

BORIS VIAN (1920–59) was a French writer, poet, musician, singer, translator, critic, actor, inventor and engineer. Best remembered for *L'Écume des jours* (translated into English by Stanley Chapman as *Froth on the Daydream* and renamed *Mood Indigo* to tie in with the film), Vian's work is characterised by the dazzling wordplay and surreal plots which made him a cult figure in 1960s France and beyond.

Mood Indigo

BORIS VIAN

Translated from the French by Stanley Chapman



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For My Bibi

Foreword

The main thing in life is to leap to every possible conclusion on every possible occasion. For the fact is that individuals are always right – and the masses always wrong. But we should be careful not to attempt to base any rules for behaviour on this – there is no need for rules to be written down before we follow them. Only two things really matter – there's love, every kind of love, with every kind of pretty girl; and there's the music of Duke Ellington, or traditional jazz. Everything else can go, because all the rest is ugly – and the few pages which follow as an illustration of this draw their entire strength from the fact that the story is completely true since I made it up from beginning to end. Its material realization – to use the correct expression – consists basically of a projection of reality, under favourable circumstances, on to an irregularly tilting, and consequently distorting, plane of reference. Obviously it is a method, if there ever was one, that can be readily divulged.

New Orleans
10 March 1946

1

Colin finished his bath. He got out and wrapped himself in a thick woolly towel with his legs coming out at the bottom and his top coming out at the top. He took the oil from the glass shelf and sprayed its pulverized perfume on to his yellow hair. His golden comb separated the silky mop into long honeyed strands like the furrows that a happy farmer ploughs through apricot jam with his fork. Colin put back his comb and, seizing the nail-clippers, bevelled the corners of his eggshell eyelids to add a touch of mystery to his appearance. He often had to do this because they grew again so quickly. He put on the little light over the magnifying mirror and went up close to it to examine the condition of his epidermis. A few blackheads were sprouting at the sides of his nose near his nostrils. When they saw themselves in the magnifying mirror and realized how ugly they were, they immediately jumped back under the skin. Colin put out the light and sighed with relief. He took the towel from his middle and slipped a corner of it between his toes to dry away the last signs of dampness. In the glass it became perfectly clear that he was exactly like a fair-headed Jean Bellpull Rondeau in a film by Jacques Goon Luddard. His face was smooth, his ears small, his nose straight and his complexion radiant. He was always smiling, as innocently as a baby, and through having done it so often a dimple had grown into his chin. He was reasonably tall and slim-hipped; he had long legs and was very, very nice. The name Colin suited him almost ideally.

He talked to girls with charm and to boys with pleasure. He was nearly always in a good mood – and the rest of the time he slept.

He emptied his bath by boring a hole in the bottom of the tub. The light yellow ceramic clay tiles of the bathroom floor sloped in such a way that the water was orientated into an orifice situated directly above the study of the tenant in the flat below. But only a few days previously, without saying a word to Colin, the position of the study had been changed. Now the water went straight into the larder underneath.

He slipped his feet into sandals made from the skins of spotted dogfish, and put on an elegant staying-in suit – trousers of deep Atlantic-green corduroy and a jacket of walnut-brown wild taffeta. He hung the towel on the towel-rail and put the bathmat on the edge of the bath. Then he sprinkled it with rock salt to bring out any water that might still be in it. The mat was soon covered in juicy clusters of little soapy bubbles.

He came out of the bathroom and went to the kitchen to cast an eye over the last touches that were being put to the meal. Chick was coming for dinner as he did every Monday evening. He lived just round the corner. It was still only Saturday, but Colin felt he wanted to see Chick and let him sample the menu that his new cook Nicholas had been working on with such joyful serenity. Chick, a bachelor too, was the same age as Colin – twenty-two. He had the same tastes in literature – but less money. Colin's fortune was large enough for him to live in comfort without having to work for other people. But Chick had to go to see his uncle at the Ministry once a week and borrow money from him because he did not earn enough at his job as an engineer

to be able to keep up with the workers he was in charge of – and it's hard to be in charge of people who are better dressed and better fed than you are. Colin helped him as much as he could and asked him round to dinner as often as he dared, but Chick's pride forced Colin to be careful and not make it obvious that he was trying to help him by doing favours too frequently.

