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# Martin Amis

"A GREAT MASTER OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE." —FINANCIAL TIMES

"A STONE-SOLID GENIUS . . . A DAZZLING STAR OF WIT AND INSIGHT." —SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

"A FORCE UNTO HIMSELF . . . THERE IS, QUITE SIMPLY, NO ONE ELSE LIKE HIM." —THE WASHINGTON POST

Author of

MONEY, LONDON FIELDS,  
& THE INFORMATION

# LIONEL

A NOVEL

# ASBO



State of **ENGLAND**

Alfred A. Knopf

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# LIONEL ASBO

## State of England

MARTIN AMIS



ALFRED A. KNOPF · NEW YORK · TORONTO · 2012

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK

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# CONTENTS

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*Cover*  
*Title Page*  
*Copyright*  
*Dedication*

## **PART I**

2006

Desmond Pepperdine, Renaissance Boy

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

## **PART II**

2009

Lionel Asbo, Lotto Lout

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

---

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

**PART III**

**2012**

**Cilla Dawn Pepperdine, Babe in Arms**

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

---

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

**PART IV**

2013 Who? Who?

Chapter 1: The Week Before

Chapter 2: Thursday

Chapter 3: Friday

Chapter 4: Saturday

Chapter 5: Tuesday

Chapter 6: Wednesday

Chapter 7: Thursday

*Other Books By This Author*





## PART I

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Who let the dogs in?

... This, we fear, is going to be the question.

Who let the dogs in?

Who let the dogs in?

Who?

Who?

# 2006 Desmond Pepperdine, Renaissance Boy

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1

*Dear Jennaveieve,*

*I'm having an affair with an older woman. Shes' a lady of some sophistication, and makes a refreshing change from the teen agers I know (like Alektra for example, or Chanel.) The sex is fantastic and I think I'm in love. But ther'es one very serious complication and i'ts this; shes' m Gran!*

Desmond Pepperdine (Desmond, Des, Desi), the author of this document, was fifteen and half. And his handwriting, nowadays, was self-consciously elegant; the letters used to slope backward, but he patiently trained them to slope forward; and when everything was smoothly conjoined he started adding little flourishes (his e was positively ornate—like a turned on its side). Using the computer he now shared with his uncle, Des had given himself a course on calligraphy, among several other courses.

*On the plus-side, the age-difference is surprisingly*

*He crossed that bit out, and resumed.*

*It started a fort-night ago when she rang up and said its the plumbing again love. And I said nan I'll be right over. She lives in a granny flat under a house about a mile away and theres always some thing wrong with it's plumbing. Now I'm no plumber but I learnd a bit from my Uncle George, whose in the trade. I sorted it out for her and she said why not stay for a few drink's?*

Calligraphy (and sociology, and anthropology, and psychology), but not yet punctuation. He was a good little speller, Des, but he knew how weak his punctuation was because he had just begun a course on it. And punctuation, he (quite rightly) intuited, was something of an art.

*So we had a few Dubonnet's which I'm not used to, and she was giving me these funny looks. She's all ways got the Beatles' on and she was playing all the slow one's like Golden Slumber, Yester-day, and Sh'es Leaving Home. Then gran says its so hot I'll just slip in to my night-dress. And she came back in a babydoll!*

He was trying to give himself an education—not at Squeers Free, recently singled out, had read in the *Diston Gazette*, as the worst school in England. But his understanding of the plan and the universe had inconceivable voids in it. He was repeatedly amazed by the tonnage of what he didn't know.

*So we had a few more drink's, and I was noticing how well preserved she is. She's taken good care of herself and shes really fit considering the life shes' led. So after a few more drink's she says are'nt you frying alive in that blazer? Come over here handsome, and give us a cuddle! Well what could I do. She put her hand on my thigh and slid it up my short's. Well I'm only human aren't I? The stereo was playing I Should Of Known Better—but one thing lead to another, and it was miff blowing!*

For instance, the only national newspaper Des had ever read was the *Morning Lark*. And Jennaveieve, his addressee, was its agony aunt—or better say its ecstasy aunt. The page she

presided over consisted of detailed accounts of perhaps wholly imaginary liaisons, and his replies consisted of a lewd pun followed by an exclamation mark. Desmond's tale was not imaginary.

*Now you must believe me that this is all very "out of character." It was never meant to be! Okay, we live in Diston, where that sort of thing isn't much frowned upon. And, okay, my Gran had a mischievous youth. But she's a respectable woman. The thing is she's got a big birthday coming up and I reckon it's turned her head. As for myself, my background is strict Christian at least on my father's side (Pentecostalist.) And you see Jennaveieve, I've been very unhappy since my Mum, Cilla, passed away three years ago. I can't find the words. I needed gentleness. And when Gran touched me like that. Well.*

Des had no intention of actually mailing his letter to Jennaveieve (whose partly naked body also adorned the page headed, not Ecstasy Aunt, but Agony Angel). He was writing simply to ease his own mind. He imagined Jennaveieve's dependably non-judgemental reply. Something like: *At least you're having a Gran old time!* Des wrote on.

