

I

This gun is not a gun.

Or such was Mr Winser's determined conviction when the youthful Alix Hoban, European Managing Director and Chief Executive of Trans-Finanz Vienna, St Petersburg and Istanbul, introduced a pallid hand into the breast of his Italian blazer and extracted neither a platinum cigarette case nor an engraved business card, but a slim blue-black automatic pistol in mint condition, and pointed it from a distance of six inches at the bridge of Mr Winser's beakish but strictly non-violent nose. This gun does not exist. It is inadmissible evidence. It is no evidence at all. It is a non-gun.

Mr Alfred Winser was a lawyer, and to a lawyer facts were there to be challenged. All facts. The more self-evident a fact might appear to the layman, the more vigorously must the conscientious lawyer contest it. And Winser at that moment was as conscientious as the best of them. Nevertheless, he dropped his briefcase in his astonishment. He heard it fall, he felt the pressure of it linger on his palm, saw with the bottom of his eyes the shadow of it lying at his feet: my briefcase, my pen, my passport, my air tickets and travellers' cheques. My credit cards, my legality. Yet he did not stoop to pick it up, though it had cost a fortune. He remained staring mutely at the non-gun.

This gun is not a gun. This apple is not an apple. Winsor was recalling the wise words of his law tutor of forty years ago as the great man spirited a green apple from the depths of his frayed sports coat and brandished it aloft for the inspection of his mostly female audience: 'It may *look* like an apple, ladies, it may *smell* like an apple, *feel* like an apple' – innuendo – 'but does it *rattle* like an apple?' – shakes it – 'cut like an apple?' – hauls an antique breadknife from a drawer of his desk, strikes. Apple translates into a shower of plaster. Carols of laughter as the great man kicks aside the shards with the toe of his sandal.

But Winsor's reckless flight down memory lane did not stop there. From his tutor's apple it was but a blinding flash of sunlight to his greengrocer in Hampstead where he lived and dearly wished himself at this moment: a cheery, unarmed apple-purveyor in a jolly apron and straw hat who sold, as well as apples, fine fresh asparagus that Winsor's wife Bunny liked, even if she didn't like much else her husband brought her. Green, remember, Alfred, and grown above ground, never the white – pressing the shopping basket on him. And only if they're in season, Alfred, the forced ones never taste. Why did I do it? Why do I have to marry people in order to discover I don't like them? Why can't I make up my mind ahead of the fact instead of after it? What is legal training for, if not to protect us from ourselves? With his terrified brain scouring every avenue of possible escape, Winsor took comfort in these excursions into his internal reality. They fortified him, if only for split seconds, against the unreality of the gun.

This gun *still* does not exist.

But Winsor couldn't take his eyes off it. He had never seen a gun so close, never been obliged to take such intimate note of colour, line, markings, burnishment and style, all perfectly pointed up for him in the glaring sunlight. Does it *fire* like a

gun? Does it *kill* like a gun, *extinguish* like a gun, removing face and features in a shower of plaster? Bravely, he revolted against this ridiculous possibility. This gun does not, absolutely does *not* exist! It is a chimera, a trick of white sky, heat and sunstroke. It is a fever gun brought on by bad food, bad marriages and two exhausting days of smoky consultations, unsettling limousine rides through sweltering, dusty, traffic-choked Istanbul, by a giddy early-morning dash in the Trans-Finanz private jet above the brown massifs of central Turkey, by a suicidal three-hour drive over switchback coast roads and hairpin bends under red rock precipices to the world's utter end, this arid boulder-strewn promontory of buckthorn and broken beehives six hundred feet above the Eastern Mediterranean, with the morning sun already turned to full, and Hoban's unblinking gun – still there and still a phantasm – peering like a surgeon into my brain.

He closed his eyes. See? he told Bunny. No gun. But Bunny was bored as usual, urging him to have his pleasure and leave her in peace, so instead he addressed the Bench, a thing he hadn't done for thirty years:

My Lord, it is my pleasant duty to advise the Court that the matter of Winser versus Hoban has been amicably resolved. Winser accepts that he was mistaken in suggesting that Hoban brandished a gun during a site conference in the southern Turkish hills. Hoban in return has provided a full and satisfactory explanation of his actions . . .

And after that, out of habit or respect, he addressed his Chairman, Managing Director and Svengali for the last twenty years, the eponymous founder and creator of the House of Single, the one and only Tiger Single himself:

It's Winser here, Tiger. Very well indeed, thank you, sir, and how about your good self? Delighted to hear it. Yes, I

think I can say that everything is exactly as you wisely predicted, and the response to date has been entirely satisfactory. Only one small thing – water under the bridge now – not a breakpoint – our client’s man Hoban gave the impression of drawing a gun on me. Nothing in it, all a fantasy, but one does like to be forewarned . . .

Even when he opened his eyes and saw the gun exactly where it had been before, and Hoban’s childlike eyes contemplating him down its barrel, and his child’s hairless forefinger crooked round the trigger, Winser did not abandon the remnants of his legal position. Very well, this gun exists as an object, but not as a gun. It is a joke gun. An amusing, harmless, practical joke. Hoban purchased it for his small son. It is a facsimile of a gun and Hoban, in order to introduce some light relief into what for a young man has no doubt been a lengthy and tedious negotiation, is flourishing it as a prank. Through numb lips, Winser contrived a species of jaunty smile in keeping with his newest theory.

‘Well, that’s a persuasive argument, I must say, Mr Hoban,’ he declared bravely. ‘What do you want me to do? Waive our fee?’

