**Monday 15 June 1970**

**07:00**

*My Father keeps the PM waiting . . .*

"What about that useless twat Bonetti, then?"

My Father is 44. Professionally, he is at the peak of his powers, and possessed of the highest expectations. He knows that if all goes well on Thursday - no, better than that, provided things don't go disastrously wrong on Thursday - there is no limit to what he can achieve over the next few years. He is still an exceptionally able young, or young-ish, man. He has left it late, but there is still time - just - to redeem the Golden Ticket conferred on him by that rarest combination of outstanding intellect, charm and cunning. Provided things don't go disastrously wrong on Thursday.

At this moment, though, My Father is unable to enjoy the brilliant prospects that lie before him. It's inhumanly early, and he has barely slept. He feels hung-over, befuddled, and a little weepy. And although he knows he should be making a concerted effort to marshal his exceptional intellectual powers, as well as all his charm and cunning, for the meeting that lies ahead, and for these next few life-defining days, he is in fact lost in a despairing reverie on the seemingly irresolvable complications in his personal life. Even reminding himself - as he has so often recently - that throughout history men of real distinction have tended to enjoy somewhat baroque arrangements with wives, lovers and children, seems for now at least to have lost its power to slow his heart-beat and steady his nerves. (Even for My Father, it's a little early for a drink.)

More immediately, though, the problem My Father faces is that he has no idea what the cab driver is talking about.

Bonetti? Italian-sounding. Might he, perhaps, be the new Foreign Minister, recently appointed following the latest political upheavals in Rome? But no, surely that's Peretti? Or is Peretti Finance Minister? Or, hang on, isn't it Furetti? In any case, it seems unlikely that a cab driver would be quizzing him on Italian politics at this unearthly hour. Unless, of course, the wretched man is of Italian descent, in which case, it's by no means inconceivable that -

"I mean, that last goal - my mother-in-law could've got a hand to it, and she's in a fucking wheelchair!"

Football! Of course. My Father takes no interest in sport, finding it insufficiently gladiatorial in comparison to politics. But now his mighty intellect clicks and whirs, and retrieves the necessary information. He knows, in a flash, that the driver is referring to England's defeat in the World Cup, currently taking place in Mexico. And, in fact, he realises that he has personally witnessed the match, if not the specific incident, in question.

His teenage sons were watching it, yesterday evening, just before My Father abruptly left the family home:

*My Father: (poking his head round the sitting room door) I'm off now, boys. I've got an early start tomorrow.*

*His sons: (Neither looking up from the TV) OK. Bye.*

*My father: (Noticing they seem despondent) Don't worry, I'll see you soon. Probably be back on Friday.*

*His younger son: OK, yeah.*

*My Father: (Realising his mistake) How's the footer going? Not well?*

*His elder son: West Germany have just scored, again - so we're losing 3-2.*

*His younger son: And there's only a couple of minutes left.*

*My Father: Oh well, still hope then.*

*My Father loiters awkwardly in the door-way. A couple of minutes pass. The boys groan as the referee blows the final whistle. My father makes an ill-judged attempt to take his leave on a lighter note.*

*My Father: Fingers crossed for a better result on Thursday!*

*Neither of his sons responds.*

*Exit My Father.*

\*

For a moment, My Father contemplates replying to the driver in his own bloke-ish idiom, a skill he acquired self-protectively doing National Service as a public school-educated private soldier serving alongside men of much more limited academic attainment. ("*Your* mother-in-law? Mine could've done a better job than that tosser Peretti, and she's fucking blind!")

But up ahead, My Father can see the disparate particles of pre-rush-hour traffic just starting to coalesce. And, glancing at his watch, he knows he is going to be late. So instead, he says, "Just wonder if we might turn left at the lights, and cut off the corner? Might save a couple of minutes, and I'm in a hurry."

"OK, guv, you're the boss," says the driver, sliding his window shut.

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Why, at this point in his life, has My Father not left My Mother?

After all, they have been married for 20 years now, and on well over 7000 of those mornings, his first thought on waking has been related to the urgent necessity of extricating himself from the endlessly recurring slow-motion car-crash that their relationship has always been. (Or perhaps that's the wrong metaphor, since in all My Father's dealings with my mother, there has always been something more implosive than explosive; a sense of every positive feeling, every warm impulse, every shred of vital energy, being sucked inward and downward, into some fearful unplumbed place of turbid inner darkness.)

It's well over **five years**, too, since he met the Woman He Loves - which should, theoretically, have increased his sense of urgency still further. He now has somewhere to escape to, as well as from.

So why doesn't he go? To start with the reason that reflects most positively on My Father, he doesn't want to leave his children. Or, perhaps more accurately, he doesn't want to see himself - or be seen by others - as the kind of father who leaves his children, particularly when they are still young. He has been debating with himself, since meeting the Woman He Loves, how old children need to be before their father can abandon them without attracting excessive censure, or inflicting undue emotional harm upon them. He suspects that his sons - now 16 and 13 - have reached that age, but his daughter is still only seven. Definitely too young. He has been wondering lately if nine might be permissible?

Next, of course, there is the most obvious reason why an exceptionally able man of 44, well placed in his career - and now perhaps, somewhat belatedly, on the verge of real success - might not leave his wife for his significantly younger mistress. He doesn't need to; not really. It's true there are aspects of his relationship with my mother that he has found increasingly hard to tolerate over the years. But to say he can't stand her would be an over-simplification. My Father is a man with a strong sense of his own innate badness, and has always felt there is something deservedly - even correctively - punitive in the way my mother effortlessly, reflexively, crushes his spirit, nullifies his hopes, negates his ambitions. At some level, it feels comfortable, familiar, to him.

In any case, My Father has succeeded over the last few years in constructing for himself a life in which my mother has only limited opportunity to be what his sons would call a "massive drag". He leads, in tabloid parlance, a double life; or, perhaps more accurately, a treble one.

Most weekends, as well as the occasional weeknight, he spends with his family, in the Surrey suburbs. Most weeknights - when My Mother believes his bulky frame is uncomfortably curled up on an inflatable mattress, on the sitting room floor of the tiny cramped Tufnell Park flat of his (actually non-existent) colleague and friend Jim - he passes luxuriantly enfolded in the Egyptian cotton sheets that clothe the vast acreage of the bed where the Woman He Loves sleeps beside him, her sharp knees nestled into his rump. (One of the things he loves about her is that, although my no means well-off - in fact, permanently on the brink of financial destitution - she insists on surrounding herself, and those she loves, with the finest, most beautiful, most desirable things. Often, when My Father arrives back in her world after a weekend of pleasure-starved domesticity in Worplesdon, he will find nothing at all in the fridge, but a gorgeous new little wood-cut on the wall alongside it.)

And then there are the weekday lunchtimes, afternoons, and occasional evenings (sometimes it's hard to get away) that he spends with the Other Woman, usually starting in an obscure pub just around the corner from her home, a profoundly depressing studio flat, redolent of ancient sad meals, escaped gas and mouse-droppings, and not containing a single beautiful thing, to which they adjourn in order to perform an act that My Father is increasingly bewildered to remember he once found so compelling. These days, he has to close his eyes, and think very hard of Jean Shrimpton - partly for erotic stimulus, and partly to prevent the face of the Woman He Loves from rearing up reproachfully before him.