*Apart from the legal question which is worrying me sick, there's another huge problem. Her son, Lionel, is my uncle, and he's like a father to me when he's not in prison. See, he's an extremely violent criminal and if he finds out I'm giving his Mum one, he'll fucking kill me. Literally!*

It might be argued that this was a grave underestimation of Lionel's views on trespass and reprisal ... The immediate goal, for Des, was to master the apostrophe. After that, the arcane of the colon and the semicolon, the hyphen, the dash, the slash.

*On the plus-side, the age-gap is not that big. See Granny Grace was an early starter, and I was pregnant when she was 12, just like my Mum.*

He heard the thick clunks of the locks, he looked with horror at his watch, he tried to stand upright on deadened legs—and suddenly Lionel was there.

## 2

Lionel was there, a great white shape, leaning on the open door with his brow pressed to his raised wrist, panting huskily, and giving off a faint grey steam in his purple singlet (the lift was misbehaving, and the flat was on the thirty-third floor—but then again Lionel could give off steam while dozing in bed on a quiet afternoon). Under his other arm he was carrying a consignment of lager. Two dozen, covered in polythene. Brand: Cobra.

"You're back early, Uncle Li."

He held up a callused palm. They waited. In his outward appearance Lionel was brutally generic—the slablike body, the full lump of the face, the tight-shaved crown with its tawny stubble. Out in the great world city, there were hundreds of thousands of young men who looked pretty much like Lionel Asbo. In certain lights and settings he resembled, some said, the England and Manchester United prodigy, striker Wayne Rooney: not exceptionally tall and not fat, but exceptionally broad and exceptionally *deep* (Des saw his uncle every day—and Lionel was always one size bigger than expected). He even had Rooney's gap-toothed smile. Well, the upper incisors were widely spaced, yet Lionel very seldom smiled. You only saw them when he sneered.

"... What you doing there with that pen? What's that you writing? Guiss it."

Des thought fast. "Uh, it's about poetry, Uncle Li."

"Poetry?" said Lionel and started back.

"Yeah. Poem called *The Faerie Queene*."

"The *what*? ... I despair of you sometimes, Des. Why aren't you out smashing windows? It's not healthy. Oh yeah, listen to this. You know that bloke I bashed up in the pub the other Friday? Mr. 'Ross Knowles,' if you please? He's only pressing charges. Grassed me. Would you credit it?"

Desmond knew how Lionel was likely to feel about such a move. One night last year Lionel came home to find Des on the black leatherette sofa, innocently slumped in front of *Crimewatch*. The result was one of the longest and noisiest slappings he had ever received from his uncle's hands. *They asking members of the public*, said Lionel, standing in front of the giant screen with his arms akimbo, *to fink on they own neighbours*. *Crimewatch, it's like a ... like a programme for paedophiles, that is. It disgusts me*. Now Des said,

"He went to the law? Aw, that's ... That's ... the lowest of the low, that is. What you going to do, Uncle Li?"

"Well I've been asking around and it turns out he's a loner. Lives in a bedsit. So there's no one I can go and terrify. Except him."

"But he's still in hospital."

"So? I'll take him a bunch of grapes. You feed the dogs?"

"Yeah. Only we're out of Tabasco."

The dogs, Joe and Jeff, were Lionel's psychopathic pitbulls. Their domain was the narrow balcony off the kitchen, where, all day, the two of them snarled, paced, and swivelled—and prosecuted their barking war with the pack of Rottweilers that lived on the roof of the neighbouring high-rise along.

"Don't lie to me, Desmond," said Lionel quietly. "Don't ever lie to me."

"I'm not!"

"You told me you fed them. And you never give them they Tabasco!"

"Uncle Li, I didn't have the cash! They've only got the big bottles and they're five ninety-five!"

"That's no excuse. You should've nicked one. You spent thirty quid, *thirty quid*, on a fucking dictionary, and you can't spare a couple of bob for the dogs."

"I never spent thirty quid! ... Gran give it me. She won it on the crossword. The prize crossword."

"Joe and Jeff—they not *pets*, Desmond Pepperdine. They tools of me trade."

Lionel's trade was still something of a mystery to Des. He knew that part of it had to do with the very hairiest end of debt collection; and he knew that part of it involved "selling on" (Lionel's word for selling on was *reset*). Des knew this by simple logic, because Extortion, With Menaces and Receiving Stolen Property were what Lionel most often went to prison for ... He stood there, Lionel, doing something he was very good at: disseminating tension. Des loved him deeply and more or less unquestioningly (*I wouldn't be here today without Uncle Li*, he often said to himself). But he always felt slightly ill in his presence. Not ill at ease. Ill.

"... You're back early, Uncle Li," he repeated as airily as he could. "Where you been?"

"Cynthia. I don't know why I bestir meself. Gaa, the *state* of that Cynthia."