The corridor leading to the kitchen was light because it had windows on both sides of it, and a sun shining behind each of them because Colin was fond of bright things. There were metal taps, brilliantly polished and gleaming, all over the place. The suns playing on the taps produced fairy-like effects. The kitchen mice liked to dance to the sounds made by the rays of the suns as they bounced off the taps, and then run after the little bubbles that the rays burst into when they hit the ground like sprays of golden mercury. Colin stroked one of the mice as he went by. It was sleek and grey, with a miraculous sheen and long black whiskers. The cook gave them plenty to eat, but made sure that they did not get too fat. The mice kept very quiet during the day and played nowhere else but in the corridor.

Colin pushed open the gleaming kitchen door. Nicholas, the cook, was studying his control-panel. He was sitting at a no less gleaming bright yellow desk covered in dials corresponding to every piece of culinary apparatus that lined the walls. The hand for the electric cooker, set for the roast turkey, hovered between 'Almost Ready' and 'Perfectly Done'. It was nearly time to take it out. Nicholas pressed a green button which released the testing needle. It slipped in, met no resistance at all, and the hand immediately shot to 'Perfectly Done'. Nicholas clicked off the current to the cooker and switched on the plate-warmer.

'Is it going to be good?' asked Colin.

'Mr Colin can be assured that it is, sir!' confirmed Nicholas. 'The turkey is done to a turn.'

'And what have we got to start with?'

'Good Lord,' said Nicholas, 'I didn't like to create anything original so soon, sir. I've stuck to plagiarizing ffroydde.'

'You could have chosen a worse master!' remarked Colin. 'And which masterpiece from his complete works are you going to reproduce?'

'I found it on page 638 of his *Cookery and Household Management*. I'll read Mr Colin the passage in question, sir.'

Colin sat on a stool upholstered in dunlopillo and oiled silk, the same colour as the walls, as Nicholas began to read.

'First line a dish with light puff pastry. Then slice a large eel into sections about an inch thick. Place these in a saucepan and cover with white wine to which has been added a sliced onion, some chopped parsley, a sprig of thyme, a bailiff's bay leaf, a four-leaved clove-hitch of garlic and a pinch of salt and pepper ... I couldn't pinch as much salt and pepper as I'd have liked, sir,' said Nicholas. 'The jemmy is wearing out.'

'I'll get you a new one,' said Colin.

Nicholas went on reading. 'Simmer slowly. Take the eel from the pan and put under the grill. Pass the remaining liquor through butter muslin and reduce until it begins to adhere to the spoon. Sieve once again, pour over the eel and cook for two more minutes. Arrange the eel in the puff pastry with a border of grilled mushrooms. Decorate the centre with soft carp's roes. Garnish with the rest of the sauce that you have kept back.'

'Sounds delicious,' nodded Colin. 'I think Chick ought to enjoy that.'

‘I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting Mr Chick yet, sir,’ concluded Nicholas, ‘but if he doesn’t like it, then I’ll make something different next time and that will help me to plot more accurately an approximate graph of his likes and dislikes.’

‘Hrumm ...!’ said Colin. ‘I’ll let you get on with it, Nicholas. I’ll be laying the table.’

He went back through the corridor in the other direction, crossed the hall and ended up in the dining-room-cum-studio, whose pale blue carpet and pink beige walls were a treat for sore eyes.

The room, approximately twelve feet by fifteen, had two wide bay windows overlooking Armstrong Avenue. Large panes of glass kept the sounds of the avenue from the room, but let in the breath of springtime when it appeared outside. A limed oak table filled one corner of the room. There were wall seats at right angles to each other on two sides of it, and matching chairs with blue morocco upholstery on the other two sides. There were two other long low cupboards in the room – one fitted up as a record-player and record container with all the latest gadgets, and the other, identical with the first, containing catapults, cutlery, plates, glasses and other implements used by civilized society for eating.