So My Father stays because he is able to have his cake, eat it, and have a bit left over for between-meal snacking purposes. But this morning, in the back of this taxi, just starting to wonder if he may need to vomit (he drank, even by his standards, a LOT last night), he knows this seemingly enviable state of affairs cannot be allowed to continue for much longer. Not least because the Woman He Loves (though ignorant of the Other Woman's existence) shows clearly detectible signs of no longer being willing to tolerate this utterly fucked-up and hateful fucking bloody situation (such as telling him repeatedly, while beating on his increasingly large stomach with her small fists, just hard enough to hurt, that she can't fucking stand this utterly fucked-up and hateful fucking bloody situation).

But on his own account, too, My Father knows that he needs to simplify his emotional life. Just lately, in particular, as the intensity of his working life has risen to vertiginous new heights, he has simply found it too draining.

At a time when he is devoting all of his exceptional energies and intellectual powers to securing a prosperous Socialist future for the country, the demands made upon him, by three women and half a dozen children, have been greater, heavier, more burdensome than one man (there is only one of him, despite what others seem to think) can be expected to bear.

My Father, as so often throughout his life, is feeling sorry for himself.

Ashamed, too. Because he has just failed, miserably, in the first and exponentially less difficult of the two life-simplification tasks he has set himself. Dumping the Other Woman.

On leaving Worplesdon last night, he went not where his heart lead, but to her desolate corner of Queen's Park, with the firm intention of bringing an end, compassionately but decisively, to their nine-year liaison. On the deserted Sunday evening train, he muttered aloud what he would say to her; "I think we both realise" . . . "I'm sure you must feel, as I do" . . . "something we'll each of us look back on one day with enormous tenderness and warmth" . . .

But, in the event, his prepared lines (so cleverly calculated to give her a sense of "owning" the painful but necessary decision) went unspoken. As he knew they would, from the moment she opened the front door. She was wearing a bobbly old dressing gown made of some profoundly unglamorous synthetic material; her hair, wet from recent washing, was surely more flecked with grey than he had ever noticed; and her conjunctivitis had flared up again. On her face, bare of make-up, a shatteringly poignant mix of girlish delight (her Lover, unable to resist an unexpected visit!) and alarm (her Lover, arriving on a Sunday evening for the first time ever, what non-catastrophic explanation could there possibly be for that?).

Whether for joy or terror, she wept. He comforted her. (What else could he do?) He drank, from the bottle of scotch kept on the kitchen shelf, beside one of her pottery cats, for his visits. And then, her tears dried and some little time elapsed, she knelt before him, as she used to do, so thrillingly, behind the locked door of his office, on evenings when they worked late together, at the very outset.

Jean Shrimpton . . . Julie Christie . . . Sophia Loren . . . Mary Hopkin . . . the girl in the newsagents with the astounding breasts . . . Eventually, physically spent and imaginatively exhausted, My Father collapsed into her bed, so different, with its faintly damp yet somehow crackly nylon sheets, from that other bed in North London, where he would so much rather have been. And by then, of course, it would have been impossible to say anything.

And then, of course, he had to get up ridiculously early, to call this taxi - which arrived nearly 15 minutes late. And then, despite his clumping furiously round her flat awaiting its arrival, she was still, rather surprisingly, asleep when he left. (On the three previous occasions they have spent a night together, she has always been up long before him, to prepare his breakfast, as well as her face.)

So, really, in the circumstances, My Father assures himself, there was no way - no humane, decent way - that he could have told her it was over. Was there?

My Father closes his eyes, and screws up his face. His head hurts. But the wave of incipient nausea seems, fortunately, to have passed. He glances at the stack of newspapers beside him on the seat of the cab. He hasn't read them yet, but he knows what's in them. Over the course of his career, he has developed an uncanny, almost osmotic ability to absorb the content of newspapers and other periodicals simply by picking them up. (Or perhaps it isn't all that uncanny, since, in many cases, he has dictated the relevant articles to their purported authors, virtually word for word.)

The newspapers sit next to him, accusingly. He knows he ought to subject them to a proper speed-scan, to equip himself with the level of detail needed for the meeting that is due to begin - he glances at his watch - in just over 10 minutes. But he can't be bothered. And, in any case, there is something about the papers that is troubling him; something other than the news and comment that today's editions contain.

Of course. It's the threat that they pose to his . . . prospects. My Father doesn't dare allow himself even to think of what it is, specifically, that he is hoping for if all goes well on Thursday. But he does expect to be rewarded. And he's aware that now, for the first time in his life, he has probably done enough to make himself a target for intrusive and hostile press coverage of his private life. And that any faint aroma of scandal between now and publication of the New Year Honour's List could be fatal to his . . . prospects.

So, on the whole, he reflects, perhaps it's just as well that he shouldn't, for the time being, do anything that might tend to disrupt the precarious equilibrium of his current state of affairs, however much the Woman He Loves may fucking hate it.

He glances at his watch again. Just under 10 minutes to get there, and the cab is still only just approaching Marble Arch. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He's going to be late.

My Father picks up the Telegraph (best to begin by knowing thy worst enemy), and starts to read at a speed only achievable by a man of truly exceptional intellectual ability . . .

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The driver has switched on his radio now. Through the partition, as he reads, My Father is faintly aware of some tinny jingle insisting on it being the summertime, when the weather is hot . . .

No fan of popular music (to the extent that he is sublimely ignorant of the current cataclysmic disintegration of The Beatles), My Father is forced to concede the meteorological accuracy of the lyric, however inane. It is fucking hot in the back of the cab, despite the early hour. My Father effortfully levers down the window (he's never interacted well with the material world), but only succeeds in letting in wafts of soupy fume-laden London air. The midsummer sun is already bouncing off the bleached chewing gum-studded pavements, with a brassy glare. Soon the temperature will be up in the mid-80s, as it has been every day for what seems like weeks.

On the whole, although uncomfortable, My Father hopes it will last until Thursday. Good weather equals good turnout. And good turnout equals predictable results. Unless weather can be *too* good? If it's as hot as this on polling day, might vast swathes of would-be Labour voters decide to spend the day lying around in parks and on beaches, guzzling ice cream and sluicing themselves down with gallons of beer and fizzy pop?

My Father fiddles with his tie, and hopes the PM will be in shirt-sleeves when he arrives at No10. The driver turns up the radio; perhaps he senses how irritating his passenger finds the song:

*In the summertime . . . when the weather's fine  
You got women, you got women, on your mind*

You can say that again, thinks My Father.

\*

Finally, in the last few minutes of his journey, My Father focuses. The papers are good. In fact, it's hard to imagine how, at this point in the campaign, they could be better. Everyone agrees it will be a Labour victory; some predict a landslide - not implausibly given that the most recent polls show a lead in double figures. Ladbroke's are offering 20-1 on the PM staying in Downing Street. My Father is not a betting man, but he knows this represents the nearest thing that exists to can't-lose certainty.

