



*An extract from
Conan Kennedy's*

The Colour of Her Eyes

Prologue

Mum and Dad brought him to Bognor in the summer. Not every weekend, but maybe once or twice a month. He was five, or six. They lived in Horsham then. Dad worked in a shoeshop. They didn't have a car, but got one later when Dad became a manager, in a shoeshop.

They went to Bognor on the bus. It was so exciting. Those buses were green and cream, Southdown Motor Company. The number sixty nine, that was the bus, Horsham to Bognor. It was quite a long journey really. Horsham to Pulborough and through Petworth and Midhurst, places like that. And Arundel. Mum always pointed out the castle there. Then they went through Ford. Dad always pointed out the prison. And said that's where you'll end up, if you're a bold boy. And Mum said don't pay any attention to your Dad, he's only joking.

It was quite a long journey, but worth every minute. They had such a good time in Bognor. It was disappointing when they didn't go. Some summer weekends they just stayed at home in Horsham. Or maybe went off somewhere else, for a trip. And sometimes on those weekends he saw a Southdown bus on the streets. There weren't that many. Most of the buses around Horsham in those days were from other companies, and there were London buses too. But when he saw the green and cream Southdown bus, the number sixty nine, and when they weren't going away on it, he got quite upset. And Mum would say, we'll go next week.

Sometimes they did, go next week, sometimes they didn't. But when they did it was always the same, always exciting. Which was strange, that it was exciting, because they always did the same things. One weekend was much the same as the next. They would

walk through the town from the bus station. That was in the High Street then. It's gone now. Down past the bowling green, where Dad would always say to Mum well we must give that a try some day. And she would laugh, but the child didn't know why, and she'd say I'll wait until I'm a little older. And Mum and Dad would laugh together, and he would put his arm around her shoulder.

They'd walk down the pier, and Mum would say stay away from the edge, John. And Dad would read rude postcards at the stalls. And he'd show some of them to Mum, and they'd both laugh together, and look at each other, something mysterious in their faces. They were very young then. He was the only child, and they didn't have much money. They never had any more children. After the pier they'd walk along the esplanade, towards Felpham. And they always stopped at a particular place. Mum called it our place. They'd sit in deckchairs and a man would come along with a ticket machine to collect money. And Mum would have brought sandwiches, and biscuits. And in those days you could buy a pot of tea at stalls.

He'd play on the beach. There was always other children, and they all played together. And sometimes Dad would stroll down to the edge of the water, and throw stones into the sea. And he would run over to him, and throw stones too. And Dad showed him how to skim stones, so they'd hop across the water. But he wasn't really strong enough for that. He was only five, or six or seven. So he just had to content himself with throwing stones out onto the water, and watching the ripples that they made. And then that was it, more or less. They'd pack up their things, and walk back to the bus station. Past the pier and past the crazy golf and past the bowling green. The players there looked like snowmen to him, in their whites, ghostly snowmen in the gloom of the evening, moving slowly.

Back at the bus station they'd get on the bus. Green and cream, Southdown Motor Services. Back to Horsham, through Midhurst, Petworth, and places like that. It was sometimes quite dark when they got home. He'd lie in bed, listening to Mum and Dad, making

love in the next room. He didn't know they were making love, too young to know. He just knew that they sounded happy. Mum was giggling. And as he listened he'd see in his mind the sea at Bognor. And the ripples from the stones he had thrown into the water. And he'd think of the ripples, going far away forever. To Australia even.

Mum never got old enough to play bowls in Bognor. She died at thirty two. Pulmonary embolism. It was very sudden. Life changed a lot, then, in Horsham. They never went to Bognor anymore. It wouldn't have been the same. He grew up. He went to Sussex University and then teacher training college in London. From there one particular saturday he went to Victoria Station, and took the train to Bognor. Just for the afternoon. On the journey he saw that station sign for Ford. And remembered Dad saying to him he'd end up there if he was a bold boy. Ford Prison. He didn't see Arundel Castle, maybe he was on the wrong side of the train. When he got to Bognor he walked from the station down to the esplanade. Past the bowling green where Mum never got to play. And then down onto the beach. He walked along to the place that Mum used call our place. And he sat in a deckchair there, watching.