But in reply he heard only a hammering of coffin-makers, which he hastily converted to the clatter of builders in the little tourist port across the bay as they fixed shutters and roof-tiles and pipes in a last-minute rush to make ready for the season after playing backgammon all winter. In his longing for normality, Winser savoured the smells of paint-stripper, blowtorches, fish cooking on charcoal, the spices of street vendors, and all the other lovely and less lovely scents of Mediterranean Turkey. Hoban barked something in Russian to his colleagues. Winser heard a scramble of feet behind him but dared not turn his head. Hands yanked his jacket from his

back, others explored his body – armpits, ribs, spine, groin. Memories of more acceptable hands momentarily replaced those of his assailants, but provided no solace as they groped their way downward to his calves and ankles, searching for a secret weapon. Winser had never carried a weapon in his life, secret or otherwise, unless it was his cherrywood walking stick to fend off rabid dogs and sex maniacs when he was taking a turn on Hampstead Heath to admire the lady joggers.

Reluctantly he remembered Hoban's too-many hangers-on. Seduced by the gun, he had briefly imagined it was just Hoban and himself alone here on the hilltop, face to face and nobody in earshot, a situation any lawyer expects to use to his advantage. He now conceded that ever since they had left Istanbul, Hoban had been attended by a gaggle of unappetising advisers. A Signor d'Emilio and a Monsieur François had joined them on their departure from Istanbul airport, coats over their shoulders, no arms showing. Winser had cared for neither man. Two more undesirables had been waiting for them at Dalaman, equipped with their own hearse-black Land Rover and driver. From Germany, Hoban had explained, introducing the pair, though not by name. From Germany they might be, but in Winser's hearing they spoke only Turkish and they wore the undertaker suits of country Turks on business.

More hands grabbed Winser by the hair and shoulders and flung him to his knees on the sandy track. He heard goat bells tinkling and decided they were the bells of St John at Hampstead tolling out his burial. Other hands took his loose change, spectacles and handkerchief. Others again picked up his treasured briefcase and he watched it as in a bad dream: his identity, his security, floating from one pair of hands to another, six hundred pounds' worth of matchless black hide, rashly bought at Zürich airport with cash drawn from a funk-money

bank account Tiger had encouraged him to open. Well, next time you're in a generous mood, you can bloody well buy me a decent handbag, Bunny is complaining in the rising nasal whine that promises there is more to come. I'll flit, he thought. Bunny gets Hampstead, I buy a flat in Zürich, one of those new terraces on a hillside. Tiger will understand.

Winser's screen was suffused with a vibrant yellow wash and he let out a shriek of agony. Horned hands had seized his wrists, dragged them behind him and twisted them in opposing directions. His shriek hurtled from one hilltop to the next on its way to extinction. Kindly at first, as a dentist might, more hands raised his head, then yanked it round by the hair to meet the sun's full blast.

'Hold it right there,' a voice ordered in English and Winser found himself squinting up at the concerned features of Signor d'Emilio, a white-haired man of Winser's age. Signor d'Emilio is our consultant from Naples, Hoban had said in the vile American-Russian twang that he had picked up God knew where. How very nice, Winser had replied, using Tiger's drawl when Tiger didn't want to be impressed, and granted him a tepid smile. Hobbled in the sand, his arms and shoulders screaming bloody murder, Winser wished very much that he had shown respect to Signor d'Emilio while he'd had the opportunity.

D'Emilio was wandering up the hillside and Winser would have liked to wander with him, arm in arm, chaps together, while he put right any false impression he might have given. But he was obliged to remain kneeling, his face twisted to the scalding sun. He pressed his eyes shut but the sun's rays still bathed them in a yellow flood. He was kneeling but straining sideways and upright and the pain that was entering his knees was the same pain that tore through his shoulders in

alternating currents. He worried about his hair. He had never wished to dye it, he had only contempt for those who did. But when his barber persuaded him to try a rinse and see, Bunny had ordered him to persist. How do you think I feel, Alfred? Going around with an old man with milky hair for a husband? – But my dear, my hair was that colour when I married you! – Worse luck me, then, she had replied.

I should have taken Tiger's advice, set her up in a flat somewhere, Dolphin Square, the Barbican. I should have fired her as my secretary and kept her as my little friend without suffering the humiliation of being her husband. Don't marry her, Winser, buy her! Cheaper in the long run, always is, Tiger had assured him – then given them both a week in Barbados for their honeymoon. He opened his eyes. He was wondering where his hat was, a snappy Panama he had bought in Istanbul for sixty dollars. He saw that his friend d'Emilio was wearing it, to the entertainment of the two dark-suited Turks. First they laughed together. Then they turned together and peered at Winser from their chosen place halfway up the hillside as if he were a play. Sourly. Interrogatively. Spectators not participants. Bunny, watching me make love to her. Having a nice time down there, are you? Well, get on with it, I'm tired. He glanced at the driver of the jeep that had driven him the last leg from the foot of the mountain. The man's got a kind face, he'll save me. And a married daughter in Izmir.

Kind face or not, the driver had gone to sleep. In the 'Turks' hearse-black Land Rover further down the track, a second driver sat with his mouth open, gawping straight ahead of him, seeing nothing.

'Hoban,' Winser said.

A shadow fell across his eyes, and the sun by now was so high that whoever was casting it must be standing close to

him. He felt sleepy. Good idea. Wake up somewhere else. Squinting downward through sweat-matted eyelashes he saw a pair of crocodile shoes protruding from elegant white ducks with turn-ups. He squinted higher and identified the black, enquiring features of Monsieur François, yet another of Hoban's satraps. Monsieur François is our surveyor. He will be taking measurements of the proposed site, Hoban had announced at Istanbul airport, and Winser had foolishly granted the surveyor the same tepid smile that he had bestowed on Signor d'Emilio.