Yet, ranging across a wide smooth ocean of favourable news and comment, My Father's eye is drawn, queasily, to a single tiny islet of doubt; a small throw-away filler piece, at the very bottom of a round-up of pre-election snippets and gossip:

*Let's say, for the sake of argument, that by the time you read this, England have been beaten by West Germany in their World Cup quarter final, on Sunday evening. And, to make it more interesting, let's imagine that after starting brightly, and seeming certain to win, our boys have wilted under the unforgiving Mexican sun, and ended up by snatching a humiliating defeat from the jaws of certain victory.*

*How much would that affect the national mood? Enough to influence the result on Thursday? We hear there's at least one football supporter - Huddersfield Town's most famous fan, in fact - who takes that remote-sounding possibility extremely seriously.*

My Father, surprisingly, understands this reference. On a late train back from some god-forsaken northern outpost earlier in the campaign, a well-lubricated PM tried unsuccessfully to engage him in sentimental recollections of youthful football allegiances.

A man of deep and lasting loyalties, not least to his home town, the PM proclaims himself a Terrier till he dies.

\*

"You said Whitehall, guv. Care to be more specific?"

My Father, over these last few weeks, has usually asked to be dropped off just around the corner, and walked the last couple of hundred yards up to that famous front door; partly in order to savour the experience, partly, perhaps, out of a desire not to be seen as flaunting his newly acquired access to the centre of power. But today he is already late, and can't afford to be even a minute or two later.

"Downing Street. Number 10, please."

"Ooh, lah-di-dah!"

\*

Staunch socialist and egalitarian though he is, My Father enjoys being saluted by the burly beef-faced policeman, who pivots on his heel and leans back rather elegantly, to shoulder open the door for him, with an obsequiously murmured, "Morning, sir". My Father wonders if perhaps the regular bobbies are starting to recognise him? And before he is able to suppress the thought, it occurs to him how much better "Morning, my lord" would sound.

Inside No 10, it is furnace-hot and airless as a well-sealed coffin. The early morning sunlight barely penetrates. From the messengers' subterranean burrow, the smell of the indeterminate stew they keep perpetually bubbling on a solitary gas-ring wafts upwards through the cavernous stairwell, and permeates the building. For a man who has not yet breakfasted - particularly one with a fairly severe hangover - it's the very opposite of appetising.

My Father hurries along the corridor, past the green baize door of the Cabinet room, and up the main staircase, running the gauntlet of the PM's predecessors, whose portraits - almost all abominably bad and lifeless - stare witheringly down on him. Disraeli, for some reason, always seem the most disapproving. ("Four and forty years old, yet scarcely any achievement of real distinction . . . in my judgment, a mere huckster and mountebank.")

As he approaches the Campaign Office, he can hear raised voices, one - muffled - instantly recognisable as Marcia's . . .

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**07:45**

*My Father hates the Fucking Pipe*

The Campaign Meeting is, belatedly, about to get underway.

In the super-heated room, the atmosphere is oppressive; highly charged yet somehow also subdued. Only the core campaign strategy team members are present, but the tiny office - for some reason, the PM's wife's former secretary's cubby-hole has been adopted as the nerve centre of the campaign, in its latter stages - is farcically overcrowded with angry, fearful, perspiring bodies.

The PM, to My Father's relief in shirt-sleeves, has the only moderately comfortable seat; a swivel chair, behind the desk, from which he will lead the meeting. Marcia is wedged in beside and slightly behind him, white-faced, still trembling with rage, and shooting occasional malevolent glances in the direction of Haines, who stares impassively into the middle distance; the faithful functionary awaiting his master's commands. Peter S, perched on a stool, exudes his usual monkish calm, which those who work with him suspect of being a disguise for permanent barely suppressed panic. Tommy B seems to be asleep in the corner (and might as well be, since tweaks to macro-economic policy are unlikely, at this late stage, to affect the result on Thursday). And My Father, who has drawn the short straw seating-wise, is uncomfortably folded up on a chintzily-upholtered chair of dollshouse proportions, in front of the desk, and almost certainly below the PM's eyeline - exactly as Haines intended when he manouevred My Father into his place.

My Father, though, is starting the meeting with something of a moral advantage. Not only is he not late in arriving, as he feared, but in fact, it's thanks to him that the meeting is able to start now, 15 minutes behind schedule. Because it was he who persuaded Marcia - who has a soft spot for My Father - to come o ut the lavatory where she had barricaded herself.

\*

"You fucking four-eyed weasel!" she's screaming, as My Father arrives on the scene. "I'll have your fucking job. I'll fucking bury you. I'll have you out of this fucking place so fucking fast your feet won't touch the fucking ground!"

No need for My Father to enquire about the weasel's identity - or, really, the nature of his offence. Throughout the campaign, the PM's Political Secretary (Marcia) and Press Secretary (Haines) have been at war, the battleground, almost invariably, privileged access to the PM, which she regards as being hers to dispense or, more usually, withhold at will. My Father knows, to a near-certainty, that Haines has tried to bypass this fearsome gate-keeper, and has been found out.

Haines has, sensibly, made himself scarce. The PM has not yet emerged from his apartment (although, since its front door is directly opposite the lavatory, he must be aware of the altercation, and may well be waiting for it to subside). So only Peter S - nominally in overall charge of the campaign, but, as so often, a powerless bystander - is standing directly in the path of the boiling torrent of enraged threats, looking as if he might burst into tears.

"She seems a mite peeved," he murmurs miserably to My Father. "Something to do with the PM's speech for this evening, I suspect. I wonder if maybe you could possibly, er, work your magic . . . "

And yes, rather to his own amazement, My Father has proved able, if not by magical means then at least by almost supernaturally persuasive ones . . .

And he has done that, astonishingly, by cajoling Haines - who hates My Father - into apologising to her, for the latest of his many egregious offences against her

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The PM calls the meeting to order.

"Marcia . . . gentlemen . . ."

As usual, he pauses here, having secured the attention of everyone in the room, to make lengthy adjustments to the contents and combustion of his pipe. He sucks loudly and spittily through it, several times; tamps unhurriedly; then once, twice, three times, re-applies the terrifying jet of flame emitted by his enormous Zippo lighter.

My Father hates the pipe.

The PM sucks some more, seemingly still not satisfied.

My Father FUCKING HATES the Fucking Pipe. He knows, of course, that it's seen by many as one of the PM's most valuable political assets; a powerful symbol of reassuring man-of-the-people dependability, which also doubles as a brilliantly effective means of buying time, on the rare occasions when an interlocutor has the PM on the ropes ("For heaven's sake, Mr Day, don't harass the poor man about the trade deficit when he's just trying to get his pipe to draw!"). But My Father also knows - or, perhaps more accurately, is just beginning to sense - that The Pipe may have negative connotations, too; that today, in 1970, an air of reassuring dependability may, increasingly, look fuddy duddy, complacent, square.

The PM is, at last, happy with his pipe. He looks up from it, and around the room, in affable acknowledgement of each team member's presence.

"So," he twinkles, through the smoke, "the best efforts of our soccer players notwithstanding, we have an election to win in three days' time. Remind me what remains to be done?"