The spectral blonde called Cynthia, or *Cymfia*, as he pronounced it, was the nearest thing

Lionel had to a childhood sweetheart, in that he started sleeping with her when she was ten (and Lionel was nine). She was also the nearest thing he had to a regular girlfriend, in that he saw her regularly—once every four or five months. Of women in general, Lionel sometimes had this to say: *More trouble than they worth, if you ask me. Women? I'm not bothered. I'm not bothered about women.* Des thought that this was probably just as well: women, in general, should be very pleased that Lionel wasn't bothered about them. One woman bothered him—yes, but she bothered everyone. She was a promiscuous beauty named Gina Drago ...

“Des. That Cynthia,” said Lionel with a surfeited leer. “Christ. Even uh, during the uh, you know, during the other, I was thinking, Lionel, you wasting you youth. Lionel, go home. Go home, boy. Go home and watch some decent porn.”

Des picked up the Mac and got smartly to his feet. “Here. I'm off out anyway.”

“Yeah? Where? Seeing that Alektra?”

“Nah. Meet up with me mates.”

“Well do something useful. Steal a car. Eh, guess what. You Uncle Ringo won the Lottery.”

“He never. How much?”

“Twelve pounds fifty. It's a mug's game, the Lottery, if you ask me. Oy. I've been meaning to ask you something. When you creep off at night ...”

Des was standing there holding the Mac in both hands, like a waiter with a tray. Lionel was standing there with the Cobras in both hands, like a drayman with a load.

“When you creep off at night, you carry a blade?”

“Uncle Li! You know me.”

“Well you should. For you own security. And you peace of mind. You going to get yourself striped. Or worse. There's no fistfights any more, not in Diston. There's only knife fights. To the death. Or guns. Well,” he relented, “I suppose they can't see you in the fucking dark.”

And Des just smiled with his clean white teeth.

“Take a knife from the drawer on you way out. One of them black ones.”

Des didn't meet up with his mates. (He didn't have any mates. And he didn't want any mates.) He crept off to his gran's.

As we know, Desmond Pepperdine was fifteen. Grace Pepperdine, who had led a very demanding life and borne many, many children, was a reasonably presentable thirty-nine. Lionel Asbo was a heavily weathered twenty-one.

... In dusty Diston (also known as Diston Town or, more simply, Town), nothing—and not one—was over sixty years old. On an international chart for life expectancy, Diston would appear between Benin and Djibouti (fifty-four for men and fifty-seven for women). And that wasn't all. On an international chart for fertility rates, Diston would appear between Malawi and Yemen (six children per couple—or per single mother). Thus the age structure in Diston was strangely shaped. But still: Town would not be thinning out.

Des was fifteen. Lionel was twenty-one. Grace was thirty-nine ...

He bent to unlatch the gate, he skipped down the seven stone steps, he knocked the knocker. He listened. Here came the shuffle of her fluffy slippers, and in the background (and ever) the melodic purity of a Beatles song. Her all-time favourite: “When I'm Sixty-Four.”

Dawn simmered over the incredible edifice—the stacked immensity of Avalon Tower.

On the curtained balcony (the size of a tight parking space), Joe lay dreaming of other dogs, enemy dogs, jewel-eyed hellhounds. He barked in his sleep. Jeff rolled over with a blissful sigh.

In bedroom number one (the size of a low-ceilinged squash court, with considerable distances between things, between the door and the bed, between the bed and the wardrobe between the wardrobe and the free-standing swing mirror), Lionel lay dreaming of prison and his five brothers. They were all in the commissary, queuing for Mars Bars.

And in bedroom number two (the size of a generous four-poster), Des lay dreaming of a ladder that rose up to heaven.

Day came. Lionel left early with Joe and Jeff (business). Des dreamed on.

• • •

For six or seven months now he had been sensing it: the pangs and quickenings of intelligence within his being. Cilla, Des's mother, died when he was twelve, and for three years he entered a kind of trance, a leaden sleep; all was numb and Mumless ... Then he woke up.

He started keeping a diary—and a notebook. There was a voice in his head, and he listened to it and he talked to it. No, he communed with it, he communed with the whispers of his intelligence. Did everybody have one, an inner voice? An inner voice that was cleverer than they were? He thought probably not. Then where did it come from?

Des looked to his family tree—to his personal Tree of Knowledge.

Well, Grace Pepperdine, Granny Grace, had not attended all that closely to her education for obvious reasons: she was the mother of seven children by the age of nineteen. Cilla came first. All the rest were boys: John (now a plasterer), Paul (a foreman), George (a plumber), Ringo (unemployed), and Stuart (a seedy registrar). Having run out of Beatles (including the “forgotten” Beatle, Stuart Sutcliffe), Grace exasperatedly christened her seventh child Lionel (after a much lesser hero, the choreographer Lionel Blair). Lionel Asbo, as he would later become, was the youngest of a very large family superintended by a single parent who was barely old enough to vote.