Colin selected a light blue tablecloth to match the carpet. He decorated the centre of the table with a pharmaceutical jar in which a pair of embryonic chickens seemed to be dancing Nijinsky’s choreography for *The Spectre of the Rose*. Around it he arranged some branches of bootlace mimosa – the gardener who worked for some friends of his had cultivated this by grafting strips of those black liquorice ribbons sold by haberdashers when school is over

onto ordinary bobbed mimosa. Then for himself and his guest he took some white china plates with filigree designs in gold and stainless steel knives and forks with perforated handles inside each of which a stuffed ladybird, floating between two layers of perspex, brought good luck every time they were used. He added crystal goblets and serviettes folded into bishops' mitres; this took him quite a time. He had hardly finished all this when the bell sprang off the wall to let him know that Chick had arrived.

Colin smoothed out an imaginary crease in the tablecloth and went to open the door.

'How are you?' asked Chick.

'How are *you*?' replied Colin. 'Take off your mac and come and see what Nicholas has made for us.'

'Is he your new cook?'

'Yes,' said Colin. 'I swapped him at the pawnbroker's for a couple of pounds of Algerian coffee and the old one.'

'And is he any good?' asked Chick.

'He seems to know what he's doing. He swears by ffroydde.'

'What have sex and dreams got to do with cooking?' asked Chick, horrified. His lush black moustache began to droop at a tragic angle.

'No, you idiot, I'm talking about Saint Clement, not Monsignor Sigmund!'

'Oh, sorry!' said Chick. 'But you know I never read anything except Jean Pulse Heartre.'

He followed Colin into the tiled corridor, stroked the mice and casually scooped up a handful of sundrops to pop into his lighter.

'Nicholas,' said Colin as he went in, 'this is my friend Chick.'

‘How do you do, sir?’ said Nicholas.

‘How do you do, Nicholas?’ replied Chick. ‘Haven’t you got a niece called Alyssum?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Nicholas. ‘And a very pretty girl too, if I may be allowed to say so.’

‘She looks very much like you,’ said Chick. ‘Although there are one or two differences around the bust ...’

‘I’m fairly broad, sir,’ said Nicholas, ‘but she is better developed in a perpendicular direction, if Mr Chick will permit the precision.’

‘Well,’ said Colin, ‘it’s almost a family reunion. You never told me you had a niece, Nicholas.’

‘Ah! My sister went wrong, sir,’ said Nicholas. ‘She took up philosophy. It isn’t the kind of thing we like to talk about outside the family ...’

‘Hm ...’ said Colin, ‘I suppose you’re right. At any rate, I see what you mean. Now, let’s have a look at your Stilet-toed Eel ...’

‘It would be fatal to open the cooker now,’ warned Nicholas. ‘By introducing air with a less rich water content than that already in the oven, desiccation would almost certainly take place.’

‘I’d rather,’ said Chick, ‘have the pleasure of seeing it for the first time on the table.’

‘Mr Chick’s patience meets with my entire approval, sir,’ said Nicholas. ‘May I be allowed to beg Mr Colin’s leave, sir, to continue with my good work?’

‘Do carry on, please, Nicholas!’

Nicholas went back to the job he was doing when they had interrupted him. He was taking fillets of sole in truffled aspic out of their moulds. Their ultimate fate was to garnish the seafood hors d’oeuvres.

‘Would you like a drink first?’ asked Colin. ‘I’ve finished my clavicocktail and we could try it out.’

‘Does it really work?’ asked Chick. ‘Or do you have to wind it up with a harpsicorkscrew first?’

‘Of course it works. I had a hard job getting it right, but the finished result is beyond my wildest dreams. When I played the “Black and Tan Fantasy” I got a really crazy concoction.’

‘How does it work?’ asked Chick.