As PM-meeting-openers go, this is a classic of its kind. First, the humorously convoluted syntax, subtly tickling the intellect of those present by delaying the arrival of his meaning; and then, of course, the self-deprecating irony of his request for a reminder. The PM never needs to be reminded of anything. His astonishing powers of recall are legendary. If memory were an Olympic sport, he would be a red-hot favourite for Gold in the Munich games of 1972.

My Father is, despite himself, impressed. He has complicated feelings towards the PM. On the one hand, he can't help thinking well of a man who possesses the wisdom and discrimination to think well of him, as the PM clearly does. (In fact, Marcia has confided that it was the PM himself who suggested drafting My Father into the core campaign team as a late replacement for his long-time publicity adviser, Gerald Kaufman, recently departed to launch his own parliamentary career, by fighting a safe seat in Manchester. If true this is, undeniably, flattering.)

And then, of course, there are the PM's extraordinary political skills. As My Father has now had plenty of opportunity to witness, the man is a formidable operator. Put him in any campaign situation - one-to-one on the doorstep with a recalcitrant voter; on stage, in a packed and not particularly well-disposed meeting-hall; in front of a TV camera, harshly lit, and with a hostile interviewer intent on dismantling his record - and he simply turns it on; a quicksilver answer-for-anything rat-a-tat delivery, which, by virtue of a certain unflustered playfulness in his tone and his gently flattened Yorkshire vowels, gives him complete command without ever making him seem (worst crime an Englishman can commit) too-clever-by-half.

He is also, My Father would be forced to admit, a notably kind and decent human being - at least in comparison to most other senior politicians. (Impossible to imagine the Chancellor, say, arriving at a meeting with delicious shortbread, baked by his wife, in a Tupperware container, as the PM did the other day.)

On the other hand, to My Father's eyes, the PM has a pouchy shop-worn look about him. It's hardly surprising after six attritional years in Number 10, battered by an almost uninterrupted sequence of frustrations (Northern Ireland!), reversals (the unions! strikes!), and outright calamities (devaluation!); hounded and pilloried by the right wing press, at every turn; and, for most of his term, reviled by a substantial majority of the electorate. For a man who wants to be loved, it must have been exquisitely painful to find himself the most unpopular PM since polling began. In any case, while still capable of remarkable feats of sustained energy, he looks tired, baggy-eyed, even a little vacant on occasion. My Father suspects that the long plateau of his supremacy, within the Labour Party and the nation's politics, is now behind him. The PM is, to put it bluntly, past his best.

And then there's the question of how good his best really was? Here My Father holds a wholly heterodox view. In the eyes of the world, the PM has always been a prodigy, a phenomenon. Head Boy of his school, an Oxford don at 21, the youngest Cabinet Minister of the 20th century, when barely into his 30s. But, My Father privately wonders, is he really exceptionally able, let alone *outstandingly* able? Viewed dispassionately, the evidence suggests not. The PM's remarkable academic success, his dazzling early career as a statistician in the coal industry, his swift ascent through the wartime Civil Service, even his indecently rapid rise through the lower ranks of the parliamentary Labour Party, can all be seen - should properly all be seen - as the accomplishments of a mind extraordinarily adept at assimilating information, processing it, and presenting it in a persuasively lucid form. Admirable enough, in its way; genuinely out of the ordinary. But not to be confused for a moment with the originality, command, vision, nuanced complexity of a truly outstandingly able man's intellect.

That Cunt Haines (as My Father thinks of him) jumps in before Marcia has a chance to take control of the agenda.

"Yes, PM, pity about the football. But they were only one goal up, while you, PM, are walking away with this election, according to all the polls."

Whenever That Oily Cunt Haines ladles it on like this, My Father realises, he is in fact congratulating himself on his own achievements in making a massive front-runner of a politician who, just months ago, seemed beyond redemption.

"We still have a lot of work to do before we can be sure of that," snaps Marcia, even less eager than My Father to allow Haines unwarranted credit. And while Haines is firing up a post-sycophancy Senior Service, she quickly outlines the order of business.

"Starting with, general policy focus and attack-lines for these last three days . . ."

"Fuck that big poof-boy in the arse," mutters Tommy B, without opening his eyes, at exactly the same moment that Peter S says, "Keep turning the pressure up on Heath; he's hopelessly out of his depth."

The PM is tamping and sucking again. Or still. "Well, it's certainly the case that the Leader of the Opposition's shortcomings - particularly those inherent in what passes for his personality - have been cruelly exposed by this campaign. But perhaps we should allow Mr Powell to complete the demolition?"

"I concur, PM." Who else? That Obsequious Cunt Haines. "We need to be hammering home your virtues - dependability, experience, connection with the common man, and his wife - rather than sniping at Mr Heath's vices."

"Little boyzzz," hisses Tommy B.

All this is perfectly on-message (as no one would have said in 1970) for the campaign. It's true that the Leader of the Opposition is universally considered to have run a disastrous campaign, and equally widely expected to find himself out of a job after the heavy defeat predicted for the Tories on Thursday. It's true that his awkward, oddball persona - his total inability to smile or shake a voter's hand with apparent sincerity - has weighed heavily against him. And it's also true that "good old Enoch", as he is known by at least 50% of Conservative voters, is running an insurrectionary private campaign, based on nakedly racist anti-immigrant rhetoric, which has probably inflicted damage on the "official" Tory platform.

And yet . . . My Father suddenly feels a powerful discomfort; a premonitory shiver that riffles through him, a little like the feeling when you read about the symptoms of a terminal disease, and abruptly realise that all of them, without exception, are significantly present in your body.

He knows, in this moment, that this election could very well still be lost.

Obviously, the PM and his closest advisers are complacent; sitting back, conserving their energy, in readiness for weighing the enormous tonnage of votes that will give them their expected crushing victory on Thursday. And why wouldn't they feel that way, in the light of all the available information? But now My Father senses that a shift, as yet barely perceptible, may be taking place. The hapless Heath has, perhaps, just taken on the faintest first tinge of plucky (and unfairly maligned) underdog. The Tories have, over the last few days, begun to concentrate their fire on Labour's greatest vulnerabilities; unruly unions and rising prices. And all that racialist nonsense, My Father suspects, is working for them, too; whatever the PM may think, people know that if they favour Enoch's policy of "sending the coloureds home", Conservative is the only productive way to vote.

My Father thinks, uneasily, too, about a phone call he fielded yesterday from Aitken at the *Guardian.* At the time, it had felt like just another off-the-record chinwag with one of the very few broadly sympathetic members of the press corps. But now, My Father recalls a seemingly innocent aside by Aitken about the quarterly trade figures, due to be released today - and their potential impact on the last few days of the campaign. Did Aitken know something? Could he possibly, My Father now wonders, have picked up a rumour from a mole in the Treasury?

For a moment My Father stares, inwardly, into the abyss. Defeat. Snatched from the jaws of cast-iron nailed-on victory. No enormous boost to his career, as the man whose publicity skills secured the landslide. (The opposite, in fact, since he will for ever be tarnished by association with a failure no one believed possible.) No admiring features in Sunday papers. No peerage ("Good to see you again, my lord").

