

The Melted Man

I

The morning was already warm. The morning was already warm and the milkman was coming, his electric float floating noiselessly down the empty street, with the council houses, on both sides, still sleeping. The bottles on the back rattled musically as it came to a halt. The milkman climbed from the open cab, grabbing two bottles of gold top and a carton of double cream. He carried the bottles expertly between the fingers of his left hand, the double cream resting in his palm, the other hand free to push open the garden gate. As he walked down the path, he admired the pink and white concrete slabs on either side. It was much better than the grass that used to be there. A sparrow in an adjacent bush watched and gave a clever and contemptuous whistle. The milkman reached the back door, turned the handle and let himself in.

"Margaret!" he called, plonking his wares on the table. After a moment a woman appeared from upstairs.

"'Ello, Mat," she said, unenthusiastically. "Is it that time already?" Margaret was wearing a pink polyester dressing gown with green flowery things, and underneath, a pink nylon night dress. Her feet were decorated with slippers, each featuring a large white pompom on the instep.

"It's late for a milkman," Mat said, smiling. He liked being a milkman. He especially liked his milkman uniform.

"It's early for me," Margaret said, dryly.

"Come 'ere, my turtle. Don't be cross." But it was Mat who went to his turtle. He was several inches shorter than Margaret, and was forced to stretch his neck to give her a peck on her turtle cheek.

"Mat!" she protested, "not in the kitchen. It's not proper." The countless double cream possibilities were like adult books to illiterate children. It was neither the time nor the place. The time was after dark, with all the lights closed, and the place was the bedroom.

It was like a strange graveyard, hidden inside a large concave bowl, formed by surrounding hills. The hills, crowding around on all sides, were like patient monster spectators, waiting for something to happen. No burials here. This was an above-ground graveyard. The corpses were left on the grass, to rot away, to have their body parts stolen.

The sun, creeping up in the sky—intent on making the already hot morning hotter—had just reached the rim of the bowl, a barren monster hill to the east, and was now pointing its sharp rays at a decrepit house in the very centre of the sunken land.

The door opened and the Melted Man stepped out. He squinted into the sun, spat on the extremely crazy pavement, looked around at the corpses of old cars and vans and even a truck, spread out on the sickly grass about the house. His extrasensory dog, chained to a dead tree beside the kitchen window, was busy looking at the Melted Man, wagging his tale and whining.

"Shurup, Mut," he said, spitting again.

The Melted Man's face was melted. It looked like a wax mask left beside a fire, left to bubble and boil, and then moved aside to set solid. The horrific distorted face seemed timeless, only his unkempt hair, thinning and turning grey, provided any hint of age. A huge belly pushed against his oil-stained T-shirt, spilled out over the waist of his loose jeans. His arms were thick rolls of coagulated fat and untidy muscle, scared with faint lines, as if they had once been tattooed with a red hot poker. With seven fingers, the Melted Man ruffled up what

was left of his hair, gave a yawn and spat again.

He turned laboriously, back towards the house; and then he noticed his extrasensory dog suddenly come to attention—ears pricked up, eyes watching the hidden distance—and stopped in mid melted stride. The Melted Man stood, listening, facing the mysterious mongrel, and then turned around again. A dirt road ran from the house, through the above-ground graveyard, between the eroding corpses, weaving its half mad way up the slope on the eastern side of the bowl, into the rising sun, and then slipping down out of sight. The Melted Man, suddenly tense, strained his eyes, watching the point where the road crossed the ridge of the hill, listening to a faint sound coming from nowhere. It was a car, and finally it reached the top of the hill and slipped down into the Melted Man's sunken domain. The Melted Man seemed to relax as he recognised the vehicle, as it slowed, creeping down between those rusting shells of cars and vans and even a small truck.

The driver opened the door, climbed out.

"Morning, Bill," the Melted Man said. There was a smile in the Melted Man's voice, though his melted face was unable to join in. The extrasensory dog took a sniff, yawned and sat back in the dusty shade of the dead tree.

"Hi," Bill said, without much enthusiasm. Bill was a scrawny man in his late twenties, balding, dressed in clothes a size too big for his narrow body.

"It's a hot one today," the Melted Man said. Bill stood in silence.

"I'm just seeing to some breakfast. Want some?"

"No," Bill began, as if reluctantly deciding to speak. "It's not a social call."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm here about the van."

"Oh. Come on in," the Melted Man said, beginning a slow rotation towards the house. "I'm doing some sausages." Reluctantly, Bill followed him inside.

From the door, a dark passage led to the kitchen, with a closed door half way down to the right. The passage was decorated with a bizarre collection of imponderables: a coat stand, providing the support for a wired human skeleton; an elephant's foot umbrella stand, minus the umbrellas; dangling from the ceiling a dusty chandelier with no bulbs; an old desk on one side, with a large pile of books, an empty goldfish bowl, a tattered manuscript, a nature magazine with a chimpanzee on the cover, and an ancient empty bottle of wine; and guarding the way into the kitchen, a stuffed, moth-eaten gorilla.

Bill walked down the corridor, oblivious to them all. In the kitchen, the Melted Man was stabbing sizzling sausages.

"Are you sure you don't want some?"

"No," Bill said. "I told you, I've come about the van."

"What about it?" Sizzle.

"I came over yesterday. You were out."

"Oh."

"I took a look underneath."

"So?"

"The frame's rusted to hell."

"Fuck, I told you it need's some work." Sizzle.

"It doesn't need work. It needs scrapping."

"Shit Bill, I've seen it. It needs some work, that's all."

"Come out and look—"

"I don't need to. I've fucking well seen it."

"Come and look. Show me the work it needs." Bill had turned and was edging into the dingy corridor. "Come on."

"I've Jesusin' seen it."

"Come on, Wayne. Come on out." The Melted Man turned off the

gas and trailed out after Bill, around the side of the house, to a grey Volkswagen van.

"Take a look," he said. He was kneeling on the sickly grass, pointing at the frame underneath.

"Shit, I don't need to take a fuckin' god damn look. I know what it's like."

"So why are you trying to sell me it?"

"'Ow many times? It need's some bastardin' work." The Melted Man shook his melted head.

"I thought we were friends, Wayne."

"What the fuck . . ."

"I thought we were friends—after all these years—and then you try to sell me this piece of junk . . ."

"All it needs is some weldin'. That's all it needs. Shit."

"You know I'm leaving next week. I need something reliable."

"You're really going?" There was nothing in the Melted Man's voice to suggest his sorrow.

"I told you."

"You fink fings'll be better in Nazi-land? You think it's better over there?"

Silence.

"You don't even speak the fucking lingo."

"I'm leaving next week, Wayne. I need a van that will get me there."

"Well you might as well try 'n' fuck yourself up the arse as go over there. It's worse. It's worse than 'ere."

"I want my money back, Wayne."

"I want my money back Wayne," he mimicked. "You want your money back? I tell you somefink, an' you don't listen. It just needs some work."

"It's rusted."

"You fink I don't know my job? Is that what you fink? Jeesh."

I've been fixing fuckin' cars since before you were fuckin' born. You weren't even a twinkle when I was fixing fuckin' cars. But you fink you know better, don't you? Like the fuckin' rest. They come 'ere with their fuckin' 'eeps of junk an' expect me to fix 'em up for fun. They don't know their Jesusin' dipsticks from their fuckin' dicks. You fink I do this shit for fun?"

"I just want my money back."

"You can 'ave your fuckin' money back. Go buy yourself another fuckin' van. Go off to fuckin' Nazi-land and fuck yourself. Do what the fuck you want. You know they killed my dad, don't you?"

"Yes."

"We fought a war against those Jew bastards, and you want to go live there. Go fuck the Nazi Jews, Bill. See if I care." The Melted Man shook his head and spat on the ground.

"Can I have my money?"

"The whole fuckin' world's going down the fuckin' drain. You can't run away from it, you know. You might fink you can, but you can't. It's every-fuckin' where. It's the fuckin' god damn fuckin' missing link."

"I don't want to hear about your missing link, Wayne."

"Course you don't want to 'ear. Who want's to 'ear? Nobody want's to bastardin' 'ear. I read about it, you know. I read about the missin' link. Well, it isn't missin' no more. We're friggin' turnin' into it."

"Can I have my money, Wayne?"

The Melted Man spat, turned his heavy body and slowly, silently, sadly walked back into the black mouth of the open doorway. He returned holding a roll of bank notes, held together with a thick elastic band.

"Here's your money," he said. Bill took it.

"Thanks," he said.

It was too bad. The Melted Man had really wanted to fix up the

van for his friend. He had thought they would do it together. It would have been a long job.

Bill held out his hand. The Melted Man reached out with his own three fingered hand. It was not so much a shake as a grasp.

