

‘Yes, but I can’t indefinitely. My work permit will run out in a couple of years. And there are no extensions.’

‘Well... what if you left and then came back again? We did that once I remember.’

‘It’s just a one-time deal. A special arrangement for all the young wild-colonials who want to spend a few years in Britain. They don’t want us to stay though.’

‘What are you going to do then?’

‘I don’t know yet.’

My mother looked at me with her wide-eyed innocent look.

I looked at Kate.

‘Time for brandy and cigars!’ said my father grandly.