When he got bored with watching he went down to the shoreline and threw stones. And watched the ripples on the water. He imagined Mum and Dad sitting up there in deckchairs, watching him. But when he looked around there was just empty deckchairs flapping in the breeze. Mum was dead and Dad was too, by then. He'd never really been the same. Alcoholism.

He walked back to the station. It was early for the train. He went into the pub there in Station Road. There was a bunch of guys and girls there that he knew. He'd known them at Sussex University. They were going back to London. And there was other students with them that he didn't know. They all went back together to London. On the train he found himself sitting beside a Belgian girl, one of the students he hadn't known before. She was very pretty. Her name was Yvette De Donnea. He married her.

One

SUSSEX POLICE. ARUN DISTRICT. BOGNOR SOUTH.

TRANSCRIPT.

11.15. 20 March

DI HARRIS - John Stanley Dexter

“Yes, she was a pretty girl, if I remember rightly.”

“What does that mean, if you remember? She was either pretty, or she wasn’t.”

“It’s an expression.”

“I don’t need expressions. I need to know. Anyway, it doesn’t strike me as being an expression. Strikes me as being an evasion.”

“You reckon?”

“Yeah I reckon. Strikes me as you saying you don’t really want to admit she was pretty. Or that you found her pretty.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Hey. We have a system here. It goes like this. I ask a question. You answer.”

“Ask away.”

“So, you tell me, why would you not want to admit? That she was pretty?”

“I don’t know...why I would do that. There’s no reason.”

“There’s a reason for everything.”

“I disagree.”

“I know you do, you believe in chance. Or let’s put it this way, you say you believe in chance. Coincidences.”

“I prefer to call them correspondences. Parallel sort of things, happening.”

“Call them what you fucking well like. I’m not going into that psychic

crap. Just answer the fucking question. Was she pretty?"

"I suppose so."

"You suppose? If you remember rightly?"

"OK, she was pretty."

"She was pretty. Jesus how long is this going to take."

"Takes as long as it takes, I suppose."

"I wasn't asking you. It was just..."

"An expression?"

"Don't fuck around with me John. What was she wearing?"

"When?"

"What do you mean when, when when when, what are we talking about here?"

"A dance. A school dance. A disco. She was wearing what you'd wear at a dance."

"I wouldn't wear what she was wearing. I'm not a fourteen year old girl."

"You're kidding? You had me there for a minute."

"What was she wearing?"

"I told you, she was wearing what a girl would wear, dancing, clubbing."

"You didn't, you told me she was wearing what I, me, a Sussex copper, what I would wear at a dance."

"I meant what one would wear at a dance. One."

"Enough of the fucking English grammar lesson, you're not a schoolteacher. Anymore."

"Once a teacher, always a teacher."

"Once a fucking evasive bastard, always a fucking evasive bastard. Look John, the point is. The reason we're sitting here. You were a schoolteacher then, at that disco. So, tell me, what was she wearing?"

"A skirt."

"No top? Like some kind of south sea maiden?"

"Of course she was wearing a top. I just started by mentioning the skirt."

“Why?”

“Probably because they usually wear jeans.”

“Who, who usually wear jeans?”

“Girls, teenagers.”

“You spend a lot of time looking at teenage girls?”

“I was a teacher, didn’t have much choice.”

“I didn’t say spent, I said spend. The present tense. I said you spend a lot of time looking at teenage girls. It was a question.”

“No more than most, men, I suppose.”

“So you’re just an average sort of creep, rather than a special one. Jesus. Anyway. This skirt. What sort of skirt?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like was it a dress kind of skirt, sort of flowing skirt, to the ankles, or a little short job?”

“Short.”

“Why didn’t you say that? Why didn’t you say she was wearing a short skirt?”

“I hadn’t got to the detail.”

“Yeah, right. This whole conversation has the same problem. Nice legs?”

“Nice legs?”