One of the crocodile shoes shifted and in his drowsy state Winser wondered whether Monsieur François proposed to kick him with it, but evidently not. He was offering something obliquely to Winser's face. A pocket tape recorder, Winser decided. The sweat in his eyes was making them smart. He wants me to speak words of reassurance to my loved ones for when they ransom me: Tiger, sir, this is Alfred Winser, the last of the Winsers, as you used to call me, and I want you to know I'm absolutely fine, nothing to worry about at all, everything ace. These are good people and they are looking after me superbly. I've learned to respect their cause, whatever it is, and when they release me, which they've promised to do any minute now, I shall speak out boldly for it in the forums of world opinion. Oh, and I hope you don't mind, I've promised them that you will too, only they're most concerned to have the benefit of your powers of persuasion . . .

He's holding it against my other cheek. He's frowning at it. It's not a tape recorder after all, it's a thermometer. No it's not, it's for reading my pulse, making sure I'm not passing out. He's putting it back in his pocket. He's swinging up the hill to join the two German Turk undertakers and Signor d'Emilio in my Panama hat.

Winser discovered that, in the strain of ruling out the unacceptable, he had wet himself. A clammy patch had formed in the left inside-leg of the trouser of his tropical suit and there was nothing he could do to conceal it. He was in limbo, in terror. He was transposing himself to other places. He was sitting late at his desk at the office because he couldn't stand another night of waiting up for Bunny to come home from her mother's in a bad temper with her cheeks flushed. He was with a chubby friend he used to love in Chiswick, and she was tying him to the bedhead with bits of dressing gown girdle she kept in a top drawer. He was anywhere, absolutely anywhere except here on this hilltop in hell. He was asleep but he went on kneeling, skewed upright and racked with pain. There must have been splinters of seashell or flint in the sand because he could feel points cutting into his kneecaps. Ancient pottery, he remembered. Roman pottery abounds on the hilltops, and the hills are said to contain gold. Only yesterday he had made this tantalising selling point to Hoban's retinue during his eloquent presentation of the Single investment blueprint in Dr Mirsky's office in Istanbul. Such touches of colour were attractive to ignorant investors, particularly boorish Russians. *Gold, Hoban! Treasure, Hoban! Ancient civilisation, think of the appeal!* He had talked brilliantly, provocatively, a virtuoso performance. Even Mirsky, whom Winser secretly regarded as an upstart and a liability, had found it in him to applaud: 'Your scheme is so legal, Alfred, it ought to be forbidden,' he had roared and, with a huge Polish laugh, slapped him so hard on the back that his knees nearly buckled.

'Please. Before I shoot you, Mr Winser, I am instructed to ask you couple of questions.'

Winser made nothing of this. He didn't hear it. He was dead.

'You are friendly with Mr Randy Massingham?' Hoban asked.

'I know him.'

'How friendly?'

Which do they want? Winser was screaming to himself. Very friendly? Scarcely at all? Middling friendly? Hoban was repeating his question, yelling it insistently.

'Describe please the exact degree of your friendship with Mr Randy Massingham. Very clearly, please. Very loudly.'

'I know him. I am his colleague. I do legal work for him. We are on formal, perfectly pleasant terms, but we are not intimate,' Winser mumbled, keeping his options open.

'Louder, please.'

Winser said some of it again, louder.

'You are wearing a fashionable cricket tie, Mr Winser. Describe to us what is represented by this tie, please.'

'This isn't a *cricket* tie!' Unexpectedly Winser had found his spirit. 'Tiger's the cricketer, not me! You've got the wrong man, you idiot!'

'Testing,' Hoban said to someone up the hill.

'Testing what?' Winser demanded gamely.

Hoban was reading from a Gucci prayer book of maroon leather that he held open before his face, at an angle not to obstruct the barrel of the automatic.

'Question,' he declaimed, festive as a town crier. 'Who was responsible please for arrest at sea last week of SS *Free Tallinn* out of Odessa bound for Liverpool?'

'What do *I* know of shipping matters?' Winser demanded truculently, his courage still up. 'We're financial consultants, not shippers. Someone has money, they need advice, they come to Single's. How they *make* the money is their affair. As long as they're adult about it.'

Adult to sting. *Adult* because Hoban was a pink piglet, hardly born. *Adult* because Mirsky was a bumptious Polish show-off, however many doctors he put before his name. Doctor of where, anyway? Of what? Hoban again glanced up the hill, licked a finger and turned to the next page of his prayer book.

‘Question. Who provided informations to the Italian police authorities concerning a special convoy of trucks returning from Bosnia to Italy on March thirtieth this year, please?’

‘Trucks? What do I know of special *trucks*? As much as you know of cricket, that’s how much! Ask me to recite the names and dates of the kings of Sweden, you’d have more chance.’

Why Sweden? he wondered. What had Sweden to do with anything? Why was he thinking of Swedish blondes, deep white thighs, Swedish crispbread, pornographic films? Why was he living in Sweden when he was dying in Turkey? Never mind. His courage was still up there. Screw the little runt, gun or no gun. Hoban turned another page of his prayer book but Winser was ahead of him. Like Hoban, he was bellowing at the top of his voice: ‘I don’t *know*, you stupid idiot! Don’t ask me, do you hear?’ – until an immense blow to the left side of his neck from Hoban’s foot sent him crashing to the ground. He had no sense of travelling, only of arriving. The sun went out, he saw the night and felt his head nestled against a friendly rock and knew that a piece of time had gone missing from his consciousness and it was not a piece he wanted back.