Although she did the *Telegraph* crossword (not the Kwik but the Cryptic—she had a weird knack for it), Grace wasn't otherwise a sharp thinker. Cilla, on the other hand, *was as bright as a barrelful of monkeys*, according to Lionel. “*Gifted,*” they said. *Top of her class without even trying. Then she got knocked up with you. She was six months gone when she sat her Eleven Plus. Still passed. But after that, after you come, Des, it was all off.* Cilla Pepperdine didn't bear any more children, but she went on to have as riotous a youth as was humanly possible with a baby in the house—a baby, then a toddler, and then a little boy.

What did he know about his dad? Very little. And it was an ignorance that Cilla largely shared. But everyone knew this about him: he was black. Hence Desmond's resinous colour, *café crème*, with the shadow of something darker in it. Rosewood, perhaps: close-grained, and

giving off a distinctive fragrance. He was a sweet-smelling youth, and delicately put together with regular mint-white teeth and mournful eyes. When he smiled in the mirror, he smiled sadly at the ghost of his father—at the ghost of the lost begetter. But in the waking world he only saw him once.

They were walking up Steep Slope, hand in hand, Des (seven) and Cilla (nineteen), after a spree at the funfair in Happy Valley, when she said suddenly,

“It’s *him!*”

“Who?”

“Your father! ... Look. He’s you! ... Mouth. Nose. Christ!”

Very poorly dressed, and shockingly shod, Des’s father was on a metal bench, sitting between a soiled yellow rucksack and five empty flagons of Strongbow. For several minutes Cilla tried to rouse him, with violent shakes and nails-only pinches and, towards the end, alarmingly loud wallops delivered with the flat of her hand.

“D’you think he’s *dead?*” Cilla leaned down and put an ear to his chest. “This sometimes works,” she said—and intently, lingeringly, kissed his eyes ... “Hopeless.” She straightened up and gave Des’s father one last deafening clout. “Oh well. Come on, darling.”

She took his hand and walked off fast and Des stumbled along beside her with his head still veering wildly round.

“You sure it’s him, Mum?”

“Course I’m sure. Don’t be cheeky!”

“Mum, stop! He’s waking up. Go and kiss his eyes again. He’s stirring.”

“No. It’s just the wind, love. And I wanted to ask him something. I wanted to ask him his name.”

“You said his name was Edwin!”

“That was a guess. You know me. I can remember a face—but I can’t remember a name. Ah, Crybaby. Don’t ...” She crouched down beside him. “Listen. I’m sorry, sweetheart. But what can I say? He came and went in an afternoon!”

“You said it lasted a whole week!”

“Ah, don’t. Don’t, darling. It breaks my heart ... Listen. He was nice. He was gentle. That’s where you get your religion from.”

“I’m not religious,” he said, and blew into the tissue she was pressing to his nose. “I hate church. I just like the stories. The miracles.”

“Well it’s where you get your gentleness from, my love. You don’t get it from me.”

So Des only saw him once (and Cilla, apparently, only saw him twice). And neither of them could possibly know how excruciating this encounter would become in Desmond’s memory. For he too, in five years’ time, would try very hard to wake someone up—to wake someone up, to bring someone back ...

It was just a slip, it was just a little slip, just a little slip on the supermarket floor.

So Des (now rising from his bed, in the great citadel)—Des thought it would be rash to attribute any great acuity, any great nous, to his father. Who, then, was the source of these rustlings, these delightful expansions, like solar flares, that were going about their work in his mind? Dominic Oldman—that’s who.

Grandpa Dom was barely out of primary school when he knocked up Granny Grace with



Cilla. But by the time he returned (and stuck around long enough to knock her up with Lionel), he was at the University of Manchester, studying Economics. *University*: it would be hard to exaggerate the reverence and the frequency with which Des murmured this word. His personal translation of it was *the one poem*. For him it meant something like the harmony of the cosmos ... And he wanted it. He wanted *university*—he wanted the one poem.

And here was the funny thing. Cilla and Lionel were known in the family as “the twins” because they were the only children who had the same father. And Des believed that Lionel (despite his dreadful CV) secretly partook of the Oldman acumen. The difference, it seemed, was one of attitude. Des loved it, his intelligence; and Lionel hated it. Hated it? Well, it was plain as day that he had always fought it, and took pride in being stupid on purpose.

When Des went to his gran’s, was he being stupid on purpose? And was she doing it too—when she let him in? After the fateful night came the fateful morning ...

*Got you some milk*, he said at the door.

She turned. He followed. Grace took up position on the armchair by the window, in her granny glasses (the circular metal rims), with her powderless face bent penitently over the *Telegraph* crossword. After a while she said,

*Frequently arrested, I’m heading east at the last minute. Two, three, four, two, four ...* In the nick of time.

In the nick of time. *How d’you work that one out?*

*Frequently arrested—in the nick oft. I’m—i, m. Heading east—e. At the last minute.* In the nick of time. *Des. You and I. We’re going to go to Hell.*

Ten minutes later, on the low divan, she said, *As long as no one knows. Ever. Where’s the harm?*

*Yeah. And round here, I mean, it’s not considered that bad.*

*No, it’s not. Uncles and nieces. Fathers and daughters all over the place.*

*And at the Tower there’s that pair of twins living in sin ... But you and me. Gran, d’you think it’s legal?*

*Don’t call me Gran! ... Maybe a misdemeanour. Because you’re not sixteen.*

*What, like a fine? Yeah, you’re probably right. Grace. Still.*

*Still. Try and stay away, Des. Even if I ask ... Try and stay away.*

And he did try. But when she asked, he went, as if magnetised. He went back—back to the free-fall pantomime of doom.