"Take care," Bill said.

"You too," the Melted Man said. Bill climbed in his car without looking back, and soon he was heading up the dirt road. The Melted Man watched the car disappear over the horizon. His eyes welled up and a tear trickled down his melted cheek.

"I'll be off then," Mat said, giving Margaret a peck on the cheek.

"Don't dilly-dally," she said, instead of goodbye. After the door closed, Margaret saw Mat had not cleared away the tea cups, and gave a disapprobatory tut. She put them in the sink herself, though not without another tut—which made her feel a good deal better. And then she marched upstairs to dress, struggled into her garish clothes, pulling on ugliness and years. And then she plucked her eyebrows and plastered on makeup with something that looked like a trowel.

Margaret sat drinking tea, waiting, smoking cigarettes, waiting, drinking tea, smoking cigarettes and growing steadily more impatient. She went into the living room, took an envelope from the sideboard and returned to her seat in the kitchen. She opened the envelope and examined—without actually reading—its contents. Two airline tickets. Margaret had never taken an aeroplane, and she was excited just looking at the papers with the tiny print. She put the tickets down and smoked a cigarette to relax. Mat finally returned five minutes before usual.

"What took you so long?" Margaret asked. Mat looked at the clock on the kitchen wall and remained silent. If marriage had taught him anything, it was the value of silence.

"You'd better go bring down the luggage," she said. Mat clambered up the stairs. When he came out of the bedroom, burdened with a large heavy suitcase in each hand, and a small heavy suitcase under his arm, Margaret was standing at the foot of the stairs, ready to supervise the decent.

"Careful of the wallpaper," she said. The wallpaper featured tacky flowers in full bloom, balanced on the top of leafy stems. As Mat stumbled downwards, one of the cases bumped, and a shower of tacky petals appeared to tumble to the carpet.

"I said be careful," she said. When Mat reached the kitchen, he plonked the suitcases on the floor. Margaret looked at the cases and then back at Mat. He knew he had plonked them too hard. He had endangered the linoleum.

"Don't be so rough," she said, and in the same breath, "you'd better turn off the gas and water." Mat disappeared.

"Are you ready then?" she asked.

"I 'aven't changed," Mat apologised. He was still wearing his milkman uniform.

"It doesn't matter. You can change at my mother's." Because Margaret had not seen her mother in over two weeks, and because she lived in almost the same direction as the airport, but mainly because Margaret said it was a good idea, they were to spend the night there, and drive on to take the aeroplane early the next morning. "You know how she likes you in your uniform," Margaret concluded. Before Mat had chance to answer, she asked:

"'ave you got the tickets?"

"No, I'll get 'em now," he said, moving towards the living room. And then Margaret saw them on the table, picked them up and put them in her handbag.

"They're not here," Mat called after a moment. "I'm sure I put them on the sideboard."

"It's all right. I 'ave 'em," Margaret said. "I couldn't trust

you with 'em, any road." Mat returned to the kitchen.

"Let's get off then," Mat's wife said, motioning with her eyes towards the cases.

Outside, humidity, heat and a strange almost tropical haze were on the increase, the clear sky becoming increasingly less obvious. As Mat carried the cases out to the car, a stray king of the jungle cat crossed his path and gave out an extremely clever and contemptuous meow. Admiring the cat, Mat loaded the luggage into the boot.

Soon they reached an old country road heading north. Though it was quicker, Margaret did not like Mat taking the motorway, insisting it was dangerous with all the cars going so fast.

"Just think," Margaret ordered, "this time tomorrow we'll be in Majorca." They had been driving an hour, were more than half way to her mother's; and as Mat thought about the same time next day, the car began making a clanking sound.

"What's that?" Margaret asked.

"It sounds like somethin' clankin'," Mat said.

"I know that."

"In the engine," he clarified.

"I know that as well. You'd better stop and 'ave a look."

Mat pulled over. He climbed out, opened the bonnet and peered at the mass of greasy metal things.

"What is it?" Margaret called, still sitting in her place. She had taken a small mirror from her hand bag and was examining her make-up.

"I don't know. Can you start up the engine?"

"Me? I don't know 'ow it goes."

Mat returned to the open door and gave the ignition key a twist. Margaret made sure she was looking the other way, so that she would continue not knowing how it goes.

With the engine running, the clanking clanking, Mat peered in

and scratched his head. Finally he closed the bonnet and climbed back into the car.

"Well?"

"I don't know what it is," Mat admitted. "We'd better drive to a garage."

"Maybe you should walk. It might make it worse."

"It might be miles," Mat said, with the merest hint of irony in his voice.

"You don't need to talk like that," she chelped. "Go on then. Drive."

And so they clanked along the road a few miles until they came to Uxminster, a large village too cautious ever to become a small town.

"I hope there's a garage," Mat said.

"It wasn't so far," Margaret answered.

They came towards a petrol station with a small garage on one side. An old man, with the lid to a car's petrol tank still in his hand, was sorting out a driver's change. He looked up at the clanking sound of the approaching car, and with his attention divided, accidentally gave the driver an extra fifty pence. The driver, a fat man wearing a wig, first looked at his change, then at the old man, still smiling at the clanking car, and took the opportunity to drive speedily away, with the booty of fifty pence tightly grasped in his clammy hand.

"Sounds like you've got a problem," the old man said, as Mat rolled down the window.

"I know. Is there someone can look at it?"

"Well there would be, normally, but he's not in."

"When will he be back?"

"Two weeks. He's on holiday. Off to Italy." The old man seemed to find this half amusing.

"Can you take a look?"

"Don't need to," the old man answered. The next thing he said sounded—at least to Mat—like: "It's probably a broken ringleshanter."

"What did he say?" Margaret asked.

"'E said he thinks it's the ringleshanter." Mat turned back to the old man. "Is there another garage somewhere?"

"Well there's one the other side of town." He paused. "But it's closed."

"Is there one open somewhere?"

"Not around here. Your best bet'd be up at Jones's; he fixes up old bangers like yours. I'm sure he can sort you out."

"Whereabouts is it?"

"Take that road straight through town," the old man motioned with his chin, "keep goin' about three mile, till you see a billboard with no picture on it. You go down a dirt road on the right, just after."

The old man, still smiling, watched the old car as it clanked away, out of the petrol station. And then he realised, with no recollection of how or why, that he was still holding a petrol tank cover. The fat man wearing a wig had driven all the way home before he realised what had happened. He had pillaged fifty pence. It cost fifty-one pence to drive back and collect the missing part.

The Melted Man had sat quietly for a while, quietly in the gloom of his kitchen, quietly listening to the solitary pumping of his heart. The front door was still open and the emptiness of the outside world was drifting in on the invisible breeze. The Melted Man was troubled with a strange idea that the whole world had gone away and had no plans to come back. And then he began to fry his sausages again. He stood, pushing them about the pan, stabbing them, watching the skins wrinkle and the fat sizzle

out. An image suddenly jumped into his head. The Melted Man forced out the image, and again there was only sizzling silence—and a world gone away.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" Margaret asked.

"I think so," Mat said. They had passed the billboard with no picture, turned off the main road and were driving along a dirt track with fields on either side. Several birds were sitting on a scarecrow, watching as the car clanked along the track.

"I don't think so," Margaret said.

Along the dusty road they clanked. When they reached a steep incline, Margaret did not think even more so.

Meanwhile, an extrasensory dog was beginning to stir. He stood up, stiff, facing the hidden distance, growling quietly, bearing his teeth, and then barked. The Melted Man appeared in the black doorway.

As the old car climbed the hill, the clanking grew louder, almost as if it knew what was on the other side.

"We should turn back," Margaret said. "I told you we were going the wrong way." And then they reached the summit, and were presented with a panoramic view of the sunken bowl of land, with its decaying car corpses and the tumble-down house at the heart. The dog ran forward a few steps and began a vain attempt to bark off his head. The Melted Man stood in the dark doorway, watching the car descend the hill with a clank clank and a clankety clank, and was actually smiling a smileless smile of relief. And then the Melted Man looked at the dog and seemed to realise what was happening.

The extrasensory dog almost never barked. He liked people. But there he was, trying to bark off his head. The Melted Man glanced up at the approaching car, and then back at his dog. He was trying to remember the last time the dog had barked.

"There's a bad dog," Margaret said.

"Don't worry," Mat said, busy worrying enough for the two of them.

The last time the extrasensory dog had barked. Actually, the extrasensory dog had only barked once before, a long time ago, when a hairy Pakistani woman had driven up for spare parts. The extrasensory dog was never wrong.

As the car came to a halt, the Melted Man was already disgusted.

Mat turned off the engine and sat looking at the dog.