Hoban, meanwhile, had resumed his reading. ‘Who implemented seizure in six countries simultaneously of all assets and shipping held directly or indirectly by First Flag Construction Company of Andorra and subsidiaries? Who provided information to international police authorities, please?’

‘What seizure? Where? When? Nothing has been seized!’

No one provided anything. You're mad, Hoban! Barking mad. Do you hear me? Mad!

Winser was still recumbent but in his frenzy he was trying to writhe his way back onto his knees, kicking and twisting like a felled animal, struggling to wedge his heels under him, half-rising, only to topple back again onto his side. Hoban was asking other questions but Winser refused to hear them – questions about commissions paid in vain, about supposedly friendly port officials who had proved unfriendly, about sums of money transferred to bank accounts days before the said accounts were seized. But Winser knew nothing of such matters.

'It's lies!' he shouted. 'Single's is a dependable and honest house. Our customers' interests are paramount.'

'Listen up, and kneel up,' Hoban ordered.

And somehow Winser with his newfound dignity knelt up and listened up. Intently. And more intently still. As intently as if Tiger himself had been commanding his attention. Never in his life had he listened so vigorously, so diligently to the sweet background music of the universe as he did now, in his effort to blank out the one sound he absolutely declined to hear, which was Hoban's grating Russian-American drone. He noted with delight a shrieking of gulls vying with the distant wail of a muezzin, a rustle of the sea as a breeze blew over it, a tink-tink of pleasure boats in the bay as they geared themselves for the season. He saw a girl from his early manhood, kneeling naked in a field of poppies, and was too scared, now as then, to reach a hand towards her. He adored with the terrified love that was welling in him all the tastes, touches and sounds of Earth and Heaven, as long as they weren't Hoban's awful voice booming out his death sentence.

'We are calling this exemplary punishment,' Hoban was declaring, in a prepared statement from his prayer book.

‘Louder,’ Monsieur François ordered laconically from up the hill, so Hoban said the sentence again.

‘Sure, it’s a vengeance killing too. Please. We would not be human if we did not exact vengeance. But also we intend this gesture will be interpreted as formal request for recompense.’ Louder still. And clearer. ‘And we sincerely hope, Mr Winser, that your friend Mr Tiger Single, and the international police, will read this message and draw the appropriate conclusion.’

Then he bawled out what Winser took to be the same message in Russian, for the benefit of those members of his audience whose English might not be up to the mark. Or was it Polish for the greater edification of Dr Mirsky?

Winser, who had momentarily lost his power of speech, was now gradually recovering it, even if at first he was capable only of such half-made scraps as ‘out of your wits’ and ‘judge and jury in one’ and ‘Single not a House to mess with’. He was filthy, he was a mess of sweat and piss and mud. In his fight for the survival of his species he was wrestling with irrelevant erotic visions that belonged to some unlivable underlife, and his fall to the ground had left him coated in red dust. His locked arms were a martyrdom and he had to crane his head back to speak at all. But he managed. He held the line.

His case was that, as previously stated, he was *de facto* and *de jure* immune. He was a lawyer and the law was its own protection. He was a healer not a destroyer, a passive facilitator of unlimited goodwill, the legal director and a board member of the House of Single with offices in London’s West End, he was a husband and father who, despite a weakness for women and two unfortunate divorces, had kept the love of his children. He had a daughter who was even now embarking on a promising

career on the stage. At the mention of his daughter he choked though no one joined him in his grief.

'Keep your voice up!' Monsieur François the surveyor advised from above him.

Winsor's tears were making tracks in the dust on his cheeks, giving the impression of disintegrating make-up, but he kept going, he still held the line. He was a specialist in preemptive tax planning and investment, he said, rolling his head right back and screaming at the white sky. His specialities embraced offshore companies, trusts, havens, and the tax shelters of all accommodating nations. He was not a marine lawyer as Dr Mirsky claimed to be, not a dicey entrepreneur like Mirsky, not a gangster. He dealt in the art of the legitimate, in transferring informal assets to firmer ground. And to this he added a wild postscript regarding legal second passports, alternative citizenship and non-obligatory residency in more than a dozen climatically and fiscally attractive countries. But he was not – repeat *not*, he insisted boldly – and never had been – involved in what he would call the *methodologies* of accumulating primary wealth. He remembered that Hoban had some kind of military past – or was it naval?

'We're *boffins*, Hoban, don't you see? Backroom boys! Planners! Strategists! You're the men of action, not *us*! You and Mirsky, if you want, since you seem to be so hugger-mugger with him!'

No one applauded. No one said Amen. But no one stopped him either and their silence convinced him that they were listening. The gulls had ceased their clamour. Across the bay it could have been siesta time. Hoban was looking at his watch again. It was becoming a fidget with him: to keep both hands on the gun while he rolled his left wrist inwards till the watch showed. He rolled it out again. A gold Rolex. What they all

aspire to. Mirsky wears one too. Bold talking had given Winsor his strength back. He took a breath and pulled what he imagined was a smile communicating reason. In a frenzy of companionability he began babbling tidbits from his presentation of the previous day in Istanbul.

‘It’s *your land*, Hoban! You own it. Six million dollars cash, you paid – dollar bills, pounds, Deutschmarks, yen, francs, liquorice allsorts – baskets, suitcases, trunks full, not a question asked! Remember? Who arranged that? We did! Sympathetic officials, tolerant politicians, people with influence – remember? Single’s fronted it all for you, washed your grubby money Persil white! Overnight, remember? You heard what Mirsky said – so legal it ought to be forbidden. Well, it’s not. It’s legal!’

No one said they remembered.