“Yes, that’s what I said, that’s what I asked. I’ll ask again. Did the girl, the pretty girl, the pretty fourteen year old girl, did she have nice legs?”

“Unusual.”

“What do you mean? Like she’d no knees or something?”

“Unusual just to have legs, or to see legs, because ordinarily these kids would wear jeans.”

“So the legs came as a surprise?”

“You could put it like that.”

“I am putting it like that. You’re telling me...let’s get this precise...you didn’t expect this girl to have legs. So what the fuck do you think they all have under their jeans? Sticks?”

"It was just a bit of a shock."

"Good legs, huh? Nice thighs? You a leg or a tit man?"

"I don't know, really."

"I think you're a leg man."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because you didn't mention her top. The top she was wearing."

"I hadn't got round to that."

"It's where you start that counts. I know what she was wearing on top."

"Do you? How?"

"Two reasons really. One I'm a detective inspector of police, I know what's going on. In society. With teenagers. All that. "

"And the other reason?"

"I'm a tit man. And I'm telling you she was wearing a skimpy little top with her tits poking out one end and her belly the other. Am I right?"

"Not quite."

"Where did I go wrong?"

"Well in those days you wouldn't see their stomach. It wasn't the fashion."

"OK, you're the expert. On underage girls. I'm only the amateur here. But I bet I'm half right. I bet her tits were falling out of the top."

"It was pretty low cut, yes."

"You in the fashion business, the rag trade?"

"You know I'm not."

"Well stop saying things like it was pretty low cut. What we both mean is her fucking tits were falling out of her fucking top. Am I right?"

"OK, you're right."

"Good. Now. So what do we have here. This little teenage poppet. Tits all over the shop. With nice thighs."

"I didn't say that. Didn't say anything about thighs."

"No you didn't, but you said she was wearing a skirt."

"That is not the same thing."

"Did she not have nice thighs?"

“Well I suppose all young girls have nice thighs.”

“Do you? Do you suppose that?”

“Well you know what I mean.”

“No I don’t. Don’t tell me I know what you mean. Tell me what you mean. Hey, by the way, what colour were her eyes?”

“Green.”

“So you remember that, immediately. Kind of vague about her legs, her tits, but you remember her eyes. Now why is that?”

“You tell me.”

“I’m going to think about that John, think about it.”

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The green eyed girl came over to help.

Or did she, John Dexter wondered, did she really come to help?

Was that the reason he found her, standing there, hovering about?

Or was that just an accident, an accident of timing, of when she came and when he came?

Was she in fact part of the group, the gang that had caused the damage?

Could be. That bunch had scattered pretty sharpish, seeing him coming. Disappeared into the mob of dancers. And did this girl just happen to be left behind? Was she someone who hadn’t been quite quick enough to merge back into the crowd?

Suspicious, thinking like that. Yep, he admitted it to himself, it’s happened. Happened already. I’m asking myself those questions, suspicious questions. Six months teaching and already he hated the little fuckers. Oh ok, put it a bit more diplomatically, he just didn’t trust teenagers.

Because he was close enough to them in age? Only about five or six years since he’d been one himself. Yes maybe that was the reason, the reason he didn’t trust them. But whatever. The reasons

weren't important. The facts were. Here in the school now he felt geriatric. And only six months in, if that. Six months in to a career. What a word, career. Something death row about the sound of it.

John Dexter sighed, and sighed. Grim view of the world, dim view of the pupils. God knows what his opinion would be by retirement.

Retirement?

Another bad word. It sort of rhymed with pension. And mortgage. Not to mention disappointment.

"Ok, ok, ok. We better get this cleaned up," he said to her, looking at the rubble on the floor.

"What a mess," she said.

"What's your name?"

"Moonshine," she replied.

"Your name is not Moonshine," he said, dropping a tired pause into the spaces between each word. And I don't care what the name is, he thought, he just felt tired. Extremely tired. And tiredly he started kicking bits of the rubble into a heap with the side of his foot.

She looked at him. "Your name is Mr Dexter, innit?"

"How do you know?"

"Some of the girls fancy you."