"Get out then," Margaret said.

"Let's wait until someone comes out," he said. Neither of them had seen the Melted Man, lurking in the shadowy doorway.

"What do you . . ." Margaret began, but the Melted Man stepped out and her words turned into spit and quickly fell back down her throat.

"Hello," Mat said, rolling down the window, trying to pretend that the Melted Man was not really melted. Being a milkman had taught him the value of politeness. "Is the dog safe?" he asked with a feigned smile. The extrasensory dog, meanwhile, was rolling his eyes, frothing at the mouth, frenzied in his effort to bark off his head.

"What do you want?" the Melted Man asked.

"There's something wrong with the car," Mat said. "I think it's the ringleshanter."

"The ringleshanter?" The Melted Man smiled another of his smiles that no one could see. The extrasensory dog was never wrong. Even if they were white—they could be white, he supposed—he was never wrong.

"You'd better get out and show me," the Melted Man teased. A bizarre plan had spread through his head like a parasitic fungus, joining vague ideas with uncertain notions and sending

him dizzy with certainty. Just then, unhealthy looking twisted black clouds appeared on the horizon, moving unnoticed, steadily towards the sunken bowl.

Mat glanced at the crazed beast, turned to the Melted Man, opening his mouth to say something, closed it again and slowly pushed open the door. And now the dog really lost control. He actually jumped in the air and did a somersault with a half twist, barking all the way around; then strained on the chain, which held him only a few paws from where Mat stood, until he almost choked himself. Mat edged himself along the side of the car and lifted up the bonnet.

"Shurup, Mut," the Melted Man said, and immediately the extrasensory dog stopped his romping rage and walked backwards to the shade of the dead tree. The Melted Man peered in at the engine and whistled.

"It's bad," he said. "Your ringleshanter's fucked. It's completely fucked."

"What can you do?" Mat asked.

"I'll 'ave to put in a new one." The Melted Man turned to the house and walked away. As soon as he was inside, Margaret rolled down her window and whispered, "Did you see his face? What did he say?"

"It needs a new ringleshanter," Mat said, walking to her side of the car.

"'Ow much will it cost?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't ask?" Margaret was ready to be mad, but the Melted Man suddenly appeared and she fell instead into an uncomfortable silence.

"Fucking ringleshanter!" he was saying, shaking his head with contentment. For a split second Margaret and Mat thought it was a ringleshanter he carried, but once the split second had joined

several other split seconds, forming a complete second, they both knew it was no ringleshanter.

"Get out a the car," the Melted Man said, pointing the double-barrelled shot gun casually towards Margaret.

"What's wrong?" Mat managed to say. The Melted Man let loose a shot, high, towards the deleterious clouds that were now entirely over head, like a cap on the sunken bowl. The milkman jumped. The milkman's wife jumped and then rolled up the window.

"I fuckin' well said get out." Margaret then seemed to realise that a closed window offered paltry protection against zooming balls of blasted metal. Displaying a walloping presence of mind, Margaret reached for her handbag before climbing out. Mat took half a step towards Margaret. Margaret took half a step towards Mat. The Melted Man took half a step towards them both. It was like a religious dance, performed by people afraid they might make the wrong move.

"Gerin the 'ouse," the Melted Man invited, pointing the way with the end of the gun. Arms wrapped around each other, they stumbled towards the house, as if in a three-legged race with no chance of winning. They were afraid to go inside, stopping at the threshold, visibly shaking. The Melted Man came up behind and they both reluctantly turned around to face him. Even with the black hole of a doorway gobbling up the light, even with the dark clouds blocking out the sun, Mat and Margaret saw the Melted Man's eyes with terrible blinding close-up clarity. They were a wonderful and incongruous blue-green, like a glinting secret tropical sea; like the eyes of God gazing out from the face of the Devil.

"In," the Melted Man said, again pointing the way with his weapon. And so they stepped into that dark corridor, passing the strung up skeleton and the rest, on to the closed door half way down.

"Open the fuckin door."

Mat pushed open the door, expecting to see the remains of a dozen starved milkmen on the other side. He was convinced the fat Melted Man was a kidnapper of milkmen. If only he had changed his milkman uniform and worn civilian clothes; but Mat was already seeing himself as a milkman martyr. The room they stepped into, however, was an ordinary living room. Well, ordinary for the Melted Man. Like the corridor, it contained another collection of objects wrenched from their context and left indecently without rapport: a kitchen sink leaning against the far wall; on the sideboard a pile of plastic spoons, bound by a thick rubber band; three light bulbs; a thermos flask; a half-dead potted plant; an old wooden metronome, over wound and refusing ever again to tap out time; on the coffee table, a frying pan with a broken handle; an empty box of matches; a tin of pink paint; two odd socks. And more.

The Melted Man, turning the gun sideways, pushed them across the room, as if herding sheep, over to a stairway. The steps groaned beneath the Melted Man's flabby magnitude. Now it was Margaret's turn for a flight of fearful fancy. They were going upstairs, to the bedroom, where the Melted Man would do terrible things to her with his melted body. What those terrible things might be, she had no idea. She only knew they would be terrible. And melted.

The corridor at the top of the stairs was of bare boards (coated only with dust and grime), and it too suffered under the Melted Man's bulk. Walking, still hand-in-hand, followed by that sound of creaking wood, afraid to look back in case they should glimpse those terribly lovely eyes, they passed two closed doors along the right wall, finally coming to a third at the very end.

"Open the door," the Melted Man said, sounding more relaxed.

The room was dark, dank and musty. On the left hand wall a

window, robbed of its glass, had been boarded up with tightly fitting planks. There was a hole in the ceiling and another directly above, in the roof, both about three feet across. All about the opening, the ceiling was stained from rain, and a pile of plaster rotted on the floor beneath. And then, no sooner had they stepped inside than the door slammed shut and a key rattled in the lock. They both turned around and found the Melted Man gone.

II

"What does he want?" Margaret asked, pulling herself to Mat and forcing tears into the breast pocket of his milkman jacket.

"I don't know . . ." Mat muttered.

For some time they remained in this clutching position, Margaret stopping her tears almost as soon as they had begun, and then sank to the floor and sat with their backs to the wall.

"He's mad," Margaret said, opening her handbag. "He's a mad man," she said, taking out the aeroplane tickets.

"Do you think we'll miss the plane?" she asked.

There was a sudden flash, a roar of thunder overhead, and then began a deluge, rain tumbling through the hole in the roof, like a waterfall, splashing onto the rotten boards below. The milkman and his wife hurried to the furthest corner of the room and sat in gloomy silence.

"He should fix the roof," Mat said, and the thunder roared again.

The Melted Man was sitting in the living room, picking his teeth with a match stick and feeling quite chuffed with himself. It would be a grand experiment. But there was something nagging away behind the whole idea, an uneasy notion that the purpose

had not yet been found.

The track out of the above-ground graveyard was already a stream of sickly mud, tumbling down towards the metal corpses: yellow brown fingers stretching out towards the house. The Melted Man's old car lurched upwards, the sound of its engine swallowed by the booming thunder and rattling rain, and then disappeared over the top.

Mat and Margaret sat still in their empty corner, unaware that they were alone in the house, expecting the Melted Man to appear at any moment—to do things.

It was not so bad in Uxminster. Most of the people were used to seeing the Melted Man, and they made sure they gave him hardly a second glance. It was for their own sakes as much as his.

Mat pushed open a shop door, setting off a dingle-dangling bell. The shop keeper, a moustached man with short stand to attention hair, looked up.

"Hell of a storm," he said, glancing at the Melted Man and then elsewhere. "Used to 'ave storms like that in India." He was an old soldier, and everything that happened in his daily life—the sale of a tin of beans, the delivery of bread, the beer he drank every evening in the pub next door, the women he watched, even the Melted Man's melted face—reminded him of some escapade of his soldiering days. "It's jungle weather that is," he commented.

"I need to go to the toilet," Margaret said.

"Oh," Mat said. "Can't you wait?"

"How can I wait? If I need to go, I need to go."

"We'll 'ave to call 'im . . ." Mat observed.

"No. I'm scared. If he comes . . ."

There was another crash of thunder.

"Did you see 'is eyes?" Margaret asked.

"Yeah."

"I never saw eyes like that. The colour would look nice in our bathroom. Do you think they make paint that colour?"

"I doubt it."

"I really need to go to the toilet."

"Shall I call 'im?" The question though was academic: there was the sudden jingle-jangle of a key in the lock. The door swung open and the Melted Man stood, unbudging, like a painting of insanity framed in the doorway, clutching in one hand the gun, in the other a very large bunch of bananas. He tossed the very large bunch of bananas to the corner where the milkman and his wife were crouched. Before they could gather any sense from the scene, the door had slammed shut and the lock clanked.