Winsor became breathless, and a little crazy. ‘Reputable private bank, Hoban – us – remember? Registered in Monaco, offers to buy *your land* lock, stock and barrel. Do you accept? No! You’ll take paper only, never cash! And our bank agrees to that. It agrees to everything, of course it does. Because we’re *you*, remember? We’re *yourselves* in another hat. We’re a bank but we’re using *your* money to buy *your* land! You can’t shoot *yourselves*! We’re *you* – we’re *one*.’

Too shrill. He checked himself. Objective is the thing. Laid-back. Detached. Never oversell yourself. That’s Mirsky’s problem. Ten minutes of Mirsky’s patter and any self-respecting trader is halfway out of the door.

‘Look at the numbers, Hoban! The beauty of it! Your own thriving holiday village – accounted any way you like! Look at the cleansing power once you start to invest! Twelve million for roads, drainage, power, lido, communal pool, ten for your rental cottages, hotels, casinos, restaurants and additional infrastructure – the merest child could get it up to thirty!’

He was going to add 'even you, Hoban' but suppressed himself in time. Were they hearing him? Perhaps he should speak louder. He roared. D'Emilio smiled. Of course! Loud is what d'Emilio likes! Well, I like it too! Loud is free. Loud is openness, legality, transparency! Loud is boys together, partners, being one! Loud is sharing hats!

'You don't even need *tenants*, Hoban – not for your cottages – not for your first year! Not *real* ones – ghost tenants for twelve straight months, imagine! *Notional* residents paying *two million a week* into shops, hotels, discos, restaurants and rented properties! The money straight out of your suitcase, through the company's books, into legitimate *European* bank accounts! Generating an immaculate *trading record* for any future purchaser of the shares! – and who's the purchaser? *You are!* Who's the seller? *You are!* You sell to yourself, you buy from yourself, up and up! And Single's there as honest broker, to see fair play, keep everything on course and above board! We're your friends, Hoban! We're not fly-by-night Mirskys. We're brothers-in-arms. Buddies! There when you need us. Even when the rub of the cloth goes against you, we're still there –' quoting Tiger desperately.

A burst of rain fell out of the clear heaven, laying the red dust, raising scents and drawing more lines on Winser's clotted face. He saw d'Emilio step forward in their shared Panama and decided he had won his case and was about to be lifted to his feet, slapped on the back and awarded the congratulations of the Court.

But d'Emilio had other plans. He was draping a white raincoat over Hoban's shoulders. Winser tried to faint but couldn't. He was screaming *Why? Friends! Don't!* He was blabbering that he had never heard of the *Free Tallinn*, never met anyone from the international police authorities, his whole life had been

spent avoiding them. D'Emilio was fitting something round Hoban's head. Mother of God, a black cap. No, a ring of black cloth. No, a stocking, a black stocking. Oh God, oh Christ, oh Mother of Heaven and Earth, a black stocking to distort the features of my executioner!

'Hoban. Tiger. Hoban. Listen to me. Stop looking at your watch! Bunny. Stop! Mirsky. Wait! What have I done to you? Nothing but good, I swear it! Tiger! All my life! Wait! Stop!'

By the time he had blurted these words his English had begun to labour as if he were interpreting from other languages in his head. Yet he possessed no other languages, no Russian, no Polish, no Turkish, no French. He stared round him and saw Monsieur François the surveyor standing up the hill, wearing earphones and peering through the sights of a movie camera with a sponge-covered microphone fitted to its barrel. He saw the black-masked and white-shrouded figure of Hoban posed obligingly in the shooting position, one leg histrionically set back, one hand folded round the gun that was trained on Winser's left temple and the other clutching a cellphone to his ear while he kept his eyes on Winser and softly whispered sweet nothings in Russian into the extended mouthpiece. He saw Hoban take one last look at his watch while Monsieur François made ready, in the best tradition of photography, to immortalise that very special moment. And he saw a smear-faced boy peering down at him from a cleft between two promontories. He had big brown unbelieving eyes, like Winser's when he was the same age, and he was lying on his stomach and using both hands as a pillow for his chin.

‘Oliver Hawthorne. Come up here immediately if you please. At the double. You’re wanted.’

In the small south English hilltown of Abbots Quay on the coast of Devon, on a sparkling spring morning that smelt of cherry blossom, Mrs Elsie Watmore stood in the front porch of her Victorian boarding house and bawled cheerfully at her lodger, Oliver, twelve steps below her on the pavement where he was loading battered black suitcases into his Japanese van with the assistance of her ten-year-old son, Sammy. Mrs Watmore had descended on Abbots Quay from the elegant spa of Buxton in the north, bringing her own high standards of decorum. Her boarding house was a Victorian symphony of furled lace, gilt mirrors and miniature bottles of liqueur in glass-fronted cabinets. Its name was the Mariners’ Rest, and she had lived there happily with Sammy, and her husband Jack until he died at sea within sight of his retirement. She was an abundant woman, intelligent, comely and compassionate. Her Derbyshire twang, lifted for comic effect, resounded like a bandsaw over the plunging seaside terraces. She was wearing a rakish mauve silk headscarf because it was a Friday, and on Fridays she always did her hair. A mild sea breeze was blowing.

‘Sammy darling, jab your elbow in Ollie’s ribs for me and

tell him he's wanted on the telephone, please – he's asleep as usual – in the hall, Ollie! Mr Toogood from the bank. Routine papers to sign, he says, but urgent – and he's being very polite and gentlemanly for a change, so don't spoil it or he'll be cutting down my overdraft again.' She waited, indulging him, which with Ollie was about all you could do. Nothing stirs him, she thought. Not when he's inside himself. I could be an air-raid and he wouldn't hear me. 'Sammy will finish loading for you, won't you, Samuel, of course you will,' she added by way of further incentive.