‘For each note,’ said Colin, ‘there’s a corresponding drink – either a wine, spirit, liqueur or fruit juice. The loud pedal puts in egg flip and the soft pedal adds ice. For soda you play a cadenza in F sharp. The quantities depend on how long a note is held – you get the sixteenth of a measure for a hemidemisemiquaver; a whole measure for a black note; and four measures for a semibreve. When you play a slow tune, then tone comes into control too to prevent the amounts growing too large and the drink getting too big for a cocktail – but the alcoholic content remains unchanged. And, depending on the length of the tune, you can, if you like, vary the measures used, reducing them, say, to a hundredth in order to get a drink taking advantage of all the harmonics by means of an adjustment on the side.’

‘Sounds a bit complicated,’ said Chick.

‘The whole thing is controlled by electrical contacts and relays. I won’t go into all the technicalities because you know all about them anyway. And, anyway, the keyboard itself can work independently.’

‘It’s wonderful!’ said Chick.

‘Only one thing still worries me,’ said Colin, ‘and that’s the loud pedal and the egg flip. I had to put in a special

gear system because if you play something too hot, lumps of omelette fall into the glass, and they're rather hard to swallow. I've still got a few modifications to make there. But it's all right if you're careful. And if you feel like a dash of fresh cream, you add a chord in G major.'

'I'm going to try an improvisation on "Loveless Love",' said Chick. 'That should be fantastic.'

'It's still in the junk room that I use as my workshop,' said Colin, 'because the guard plates aren't screwed down yet. Come in there with me. I'll set it for two cocktails of about seventy-five milligallons each to start with.'

Chick sat at the instrument. When he'd reached the end of the tune a section of the front panel came down with a sharp click and a row of glasses appeared. Two of them were brimming with an appetizing mixture.

'You scared me,' said Colin. 'You played a wrong note once. Luckily it was only in the harmonization.'

'You don't mean to say that that comes into it too?' said Chick.

'Not always,' said Colin. 'That would make it too elaborate. So we just give it a few passing acknowledgements. Now drink up – and we'll go and eat.'

2

'This Stilettoed Eel is terrific,' said Chick. 'Where did you get the idea from?'

'Nicholas had it,' said Colin. 'There's an eel – or there *was* an eel, rather – that used to go into his wash-basin every day through the cold-water tap.'

‘What a funny thing to do,’ said Chick. ‘Why did it do that?’

‘It used to pop its head out and empty the toothpaste by squeezing the tube with its teeth. Nicholas only uses that American brand with the pineapple flavour, and I don’t think it could resist the temptation.’

‘How did he catch it?’ asked Chick.

‘One day he put a whole pineapple there instead of the toothpaste. When it was only the tube it would suck out the toothpaste, swallow it, and then pop its head straight back. But with the pineapple it wouldn’t work. The harder it pulled, the farther its teeth sunk in. Nicholas ...’

Colin held back the rest of his sentence.

‘Nicholas what?’ said Chick.

‘I’m scared to tell you the rest. It might take away your appetite.’

‘Carry on,’ said Chick, ‘my plate’s almost empty, anyway.’

‘Well, Nicholas came in at that very moment and sliced off its head with a razor blade. Then he swiftly turned on the tap and out came the rest.’

‘Is that all?’ said Chick. ‘Give me some more then! I hope it left a large family in the tank.’

‘Nicholas has put out a tube of raspberry-flavoured toothpaste to see ...’ said Colin. ‘But tell me more about this Alyssum you were talking to him about ...’

‘I can just see her now,’ said Chick. ‘I met her at one of Jean Pulse’s lectures. We were both lying flat on our stomachs under the platform – and that’s how I got to know her ...’

‘What’s she like?’

‘Oh, I’m no good at descriptions,’ said Chick. ‘She’s pretty ...’

‘Ah!...’ said Colin.

Nicholas came back. He was bringing in the turkey.

‘Sit down and eat with us, Nicholas,’ said Colin. ‘After all, as Chick was saying, you’re almost one of the family.’

‘I must see to the mice first, if Mr Colin has no objections, sir,’ said Nicholas. ‘But I’ll be back in a moment. I’ve already carved the turkey ... And here is the sauce ...’

‘Wait till you taste it,’ said Colin. ‘It’s a sauce made from creamed mangoes and juniper berries piped into little pouches of plaited veal. You blow into them like bagpipes and the sauce comes out like toothpaste.’