“The main role of the semicolon,” he read in his *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, “is to mark grammatical separation that is stronger in effect than a comma but less strong than a full stop.”

Des had the weight of the book on his lap. It was his prize possession. Its paper jacket was royal blue (“deep, vivid”).

“You can also use a semicolon as a stronger division in a sentence that already contains commas:

What has crippled me? Was it my grandmother, frowning on my childish affection and

turning it to formality and cold courtesy; or was it my pious mother, with her pathological caution; or was it my spineless uncle, who, despite numerous affronts and wrongs, proved incapable of even ...”

Des heard the dogs. They weren't barking, he realised, not exactly: they were swearing (and the rooftop Rottweilers, faintly and almost plaintively, at this distance, were swearing back).

*Fuckoff!* yelled Joe (or Jeff). It was almost a monosyllable.  
*Fuckoff! ... Fuck! ... Fuck! ... Fuckoff!*

*Fuckoff!* yelled Jeff (or Joe). *Fuckoff! ... Fuck! ... Fuck! ... Fuckoff!*

## 4

“Dogs,” said Lionel, “they descended from wolves. That's their heritage. Now *wolves*,” he went on, “they not man's natural enemy. Oh no. You wolf won't attack a human. That's a myth, that is, Des. A total myth.”

Des listened. Lionel pronounced “myth” *miff*. Full possessive pronouns—*your*, *their*, *my*—still made guest appearances in his English, and he didn't invariably defy grammatical number (*they was*, and so on). But his verbal prose and his accent were in steep decline. Until a couple of years ago Lionel pronounced “Lionel” *Lionel*. But these days he pronounced “Lionel” *Loyonel*, or even *Loyonoo*.

“Now I know you reckon I'm harsh with Jeff and Joe. But that's for why. To make them attack humans—at my own bidding ... It's about time I got them pissed again.”

Every couple of weeks Lionel got the dogs pissed on Special Brews. Interesting, thought Des. In America, evidently, *pissed* meant angered, or pissed off; in England, *pissed* just meant drunk. After six cans each of potent malt lager, Jeff and Joe were pissed in both senses. *Course, they useless when they actually pissed*, said Lionel. *They come on tough but they can't hardly walk. It's the next morning—ooh. That's when they tasty ...* That *ooh* sounded more like *ouè*. Nor was this the only example of Lionel's inadvertent French. He also used *un*—as a modest expletive, denoting frustration, effort, or even mild physical pain. Now Des said,

“You got them pissed Saturday before last.”

“Did I? What for?”

“You had that meet with the shark from Redbridge. Sunday morning.”

Lionel said, “So I did, Des. So I did.”

They were enjoying their usual breakfast of sweet milky tea and Pop-Tarts (there were also a few tins of Cobra close to hand). Like Lionel's room, the kitchen was spacious, but it was dominated by two items of furniture that made it feel cramped. First, the wall-wide TV, impressive in itself but almost impossible to watch. You couldn't get far enough away from it and the colours swam and everyone wore a wraithlike nimbus of white. Whatever was actually showing, Des always felt he was watching a documentary about the Ku Klux Klan. Item number two, known as *the tank*, was a cuboid gunmetal rubbish bin, its dimensions corresponding to those of an average dishwasher. *It not only looks smart*, said Lionel, as with Des's help he dragged it out of the lift. *It's a fine piece of machine-tooled workmanship. German*

*Christ. Weighs enough.* But this item, too, had its flaw.

---

Lionel now lit a cigarette and said, "You been sitting on it."

"I never."

"Then why won't it open?"

"It hardly ever opened, Uncle Li," said Des. "Right from the start." They had been through this many times before. "And when it does open, you can't get it shut."

"It sometimes opens. It's no fucking use to man or beast, is it. Shut."

"I lost half a nail trying to open it."

Lionel leaned over and gave the lid a tug. "*Un ...* You been sitting on it."

They ate and drank in silence.

"Ross Knowles."

There followed a grave debate, or a grave disquisition, on the difference between ABH and GBH—between Actual Bodily Harm and its sterner older brother, Grievous. Like many career delinquents, Lionel was almost up to PhD level on questions of criminal law. Criminal law, after all, was the third element in his vocational trinity, the other two being villainy and prison. When Lionel talked about the law (reaching for a kind of high style), Des always paid close attention. Criminal law was in any case much on his mind.

"In a nutshell, Des, in a nutshell, it's the difference between the first-aid kit and the casualty ward."

"And this Ross Knowles, Uncle Li. How long's he been in Diston General?" asked Des (referring to the worst hospital in England).