"I need to go to the toilet," Margaret remembered.

"My wife needs to go to the toilet!" Mat called out in a whisper. But the agony of the hall floor boards, after a brief pause, could be heard, crying further and further away. And then there was only the sound of the rain bouncing down outside, and the splashing of the waterfall into the room.

"He didn't hear you," Margaret said, vexed.

"He doesn't care," Mat answered.

Actually the Melted Man was shocked. He had completely overlooked the sewage problem. His carefully constructed plan was clearly not as carefully constructed as he had imagined. It was, in a sense, full of shit. When he arrived downstairs, the Melted Man sank into the couch and pondered. For a terrible time he pondered. And then he seemed to recall that somewhere about the house there was a potty: an enamel potty featuring the picture of a small boy having a wee. But then, if he gave them a potty he would have to empty it himself. Where was it though?

"At least we know he's not gonna kill us," Mat said.

"'Ow do you make that out?"

"The bananas. He wouldn't be feeding us if he was gonna murder us."

"Maybe he would," Margaret contended.

Meanwhile, the Melted Man was searching high and low. Where was that potty with the little boy having a wee? And then he saw it, in a cupboard under the sink, hidden behind a pile of plastic bags. He took out the potty and, as he looked at the little boy having a wee, remembered it had been his own potty. The little boy was him. Having a wee before . . . before . . . it had happened. Vague memories grew clear, sparkled with tears of nostalgia, tears of regret, tears of if only. No. Certainly not. He could never let them use his little boy having a wee potty. He took it into the living room, set it on the coffee table, between the empty box of matches and tin of pink paint.

This time, when the door opened, the Melted Man held the gun and a plastic bucket. He tossed the bucket into the room and, without further ado, closed and locked the door.

"He's mad," Margaret said. "First bananas and then a bucket."

"I think it's for you."

"What do you mean?"

"To go to the toilet." Margaret, who had her arm around Mat's waist, quickly withdrew it, as if the very idea somehow made him dirty.

"That? How can I use that? It can't be." Margaret sat, looking at the bucket, lying on its side in the middle of the empty floor, shocked and disgusted and wishing the Melted Man was less melted.

"Well?" she said, disconcerted. The sound of the rain and falling water, and thinking about not using the bucket, were all making matters worse. And Mat was being too quiet. He was always too quiet. He was never any help.

"We have no choice," he muttered.

"We? It's me who has no choice. Oooh, I'm proper burstin'," she said.

"You'll have to use the bucket, dear."

"Oh my God. It so . . . it's so humiliating." It was a big word, and Margaret was surprised to hear herself say it. "Go away," she said to Mat. "Go away and turn away."

"Where can I go?"

"In the corner, over there." Mat walked over, passed the boarded up window, and stood like an ill-behaved schoolboy sent to face the corner. He tried to ignore the sounds as Margaret got to her feet, collecting the bucket and carrying it to the opposite corner, rustling her dress up and knickers down; as the urine tumbled into the plastic bucket; as she put her clothes back in order. It was only when Margaret had returned to her original place that she said, "All right, you can turn around." As Mat went to join her, he tried not to notice her face, red with embarrassment.

The afternoon had turned into early evening. Still it rained, though now with less intensity, and the thunder had not thundered for several hours. Mat and Margaret had made themselves more comfortable, Mat removing his milkman's jacket—though not his milkman's tie—upon which they now sat, and Margaret her high healed shoes. They were busy eating bananas.

"Is that all he's gonna give us?" Margaret asked.

"I don't know."

"What about somethin' to drink? You should shout and ask for somethin' to drink. I'm dying of thirst."

"He might get mad," Mat said. Margaret paused for thought.

"You said he didn't mean to kill us," Margaret, thinking herself very clever, remembered.

"I know, but . . ."

"What?"

"He might get mad. Why don't we just wait?"

"We'll die of waiting," she said.

The Melted Man was also doing some eating, tucking into a large plate of fish and chips with a bottle of stout to wash it down. He was having a lovely time, washing it down. Everywhere the air was stagnant and stifling, creeping through the open doorway, down the corridor, clinging to the Melted Man, enveloping his fat melted body, drawing out sweat until his clothes were sodden.

Satiated, the Melted Man strolled out and plonked himself down on a shredded car seat, beneath the shelter of the porch, to watch the evening die. Rain. He spat, and the spittle joined the rain and fell to the ground. The Melted Man, taking a half smoked cigar from the pocket of his T-shirt, struck a match against the stone wall and puffed away. He turned towards the dog, huddled in his kennel, gnawing on the bony remains of his own meal. The animal looked up with wide extrasensory eyes and wagged his tail half heartedly. He was a good dog, the Melted Man thought.

The ground surrounding the house was becoming waterlogged. Puddles were beginning to form where normally no puddles would form; puddles in puddle places, turning into pools. Streams were beginning to trickle down the steep slopes of the bowl, making their muddy way towards the car corpses, forming new pools, closing in on the house. There was clearly a danger of flooding, though to this the Melted Man remained gloriously oblivious, taking pleasure in the force and longevity of the downpour.

The Melted Man picked out shreds of cigar from his mouth and flicked them away. He looked back at the dog, who now dropped the bone from his mouth, stood to stretch, and began lapping up yellow rusty rain water from a puddle. Only now did the Melted

Man realise his captives would also need something to drink. Leaving the door ajar, the Melted Man walked down the corridor and into the kitchen, where he found a large plastic bowl and filled it with water. He would have preferred to use a dog bowl, but the dog was using it.

When the Melted Man opened the door, Mat and Margaret had finished eating and had piled up the banana skins neatly in the corner, beside the bucket of urine. He placed the bowl brusquely on the floor and was gone again without a word. Mat stood and walked over to the bowl.

"What is it?" Margaret asked.

"Water."

"Water? Are we supposed to drink from that? Maybe it's for washing," she imagined.

"Well what do we drink then? You think he's gonna bring us some wine later?"

"Don't you answer me back like that!" Margaret snapped.

"Sorry . . ." Mat muttered, wondering if bananas required red, white or rosé.

"And why doesn't he speak?" Margaret asked, exasperated.

"What do you want him to say?"

"I want him to tell us what he's doing. Why he's keeping us here like this. What does he want?" Margaret was becoming hysterical. She needed tender words of hope. She needed lies.

"Maybe he wants to kill us." Mat had already forgotten his banana proof. "That's what I think." Margaret, who had also already forgotten, began to cry. Mat went back to sit beside her, and she pulled herself into his chest for comfort. Mat felt proud. He felt like a milkman. In control. Dependable. Essential.

"Do you want a drink," Mat asked, after the tear spilling was over.

"Yes, please," Margaret said, with a final sob. Mat fetched the bowl over, spilling hardly drop until he reached his wife, when half of it splashed down her polyester dress.

"Bugger," Margaret blurted. Now there was a noteworthy word. A rare word. "Look at the state of me!" she continued. "I'm soaking wet; you clumsy oaf." But Mat was hardly listening, captivated by the sight of the wet dress, clinging to her body, revealing the outline of her brassière and the shape of her breasts. He was a milkman and was feeling milkman urges.

"What're you doing?" Margaret gasped. Mat had set about her, was grabbing her breasts and sinking his teeth into her neck. "Mat!" she cried. "Stop it. Stop it." Mat pressed on: a milkman lost in milkman fantasies. "Stop it!" she screamed, pushing him away with all her force. Mat fell back onto the floor. The connection between milkman and milkman fantasy was broken, and now a silent shame came creeping about.

"Sorry," he muttered. "It's just that . . ."

"What the hell were you doing?" she gasped, using another of those rare words. "Don't you ever do that again. What if he came?"

The last light was ebbing away, the evening's darkness beginning to tumble through the hole in the roof and fill up the empty room. Margaret, with her dress still wet, was squinting at the aeroplane tickets.

"Five o'clock tomorrow," she said, finally condescending to speak to her husband. "I hope we don't miss it."

The night was long. No bed, no covers, no pillows, no comfort: Mat and Margaret struggled to find sleep. Once, in the early hours, as the rain outside began to abate, Mat moved across the inches of space and pushed his body against Margaret's body. Margaret became rigid and he moved away again.

Morning light began to tumble into the room.

"I need some tea," Margaret said, sitting up with her back against the wall.

"There's water," Mat reminded her.

"I need tea."

And then there came a sound from outside the house. A hellish call, a cry of, "No", that seemed like the answer to something that was not a question.

"What was that?" Margaret asked, wrought with apprehension.

"Must be him," Mat said.

"It sounded like an animal."