‘Super!’ said Chick.

‘You wouldn’t like to give me some clues about the way in which you entered into your relationship with her? ...’ Colin went on.

‘Well ...’ said Chick, ‘I asked her if she liked Jean Pulse Heartre and she told me that she collected all his works ... Then I said to her “So do I” ... And every time that I said something to her, she answered “So do I”, and vice versa ... Then, finally, just as an existentialist experiment, I said to her “I love you very much”. But that time she just said “Oh!” ...’

‘So the experiment was a flop,’ said Colin.

‘I suppose so,’ said Chick. ‘But all the same she didn’t go. So then I said “I’m going that way”, and she said “I’m not”. But she went on “I’m going *this* way” ...’

‘Extraordinary,’ nodded Colin.

‘So I said “So am I” ...’ said Chick. ‘And after that I went everywhere that she did ...’

‘And the consequence was? ...’ said Colin.

‘Hmmm! ...’ said Chick. ‘Well, it was bedtime ...’

Colin gulped hard and swallowed down a bottle of red wine before he recovered.

'I'm going skating with her tomorrow,' said Chick. 'It's Sunday. How about coming with us? We're going in the morning because there won't be too many people around then. I'm not all that keen,' he remarked, 'because I'm a rotten skater, but we can always talk about Heartre.'

'I'll be there ...' promised Colin. 'And I'll bring Nicholas ... Maybe he's got some more nieces ...'

3

Colin stepped down from the tube train and went up the escalator. He came out on the wrong side of the station, turned left and went right round it before he could get his bearings. He used his yellow silk handkerchief to find out the direction of the wind. It immediately swept all the colour out of the handkerchief and spread it over a large lumpy building which suddenly took on the appearance of the Rinkspot Skating Club.

The bump on the side nearest Colin was the indoor swimming pool. He went past that, and on the other side penetrated into the petrified organism by going through a double set of plate glass swing doors with bronze handles. When he showed his season ticket to the Commissionaire it winked at him through the two little round holes that had already been punched in it. The Commissionaire smiled back, but nevertheless gave a third brutal punch to the orange card and the ticket was blinded for life. Colin hurriedly put it back into his wallodile crocket and turned left into a corridor with a rubber floor that led to the changing cubicles. The ones at the level of the rink were all full. So

he went up the concrete stairs, bumping into some very tall people on their way down cutting extraordinary capers and trying desperately to behave naturally despite the obvious disadvantage of being perched on vertical metallic blades. A man in a white polo-necked sweater opened a cubicle for him, pocketed the tip Colin gave him for his pains but which Colin was sure he would spend on pleasure because he looked like a liar, and left Colin to rest in peace there alone, after having carelessly scribbled his initials with a piece of chalk on a little blackboard specially put there for that purpose. Colin noticed that the man did not have a man's head, but an ostrich's, and couldn't understand why he was working in the ice-rink instead of at the swimming pool.

An oval sound rose from the rink, overlaid by the music of loud-speakers scattered all around. The skaters' trampling had not yet reached the sonic booming of those hectic moments when the noise it makes can be compared to a regiment marching over cobbled roads through squelching mud. Colin looked round for Alyssum and Chick, but they did not seem to be on the ice. Nicholas was coming to join him a little later; he still had some work to do in the kitchen in preparation for lunch.

Colin undid his shoelaces and noticed that his soles had gone. He took a roll of sticky tape from his pocket, but there wasn't enough left. So he planted his shoes in a little puddle of condensation on the concrete seat and sprinkled them with concentrated fertilizer to make the leather sprout again quickly. He slipped on a pair of thick woollen socks with wide yellow and purple stripes, and put on his skating boots. His skates had blades that were divided in two at the front so that he could easily make changes of direction.

He went out of his cubicle, and downstairs again. His ankles twisted slightly on the corrugated rubber that lined the reinforced concrete corridors. Just as he was about to risk himself on the rink he had to spring back to avoid being knocked over. A skating draughtswoman, at the end of a magnificent whirlwind spread eagle (which she termed a double elephant), laid an enormous egg which split open at Colin's feet.