"Oy. Objection. That's prejudicial."

Panting and drooling, Jeff and Joe stared in through the glass door: brickfaced, with thuggish foreheads, and their little ears trying to point towards each other.

"Why prejudicial?"

"Hypothesis." *Hypoffesis*. "I give Ross Knowles a little tap in a fair fight, he comes out of the Hobgoblin—and walks under a truck." Truck: pronounced *truc-kuh* (with a glottal stop on the terminal plosive). "See? Prejudicial."

Des nodded. It was in fact strongly rumoured that Ross Knowles came out of the Hobgoblin on a stretcher.

"According to the Offences Against the Person Act," Lionel went on, "there's Common Assault, ABH, and G. It's decided, Des, by your level of intent and the seriousness of the injury. Offensive weapon, offensive weapon of any kind, you know, something like a beer glass—that's G. If he needs a blood transfusion—that's G. If you kick him in the bonce—that's G."

"What did you use on him, Uncle Li?"

"A beer glass."

"Did he need a blood transfusion?"

"So they say."

"And did you kick him in the bonce?"

"No. I jumped on it. In me trainers, mind ... Uh, visible disfigurement or permanent disability—that's the clincher, Des."

"And in this case, Uncle Li?"

“Well I don’t know, do I. I don’t know what sort of nick he was in before.”

“... Why d’you smash him up?”

“Didn’t like the smile on his face.” Lionel gave his laugh—a series of visceral grunts. “No, I’m not *that* thick.” (*Thic-kuh*.) “I had two reasons, Des. Ross Knowles—I heard Ross Knowles saying something about buying a banger off Jayden Drago. And he’s got the same moustache as Marlon. Ross has. So I smashed him up.”

“Hang on.” Des tried to work it out (he went in search of the sequitur). Jayden Drago, the renowned used-car salesman, was Gina Drago’s father. And Marlon, Marlon Welkway, was Lionel’s first cousin (and closest associate). “I still don’t get it.”

“Jesus. Haven’t you heard? Marlon’s pulled Gina! Yeah. Marlon’s pulled Gina ... So all that come together in me mind. And it put me in a mood.” For a while Lionel gnawed on his thumb. He looked up and said neutrally, “I’m still hoping for Common Assault. But me bri said the injuries were uh, *more consistent with Attempted Manslaughter*. So we’ll see. Are you going to school today?”

“Yeah, I thought I might look in.”

“Ah, you such a little angel. Come on.”

They refilled the water bowls. Then man and boy filed down the thirty-three floors. Lionel, as usual, went to the corner shop for his smokes and his *Morning Lark* while Des waited on the street.

“... Fruit, Uncle Li? Not like you. You don’t eat fruit.”

“Yeah I do. What you think a Pop-Tart is? Look. Nice bunch of grapes. See, I got a frier who’s uh, indisposed. Thought I’d go and cheer him up. Put this in you satchel.”

He handed over the bottle of Tabasco. Plus an apple.

“A nice Granny Smith. For you teacher.”

To evoke the London borough of Diston, we turn to the poetry of Chaos:

*Each thing hostile*

*To every other thing: at every point*

*Hot fought cold, moist dry, soft hard, and the weightless*

*Resisted weight.*

So Des lived his life in tunnels. The tunnel from flat to school, the tunnel (not the same tunnel) from school to flat. And all the warrens that took him to Grace, and brought him back again. He lived his life in tunnels ... And yet for the sensitive soul, in Diston Town, there was really only one place to look. Where did the eyes go? They went up, up.

School—Squeers Free, under a sky of white: the weakling headmaster, the demoralised chalkies in their rayon tracksuits, the ramshackle little gym with its tripwires and boob traps, the Lifestyle Consultants (Every Child Matters), and the Special Needs Coordinator (who dealt with all the “non-readers”). In addition, Squeers Free set the standard for the most police call-outs, the least GCSE passes, and the highest truancy rates. It also led the pack in suspensions, expulsions, and PRU “offrolls”; such an offroll—a transfer to a Pupil Referral Unit—was usually the doorway to a Youth Custody Centre and then a Young Offender

Institution. Lionel, who had followed this route, always spoke of his five and a half years (on and off) in a Young Offender Institution (or *Yoi*, as he called it) with rueful fondness, like one recalling a rite of passage—inevitable, bittersweet. *I was out for a month*, he would typically reminisce. *Then I was back up north. Doing me Yoi.*

On the other hand, Squeers Free had in its staff room an exceptional Learning Mentor—a Mr Vincent Tigg.