At seven thirty, the Melted Man had climbed from his grimy bed, splashed his grimy melted face with cold water and put on the kettle. He took out a sack of dog food from the pantry, rummaged inside for a large morsel and plopped it into his mouth. Crunch crunch: he gobbled as he carried the sack to the door. Stepping out, the Melted Man glanced upwards to a sky still laden with low grimy hanging clouds, churning themselves inside-out. Humidity hung in the air like droplets of blood on a butcher's counter.

The Melted Man was surprised to see Mut still asleep.

"Come on, Mut. Wake up." The Melted Man filled up the bowl with dog food. Still Mut refused to move, stretched out inside his kennel, his eyes closed.

"Come on Mut," the Melted Man said, stroking the dog to wake him. "Breakfast time." Mut's body was stiff to the touch. Fear grew in the Melted Man's heart and was pumped down his veins to all four corners of his melted body.

"Wake up, Mut. Wake up." The Melted Man, falling to his knees, shook his pet. "Mut. Mut." The fear had reached his vocal cords and was twisting them, wringing out strange gasping sounds. The Melted Man, pushing his hand under the dog's muzzle, lifted the lifeless head. Now there could be no doubt. With tears dripping

down his melted cheeks, the Melted Man gave out a strangulated cry of, "No," which echoed about the concave land, bouncing from one hillside to another to another, until, dizzy, it disappeared into silence. The Melted Man gently lowered Mut's head. Dead.

To the Melted Man, it seemed as if the whole of Mut's life had been preparatory: the hairy Pakistani woman, years ago, had awakened his special power; and now, with one glorious barking-his-head-off act, it was used up. Mut had revealed the milkman and his wife. His task was done.

The Melted Man, with a shovel in one hand, lifted Mut and carried him behind the house, through puddles and mud, up the hill and out of the sunken enclave. Far away, beside a gurgling beck, he lay the dog to rest. Wiping the tears from his face with grimy hands, the Melted Man returned to his hidden domain.

It was almost lunch time. There were no bananas left. The Melted Man had not once shown his melted face.

"He's forgotten all about us," Margaret said, pacing back and forth. "And if he doesn't let us go now, we'll miss the plane for sure." Mat remained silent, sitting on the floor and picking his finger nails.

"Well?!"

"What?" Mat asked, apologetically.

"You'd better call 'im. Tell 'im we've got to go."

"Do you think I should?" he asked, obviously thinking he should not.

"Yes, I bloody well do." Margaret was becoming a habitual user of rare words.

Mat rose, walked to the door and called, "Hello." Silence. "Hello," he called again. "Hello, down there." And then the sound of heavy feet came stomping up the stairs, along the corridor. Mat, by this time, had moved away from the door and was standing at the wall, beside the boarded up window. Clink.

The door opened. The Melted Man was without his big gun, and Mat nursed hopeful expectations. But there he stood, framed in the doorway, silently staring at one and then the other.

"Hello," Mat said.

"Hello," Margaret said. Still, the Melted Man stood in silence.

"You see," Mat began, "we've got these plane tickets. We're going to Spain . . ." A short pause. ". . . and our plane leaves at five o'clock."

"Looks like you'll be missing the fuckin' thing, then," the Melted Man said, with no trace in his voice of the smile that was nowhere to be seen on his melted face.

"But what do you want?" Margaret asked.

"Want? What makes you think I want somefink?"

"Why are you keeping us here?"

"I'm helping you, aren't I. I'm like your god damn guidance counsellor. Get it? I'm finking of your future. Now shut the fuck up," he said, reaching for the door handle.

"We don't want help. We want to go!" Margaret called, as the door slammed closed. "And we need more bananas!" she called.

"What do you mean we need more bananas?" Mat asked his better half.

"Eh? I meant food. I meant we need more food." Again, a note of hysteria arose in her voice. Mat took her in his arms and said, "There, there."

Almost at once, with Mat still muttering the same "there, there," as if he really knew where, and was not just pretending, the door opened again. The Melted Man had changed his mind, after all. He was sorry. He didn't really want them to miss the aeroplane. They should hurry along. He'd already fixed the car. Mat and Margaret both looked up, eager to hear the good news. The Melted Man threw another bunch of bananas onto the floor and

closed the door.

"You're bananas," Mat said.

"It must be five," Margaret said. "About."

"Tea time already?"

"The aeroplane'll be taking off." She was clutching the tickets, crumpling them in her clenched fist, almost shaking with anger. "Well that's it. We've missed it. We've missed it 'aven't we? I could kill 'im. I could ruddy well throttle 'im." Margaret bared her teeth and growled. And then, in a more doleful voice: "All I wanted was to go on 'oliday." It was like Christmas morning, with all the presents stolen.

As they munched away on a banana each, the house, the whole world was in complete silence.

"I was thinking . . ." Mat began.

"What?"

"When it gets dark, maybe I could lift you up to the 'ole there."

"What for?" Margaret seemed hardly to be listening. The aeroplane had gone without them, and she had resigned herself to hopelessness.

"You could get out onto the roof, climb down the drain pipe and go get help."

"Climb down the drain pipe?" Now she was listening. "What do you think I am, a monkey?"

"It's our only chance."

"Why don't you do it?"

"You're not strong enough to lift me up."

"You mean you're too 'eavy. I told you ages ago you were gettin' fat, but you never listen. I don't know why I waste my breath." Mat chewed on his banana for a few moments.

"Do you want to try?" Mat asked, timidly.

"We'll see."

Gradually the darkness descended, through the hole and into the room.

"I wonder what he meant when he said he was our . . . what was it he said?"

"Guidance counsellor," Mat answered.

"That's it. I wonder what he meant?"

"He's crazy. He doesn't mean nothin'."

What time was it? The darkness had robbed them of any sense of interval, and there was no way of knowing. There was only empty, wordless, eventless existence.

And then, unexpectedly, the Melted Man came in, threw a blanket over to them, and was gone.

"I bet he's going to bed," Mat said.

Something that might be time, but seemed more like heavy chains, dragged silently on.

"He must be asleep now," Mat broke the monotony. Margaret looked up without answering.

"Do you want to try?"

"Try what?"

"Climbing out."

"I could fall."

"Do you want to try?"

"I could fall."

"Try to lift me up then."

They stood directly under the hole in the roof. Mat glanced up, and saw it was at least nine feet to the rafters.

"Cup your hands," Mat said.

"How?"

"Lock your fingers together—like this," he demonstrated. Mat put his foot in her hands and held onto her shoulders to balance. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"I suppose," she grumbled. Again, Mat looked up at the hole and then pushed himself upwards, using her hands like a step. He was seven inches above the ground when her hands fell apart and he tumbled down.

"I can't do it," she snivelled. Mat breathed a lengthy sigh.

"Well do you want to try?" he asked.

"All right. All right, I'll try. Don't keep going on."

With Margaret's foot in his hands, Mat counted, "One two three," and hoisted her up. She reached for the exposed rafters and caught hold.

"Pull," he said, pushing upwards until half her body was inside the rent. Margaret kicked with her free foot and dealt him a blow to the nose. "Get your leg over the beam," he said. A moment later she was sitting astride the wooden rafter, her feet dangling down on either side.

"I can see outside," she whispered, managing to peep over the edge of the roof.

"Can you get onto the roof?"

"I don't know."

"Can you?"

Can you, can you, can you? He had no right asking her. This was his job: a man's job.

Margaret, tense with fear, took hold of the moss covered slates around the edge of the hole and carefully stood up on the wooden girder. The roof, sloping up and down from her waist, was steep, the black slates still shiny from the rain. A warm humid breeze touched her hair; and it seemed, as she looked out to the ground and into the night time distance, that freedom was far away. Margaret watched herself climb onto the roof, slip and tumble over the edge. Dead on the ground, her body broken.

"I can't do it," she said. "It's too 'ard."

Mat, going against a lifetime's tradition, had an idea.

"Wait a minute," he said, taking the blanket. "Catch this." Carefully, Margaret sat once again astride the beam. Mat threw the blanket and she caught hold.

"Tie it to the wood," Mat said.

"What for?"

"Just tie it," Mat answered, petulantly.

"Don't you answer me like that," Margaret said.

"If you tie it, I can climb up," he explained. That was better. Margaret tied the blanket.

"Is it tight?"

"It's as tight as I can do."

"Move over then," he said, and began to climb. Mat had always liked the ropes in his elementary school's gymnasium, and he ascended quickly, easily.

"I want to get down," Margaret said, as Mat came along side.

"Go on then," he answered. Margaret climbed down as if she also had liked the ropes in her elementary school's gymnasium.

And now Mat stood up and looked at the lightless outside world. It was true: the roof was steep. But there was no turning back—not with Margaret down there, watching, expecting him to do his milkman duty: to aid a damsel in distress. So Mat struggled to climb out, sending down, as he did so, a shower of broken slates from about the edge of the hole.