Meanwhile, the meeting has moved on to the second main agenda-point; the PM's speech this evening. And now the temperature in the room rises still higher. Because this was the cause of the earlier altercation between Marcia and Haines, and resentments are still simmering.

"PM, I hope you've had a chance to run an eye over the talking-points?" Haines is saying.

"Unlike me," hisses Marcia.

Haines's steel-rimmed spectacles flash. "I finished them late - long after you'd left for the day."

"You could've had them sent them over to me."

"I could have, but I remembered the last time I 'bothered you at home' - and how you reacted."

"That was a completely different set of circumstances. I bloody well won't be treated like this, PM?"

The PM looks miserable, cowed - as he does whenever Marcia gets angry, and appeals to him for support, which is often. He tamps and sucks, and rummages for his lighter.

My Father wants to jump to his feet, like an old testament prophet, and bellow, "We're going to lose this election if you don't stop behaving like fucking six year olds!" (Actually, his powerful newly formed conviction is that they are probably going to lose it however they behave.)

But instead, once again, he plays the conciliator.

"I think perhaps we ventilated that topic earlier?" My Father's voice is a soothing light tenor; his tone is humorous, persuasive. "The important thing, PM, is that you - and Marcia - are happy with what you've got?"

Marcia harrumphs, but seems somewhat mollified. The PM looks gratefully at My Father. "Well, I don't need very much. It'll be a friendly crowd. And provided I remember that we're the Socialists and they are the Evil Capitalists, I don't think I'll go too far wrong."

Marcia still looks deeply discontented, but doesn't seem inclined to pursue the matter. My Father takes advantage of this unexpected lull, to move the meeting on.

"And Marcia, how are we placed with our "celebrity attendees"? Will we have enough for two full rows, behind the PM?"

"Yes," says Marcia, who often goes monosyllabic immediately post-conflict.

"Good," says My Father, smiling at Marcia with considerable charm. "Perhaps you and I could go through the list later? To make sure we deploy them to maximum effect?"

"As long as Miss Christie is there," says the PM, roguishly, "I'll be perfectly happy. Though I'd prefer you not to tell Mary I said that."

A notably strait-laced man, not given to lubricious remarks about actresses, the PM is nevertheless somewhat smitten with Julie Christie, since having met her at a recent Downing Street reception.

"Miss Christie has confirmed her attendance," says Marcia, icily.

There's an uncomfortable silence, while the PM pats his pockets, in search a small chisel-like tool that he uses to dislodge obstructions in the stem of his pipe, at particularly uncomfortable moments. Conversation moves on, falteringly at first, to more detailed discussion of arrangements for this evening's meeting; more of a rally, in fact, with the focus squarely on the PM's famous supporters, rather than substantive matters of policy.

Again, My Father feels a rising tide of panic within him. If he's right about the tightening of the race, the turning of the tide, how can it possibly be a good idea to use this last major meeting of the campaign to indulge in showbiz-back-slapping?

Marcia and Haines are disagreeing, quietly but violently, over what time the PM's car needs to be called for. ("Six fifteen will be more than early enough." "Absolutely. Provided we're happy for the PM to arrive half an hour late, and keep his distinguished guests waiting . . .")

The PM lays down his pipe purposefully. He is impatient to get onto the main business of the meeting.

"Marcia, gentlemen - since time is short, perhaps we'd better turn our attention the PPB? Oriel, how have you got on?"

The PM is big on nicknames. Oriel is what he calls My Father. At first, My Father glowed whenever he was addressed in this way. But, over time, he's come to suspect that, while probably affectionate, it may also be intended as a not particularly subtle reminder that the Oxford college he attended was considerably less prestigious than the PM's.

My Father has been working on the Party Political Broadcast over the weekend. In fact, exceptionally, he has been given Sunday off from campaigning, to allow him to concentrate on this. Because these 10 minutes of national television - to be recorded tomorrow afternoon, and broadcast later the same evening - are Labour's last chance to grind the opposition and their useless leader into the dust, before voting on Thursday. (The Tories have their final broadcast this evening, but no one in the room feels they have anything to fear from this.)

All eyes turn towards My Father. Has he, once again, worked his persuasive magic? Will this broadcast play its part in turning a comfortable Labour victory into one of the great historic landslides?

My Father stares miserably at the half-dozen sheets of heavily annotated A4 on his lap. (He has been working from a rough draft provided by Haines and Marcia, editing and revising in his own psychopathic scrawl; throughout a long career mostly based on the written word, My Father never learns to type.) Instinctively aware that his absurd semi-recumbent position puts him at a major disadvantage, he scrambles to his feet. The PM has asked him a direct question; he needs to answer, now.

"I think we're in good order, PM."

He doesn't really, though. He knows now that the PPB is all wrong - and indeed that the whole campaign, for which it serves as a conclusive summing-up, has been misconceived from the start. Too complacently certain of the opposition's weakness. Too triumphalist. Too smugly assured that voters will remember the economic advances of the last few months, rather than the endless catalogue of cock-ups and catastrophes stretching back over the preceding half-decade. And far, far too "presidential" (assuming My Father is correct in his intuition that, like an ammoniac Camembert a day or two past runny perfection, the PM has just reached the tipping-point between electoral asset and liability).

What is My Father to do? There isn't time - and, in any case, he doesn't have authority to suggest it - to throw away the script, and start again. But he's convinced it would be madness to go ahead with what they currently have. How could he, he berates himself, have been so insensitive to the campaign's shifting momentum when he was working on the script just 24 hours earlier?

The PM is getting impatient. He gestures with his pipe-stem at the papers My Father is holding. "Perhaps, Oriel, you'd be kind enough to share with us your latest no doubt excellent . . ."

In the moment, My Father makes a decision to stake all his standing within the campaign team on getting more time to work on the PPB. He can't rewrite it from scratch, but he can tweak, refine, and soften some of its worst excesses.

"PM, I need just an hour or two more to get it exactly right," he says.

"You had all day yesterday," Haines fires back, with venom.

"Yes, but I've had some new interesting ideas, based on feedback from friendly journalists, which I really think we need to incorporate," My Father improvises.

"Which journalists?" asks Haines.

"What kind of feedback?" asks Marcia, less hostile towards My Father, but ever-alert to any possible slight. "I hope you're not intending to change the basic structure I gave you."

"*We* gave you," corrects Haines.

"Of course not," says My Father. "It's only really a couple of small shifts in emphasis that I have I mind, but I don't want to waste everyone's time now, until we have a finished script. I can run it past you both later this morning."

Haines is sneering openly, Marcia looks far from contented. But there's a momentary pause while they wait for the PM to adjudicate.

"All right, Oriel. It's vital we make it as strong as possible. We can give you a little more time to buckle on your crampons and attempt the highest summit of perfection."

My Father feels immense relief, with an afternote of panic. He has his reprieve, but can he do what he intends? Is it possible, working with the materials he has, to craft a broadcast that will win the election, rather than making it more likely to be lost? Even for a man of his exceptional powers?