*What's going on with you, Desmond? You were always an idle little sod. Now you can't get enough of it. Well, what next?*

*I fancy modern languages, sir. And history. And sociology. And astronomy. And—*

*You can't study everything, you know.*

*Yes I can. Renaissance boy, innit.*

*... You want to watch that smile, lad. All right. We'll see about you. Now off you go.*

And in the schoolyard? On the face of it, Des was a prime candidate for persecution. He seldom bunked off, he never slept in class, he didn't assault the teachers or shoot up in the toilets—and he preferred the company of the gentler sex (the gentler sex, at Squeers Free being quite rough enough). So in the normal course of things Des would have been savagely bullied, as all the other misfits (swats, wimps, four-eyes, sweating fatties) were savagely bullied—to the brink of suicide and beyond. They called him Skiprope and Hopscotch, but Des wasn't bullied. How to explain this? To use Uncle Ringo's favourite expression, it was *no-brainer*. Desmond Pepperdine was inviolable. He was the nephew, and ward, of Lionel Asbo.

It was different on the street. Once a term, true, Lionel escorted him to Squeers Free, and escorted him back again the same day (restraining, with exaggerated difficulty, the two frothing pitbulls on their thick steel chains). But it would be foolish to suppose that each and every gangbanger and posse-artist (and every Yardie and jihadi) in the entire manor had heard tell of the great asocial. And it was different at night, because different people of different shapes, levered themselves upward after dark ... Des was fleet of foot, but he was otherwise unsuited to life in Diston Town. Second or even first nature to Lionel (who was pronounced "uncontrollable" at the age of eighteen months), violence was alien to Des, who always felt that violence—extreme and ubiquitous though it certainly seemed to be—came from another dimension.

So, this day, he went down the tunnel and attended school. But on his way home he fainted sideways and took a detour. With hesitation, and with deafening self-consciousness, he entered the Public Library on Blimber Road. Squeers Free had a library, of course, a distant Portakabin with a few primers and ripped paperbacks scattered across its floor ... But this rank upon rank of proud-chested bookcases, like lavishly decorated generals. By what right could you claim any share of it? He entered the Reading Room, where the newspapers were firmly clamped to long wooden struts, were apparently available for scrutiny. No one stopped him as he approached.

He had of course *seen* the dailies before, in the corner shop and so on, and there were Gran's *Telegraphs*, but his experience of actual newsprint was confined to the *Morning Lar*

that Lionel left around the flat, all scrumpled up, like origami tumbleweeds (there was also the occasional *Diston Gazette*). Respectfully averting his eyes from the *Times*, the *Independent* and the *Guardian*, Des reached for the *Sun*, which at least *looked* like a *Lark*, with its crimson logo and the footballer's fiancée on the cover staggering out of a nightclub with blood running down her neck. And, sure enough, on page three (News in Briefs) there was a hefty redheaded redhead wearing knickers and a sombrero.

But then all resemblances ceased. You got scandal and gossip, and more girls, but also international news, parliamentary reports, comment, analysis ... Until now he had accepted the *Morning Lark* as an accurate reflection of reality. Indeed, he sometimes thought it was a local paper (a light-hearted adjunct to the *Gazette*), such was its fidelity to the customs and mores of his borough. Now, though, as he stood there with the *Sun* quivering in his hands, the *Lark* stood revealed for what it was—a daily lads' mag, perfunctorily posing as a journal of record.

The *Sun*, additionally to recommend it, had an agony column presided over not by the feckless Jennaveieve, but by a wise-looking old dear called Daphne, who dealt sympathetically, that day, with a number of quite serious problems and dilemmas, and suggested leaflets and helplines, and seemed genuinely ...

“Dear Daphne,” whispered Desmond.

## 5

Turn the clock back to January and the eve of his fifteenth birthday.

Uncle Lionel was out on the balcony, chivvying the dogs. Des, in a white apron (at the time he had done no wrong and knew no guile), was washing up.

*Come out here, Des. Forget you housework ... Listen. You forbidden to go to school tomorrow.*

*Why's this, Uncle Li?*

*Tell you in the morning ... Des. Girls. Have you done it? No, don't answer. I don't want to know. Look at you in you white pinny. Fourteen.*

Des was woken by a gust of cigarette smoke. He squinted up with his unfallen eyes. Lionel, in a black mesh T-shirt, boded over him.

*Shove up, he said, and sat. Okay. You a young man now. You fifteen. And an orphan. So you got to listen to you Uncle Li.*

*Yeah. Course.*

*Right. From this day forth, son, you can borrow me Mac. When I'm out.*

Smiling, Des said thanks, and he meant it. He also had that familiar sense of Lionel as a kind of anti-dad or counterfather.

*But listen.* Lionel raised a stubby forefinger. *It's not just for messing around with. I want you concentrate you efforts.*

*On what?*

*Porn.*

In common with every other Distonite old enough to walk, Des knew about the existence

of pornography on the Web. He had never gone looking for it. *Porn, Uncle Li?*

*Porn. You see, Des, this is it. You don't actually need girls. Girls? They more trouble than the worth if you ask me. With the Mac, you can have three new bunk-ups every day—just by using your imagination! And it doesn't cost you fuck all. Okay. Lecture over. So endeth the first lesson. Just promise you'll ponder me words. And here's an extra fiver for yuh.*

Lionel got to his feet. He grinned (a rare occurrence) and said,

*Go on, fill you boots ... When I come back tonight, you'll be holding a white stick. In you hair, palm. His grin deepened. I just hope Jeff and Joe hit it off with you guide dog. And here's at Fucked-up Facials. Start you off on the right foot. Well, son. Happy birthday. I'm glad we had the talk. It's cleared the air.*

Des did, in fact, have a quick look at *Fucked-up Facials*. And the site, he found, was accurate, so called: he had never seen anything half so fucked-up in all his life. After gaping his way through thirty seconds of that, he clicked on History. There was no doubt about it. The pornography Lionel watched was in highly questionable taste. So for an hour Des randomly surfed, or foundered, in the Pacific of filth. This surfing or foundering, he realised with a kind of terror, was a way of finding out who you were, sexually, by finding out what you liked—whether you liked what you liked or not.