"Be careful," Margaret chelped, "you nearly 'it me."

Mat though had already escaped her admonishment, out on the roof, where the only sound was a whispering wind. Carefully, Mat sat and slithered down the roof on his hind quarters, bracing himself with the flat of his hands on the slimy slates; his misgivings increasing as he reached the gutter along the edge of the roof. From there he could see the ground, which looked like normal ground, except it was much further away. Slowly he moved, sideways, his feet resting on the very edge of the roof, towards

the corner and the drainpipe, with its elegant twisted neck. And then, only a few slithers away from his goal, a slate was pushed from its position by Mat's size eight shoe. It fell to the floor, crashing into at least five pieces on the crazy pavement. Mat stopped dead still, his heart pumping madly, and then moved away from the edge of the roof and lay backwards, trying his best to be something thin and unnoticeable.

Certainly for more than five minutes, probably for less than one hour, Mat maintained his thin unnoticeable position, listening for any indication that the Melted Man had been disturbed. Nothing happened. Very slowly, with great attention to detail, nothing happened. It was time to move again.

There it was: the drainpipe with the elegant twisted neck. Mat lined himself up, turned onto his stomach and moved down the roof. His feet dangled, his legs dangled, over the edge he dangled. There soon came a decisive moment. It was impossible to wrap his feet around the drainpipe without dangling over a few more inches, but to dangle further seemed to mean leaving the roof behind. Dangle he did, and at the moment Mat felt himself lose the roof, his feet found the pipe and guided his fall. His hands grabbed the edge of the gutter, which moaned and shuddered under his weight. Next he was holding the drainpipe, gradually lowering himself to the ground.

Mat was smiling during the last two feet of the decent.

So was the Melted Man. He had heard the slate fall, sneaked out and watched the whole thing from behind Mat's car.

"That was very good," the Melted Man said. Mat span around—almost spinning too far in his shock—and saw the Melted Man standing casually with the shot gun hanging limply under his arm. "I should've known you'd be a good climber." Mat, of course, could not see the smile on the Melted Man's melted face, though the amusement in his voice was clear. "I'll make a monkey

of you yet."

III

"What do you mean?" Mat babbled. "Why won't you let us go?"

The Melted Man came out from behind the car; his melted face made less appalling by the mask of darkness.

"Let you go? I'd rather let go of my fuckin' sanity," he quipped.

"But what do you want?"

"You don't know?" The Melted Man seemed genuinely surprised. "I want to watch you change. What the fuck else?"

"Change into what?"

"Into what?" And now the Melted Man actually began to laugh, a strange quiet short lived laugh, as if he was not really sure how it was done. "I should've known you'd be a bit bleedin' slow.

"You remember my dog?"

"Yes," Mat said, involuntarily looking around for the beast.

"Don't worry. 'E's dead."

"Oh."

"'E 'ad this special power, that dog did. 'E could spot your kind like mad. 'E was the one that found you out see? 'E knew what you was. An' then 'e died."

"What are we?"

The Melted Man breathed another short laugh and shook his head. "You're the god damn mother fuckin' missin' link, that's what you are. I'm gonna watch you change into monkeys, an' then I'll keep you for pets." And now, as the words tumbled from his mouth, as his intentions were for the first time verbalised, the whole plan became well defined: the boundaries sharpened, the

vagueness vanished, everything seemed to make perfect purposeful sense.

"Now get into the 'ouse," he said, raising the gun and pointing it towards the door.

"'E said 'e wants to watch us turn into monkeys," Mat explained to Margaret. The Melted Man had cut the blanket down from the rafter and taken it away.

"'E's mad."

"'E said we're the missing link."

"What's that when it's at home?"

"I don't know."

The next morning, Mat and Margaret heard strange clinking clanking sounds, coming from outside and downstairs.

"What do you think 'e's doin'?" Margaret asked.

"I don't know."

Clink. Clank.

"I need to do a wee," Margaret said. Mat knew the ritual. He walked to the far corner of the room and stood facing the wall.

There were plenty of bananas and water.

Clink. Clank.

The metallic clinking clanking noise continued all through the afternoon, like the ticking of a deranged mechanical clock, sometimes stopping for lengthy periods, then clinking clanking rapidly as if to make up for lost time.

Later the timeless silence returned: the chains dragging along the featureless floor of unchanging existence, moving slowly, imperceptibly from nowhere to nowhere else.

"How many words can you think of that mean 'mad'?" Mat asked.

"Eh?"

"Like crazy," Mat said. They both sat, trying for a few moments to think of other words.

"I hate those kind a games," Margaret said.

"Me too," Mat agreed.

Darkness began to seep into the room.

"I'm sick of bananas," Margaret said. "Even monkeys don't just eat bananas. We should tell 'im. Even monkeys don't just eat bananas."

When the Melted Man arrived, the following morning, to empty the toilet bucket and bring them more bananas and water, Margaret nudged her husband.

"We can't live on bananas," Mat said.

"Oh no?" the Melted Man asked, surprised.

"Even monkeys don't just eat bananas," Margaret said.

And then the Melted Man was gone.

Soon after, from downstairs, came the growling of an engine.

"What the devil's that?" Margaret asked.

"It's an engine," Mat said.

It growled on; and then a new sound was added: a high pitched hiss hiss hissing, as if the machine beast was spitting sparks.

All day long, interspersed with clink clanking, the growling and hissing growled and hissed. The Melted Man was up to no good. Mat and Margaret were sure he was up to no good.

The humidity dwindled, and in the early evening a sudden shaft of sunlight tumbled through the hole like a streak of lead.

The Melted Man was sitting outside on the shredded car seat, smoking his cigar and watching the clouds drifting away. From the floor, beside the shredded car seat, he took a nature magazine with a chimpanzee on the cover. He flicked through the pages, passing a short article concerning the missing link—the source of his own melted theory—found his place and began to read. It was hard work. The Melted Man was no good at reading, and reading was not good at the Melted Man. It was not something he liked to do too often. But there it was. Incredulous, the Melted Man gazed upon a paragraph which clearly stated that

chimpanzees do not eat only bananas. Well, what about that. A revelation. And it all made sense. Even so, he would leave them on bananas for a while longer.

During what might have been the afternoon of the next day, the Melted Man came into the room.

"Come on out," the Melted Man said, motioning towards the corridor. Mat and Margaret stood up and walked through the doorway.

"What do you want?" Mat asked, afraid to believe that they were to be set free.

"You'll bleedin' see," he said, in a friendly tone.

Down the corridor, down the steps and into the living room. The Melted Man had been doing some decorating. All the furniture had been moved arbitrarily to the edges of the room. In its centre now stood a large cage, eight feet tall, welded from odd scraps of car metal, a few fence railings, a great number of car exhaust pipes and enclosed on top with steel cable, strung crisscrossing one another. One side of the cage featured the frame and door of an oven, with a chain passing through the handle, twisted about one of the bars and fixed with a padlock. Another side was not finished: a space remained at the corner.

"Get on in," the Melted Man said, pointing to the gap with the barrel of his gun. As Mat and Margaret squeezed in, the Melted Man turned on an electric welding torch. The motor growled and the nozzle began to spit hissing sparks as the last two exhaust pipes were fixed in place.

"It's your new home," the Melted Man said, turning off the device. "Do you like it?"

IV

Now that Mat and Margaret were downstairs, the chains dragged more easily, though the possibility of release seemed, like anything far away, hardly to exist. The couple amused themselves watching the comings and goings of the Melted Man, and listened to the tinkering sounds of his tinkering with the cars outside.

"Pass me the fuckin' bucket," the Melted Man said. He unlocked the padlock on the cage, removed the chain and pulled open the oven door, which served as a hatchway. Mat passed the bucket through.

"You do some fuckin' stinkin' shit. Jesus," The Melted Man said, taking the bucket. "Just fuckin' look at it, you mother fuckin' animals."

There was something wrong. Not the swearing. Swearing was like breathing to the Melted Man; but there was a tenseness to his voice that they had never heard before.

"I don't know why the fuck I keep you, I really fuckin' don't." He turned away with the bucket, muttering, "Fuckin' shit. Holy fuckin' shit."

"What's wrong with 'im?" Margaret said.

"I don't know."

When the Melted Man returned with the emptied bucket, rather than pass it to them, as he usually did, he pulled open the hatchway and threw it inside. The chain clanked as he wound it back in place.

"They murdered my father you know," the Melted Man said; clicking shut the padlock. "The German Jew bastards. Do you know that? The fuckin' Nazi Jew bastards."

"Sorry," Margaret said.