"But, Oriel," the PM goes on, "let me just hear the opening, to get a feel for the kind of performance you'll be needing from me."

There's no way out for My Father. He's won himself a little more time to save the election, but - short of feigning a heart attack - he sees no way to avoid complying with this direct, and very reasonable, request from the PM.

He shuffles his papers, coughs miserably, then reads aloud: "We open on news archive of crowds of enthusiastic voters . . ."

"Speak up," interrupts Haines.

". . . crowds of enthusiastic voters greeting the PM, as he goes on one of his city centre walk-abouts. In voice-over at first, the PM sets the scene: 'It has been like this all over the country. People everywhere are feeling a new confidence. They are confident because their efforts have produced solid results. Results of which everyone is proud. Confident and determined. They realise that no Prime Minister in this century has fought an election against such a background of economic strength as we have got today . . .'

My Father tails off, wondering how he could ever have written such complete shit. True, he wasn't to blame for the cheering crowds, which were one of Marcia's non-optional suggestions. But the tone! And all that ridiculously exaggerated bollocks about "economic strength".

What's really terrifying, though, is that the room is clearly enraptured by what he's just read. Even Haines can't think of anything negative to say.

"Very stirring," murmurs Peter S, as Marcia mimes a brief round of applause.

"'Solid results'", parrots the PM. "I think that's exactly what this government has been about. I like it. And if it continues in a similar vein - well, are you sure it needs further refinement?"

Damn, damn, damn. That means My Father won't be able to change the opening - at least, not by more than tiny tweaks to wording.

"Just give me an hour or two," he repeats, grimly.

The meeting starts to wind down. The daily press conference is due to start shortly, in the press room downstairs. But as papers are shuffled, and briefcases opened, there is the sound of fast-approaching footsteps from the corridor, and the campaign office door is pushed open.

"Gerald!" says the PM, delightedly.

"PM!" replies Kaufman, who is wearing some kind of candy-striped yachting blazer, and a straw boater. "I came as quickly as I could. I heard that you might appreciate a little help banging the last few nails into Laughing Boy's coffin!"

"My idea, PM," says Haines. "Gerald's seat is in the bag, so I thought we would get him down from Manchester, for these last few days."

"Excellent notion," says the PM, who is still shaking Kaufman's hand.

"And I thought you could start," says Haynes to Kaufman, "by running an eye over the PPB? I'm sure *(My Father)* would appreciate it. Wouldn't you, Oriel?"

No one but the PM calls My Father this. You bastard, Haines, you fucking, fucking bastard, thinks My Father.

**11:15**

*My Father has got women, has got women, on his mind . . .*

My Father is thinking about the backs of the knees of the Woman He Loves. He has known many women, a not unimpressive number of them intimately, but until very recently he has never been aware how much delight is to be found in this under-appreciated cranny of the female anatomy.

He has time to think about the backs of the knees of the Woman He Loves because he his waiting for the revised PPB script, which is being typed - reluctantly - by one of the Garden Girls. (Haines has forbidden either of the two Press Office secretaries from working for My Father, on the grounds that he, as Press Secretary, needs them both to be in a state of perpetual readiness to respond instantly to his many and varied demands.)

My Father has, he hopes, done everything he reasonably could, in the circumstances, with the PPB. Which is to say, not much. He has toned down the more vainglorious claims about the nation's unprecedented economic wellbeing, while smuggling in a couple of incidental references to a stronger economy being a work-in-progress. He has dialled up a passage mocking the Tories' contradictory claims of being able to increase public spending at the same time as reducing taxes. He has cut two out of five references to Socialism (it's not yet a dirty word, but My Father is perhaps ahead of his time in suspecting that it's no longer a vote-winner). And, most important of all he thinks, he has introduced a new para in which the PM pays tribute to the talent, strength and experience within his senior ministerial team.

The Garden Girls - the typists who work in the large conservatory-like room adjoining No 10's garden - are hierarchical by nature, and do not regard work for a temporary unpaid attachee to the PM's press team as a high priority. My Father's wait continues.

How can he use the time productively? He is alone in the campaign office now - seated, more comfortably, at the desk - the rest of the team dispersed to their various domains around the building. This is their first day largely based at Downing Street since the campaign began nearly three weeks ago. My Father's thoughts turn to his abject performance with the Other Woman, his utter failure to address the matter in hand. Would it be so terrible, he wonders, to do it by post? A bit brutal, perhaps; but it has to be done - and whatever the means of communication, it will hit her hard.

He picks up his ballpoint pen, and starts to write. And once he is past the problem of how to address her (he eventually settles on "Dearest . . .", confident that his notorious handwriting will make it hard to distinguish from the "Darling . . . " that he's used in his infrequent previous written communications with her), the phrases he needs come easily: "I think we both realise" . . . "I'm sure you must feel, as I do" . . . "something we'll each of us look back on one day with enormous tenderness and warmth" . . .

Signing off is tricky, though; but once again, illegibility comes to the rescue. He scrawls a complicated hieroglyph, which could be "Love", followed by his initial, and a single kiss - or, equally well, something more indicative of the change in their relationship status ("With fond best wishes").

He looks at the finished letter; more of a note, really. Can he really send it? Will she be able to decipher it (at least, the parts that matter)? Can he bear the thought of how much it will hurt her? (My Father does not enjoy inflicting pain.)

Hurriedly, as if to complete the action before reconsidering it, he folds the paper and stuffs it into an envelope, which he seals and addresses, as legibly as he can. Then, as he pushes open the door to take the letter to the post-tray at the end of the corridor, everything happens at once. One of the messengers - a wizened dwarfish figure with the look of an ancient child - rushes importantly towards him, clasping a manila folder.

"Your documents, from the typists, sir," he murmurs discreetly, as if this might be classified information.

At the same moment, from Marcia's office - the door of which is ajar to aid ventilation - emerges a chilling wordless banshee howl. Even by the standards of the PM's Political Secretary, this seems a melodramatic response. But to what?

My Father glances inside the folder. The script seems to have been accurately typed. Never one for unnecessary physical exertion, he nevertheless covers the 30-odd feet that separate him from Marcia's office at an impressively speedy semi-jog-trot.

He taps on the door, as he cranes his head around it. Marcia, Haines and Kaufman are sitting dumbstruck, in a variety of postures suggestive of aghast. They seem oblivious to My Father's presence.

"Um, I have the PPB script. I thought we might go through it before . . ." he tails off, unable to continue in the face of what is clearly some kind of crisis.

"What is it?" he asks.

Still staring blankly ahead of her, Marcia replies. "The trade figures. The Chancellor of the fucking Exchequer has just shown us the enormous courtesy of letting us know, less than a fucking hour before they become fucking public, that they are FUCKING CATASTROPHIC!"

My Father is at his best in a crisis, provided it's the kind where unfavourable news needs to be presented in the least damaging light possible.

"How catastrophic?" he asks, calmly.

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The next couple of hours pass in a blur of damage limitation. The monthly trade figures, released by the Treasury at 12 noon, are indeed a setback for Labour, showing a deficit of over £30 million, following almost a year in surplus. And immediately, the Tories go on the offensive, with both their leader and the Shadow Chancellor suddenly everywhere, loudly insistent that Labour's so-called economic recovery has been thrown into reverse, holed below the waterline, exposed for the sham it always was.