And what did he like, Des Pepperdine? Well, his soul instantly and reassuringly recoiled from anything weird. Or anything rough. In churning and interminable close-up, even straightforward copulation looked horrific (this is what happens, he suddenly thought, when a zoo rapes an aquarium). And all these stripped blokes, with biker or convict faces, and the third-degree tattoos ... The lez stuff was okay, but what he liked, it turned out, was this: a pretty girl acting alone, slowly undressing (it was never slowly enough), and indulging perhaps, in a discreet self-caress—with the lighting all misty and vague. Practical everything else seemed gladiatorial. I'm a romantic! he thought. I knew it ... And after a pensive interlude, under the auspices of *Strictly Solo Tease* and more particularly a wandlike blonde called Cadence Meadowbrook, Des put the Web aside, reached for the Cloud, and started learning about calligraphy.

The Cloud, the Web: it was the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge—the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It was the modern Fall. And there was no going back.

*You're doing that funny face again,* he said during his next session with Alektra.

*What funny face?*

*Like you're looking in a mirror. Or at a camera ... Ow. That hurts.*

Chanel was the same—and Joslinne, and Jade. What did you expect? They had started learning about the birds and the bees (in high definition) when they were three.

*... Why're you always spitting and saying how nasty you are?*

*Boys expect it.*

He said, *Not me. You see, love, I'm a romantic. It's just the way I'm made.*

And it was all so very different with Grace.

That first time, when she was giving him the funny looks, he was paralysed by the unreality of it all, what with the Dubonnets—and then the babydoll! *Come over her*

*handsome, and give us a cuddle.* This was the unalterable premise: he couldn't hurt her, he couldn't spurn her, it wasn't in him, it wasn't the way he was made. So he walked across the room. And what a long walk that was—fifteen feet, across the granny flat, from grace to Grace. He walked across the room because of the clear impossibility of doing otherwise, and entered the heedless world of the deaf. Then he lay back and succumbed to an experiment—an experiment in gentleness. And the texture of her flesh to the touch, with that strange give in it, and the depth of all that lived life, now brought languidly to bear on him and his body.

*Oh, you're so beautiful, Desi my dearest. It hurts my heart you're so beautiful.*

And his heart, in its turn, flared up on him, like an inner climax running through his chest to his throat. He kissed her neck. She touched his brow. On the table was a jar of strawberry jam with a spoon in it. The stereo, with its tiny but furious red eye, was playing "If I Fell."

That was in March, and now it was April. It was April, with its drip drip drip ...

"Des, there's something I never told you."

They were getting dressed. It was all behind them for the moment—the soundproofed laboratory of sin.

"What's that, Gran? Sorry. What's that, Grace?"

"Remember—remember when I used to have gentlemen friends? Remember Toby?"

"Toby. I remember. And Kevin."

"And Kevin. Guess why I stopped."

"Why?"

"Because of Lionel ... Remember the summer your grandad died?"

Dominic Oldman was out fishing with his boy Mark (the one child of his twelve-year marriage to a pharmacist named Eileen). And suddenly nature became too big and too loud, and Mark slipped down the bank and into the headstrong River Avon, and Dominic went after him. Only Mark came back—only Mark came back from under the thick nets of the mists.

"They let Lionel out of Yoi for the cremation. You were there, Des. After it was over, he sees me home, he comes in here, and he takes the Bible down from the shelf. And he jams his hand on it and makes me swear. *No more of your bleeding geezers, Mum*, he says. *No more of your nonsense, woman. You're past it anyway. It's all over.*"

Des pictured himself—that day in Golders Green, wearing white shirt, blue tie, black long trousers. He was ten. Gran would have been thirty-four.

"And he scared me. He really did." She held her wrist and rotated it. "Time goes by and Toby pops in for a cup of tea. He's been here half an hour and the doorbell rings. Lionel. He drags poor Toby out by his hair and gives him a right mauling there on the steps. For a cup of tea! Ooh. Mean Mr. Mustard. See, he's got *spies* ... Don't look so stricken, Des! It's all right with you—you're in and out all the time anyway. And I'm your gran."

She gave her strange new spiralling laugh, reached for the crossword, and sat down with a bounce on the window-side armchair.

"Eight letters ... It's an anagram. Got it. *Features.*"

"Yeah? What's the clue?"

"Mug smashed after use."



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