Again she waited, to no avail. Oliver's pudgy face, shadowed by the onion-seller's beret which was his trademark, was locked in a ferocious pout of concentration as he passed Sammy another black suitcase for him to fit into the back of the van. They're two of a feather, she thought indulgently, watching Sammy try the suitcase all ways on because he was slow, and slower since his father's death. Everything's a problem for them, never mind how small it is. You'd think they were off to Monte Carlo, not just down the road. The suitcases were of the commercial traveller's sort, rexine-covered, each a different size. Beside them stood an inflated red ball two feet in circumference.

'It's not "Where's our Ollie?" – it's not like that at all,' she persisted, by now convinced the bank manager had rung off. 'It's "Kindly have the goodness to bring Mr Oliver Hawthorne to the telephone," more like. You've not won the lottery, have you, Ollie? Only you wouldn't tell us, would you, which is you all over, being strong and silent. Put that down, Sammy. Ollie will help you with it after he's spoken to Mr Toogood. You'll drop it next.' Bunching her fists she plonked them on her hips in mock exasperation: 'Oliver Hawthorne. Mr Toogood is a highly paid executive of our bank. We can't let him listen to a

vacuum at a hundred pounds an hour. He'll be putting up our charges next, and you'll be the one to blame.'

But by then, what with the sunshine and the languor of the spring day, her thoughts had taken their own strange turn, which with Ollie they tended to. She was thinking what a picture they made, brothers almost, even if they weren't that similar: Ollie, big as an Alp in his grey-wolf overcoat that he wore all weathers, never mind the neighbours or the looks he got; Sammy, haggard and beaky like his father, with his cat's tongue of silky brown hair and the leather bomber jacket Ollie had given him for his birthday and Sammy had hardly taken off since.

She was remembering the day Oliver first arrived on her doorstep looking crumpled and enormous in his overcoat, two days' beard and just a small suitcase in his hand. Nine in the morning it was, she was clearing breakfast. 'Can I come and live here, please?' he says – not, have you got a room? or can I see it? or how much for a night? – just 'Can I come and live here?' like a lost child. And it's raining, so how can she leave him standing there on the doorstep? They talk about the weather, he admires her mahogany sideboard and her ormolu clock. She shows him the parlour and the dining room, she tells him the rules and takes him upstairs and shows him number seven with its view of the churchyard if he didn't find it too depressing. No, he says, he's got no objection to sharing with the dead. Which is not how Elsie would have put it, not since Mr Watmore went, but they still manage to have a good laugh. Yes, he says, he's got more luggage coming, mostly books and stuff.

'And a disgraceful old van,' he adds shyly. 'If it's a bother, I'll shove it down the road.'

'It's no bother whatever,' she replies primly. 'We're not like that at the Rest, Mr Hawthorne, and I hope we never will be.'

And the next thing she knows, he's paying a month in advance, four hundred pounds counted onto the washstand, a gift from Heaven considering her overdraft.

'You're not on the run, are you, dear?' she asks him, making a joke of it, but not quite, when they're back downstairs. First he puzzles, then he blushes. Then to her relief he cracks a five-star sunny smile that makes everything all right.

'Not now I'm not, am I?' he says.

'And him over there's Sammy,' Elsie says, pointing to the half-open parlour door because Sammy as usual has tiptoed downstairs to spy out the new lodger. 'Come on out, Sammy, you've been spotted.'

And a week later it's Sammy's birthday and that leather jacket must have cost fifty quid if a shilling, and Elsie fretted herself sick about it because these days men got up to everything, never mind how charming they were when they needed to be. All night long she sat up beating her brains to guess what her poor Jack would have done, because Jack with his years at sea had a nose for them. He could smell them as soon as they came up the gangway, he used to boast, and she was fearful that Oliver was another and she'd missed the signs. Next morning she was halfway to telling Ollie to take that jacket straight back to where he'd bought it – would have done, in fact, if she hadn't been chatting to Mrs Eggar of Glenarvon in the checkout queue at Safeway and learned to her astonishment that Ollie had a baby girl called Carmen and an ex-wife called Heather who'd been a no-good nurse up at the Freeborn, into bed with anybody who could work a stethoscope. Not to mention a plush house on Shore Heights that he'd made over to her, paid and signed, not a penny owing, some girls made you sick.

'Why did you never tell me you were a proud father?' Elsie

asked Ollie reproachfully, torn between the relief of her discovery and the indignity of receiving sensational intelligence from a competing landlady. 'We love a baby, don't we, Samuel? Baby-mad we are, just as long as they don't bother the lodgers, aren't we?'

To which Ollie said nothing: just lowered his head and muttered, 'Yeah, well, see you,' like a man caught in shame, and went to his room to pace, very lightly, not wanting to disturb, which was Ollie all over. Till finally the pacing stopped and she heard his chair creak, and knew he'd settled to one of his books piled round him on his floor although she'd given him a bookcase – books on law, ethics, magic, books in foreign – all sipped at and nibbled at and put down again on their faces, or with bits of torn paper stuck in to mark the place. It made her shudder sometimes, just to wonder what a cocktail of thoughts he must have churning away inside that shambling body of his.

And his binges – three there'd been till now – so controlled they scared the wits out of her. Oh, she'd had lodgers who took a drop. Shared a drop with them sometimes, to be friendly, keep an eye. But never before had a taxi pulled up at day-break, twenty yards down the road so as not to wake anyone, and delivered a deathly pale, mummified six-foot-something hulk who had to be nursed up the steps like a bomb casualty, with his overcoat hung round him and his beret straight as a ruler across his forehead – yet was still able to fish out his wallet, select a twenty for the driver, whisper, 'Sorry, Elsie,' and with only a little help from her, haul himself upstairs without disturbing a soul except Sammy who had waited all night for him. Through the morning and afternoon, Oliver had slept, which is to say Elsie heard no creak or footfall through the ceiling, and listened in vain for the knocking of the water pipes.