But, as My Father is quick to see, there is a way of presenting these figures as a blip, resulting from exceptional circumstances - specifically, the purchase for nearly £20 million of not one but two Jumbo jets. And, impressively quickly, the defensive fightback begins, led by the Chancellor, who goes on the World at One and tells Bill Hardcastle that, "if the Tories in their hopeless and divided plight, believe they can escape from defeat on the wings of a couple of Jumbo jet, they will believe anything". My Father is not particularly keen on the Chancellor's rather fanciful wording (but then, he's not particularly keen on the Chancellor, whom he regards as an over-promoted near-nincompoop), but he has to admit the message is delivered with a degree of scorn that sounds convincing.

By early afternoon, what can be done has been done. The PM seems remarkably relaxed about the situation (My Father can't decide if this is genuine confidence or weary complacency). And there's nothing more to be done but wait to see how it plays in tomorrow's papers.

**14:25**

*My Father checks his messages, and wishes he hadn't . . .*

My Father is, technically, on holiday. He has taken three weeks' leave from his job as Director of Information Services at the British Steel Corporation to devote his full attention to masterminding publicity and press relations for the PM, accompanying him on almost every leg of his 6000-mile campaign journey. (My Mother is, to say the least, not thrilled about this, since it means he has only one remaining week of leave for a family holiday - which he has told her will have to wait until "the dust settles" following the election.)

Every day since the campaign began, he has - often with difficulty - found a few minutes to call his office, where his secretary Linda updates him on matters of professional interest, and passes on messages.

He's talking to her now.

"Any word from the Chairman?"

"No, he's away again. On another fact-finding tour."

The Chairman of British Steel has a villa in Tuscany, and finds it necessary to go on regular fact-finding tours in Italy.

"And how is Martin doing? Still keeping on top of things?"

"My impression is that Mr Lawrence is doing an excellent job. The journalists seem to love him."

My Father, who likes to feel indispensable as much as the next man, or possibly a little more, is not particularly delighted to hear his deputy is performing so well in his absence. He wonders briefly if Linda may be teasing him. She's an excellent secretary - punctual, efficient, literate, well spoken - and has been with him for nearly 10 years, accompanying him from job to job. But she gives away almost nothing about herself (as far as her personal life is concerned, all he knows is that she lives with her mother in Surbiton), and what she thinks or feels is still, nearly always, a mystery to him. In particular, her attitude towards the convolutions in his personal life remains entirely obscure.

"Anything else?" he asks.

"Your wife called. Twice. She wanted to know if you would be going home tonight."

Of course My Mother knows My Father won't be going home tonight. There is a general election, the perilously uncertain outcome of which he may still be able to influence, in just three days' time. It's not seriously very likely - and My Mother can't possibly think it is - that he is going to spend any of that time commuting to the seat of power from fucking Worplesdon.

"Could you very kindly call her, and remind her that I told her I'll be staying in a hotel until the election?"

"Of course. But she'll ask which hotel."

"I don't have the details with me. Tell her I'll be in touch tomorrow."

"OK. Oh, and one other call, from (she says the name of the Woman My Father Loves). She wondered if you could let her know what time you'd be back tonight?"

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**16.15**

*My Father has doubts about one of Marcia's celebrities*

"Basil Brush?" says My Father. He is sitting beside Marcia in the back of the PM's ocean-liner-like Humber, on the way to Hammersmith Town Hall, where this evening's meeting will take place.

The name sounds familiar, but he can't quite place it.

"He's very popular," says Marcia, a shade defensively, it sounds to My Father. She always insists on using the PM's car, sometimes even when the PM also needs it.

"And really quite entertaining," she goes on. "I thought we could put him on for five minutes between the Foreign Secretary and the PM."

My Father, who is a man with very little time to spare for light entertainment, still can't quite bring this Brush person to mind. Marcia interprets his uncertainty as a need to be further convinced.

"He's actually quite a strong Labour supporter. Well, obviously he himself isn't, but the chap who has his hand inside him is."

A shiver of realisation goes through My Father. Marcia is not known as a woman who responds well to having her political judgement challenged.

My Father tries, with limited success, to keep appalled incredulity out of his voice: "Basil Brush, the glove-puppet?"

"Yes, I thought it might help to lighten the mood, and give everyone a lift?"

My Father thinks quickly. There is only one possible way to head this off, without igniting a major conflagration.

"Have you mentioned this to the PM?" he asks, invoking the only authority that Marcia is usually willing to recognise.

"Not directly."

My Father lets this hang. Marcia will never admit she's wrong, if confronted. But sometimes, rarely, she is capable of recognising her own error, unprompted.

My Father purses his lips, as if there is much he could say, but chooses to keep to himself. Marcia shifts uncomfortably on the plump leather upholstery and sighs heavily.   
  
"Well, I suppose we could stand him down, and perhaps ask Nicol Williamson to take that slot. He's frightfully passionate. And the PM is a huge admirer."

"I think that might be wise," says My Father, turning to Marcia with a boyish smile. (There is an almost inaudible batsqueak of flirtation in their relationship, though even My Father would not be rash enough to imagine it can ever be acknowledged.) "Shall we just run through the other confirmed guests?"

"All right." Marcia riffles through her notebook. "Confirmed, front-row guests . . . Mary Quant, Alan Bates, Sir Ralph Richardson, Twiggy, Nicol Williamson, Glenda Jackson, Charlie Watts, Jean Shrimpton, Terence Stamp, Peter Cook, and of course," she sniffs disapprovingly - "Julie Christie . . . "

"Good," says My Father, who has few interests beyond politics, and to whom at least half these names mean nothing at all. "And what about the second row?"

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**19.25**

*My Father is impressed by the PM's sang-froid*

The meeting is not going entirely according to plan.

A number of the celebrity guests - including, catastrophically for the PM's morale, and despite her earlier confirmation, Julie Christie - have been no-shows. Nicol Williamson's brief slot, in between the Foreign Secretary and the PM, has turned out to be a 25-minute ramble, mainly unintelligble but clearly angry, and possibly referring in places to the criminal underfunding by successive governments of the UK's subsidised theatre sector. And, most seriously, the largely invited audience seems to have been thoroughly infiltrated by disruptive elements.

As a result, the intended celebratory tone has not been possible to achieve. In tomorrow's *Times*, the mood of the meeting will be described as stormy*.* But to My Father, watching the PM speak from the wings, it feels much worse and more chaotic than that; an opportunity to generate positive coverage for the campaign that, at this point, seems likely to degenerate into an incoherent shambles, if not a massive brawl.

To be fair, the PM is partly to blame. Becoming aware during his opening remarks of a sizeable contingent of hostile Tories scattered around the hall, he has chosen to go on the offensive. Ditching his largely anodyne talking-points (the strength of the economy, despite those Jumbo jets, fairness for all, the certain prospect of an ever-brighter future under Socialism), he has launched an incendiary attack on the Conservative record as the ruling-party in Northern Ireland - which he claims is directly responsible for the breakdown of law and order there, and the necessity for the Government to intervene with force of arms.