"Well, that's nice. Better that than some of the boys," he added. Though, looking around at some of the girls, he wondered.

She laughed, but not much. And then she started kicking at the stuff from the other direction. He watched her feet, down there in those high heeled sandals. Nice feet, he thought. If this was a dream I could kiss her feet and lick her toes. But this was Walthamstow. And this was not a dream.

They don't do dreams in Walthamstow. But there again, she had a nice laugh. OK she looked rough, very rough. But then, why shouldn't rough looking girls have nice laughs? No reason. And why the hell shouldn't they have nice feet? Very nice feet. Her toenails were varnished scarlet. And was that a real tattoo on her ankle, or

one of those stick on efforts?

No matter.

I am not going to kiss her feet and lick her toes, he realised. Because the more he looked at her, the more she seemed to be very young. And the older he felt. And the less interested. And even her real name, he couldn't be arsed, he just couldn't be bothered. He was tired. It was late. He was too fucking old to be at a teenagers' disco. But it was work. A teacher's work. Mr Girdlestone the Head had laid it on the line.

"Important to bond with the young people, John."

"I completely agree," Dexter had said.

Little choice. A few months into the job and his role was to completely agree. But bond? Bond my arse he thought, there was no bonding with this lot. They were different. Probably mutants. Brain dead from computer games. And those food additives in ready meals, none of that could have helped. Bond? Yeah right. Not hard to notice that Mr Girdlestone himself was not in the hall, no sign of him bonding with the young people. No chance. Hiding in his office, no doubt. Notorious for hiding in his office, Mr Girdlestone spent his days writing poetry, or so the teachers laughed. Very bad poetry. A very bad poet, at the head of a very bad school.

Bloody Walthamstow, Dexter thought, bloody Walthamstow. And this bloody girl. What the hell did it matter what her name was? Nothing. He shrugged. No point in arguing the toss. Let her be Moonshine. Snowflake. Marge Simpson. It didn't matter. He didn't have to know. He'd never even seen her before. And might not ever again. She definitely wasn't in any of his classes, would have remembered her. And if he did ever need to know her real name, he'd find out. Right now there was more immediate things. Suddenly he saw his thinking glinting in some mirror of the mind. And that made him grin to himself. Like there was a joke going around.

"What you grinning at?" the girl said.

“Nothing, nothing,” he said quickly, stopping grinning. No it wasn’t that amusing. And it was terrible really how a teacher gets into this frame of mind so damn quickly. So bloody negative. Come to work. Do what’s now. Try to keep a lid on most stuff. Go home.

“You’re mocking me, taking the piss, that grin.”

“I am not,” and he was nearly going to add “do you know what the word paranoid means,” but she wouldn’t, she wouldn’t know. So he held his peace, and just continued sliding the rubble into a pile with the side of his foot, watching his shoe, and how it was getting dirty, dusty.

Those were his black leather shoes, his only black leather shoes. And, in fact, the only pair of black leather shoes on a male in this entire school hall. Oh yes, he’d noticed that, earlier. The kids wore canvas trainers, or plastic or whatever they were. With logos. And the other male teachers on duty had dressed down to that standard. Yes he knew that older men teachers tend to do that, as if deliberately setting out to look ridiculous. But even Karl Evans over there, the same age as himself, even he was dressed like one of the pupils. Not that that surprised him.. Dexter had been to College with Karl Evans, and knew that he had an instinct for these things. Tended to fit in, automatically. Maybe next disco he himself would do the same, wear trainers. Now that he knew the form. Best always to feel one’s way into these things. Err on the side of caution.

John Dexter was a fairly cautious sort of person.

He kicked at the mess. It wasn’t really rubble on the floor, couldn’t be described as that. It was just the remains of a large ceramic plant pot which had toppled from its stand. Or, perhaps more precisely, a pot which had been toppled...yes, had, been, toppled, from its stand. It now lay smashed, and scattered in a spill of earth or compost across the floor. The plant itself lay there too, its roots freed from the soil. Reminded him somehow of a dead fish, washed up out of its element.

“What we need is a brush,” he said to the girl, “a brush and pan.”