And when she went upstairs to him, taking a cup of tea as an excuse, and tapped on his bedroom door and heard nothing, and fearfully turned the handle, she found him not on his bed but on the floor and on his side, still wearing his overcoat, with his knees drawn up to his tummy the same as a baby, eyes wide awake, staring at the wall.

'Thank you, Elsie. Just put it on the table if you would,' he said patiently, as if he had more staring to do. So she did. And left him, and back downstairs had wondered whether she should call the doctor but she never did – not then, and not the other times that followed.

What was burning him? The divorce? That ex-wife of his was a hard-nosed tart by all accounts, and neurotic with it, he was lucky to be rid of her. What was he trying to drink away that the drink only drove deeper down in him? Here Elsie's thoughts returned, as latterly they always did, to the night three weeks ago when for a terrible hour she had believed she was going to lose her Sammy to a home or worse, until Oliver rode up on his white horse to rescue them. I'll never be able to thank him. I'd do anything he asked me to, tomorrow or tonight.

Cadgwith, the man called himself, and waved a shiny visiting card at her to prove it – P. J. Cadgwith, Area Supervisor, Friendship Home Marketing Limited, Branches Everywhere. Do your Friends a Favour, said the fine writing underneath, Earn Yourself a Fortune in your Home. Standing where Elsie was standing now, with his finger on the doorbell at ten o'clock at night, and his slicked-back hair and copper's polished shoes glistening in the fisheye, and a copper's false courtesy.

'I'd like to speak to Mr Samuel Watmore, if I may, madam. Is that your husband, by any chance?'

'My husband's dead,' said Elsie. 'Sammy's my son. What do you want?'

Which was only the first mistake she made, as she realised when it was too late. She should have told him Jack was down at the pub and due back any minute. She should have told him Jack would give him a good leathering if he so much as put his dirty nose inside her house. She should have slammed the door in his face, which Ollie afterwards told her she'd a perfect right to do, instead of letting him walk past her into the hall, then almost without thinking, calling out, 'Sammy, where are you, darling, there's a gentleman to see you,' a split second before she glimpsed him through the half-open parlour door, on his tummy with his bottom in the air and his eyes closed, wriggling behind the sofa. After that she had only bits of memory, the worst bits, nothing whole:

Sammy standing in the centre of the parlour, dead white and his eyes closed, shaking his head but meaning yes. Mrs Watmore whispering, 'Sammy.' Cadgwith with his chin back like an emperor, saying, 'Where, show me, where?' Sammy groping in the ginger jar for where he'd hidden the key. Elsie with Sammy and Cadgwith in Jack's woodshed where Jack and Sammy used to make their model boats together whenever Jack came home on leave, Spanish galleons, dinghies, long-boats, all hand-carved, never a kit. It was what Sammy had loved doing best in the world which was why he went and moped there after Jack died, till Elsie decided it was unhealthy for him, and locked the shed up as a way of helping him forget. Sammy opening the shed cupboards one by one, and there it all was: heap upon heap of sales samples from Friendship Home Marketing, Branches Everywhere, Do your Friends a Favour, Earn Yourself a Fortune in your Home, except that Sammy hadn't done anyone a favour or earned himself a penny. He'd

signed himself on as agent for the neighbourhood and he'd stored everything away for treasure to make up for his lost dad, or perhaps it was a kind of gift to him: costume jewellery, eternal clocks, Norwegian roll-neck pullovers, plastic bubbles to enlarge your TV image, scent, hairspray, pocket computers, ladies and gentlemen in wooden chalets who came out for rain or sun – seventeen hundred and thirty quids' worth, Mr Cadgwith reckoned back in the parlour, which with interest and loss of earnings and travel time and overtime and the date added in, he rounded up to eighteen hundred and fifty, then for friendship's sake down again to eighteen hundred for cash, or up again to a hundred a month for twenty-four months with the first instalment due today.

How Sammy had ever put his mind to such a thing – sent away for the forms and faked his date of birth and everything, all without anyone in the world to help him – was beyond Elsie's comprehension but he had, because Mr Cadgwith had the documentation with him, printed up and folded into an official-looking brown envelope with a button and a cotton loop to fasten it, first the contract that Sammy had signed, giving his age as forty-five which was how old Jack was when he died, then the impressive Solemn Undertaking to Pay with embossed lions on each corner for extra solemnity. And Elsie would have signed everything on the spot, signed away the Rest and whatever else she didn't own, just to get Sammy off the hook, if Ollie by the Grace of God hadn't happened to shamle in from his last gig of the day still in his beret and grey-wolf coat to find Sammy sitting on the sofa looking dead with his eyes open – and as to herself, well, after Jack went she thought she'd never weep again in her life, but she was wrong.

First of all Ollie read the papers slowly, wrinkling his nose and rubbing it and frowning like somebody who knows what

he's looking for and doesn't like it, while Cadgwith watched him. He read once, then frowned more fiercely still and read again, and this time as he read, he seemed to straighten up or shape up or square up, or whatever it was that men did when they were getting ready for a scrap. It was a real coming-out-of-hiding that she was watching, like the moment in a movie she and Sammy loved, when the Scots hero strides out of the cave with his armour on, and you know he's the one, although you knew it all along. And Cadgwith must have spotted something of this, because by the time Ollie had read Sammy's contract a third time – and after it the Solemn Undertaking to Pay – he had gone a bit poorly-looking.