While one of the serf-sweepers was cleaning up the scattered fragments, Colin noticed Chick and Alyssum who had just arrived on the other side of the rink. He waved at them, but as they did not see him he set off to meet them without taking the gyratory movement of the rink into account. The result was the rapid formation of a tremendous heap of people rushing to complain. Every second they were joined by a vast agglomeration of others, desperately beating their arms, their legs, their shoulders and their whole bodies in the air before collapsing on to the pile of the first fallen. As the sun had melted the surface of the ice, there was a horrible squelching under the heap of bodies.

In no time at all ninety per cent of the skaters were on the heap and Chick and Alyssum had the rink to themselves – or almost. They went up to the swarming mass and Chick, recognizing Colin by his cleft skates, grabbed his ankles and extricated him from the seething crowd. They shook hands. Chick introduced Alyssum and Colin put himself on her left as Chick already occupied the dexter flank.

They brushed themselves down when they reached the far side of the rink to make room for the serf-sweepers who, giving up all hope of finding anything but worthless rags and tatters of disconnected personalities in the mountain

of victims, had got out their squeegees to wipe out the hundreds of stiffs, and shoved them into the gully while singing the Rinkunabulan Anthem composed by Beatrice Webb in 1892, and which goes something like this:

*Withdraw, sweet skaters, from the icy scene –
Within a trice the serfs will sweep it clean ...*

The whole ceremony was punctuated with exclamation marks from the whooter which were intended to instil, in the depths of the most devoted souls, a shudder of incoercible terror.

Those skaters who were left applauded the initiative that had been shown, and the trap closed over the rest. Chick, Alyssum and Colin said a short prayer and began to gyrate once again.

Colin looked at Alyssum. By some strange trick of Fate she was wearing a white tee-shirt with a yellow skirt. She had white and yellow shoes, with ice-hockey skates. She had smoked silk stockings and short white socks rolled over the tops of her little boots whose fluffy white laces had been twisted three times round her ankles. On top of all this she also had a sharp green silk scarf and masses of thick blonde hair from which her face peeped out. She looked out at the world through wide open blue eyes, and the boundaries of her being were delineated by a skin that was radiant and golden. She possessed round arms and calves, a narrow waist and a bust that was so perfect it might have been a photo.

Colin looked somewhere else in order to steady himself. When he had managed this he lowered his eyes and asked Chick if the Stilettoed Eel hadn't given him indigestion.

‘Don’t talk to me about it,’ said Chick. ‘I stayed up all night fishing in my bathroom to see if I could find one too. But there only seems to be trout in my place.’

‘Nicholas ought to be able to do something for you,’ said Colin, reassuringly. And then, addressing himself more particularly to Alyssum, ‘You have an extraordinarily gifted uncle.’

‘He’s the pride of the family,’ said Alyssum. ‘My mother’s never got over being married to a mathematical wizard with nothing more than a first in calculus while her brother has done so well for himself in life.’

‘Your father’s a wizard with a degree in maths?’

‘Yes, he’s a don at the University and a member of the Magic Squared Circle ...’ said Alyssum. ‘It’s awful. And he’s thirty-eight! You’d think he might have made some effort. Luckily we’ve always got Uncle Nicholas.’

‘Wasn’t he going to come this morning?’ said Chick.

A heady perfume rose from Alyssum’s shining hair. Colin moved away a little.

‘I think he’s going to be late. He was full of inspiration this morning ... If you’d both like to come back home for lunch with me, we’ll find out what it was ...’

‘Fine,’ said Chick. ‘But if you think I’m going to accept an invitation like that, then you must have a very strange conception of the Universe ... Find a fourth first! I’m not going to let Alyssum go to your place or you’ll seduce her with the magic of your clavicocktail – and I’m not standing for that.’

‘Oh ...’ protested Colin. ‘Hark at the things he’s saying! ...’