No, he didn't say, he shouted at the girl. The noise was horrendous.

"Pan?" she looked at him.

That's when he really noticed the green eyes.

What extraordinary eyes, he thought. But then he thought of something else, something awful. God, this girl doesn't know what a pan is. It's meltdown. Social collapse. In another generation they won't know what a brush is for.

"The thing that goes with the brush," he explained, astonished, "for sweeping up. Little flat thing."

"Oh yeah," she said, "Gran has one of them."

Good for Gran, he thought. "Tell you what," he said, "there'll be brushes and so on in the cleaners' cupboard in the corridor. Would you go like a good girl and get them."

"I'll go," she said, and paused. "Like a good girl."

That's when he noticed her grin.

"And get a bucket, to put all this stuff into." He kicked the rubble together a little more, as if to demonstrate what he needed the bucket for. "I'll stay here and stop kids kicking it all over the place."

"As if they would," she said, and left.

He watched her, going. Skinny? No. Not skinny. Slender was the more appropriate word. A skinny young girl becomes slender. It's a tipping point, that. One day skinny, next day slender. Go to bed skinny, wake up slender. Mysterious. But not half as mysterious as how do they walk on those ridiculous high heels? And is she deliberately wagging her arse like that? Do they make a decision to waggle their arse? Or is it just nature's mysterious way, like going to bed skinny and waking up slender?

Oh Christ, what the fuck does it matter.

Wondering and thinking about all this stuff achieves nothing, Dexter decided. Except to mark me out as even more of an old fogey. He turned away from watching and just stood there, guarding his

pile of rubble in its little heap. Wished he was at home, really. Or down the pub. The launderette? Even.

The noise here was, yes, horrendous. In strict legal terms, he imagined, teachers on supervision duty should have been issued with ear muffs, like blokes on building sites operating pneumatic drills. The noise here was just as bad. Alright for the kids, they were immune to it anyway, half deaf already from music wired into their ears, but it was definitely a threat to teachers' health. Twenty years time and my hearing is shot, well then someone will be hearing from my solicitors.

Twenty years time. He sighed, picking the words out of the thought.

Twenty years of this?

The return of the green eyed girl put a stop to that line of thought.

Yes, she had found a brush, and a bucket, and a pan, even if she didn't quite know the purpose of the last item. He showed her how, how it worked, and it was like demonstrating some amazing new piece of technology. Between them order was restored to their little spot of floor. The bucket was full.

"What will I do with the plant," he wondered aloud, holding it and looking at her.

Something in her eyes made him immediately sorry he had spoken. He waited for it. It came.

"You could stick it up the headmaster's arse," she said.

"Now," he raised a schoolteachery hand, he paused. Then added, "let's have none of that."

"Now Moonshine," she said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said now, to give out to me, and then you were going to say my name, but you hesitated, 'cos you didn't know it. So you just did without it."

She was right.

“Very observant of you.”

“Moonshine,” she corrected.

“Sorry?”

“Very observant of you, Moonshine, that’s what you should say.”

“I’m not going to get involved in that nonsense. If you want to tell me your real name you will, if you don’t, please yourself. Why don’t you get back to your friends, to the dance...or whatever that jumping around is...I’ll look after the bucket.”

“And the plant?” she grinned, making a shoving-up-arse gesture with her arm.

“Yes,” he sighed, suddenly even more tired, realising he wanted to be at home doing old fogey stuff, listening to Dvorak or watching Mastermind. Even watching a blank screen. Or down the pub. Or, yes, down at the launderette. Anywhere. “Yes, I’ll look after everything.”

“I can’t go back to my friends. I don’t have any friends, and they’re all off their heads anyway.”

“You’ve been drinking too, haven’t you?”

“A little vodka.”

“That’s just awful. You know, I had my first beer when I was eighteen.”

“Yes but you’re an old fella. You grew up in history.”

“I am twenty five.”

“That’s fucking ancient.”

“On the contrary, that is very young. Which makes you extremely young indeed. Particularly to be drinking vodka.”

“You could report me. But then you’d have to report the whole fucking school.”