'Show me the figures,' Ollie ordered, so Cadgwith handed him the figures, pages of them, with the interest added in, and everything at the bottom of the page printed red. And Ollie read the figures too, with the kind of sureness you only see in bankers or accountants, read them as fast as if they were just words.

'You haven't a bloody leg to stand on,' he told Cadgwith. 'The contract's a lot of codswallop, the accounts are a joke, Sam's a minor and you're a crook. Pick up and piss off.'

And of course Ollie's a big fellow, and when he's not speaking to you through a wad of cotton wool he's got the voice – a strong, upright, officer-class voice, the sort you get in courtroom melodramas. And he's got the eyes too, when he looks at you properly instead of at the floor three yards ahead of him. Angry eyes. Eyes like those poor Irishmen had after years in jail for things they'd never done. And being tall and big, Oliver stood close to Cadgwith, and stayed close to him all the way to the front door, looking attentive. And at the door he said something to Cadgwith to help him on his way. And though Elsie never caught his words, Sammy heard them plainly, because

over the next weeks while he was recovering his sparkle he repeated them at any odd moment like a motto to cheer him up: 'And if you ever come back here, I'll break your dirty little neck,' in a nice low measured, unemotional voice, no threat intended just information, but it kept Sammy going through his recovery. Because all the time while Sammy and Ollie were in the woodshed packing up the treasures to send back to Friendship Home Marketing, Sammy went on muttering it to keep his spirits up: 'If you ever come back here, I'll break your dirty little neck,' like a prayer of hope.

Oliver had finally consented to hear her.

'I can't talk to him now, thank you, Else, I'm afraid it's not convenient,' he replied, manners perfect as always, from inside the darkness of his beret. Then he stretched himself, one of his writhes, arching his long back and shoving both arms down behind him, and his chin tucked in like a guardsman called to order. Standing his full height this way, and his full width, he was too tall for Sammy and too wide for the van, which was red and upright and had UNCLE OLLIE'S MAGIC BUS painted on its side in pink bubble writing defaced by bad parking and vandals.

'We've got a one o'clock in Teignmouth and a three o'clock in Torquay,' he explained, somehow cramming himself into the driving seat. Sammy was already beside him clutching the red ball, banging his head against it, impatient to be off. 'And the Sally Army at six.' The engine coughed, but that was all. 'They want bloody Take That,' he added over Sammy's howl of frustration.

He turned the key a second time, without success. He's flooded it again, she thought. He'll be late for his own funeral. 'If we haven't got Take That, we're not to bother, right,

Sammy?’ – twisting the key a third time. The van’s engine hobbled reluctantly to life. ‘So long, Else. Tell him I’ll phone him tomorrow, please. Morning. Before work. And stop playing silly buggers, you,’ he ordered Sammy. ‘Don’t bang your head like that, it’s stupid.’

Sammy stopped banging his head. Elsie Watmore watched the van zigzag down the mid-levels of the hillside to the harbourfront. Then round the roundabout twice before Oliver took the ring road, fumes pouring from the exhaust. And as she watched she felt the anxiety rise in her the way it always did, she couldn’t hold it back and she wasn’t sure she wanted to. Not on account of Sammy, which was the strange thing, but of Ollie. It was the fearing he’d never come back. Every time he walked out of the house or drove off in his van – even when he took Sammy down to the Legion for a game of billiards – she found herself saying goodbye to him for good, the same as when her Jack went off to sea.

Still daydreaming, Elsie Watmore relinquished her sunspot on the front porch and, returning to her hall, discovered to her surprise that Arthur Toogood was still waiting on the telephone.

‘Mr Hawthorne’s got performances all afternoon,’ she told him disdainfully. ‘He won’t be back till late. He’ll telephone tomorrow if it’s convenient to his schedule.’

But tomorrow wasn’t good enough for Toogood. In immense confidence he had to give her his ex-directory home telephone number. Ollie should please to ring him at whatever hour, never mind how late, Elsie, are you with me? He tried to make her tell him where Ollie was performing, but she remained aloof. *Mister* Hawthorne may have said something about a grand hotel in Torquay, she conceded airily. And a disco up the Salvation Army hostel at six. Or maybe it was

seven, she forgot. Or if she didn't forget, she pretended to. There were times when she had no wish to share Ollie with anyone, least of all a randy small-town bank manager who last time she had gone to him about her loan suggested they sort the details in bed.

'*Toogood*,' Oliver repeated indignantly as he drove round the roundabout. '*Routine papers. Friendly chat. Stupid tit. Damn.*' He had missed the turning. Sammy let out a great honking laugh. 'What's there left to sign?' Oliver demanded, appealing to Sammy as if they were equals, which was how he always spoke to him. 'She's got the bloody house. She's got the bloody money. She's got Carmen. All she hasn't got any more is me, which is how she wanted it.'

'Then she's lost the best bit, hasn't she?' Sammy shouted hilariously.

'The best bit's Carmen,' Oliver growled, and Sammy held his tongue for a while.

They crawled up a hill. An impatient lorry carved them into the kerb. The van wasn't very good at hills.

'What are we giving?' Sammy asked when he judged the moment safe.

'Menu A. Bouncy ball, magic beads, find the birdie, windmills of the mind, puppy sculpture, origami, thuds and get out. What's wrong now?' – for Sammy had let out a horrorfilm wail of despair.

'No spinning plates!'

'If there's time we'll do plates. Only if there's time.'

Spinning plates were Sammy's best thing. He had practised them night and day and, though he had never succeeded in getting one spinning, he had convinced himself he was a star. The van entered a grim council estate. A threatening poster warned of heart attacks but the remedy was unclear.