He didn’t hear any more because an inordinately lengthy individual, who had been giving a demonstration of speed

for the past five minutes, had just slipped through his legs by leaning forward as far as possible and the rush of air that he created lifted Colin several yards above the ground. He clutched the edge of the first floor gallery, got his balance and after doing a backwards somersault the wrong way round, landed back at the sides of Chick and Alyssum.

‘They ought to be stopped from going too fast,’ said Colin.

Then he quickly crossed himself because the culprit had just skated straight into the wall of the restaurant at the other end of the rink and flattened himself against it like a marshmallow jellyfish picked to pieces by a destructive child.

The serf-sweepers once again did their duty and one of them planted a cross of ice on the spot where the accident had occurred. As it melted, the Master of Ceremonies played a selection of religious records.

Then everything went back to normal. And Chick, Alyssum and Colin went round and round and round.

4

‘Here’s Nicholas!’ cried Alyssum.

‘And there’s Isis!’ said Chick.

Nicholas had just turned up at the pay-desk, and Isis had just appeared in the rink. The former went to the upper floors; the latter to join Chick, Colin and Alyssum.

‘Hallo, Isis,’ said Colin. ‘This is Alyssum. Alyssum, this is Isis. You know Chick.’

There were handshakes all round and Chick made the

most of this to slip away with Alyssum, leaving Isis in Colin's arms, in which position they both immediately took off.

'It's nice to see you again,' said Isis.

Colin thought it was nice to see her again too. During her eighteen years of life Isis had managed to equip herself with chestnut hair, a white tee-shirt and a yellow skirt with a sharp green scarf, white and yellow shoes and a pair of sunglasses. She was pretty. But Colin knew her parents very well.

'There's a tea-party at our place next week,' said Isis. 'It's Wry-Tangle's birthday.'

'Who's Wry-Tangle?'

'My poodle. So I'm asking all my friends round. You'll come, won't you? Will four be all right? ...'

'Of course,' said Colin. 'I'd love to come.'

'Bring your friends too!' said Isis.

'Chick and Alyssum?'

'Yes, they're nice ... See you on Sunday then!'

'Are you going already?' said Colin.

'Yes. I never stay anywhere long. And I've already been here since ten o'clock, you know ...'

'But it's only eleven!' said Colin.

'Ah, but I was in the bar! ... See you! ...'

5

Colin hurried through the glistening streets. The wind was keen and dry, and little patches of ice snapped, crackled and popped underfoot.

People hid behind anything they could find – the collars

of their overcoats, their scarves, their muffs – and he even saw one man who had wrapped himself in a gilded bird-cage with its little door pressing down on his nose.

‘I’m going to the High-Pottinuice’s tomorrow,’ thought Colin.

That was Isis’s parents’ name.

‘And tonight I’m having supper with Chick ...

‘I’ll go back home to get ready for tomorrow ...’

He took a big step to avoid a join in the pavement that looked particularly dangerous.

‘If I can do twenty steps without walking on the joints,’ said Colin, ‘I won’t get a pimple on my nose tomorrow.’

‘But it won’t make any difference,’ he said, jumping on to the ninth joint with both feet, ‘because that kind of superstition is stupid. I won’t get a pimple whatever I do.’

He bent down to pick a pink and blue orchid that the frost had brought out of the earth.

It smelt like Alyssum’s hair.

‘I’ll be seeing Alyssum tomorrow ...’

But that was something he shouldn’t think about. Legally Alyssum belonged to Chick.

‘I’m bound to find a girl tomorrow ...’

But his thoughts still lingered on Alyssum.

‘Do they really discuss Jean Pulse Heartre when they’re alone? ...’

But perhaps it was best not to think about what they did when they were alone together.

‘How many articles has Jean Pulse Heartre written during the last year? ...’

At any rate, there wasn’t enough time for him to count them all before he got home.

‘I wonder what Nicholas is making for this evening ...’

When you came to think about it, the likeness between Alyssum and Nicholas wasn't all that extraordinary since they both belonged to the same family. He was slyly creeping back to the forbidden topic and he quickly thought about something else.

'How I wonder what Nicholas – who is so much like Alyssum – is making for this evening ...'