“You know, you really should moderate your language, it’s very unladylike.”

“I’m not a lady,” she retorted, in a new tone, suddenly a rather cold and crisp manner. He noticed that, the chilliness. And wondered vaguely why. Why had she clicked from one mood to another, as

if by a switch? He looked at her, carefully. And she looked back, everything about her saying yeah, so what?

“Drink and language,” he said, shaking his head, “it’s just up to you. You have to learn to self discipline yourself.” He looked away. Something about those weird eyes were slightly intimidating. Also her low cut top. His eyes would tend to drift down there. Nature’s way, and that. And he knew she’d notice, and wait for it, and mock him in some way. That’d give her some advantage, if she saw him looking down her front. “Self discipline,” he continued, looking away from her and towards the dancers, “it’s up to you. At your age. It’s no good teachers and principals trying to lay down the law. It’s a personal responsibility.”

“Oh God shut up I don’t need a lecture.”

“You mustn’t tell teachers to shut up. It’s quite disrespectful. It doesn’t affect the teacher, but it does reflect badly on yourself.”

“Just bleeding fucking shut up then,” she screeched suddenly, and then was quiet, equally suddenly. This kid is off her head, he realised. He looked around, grateful just in that moment that the noise was so bad, no-one else seemed to have heard the outburst.

“You’re upset,” he said, reaching out his hand, to touch her on the elbow, that sort of gesture. But the hand he reached out held the plant, and he stopped his arm, just there.

“You’re giving me the plant?”

“No, I was going to...”

“Touch me.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “Just on the elbow,” he added quickly. “But.” He waved the plant, and smiled. “And,” he swayed the bucket in his other hand. “Just don’t have any hands available.”

“You could put that stuff down. And touch me.” Her mood had shifted from screeching harridan to flirtatious. This is not a girl, he told himself. This is a little chemical time bomb standing here in front of me, waiting to go off.

“The moment has passed,” he said, looking coolly at her. Like

he might look at a grown up woman of his own age. Look here, he told himself, there's no point in treating these kids as children. Particularly when they're on drugs. Deal with them on their own level. They hate that, usually.

"The moment? For touching me?"

"You're not upset anymore." He didn't like the way the conversation was going.

"Do you only touch women when they're upset?"

"You are not a woman," he started to say, realising that he liked even less the way the conversation was going.

"Oh," she said, doing something with her shoulders that affected the lie of her breasts. Something far from subtle with her shoulders.

"No, you are not." Time for firmness, he told himself. I am the boss in this situation. "Look," he raised his hand to emphasise. Though the wilting plant he held didn't really help the moment. "Look, you are a schoolchild, you are drunk, and more than that, I suspect. On something. And I am a teacher and I'm telling you, you should really go home."

"We could go up on the balcony," she said.

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SUSSEX POLICE. ARUN DISTRICT. BOGNOR SOUTH.

TRANSCRIPT.

14.15. 20 March

DI HARRIS - John Stanley Dexter

"Well here we go again. Nice lunch?"

"So so."

"Good. Now. Let's talk about that balcony John."

"Balcony?"

"Balcony."

"OK. The school hall, it had a balcony around the edges. On three

sides.”

“Only three?”

“One end of the hall was the stage.”

“What was the balcony for?”

“Watching plays and so on. Also the lights for the stage, the spotlights and equipment and that, they were up there.”

“Watching plays?”

“Yes but the school didn’t use it for that anymore. Just had become a discipline problem. Kids up there would be out of sight. Smoking. Up to god knows what.”

“What did you think, when she said the two of you could go up on the balcony.”

“Well what would you think?”

“I would think she was making a pass at me.”

“That’s what I thought too. But we’re trained to expect that. From young teenage girls. They test out their sexuality on teachers.”

“You’re trained?”

“To deflect inappropriate behaviour. Without of course damaging the girls’ self esteem.”

“Of course. Naturally. Right. Get you. Though that’s all psychological mumbo jumbo politically correct crap, isn’t it?”

“Well it can be a very difficult area.”