"There may be a few people here who would prefer not to hear it," he is saying, with considerable force, "but while the rest of our United Kingdom continues to flourish under Labour, one part - the only part where Conservatives are in power - Tory Northern Ireland, has been brought to its knees economically, and stands on the brink of civil war!"

This does not go down well in the room, and for a good 30 or 40 seconds the PM is forced to wait, hands outstretched in a calming gesture, for the hubbub to subside. He seems, My Father notes with grudging admiration, to be enjoying himself; but behind him, his family - Mary, and both his sons and their wives - look as if they would rather be anywhere else on earth. And behind them, most of the celebrities are looking restless. In the under-populated second row, My Father's eye is momentarily caught by a non-descript middle-aged man, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, with a large case on his lap of the kind that might be used to carry a saxophone.

And then, as the audience finally starts to settle down, the chanting begins. It comes from a small group of burly youngish men in T-shirts, at the back of the room. They're on their feet, swaying, and clapping and stamping rhythmically, to give emphasis to their chant. At first, My Father can't make out what they are saying, but as their volume increases their message quickly gains clarity:

"E-NOCH (stamp-stamp-stamp) WOGS-OUT (stamp-stamp-stamp) E-NOCH (stamp-stamp-stamp) WOGS-OUT (stamp-stamp-stamp) E-NOCH (stamp-stamp-stamp) WOGS-OUT . . . "

As the stewards move in, other voices around the hall - belonging, apparently, to respectable Tory voters - join in, and for a minute or two, before something approximating to an uneasy peace is eventually restored, there seems a real possibility that a proper riot may be about to erupt.

Oh fuck, thinks My Father, this doesn't feel right; this really doesn't feel right, at all.

In his travelling-case - which did indeed once house a tenor sax - Basil Brush relaxes in preparation for his next speaking engagement, at a late night student debate.

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**21.45**

*My Father visits the PM at home*

Back at No 10, My Father - along with Marcia and Haines - is invited by the PM to join him for a nightcap in his flat, and to watch the Tory broadcast, which is on after the news. As Marcia pours Scotch, the PM seems tired but elated. His elderly golden Labrador, Paddy, is asleep on his feet.

"Well, I thought that went rather well?"

"Extremely well, PM." Haines, of course.

"I always enjoy campaigning more when it gets a little . . . combative. I suppose it's the heady whiff of cordite, stirring the old warhorse!"

My Father's feelings are complex. He's gratified, undeniably, to have been granted this first insight into prime ministerial domesticity. At the same time, as he takes in his surroundings - the framed family photos, the lurid plaid rugs on the sofa and chairs, the decorative knick-knacks that carpet every surface, a truly terrible water colour over the fireplace - he is enjoying a scornful sense of aesthetic superiority (he can hardly wait to describe the provincial ghastliness of it all to the Woman He Loves). And he is also still quite shaken by the rancour and barely contained violence of the meeting, and the sense it has given him of a campaign in imminent danger of going off the rails, hurdling the embankment, and plunging into the abyss.

"Pity about Miss Christie," the PM is saying, in a stage-whisper. (Mary has gone to bed immediately upon their return from the meeting.) "But I thought Nicol was very interesting on arts funding. Didn't you, Oriel?"

"Very," says My Father, stirring himself, "though I thought he could have made his point a little more succinctly."

The Scotch is doing its work now, and this gets a small laugh from the company.

"Well, perhaps," says the PM. "But it's certainly something we need to look at after the election. Make a note of it, Marcia."

Don't bother, Marcia, thinks My Father. That isn't going to happen.

Just before 10, Haines switches the TV on, and they settle down to watch the Tory broadcast. At first, there's some jeering and heckling in the room - particularly at the opening sequence, which shows the Leader of the Opposition inter-acting, awkwardly, with crowds of voters ("not really his forte," remarks the PM, whose forte inter-acting with cheering crowds most certainly is). But after the first minute or two, they watch mostly in silence as the broadcast develops its theme of a man not blessed with slick presentation skills, sometimes seen as cold and aloof, but fundamentally serious, substantial, worthy of the nation's trust ("They're admitting he's fucking hopeless," mutters Haines). And then in the last part of the broadcast, Heath himself appears, sitting uncomfortably at his desk, talking to camera with a notable lack of polished fluency, linking national renewal under an incoming Conservative government to his recent victory, as the skipper of *Morning Cloud*, in the Sydney to Hobart yacht race.

"Oh god," groans Marcia, "when's he going to give that a rest?"

When the PM wins the men's singles at Wimbledon, thinks My Father, disloyally - aware that for a serving frontline politician to triumph in a major international sporting contest is an unprecedented achievement, very likely indeed to play extremely well with voters.

As the broadcast ends, the PM relaxes. "Well, nothing much to alarm us there, I'd say."

"Nothing at all, PM," says Haines.

"Although," says Marcia, cautiously, "there may be one or two points there we need to respond to in ours tomorrow?"

"Well, let's leave that until the morning," says the PM, holding out his glass for more Scotch.

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**23.30**

*My Father narrowly avoids being banished to the sofa*

When My Father's taxi drops him outside the North London home of the Woman He Loves, he's surprised to find the high narrow house in darkness. Usually, however late he is, she will be at the kitchen table, drawing, a glass of wine hardly touched by her pad, classical music burbling away at low volume on the stereo. (My Father knows even less about classical music than the popular kind.)

He wonders, momentarily, if perhaps she isn't expecting him - but then reminds himself of the message she left earlier. He lets himself in, using the key she has recently conferred upon him. In the hallway, he calls her name, but there's no reply. He climbs the stairs, past the rooms where her children sleep, to the top floor where her bedroom is.

The bedside reading light is still on, and her book is lying open on the bed. The sheets are pushed back, against the heat, and she is lying, sprawled, arms stretched above her head, wearing only a T-shirt (Hawkwind? My Father wonders what that refers to), very deeply asleep.

On the pillow, on the side of the bed where he sleeps, there is a sheet of paper on which she has written, in her beautiful hand-writing: "If you spent last night with that ghastly woman - EVEN IF YOU DID NOT FUCK HER - you are FORBIDDEN to sleep in this bed tonight! There's a duvet on the sofa downstairs."

For a panicky moment, My Father thinks this refers to the Other Woman, with whom he did indeed spend last night - even if he didn't, technically, fuck her. But how could the Woman He Loves possibly have found out about that? Of course she hasn't, he realises; the "ghastly woman" is My Mother.

And so, with all three women on his mind, as well as a heavy weight of dull conviction that Thursday may turn out to be the most disastrous and disappointing day of his life, My Father sheds his clothes - allowing them to drop to the floor - switches off the bedside light, and slides into bed beside the Woman He Loves.

Lying in the dark, he remembers that he has eaten virtually nothing all day. But he's so exhausted that sleep easily defeats hunger, and soon he is dreaming uneasily of tomorrow's headlines (RACE NARROWS! TORIES' LATE SURGE! CAN LABOUR STILL SNATCH DEFEAT FROM JAWS OF VICTORY?)

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