"Don't give me none of your sorry bullshit. I don't need your sorry bullshit."

When the Melted Man had left the room, Margaret whispered, "What's 'e on about?" And then they heard a car engine start up.

"He's gone," Mat said, the sound receding until only silence remained.

"I hope 'e's gone to get some food. I'm sick to death of bananas."

But Mat was not thinking of bananas. Placing his arm about his wife's shoulder, he pushed his lips to hers.

"He might come back," Margaret said, weakly.

"You know he won't," Mat whispered, pushing his tongue into her mouth.

As Margaret shed her clothes, dropping them untidily to the floor, years fell with them. So there she stood: naked, pathetically covering her pubic hairs, waiting for Mat to take off his soiled uniform. As a concession to modesty, he kept his socks.

They were both more excited than usual; even so, it was almost as if they made love without actually having sex. Once, Margaret almost said, "Ooh," but managed to stop herself before it came out.

The city was ten miles beyond Uxminster. Normally, the Melted Man went into the city with Bill. For years they had always gone together; but now, with a sense of loathing and even fear, he drove alone. The Melted Man had spent the last week repairing Mat's car, had changed the licence plate, and was now towing it to an unscrupulous dealer who was by no means a friend, but was at least used to his melted face.

The Melted Man pulled over into the dealer's lot. He opened the door and climbed out. As he walked over to the office, he knew passers by were staring at him, pointing at him, turning away from him, pointing, hurrying away, pointing, hurrying away pointing, pointing. All eyes were on him or off him. The Melted Man walked as quickly as he could, but quickly was never quite

quick enough. The Melted Man felt like a child molester being judged by a jury of parents.

Finally he entered the hut-like office.

A shifty fellow, with a bulging eyes that looked in two directions at the same time, glanced up from a pile of papers on his desk: "Hello, Wayne."

"Yeah," the Melted Man answered.

"Where's Bill?"

"He's not here. He's off in Germany."

"Germany eh?" he said, trying to sound interested.

"Got somethin' for me?"

"What the fuck else would I be doin' 'ere?" the Melted Man chelped.

"Right. Let's see it then." He stood and they walked together, out into the world of eyes and fingers.

"Is it 'ot?"

"Yeah. It's 'ot."

"'Ow's the engine?"

"You know I don't bring you no shit. It's all fixed up."

The dealer kicked the front tyre in time tested ceremony. "I can give you a thou'." He knew there was no dealing with the Melted Man. Either he offered a reasonable price straight away, or there would be no sale.

"Okay," the Melted Man said.

"I need a change of clothes," Margaret said as she dressed. "These are startin' to smell. You should ask 'im."

"Why me?"

Margaret turned and stared at Mat. He was about to acquiesce, but seemed to think the worse of it, and instead returned her stare.

"Don't you look at me like that," she said. But Mat did look

at her like that.

"If you want something, you damn well ask," Mat said. Margaret was shocked. It was not like Mat to stare and answer back. She turned away and continued to dress, finally saying:

"In any case, he wouldn't give me any."

It was evening, and the Melted Man was sitting in his faded armchair. He had left his bad humour in the city, and was back to his usual self. Margaret, sensing the return to normality, collected her courage and said:

"We need some clean clothes."

"That's a good one," he said, looking up and almost laughing. "Monkeys don't need no clean clothes. Monkeys don't need any kind a clothes."

"We're not monkeys," Margaret said.

"Not yet you ain't," the Melted Man answered.

He was remembering the hairy Pakistani woman, imagining the gradual change: dragging humankind back to another kind. By now she had probably reverted to her natural form. Her family probably kept her locked indoors, so the neighbours would never know.

The Melted Man had retired to bed. Mat and Margaret were lying on the carpeted floor of their cage, moonlight bleeding through the window.

"'E really thinks we're gonna change into monkeys or somethin'."

"I know," Mat said, scratching his half grown beard.

Mat and Margaret were becoming emaciated. Their eyes were sunk in great brown ringed pits; their limbs dangled like knotted string. The monotonous diet of bananas and water was taking its toll, sapping their strength, draining their will to live.

"I've brought you a special treat for tea," the Melted man

said, brandishing a plastic margarine container with its lid in place. He unlocked the hatchway. "Here," he said, passing the container to Margaret, who forced herself to her knees and reached out to take it. She looked at the container, blankly, as if not quite understanding its meaning.

"Food," Mat said. Their bodies had rejected bananas, refused to have anything more to do with bananas, and it had been several days since they had eaten.

And now, the idea of "food" returned like a lost memory, saliva gushed about their mouths like a flooding Niagara Falls of anticipation. "Yum, yum," they both thought. When Margaret opened the lid, she screamed and dropped the container to the floor. Its contents spilled out.

"You're mad," Mat said to the Melted Man, using his last reserves of strength to move and console his wife. "We can't eat that."

"Humph," breathed the Melted Man. "Please yourselves." And out he walked.

Margaret was sobbing. She had moved over to the corner of the cage, as far away as possible from the creeping and crawling contents of the margarine container.

"Get rid of them," Margaret cried. Kneeling down, Mat began to pick up the assortment of tangled worms and caterpillars, carefully placing them back in the container, and noticing how juicy some of the worms looked.

"He's washed them," Mat said.

Margaret often dozed in the afternoon. When he was certain she slept, Mat opened the plastic tub and looked indecisively at the creepy-crawlers. He picked up the nicest looking worm, felt it wriggle between his fingers, felt the texture of its crease-ringed skin, and quickly—giving himself no time for thought—popped it into his mouth, chewed at double speed and swallowed.

The taste hung in his mouth. Actually, it was not too bad. Actually, it was very good. But what about the caterpillars? What about the yummy looking caterpillars? Mat took one in the palm of his hand, closed the hand, making a fist, squashing the creature to death, and then popped it into his mouth. This time his mastication was less hurried, allowing the sweet flavour to fill his mouth before swallowing.

Margaret awoke and saw mat popping creepy-crawlers like other people pop popcorn, munching away happily.

"Mat!" she gasped. He looked at her guiltily.

"I was just . . . They're not too bad," he apologised

"Ow can you?"

"We have to eat, Margaret."

"I know, but . . ."

"Try one. Just one. The caterpillars are nice. They taste like sweet meat."

"Meat's not supposed to be sweet."

"Try one."

"Never."

Another day passed before Margaret dared to eat. Mat had been right: the caterpillars did taste like sweet meat; and the worms were like raw bacon. The Melted Man was overjoyed with their progress, and made it a habit to sit in the armchair and watch while they ate. And as time passed, as the Melted Man grew fond of his pets, adding a variety of fruits, nuts and raw vegetables to the diet, their strength returned.

The Melted Man had driven away. Mat and Margaret were spread out on the floor, naked, the passion of their desire satiated. Mat stroked his wife, gently, running his hand up her hairy legs, pausing on her foresty pubes, following the path of hair to her navel, drawing rings on her stomach with the tips of his fingers. After the violence of sex, it was time to be gentle.

Margaret opened her eyes.

"I need to do a wee," she said.

"Go on then," Mat said. Margaret took this to mean he would move to the far corner of the cage and turn away; but as she stood astride the bucket, she saw he was not inclined to move.

"Turn away, then."

"What's the point?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's the point?" he repeated.

"Please yourself," she said, and began to urinate.

"I wonder what it'd be like—if we turned into monkeys?" Mat pondered, using the back of his hand to wipe away the sweat of his brow.

"Like nothing," Margaret said, shaking away the last drops. "I don't know."

The summer was over. The Melted Man used pirated electricity, redirected to his house from an underground cable half a mile away; so the free heat, once on, was permanent, regulated only by the occasional opening of a door or window.

The Melted Man had driven his car out of the sunken land and parked it a few hundred yards down the lane. Now he walked slowly, stealthily back to the house, crept passed the door and around the side to the window. He peeped in and saw Mat and Margaret, naked, their foul clothes in a pile on the floor, busy doing monkey copulation with great monkey fervour. He watched with detached interest for a few minutes, then walked quietly back around the house, inside, down the corridor, pushed open the living room door and entered. They were definitely going at it like animals, and the Melted Man was beside the cage, reaching in through the bars, before they even noticed his presence.

"Don't mind me," he said, grabbing the pile of clothes. "I'm just gonna wash 'em."

Mat was still inside Margaret, and as soon as the Melted Man was out of the room, he began again to thrust away, as if nothing had happened.

"We've got nothing to wear," Margaret said, afterwards.

"'E's just washin' 'em." Mat said.

"'E's gonna see us."

"'E already did," Mat answered, delicately moulding her breasts in his hand, feeling the brush of hairs around her nipples.

Later, when the Melted Man brought in their tea, Margaret turned away, hiding her nudity with her hands.