“Difficult. Um. Young girl. Short skirt. Nice thighs. Wants to put it about a bit. How difficult is that?”

“I didn’t say she had nice thighs.”

“Listen. She had nice thighs. Face facts. Nice thighs leading all the way up to a nice little arse. And nice little breasts up on top. Cherries on the cake. You didn’t mention them’.

“I didn’t mention her thighs either.”

“I don’t listen to words.”

“So why ask questions?”

“To get answers. Answers don’t come in words, mate. They come in silence. In between the words.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Dumb policemen are taught stuff like that. You might say we were trained. Just like brilliant schoolteachers are trained. To stop young girls taking their knickers off.”

“Whatever.”

“Or are the teachers trained to stop themselves, to stop themselves taking their pupils’ knickers off?”

“It’s a balanced approach. Training recognises the potential for inappropriate behaviour on all sides of the equation.”

“Does it indeed. So let’s put that in English. It says keep your dirty mitts off the young girls, or you’ll end up in front of fuckers like me, thick cops who’ll give you a hard time?”

“I don’t think you’re thick.”

“Well, there’s one thing we agree on. So. Here we have it. Young teacher. Young wife at home. Young girl on balcony. Quick shag. I understand these things.”

“You don’t. And I didn’t have a wife, then. Yvette was in Belgium.”

“What was she doing in Belgium?”

“Getting things ready. For the wedding.”

“Getting things ready? For the wedding? In Belgium? And you’re shagging this underage girl in Walthamstow? Oh John. John John John.”

“I wasn’t.”

“So you say. But anyway. Tell me more... about this balcony.”

“It’s just sort of, up there. Like a mezzanine.”

“A mezzanine?”

“Between the floor of the hall, and the roof. A sort of extra floor.”

“I know what a fucking mezzanine is. I want to know about the balcony. Like how do you get there?”

“Up a stairs. Two stairs actually. Two ways up.”

“Where are these stairs?”

“Where?”

“Like where do they start from?”

“One is from the corridor. Outside the hall.”

“And the other?”

“From outside the building altogether. That’s an escape route really. Fire regulations.”

“So you can’t go up that?”

“Well you can, but you can’t get in.”

“Can’t get in?”

“There’s one of those escape bars, inside, so you can only open the doors from inside.”

“Though if someone had propped it open.”

“Well then you could get in.”

“And this other stairs, from the corridor?”

“What about them?”

“Someone could go out into the corridor. Or, some people, like say two people, or more precisely two people sneaking off for an illicit rendezvous...”

“An illicit rendezvous?”

“Yeah, I like the phrase, glad you appreciate.”

“But a rendezvous is a place you meet. Two people wouldn’t go together to it. Unless they were meeting someone else. They’d go separately. To the rendezvous. If there was only two of them.”

“I’ll remember that. When I’m doing my fucking A levels English.”

“It’s French. Rendezvous. Anyway they wouldn’t ask you questions like that. Grammar is a dead duck.”

“Got you. Dead ducks. Thing is, John, I tend to worry more about dead people than dead ducks. It’s my area, of expertise, so to speak. So. Moving right along. You’re telling me, you can sneak out of this hall, into the corridor, and up a stairs to the balcony.”

“I didn’t say anything of the sort.”

“You can sneak out, and up to the balcony, unseen by the people in the hall, right?”

“Yes you could, but I didn’t say you could.”

“If you wanted to, you could. Did you want to?”

“Want to what?”

“Go up on the balcony with the girl.”

“Didn’t cross my mind.”

“You mad, or gay, or both?”

“It wasn’t appropriate.”

“Appropriate. You mean some old fuckers or some old biddys wrote it down in a book, an instructional manual for young teachers.”

“Well it would be general...sort of policy...accepted in our culture. And particularly in schools. It’s really quite a betrayal. Of the kids.”

“But it’s general policy of your balls to be heading towards young women. Human nature.”

“But that’s what civilisation is all about, taking human nature, adapting it to life, so to speak. Social mores. Without discipline and values what would we have?”