"Where's our clothes?" she asked.

"I 'ad to frow 'em away," the Melted Man answered. "They were fallin' apart with all the muck."

"You can't do that. I need some new ones," she cried.

"I told yer, monkeys don't need clothes," he said, sitting himself down to watch them eat.

Margaret began to weep, "You can't: it's not fair."

The Melted Man stood and left the room. If there was one thing he hated, it was the sound of a monkey crying.

As a consolation for their loss of clothes, the Melted Man gave them some thick knotted ropes and instructed them to tie them to the cabled roof of the cage, hoping they would use them to swing and climb and to generally frolic in monkey-like ways. Unfortunately, his pets showed no interest, and the ropes dangled like flaccid symbols of an impotent plan.

One evening, in February, the Melted Man was in extremely good spirits. He had drunk half a bottle of whiskey, and even given his monkeys a sip each.

"I wasn't born like this," he began.

"Like what?" Mat asked. It was strange to hear his own voice. It had been several days since he had last spoken. There was nothing to say to Margaret anymore, no milk rounds to talk over, no T.V. shows to discuss, and the Melted Man hardly ever said anything. There were only endless days of lying around, scratching, listening to the silence, and copulation.

"Like this," the Melted Man said. "You fought I was some kind of fuckin' freak I bet. Admit it. Like the two of you." He took another swig of the whiskey. "No no no. I was normal once, like every-fuckin'-body else. I was a normal, a normal bloody kid, like all the others. I used to look up girls' dresses, you know. You know that? They liked me, the girls did. They liked my eyes! What the fuck . . . We used to go down into the woods over there and play 'iddy till it got dark. Before they killed my dad, that was, when the war broke out, an' 'e went, an' 'e never came back.

"I was playin' in an old car out back. My dad used to fix up cars like me, you know. I'd pinched these fuckin' matches from the kitchen, an' I was larkin' around with 'em—in the car—with these bits a newspaper." The Melted Man took another drink.

"So there I was, like a right prick, layin' on the back seat, daydreamin'. You know what I was day dreamin' about? I remember, see? I remember everything like it was fuckin' yesterday. It's burned in my brain, see? That's why. It's burned right in my fuckin' brain. It's all right for you monkeys: I bet you don't even remember what 'appened this mornin'. Go on, tell me: what the fuck 'appened this mornin'?" It was true: neither Mat nor Margaret had any idea what had happened during the morning. But they were not really trying. "Just like I said. Fuckin' monkeys." The Melted Man shook his head, a shake of resentment, a shake of envy, that the monkeys could not remember, and that he could.

"So there I was, lounging around finking about bein' like my dad, fixing cars, fixing cars with 'im when 'e came back from the war. It was like a big fuckin' dream. What do yer call it? A bastardin' ambition, it was. To fix cars." The Melted Man made a noise like a laugh.

"I don't know if I fell asleep. I must've. I must've, cos the next thing I knew, the fuckin' car was burnin' up. There were fuckin' flames, like all over the place. I started to scream—the flames was licking my face—crying out, 'Mammy mammy mammy.' I could feel my face, like meltin' or somethin'. I screamed and I screamed, an' I was burnin, an' then the door opened an' I saw my mam. She pulled me out. It was 'er fault." The Melted Man took another drink, handed the bottle to Mat, and then left the room.

The next morning, as he brought them more worms and a banana each—they were fond again of bananas, now that their diet was more varied—the Melted Man showed no signs embarrassment or regret. Why should he? He had exposed himself, certainly, but they were, after all, just a couple of monkeys. Indeed, he was still in high spirits.

"I'm gonna show you both a trick," he said. "See this egg? Look." Using the point of a penknife, the Melted Man pierced a hole in the top and bottom of the egg. Next he pushed one of the holes to his left nostril, and proceeded to sniff with what seemed the power of an industrial vacuum cleaner. Besides the sniffing, a strange gooey sound could be heard, as the contents of the egg began to travel up his nose. And now, the Melted Man opened his mouth, and, as he continued to sniff, first the white, then the broken yoke appeared, and dribbled from his lip onto the floor.

"Not bad, eh? Not fuckin' bad," the Melted Man said, with a short laugh. Not bad at all. Mat and Margaret were impressed.

They were also eying the broken egg on the floor with a certain desire. It had been a long time since they had eaten egg.

That night, as the Melted Man lay in bed, he heard them downstairs. They were going at it like animals again. They were always going at it like animals. Sometimes they did not even stop when he walked into the room. The Melted Man listened, intrigued.

"Come on, you great big ape. Give it to me," Margaret cried. "Oh, oh, oh."

The winter was almost over. The Melted Man was sitting in the armchair smoking a used cigar. The male was lying on his side, idly scratching his testicles. The female was squatting over the bucket, straining away as excrement dropped out. And then, as she sat on the floor and gazed into space, there was complete silence, like an encyclopaedia of blank pages. Volume after volume of silence. All things known to man, reduced to silence.

V

It was sometime in late spring that the Melted Man realised Mat and Margaret really were the missing link. They had almost become what they were.

He had just returned from Uxminster, where he had purchased a large supply of worms from the fishing tackle shop, as well several bunches of bananas, and, as he came into the living room, saw his pets finally, after months and months, clambering about on the ropes. Oh how they clambered. It was wonderful to see. Margaret, accustomed now to her nudity—and the house, after all, was extremely warm—seemed particularly to enjoy sitting with a large knot between her legs and swinging gently back and

forth.

"Well I'll be a monkey's uncle," he said, astounded and rapturous at the sight. "Well I'll be a fuckin' monkey's uncle."

Just then, there was a sound where there should be no sound. There should be no sound anywhere. There should be volume after volume of silence. Out in the corridor. Footsteps. Foot foot footsteps. Footing footsteps. In a sudden panic, the Melted Man rushed to close the door; but he was too late, and as he took hold of the handle, the footsteps arrived.

"Hi Wayne."

"Bill!" said the Melted Man.

A fraction of a second passed before Bill noticed the exhaust pipe cage and the creatures inside. "What the hell . . ."

"Bill. What the fuck you doin' 'ere?" The Melted Man tried to force Bill back into the corridor.

"Never mind what I'm doing," Bill answered, standing his ground. "What the hell are you doing? Have you gone mad, or what? What's going on?"

"It's nothin' to fuckin' do with you."

Bill walked passed the Melted Man towards the cage.

"Who are you?"

The two creatures looked up with forgotten eyes.

"Who are you? What's going on?"

"It's nothin' Bill," the Melted Man broke in. "They're just a couple of monkeys. They're the fuckin' missin' fuckin' link. Like I always said."

"Don't give me any of that—"

"I tell you they are. Look at 'em."

"How long they been here, Wayne?"

"I don't know. Jeess, what the fuck difference does it make?"

"How long?"

"I told yer, I don't friggin' know. About since when you

left."

"You can't do this to people." Bill looked back towards the couple in the cage, who were still spread out on the floor as if nothing was going on. "Have you gone mad, or what? You can't do it, Wayne."

"They not people," the Melted Man growled, his jaw tense, his mouth almost closed.

"Let them go, Wayne."

"It's nothin' to do with you," he growled.

"Let them go, or I'll go to the police. I'm not joking."

Suddenly, the Melted Man turned on his heels and hurried out of the room. A few moments later he returned with the shotgun.

"Get out, Bill," the Melted Man shouted. "Get the fuck out, before I do somefink, you fuckin' meddlin' fucking bastard. Go on, fucking shit head. I'm not fuckin' jokin' either. Get the fuck out." And then, as loud as he could, the Melted Man shouted, "Now!" The cage rattled with the force of the sound.

Bill walked slowly towards the door. Once in the corridor, he turned and said, "I'll give you till tomorrow. I'll be back tomorrow."

The Melted Man sat in the armchair. His heart was thumping away; sweat dribbled down his face. "Jesus. Jesus fuckin' Jesus," he muttered, shaking his melted head.

VI

The Melted Man watched as the two naked bodies scampered away from the house, over the hill and disappeared. He had no choice. He walked, dejected, shoulders down, arms hanging low, limp, back to the living room. Two of the exhaust pipe bars lay across the floor. The cage was empty. He had no choice. He stared at

the cage. It looked all wrong: all empty, like a car without an owner. The Melted Man stumbled over to the cage, turned sideways and squeezed in through the space. All kinds of monkey memories came flooding through his mind, climbing and swinging, monkey business. He fell to the ground and sat with his back to the bars. The memories fled, replaced by a blank page, two, three, a volume, volume after volume.

The Melted Man picked up a banana from the untidy floor. The Melted Man peeled the banana. The Melted Man shoved the banana into his mouth, whole, and began silently to chew.