“We’d have modern England, wouldn’t we? Lookit, I’m not going in this direction. Social mores my arse. I’m too old for philosophy. Any conversation with social mores in it has gone too far.”

“You brought it up.”

“Did I? OK. My fault. So. So you went up on the balcony with the girl?”

“I didn’t say that.”

*

“The balcony?” he asked her, “why should we go up there?”

She shrugged. A one shoulder shrug. A peculiar sort of shrug, perhaps more like a twitch than a shrug. Something nervous about the gesture. But whatever it was like, John Dexter realised what it said. If you have to bloody ask then there’s not much point anyway.

“I’ll just leave the rubbish in the cleaners’ cupboard,” he said, “I’ll let them know about it tomorrow.”

“We could bring the bucket to the balcony.”

“I don’t see the point, really.” He wondered what was that she was on, that something on top of the vodka. It’d be good to know

the symptoms, of the different drugs. They live in a bit of a secret world, these kids. Stuff we were taught about in college probably completely old fashioned by now. He wondered about the drugs. Apart from weed...ok and a bit of acid in Sussex University days... he didn't really have any experience himself. But he knew there was definitely something there. Though she didn't actually appear to have any symptoms, nothing manic, or hyper, or twitchy. Outside those sudden flips of mood she was, in fact, very calm. Maybe she was just mad. The only certainty was that she was quite drunk.

"We could drop the stuff over onto the dancers," she said, calmly, pointing at the bucket.

"Why would we do that?"

"It'd be fun."

"But it could hurt someone. There's bits of rocks and shards of pottery. Someone could get a nasty gash."

"Yes," she agreed, seemingly none too perturbed about the possibility.

"Is there someone has annoyed you, that you want to dump rubbish on their head?" he wondered.

"No, not particularly, a lot of people there are my friends."

"Ah but you said you hadn't any friends," he challenged.

"People I know," she responded. "But people who don't know me. Do you call them friends?"

"I don't think it's the time of night for that sort of discussion. It's interesting but..."

"What is it the time of night for?"

"Certainly not the time of night for dropping stuff on your friends' heads." He smiled, and she didn't smile back. "Or on the heads of people you know, but who don't know you."

She still didn't smile, but looked at him intensely. A lot more intensely than he would have expected, with the vodka and drugs and whatever else. That look reminded him of some animal behind a bars, in a zoo. There's a moment when it suddenly catches your

eyes. And you realise that you haven't a clue who is in there. This was that moment. It shook him up a little, unnerved him a bit.

I don't want to look into this girl's eyes, he realised.

She'll draw me in. And I'll drown. And I'll end up on a sex register.

He looked away.

"Isn't it interesting," she asked, "that you wouldn't know where it would fall, the rubbish, or on who. Not in the dark with the noise and the dancing, it'd be all down to chance."

"Chance?"

"It's the same like you never know who you're going to meet, do you, Mr Dexter? Get up in the fucking morning. Think it's another fucking day. But it's a different day, innit. Something's going to happen. Some fucker's going to stand behind you in the tube, push you under a train. They do that, you know. Mad fuckers. You never know if they're standing behind you. Like you can't look behind you all the time. You've got to take a chance. It's your fate, or not your fate."

"You really should go home. Do you want me to get Miss Wilson to take you home?"

"Miss Wilson can fuck herself. With that brush. Do her good."

"It doesn't do you any good you know, being angry."

"I'm not angry. I'm talking about fate. And destiny. And getting up in the morning. And not knowing what's going to happen. Who you're going to meet. You didn't know you were going to meet me today, did you?"

"No."

"I knew I was going to meet you."

This girl is a psychiatric case, Dexter thought. Is there no counselling or social workers or child protection people or whatever in bloody Walthamstow? What the hell is a half dressed teenage girl doing being let wander around like this? Out of her bloody head.

What will happen to her?

“How did you know,” he asked gently. Gently because he felt gentle towards her, now. And her eyes were lovely and her feet were pretty. “How did you know,” he asked, “how did you know you were going to meet me?”

“Fate. Don’t you believe in fate, Mr Dexter? Destiny? Our destiny?”

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