'Nicholas is eleven years older than Alyssum. That makes him twenty-nine. He's a tremendously gifted cook. He's going to make a casserole.'

Colin was almost home.

'Flower-shops never have shutters. Nobody ever thinks of stealing flowers.'

That was logical enough. He picked a grey and orange orchid with a delicate trembling tendril. Its colours shimmered in the light like shot silk.

'It's just like the mouse with the black whiskers ... And I'm home!'

Colin went up the stone staircase that was wrapped in its thick winter woollies. Into the lock in the door of silvered glass he introduced a little golden key.

'Hither, my faithful lackeys! ... Your master is returned! ...'

He flung his mac on to a chair and went to look for Nicholas.

6

'Nicholas, are you going to make a casserole tonight?' asked Colin.

'Good Lord,' said Nicholas, 'Mr Colin didn't ask me to.

I'd thought of something quite different.'

'Caterwauling cocklesHELLs!' said Colin. 'Why must you always talk to me perpetually in the third person?'

'If Mr Colin will give me permission to explain my reasons, sir, I should like to state that I find any familiarity permissible only after the barriers have been consistently respected on both sides – and that certainly is not the case here.'

'You're a bloody snob, Nicholas,' said Colin.

'I have the pride of my position, sir,' said Nicholas, 'and you can't complain about that.'

'Of course not,' said Colin. 'But I wish you weren't always so aloof.'

'I have a sincere affection for Mr Colin underneath, sir,' said Nicholas.

'And I'm proud of it – and happy too, Nicholas – and I feel just the same about you. Therefore ... what are you going to make tonight?'

'Once again I shall remain within the ffroyddian tradition by making musk-antler bangers with port and mash.'

'And how are you going to do that?' said Colin.

'This is the recipe. Take a bunch of musk-antler bangers and skin them, taking no heed whatsoever of their screams. Carefully preserve the skins. Alternate rounds of the musk-antler bangers with sliced lobster claws that have been previously tossed in hot butter. Place them on ice in a pan. Heighten the flame and, in the space thereby gained, tastefully arrange little rings of coddled rice. When the bangers emit a continuous low note, take them swiftly from the flame and cover with rare old tawny port. Stir in with a platinum spatula. Grease a tin to prevent it rusting and then line it with the bangers. Just before serving, make a thick sauce

of periwinkles, parsley and a pint of pure cream. Sprinkle with valerian drops, garnish with the rice rings, serve ... and disappear.'

'I'm starving,' said Colin. 'I can't wait. Your ffroyde is a genius. But tell me, Nicholas, do you think it will make me get a pimple on my nose tomorrow?'

Nicholas gave great consideration to the condition of Colin's conk and concluded that it would not.

'Oh, and while I'm on the subject, do you know how to do the Squint?'

'My technical development hasn't advanced much beyond the Disraeli Dislocation and the Aurora Borealis which were still the rage last week in Swingingsville,' said Nicholas, 'so I haven't perfected all the refinements of the Squint. But I certainly know the rudiments of the dance.'

'Do you think,' asked Colin, 'that its technique could be mastered in one evening?'

'I should think so,' said Nicholas. 'The basic movements aren't very complicated. All one has to do is avoid vulgar faux-pas and errors of taste, such as trying to dance the Squint to a boogie-woogie.'

'That would be wrong? ...'

'It would be a serious crime against good taste!'

Nicholas put the grapefruit that he had been peeling during this interview on to the table and his hands under the tap.

'Are you very busy?' asked Colin.

'Good Lord, no, sir,' said Nicholas. 'Everything in the kitchen is going along nicely.'

'Then perhaps you would be so kind as to instruct me in the rudiments of the Squint,' said Colin. 'Come into the other room and I'll put on a record.'

‘I would like to advise Mr Colin, sir, to choose something with feeling – something like “Chloe” in an arrangement by Duke Ellington, or the “Concerto for Johnny Hodges” ...’ said Nicholas. ‘Something that they might call sultry or moody on the other side of the Atlantic.’

7

‘The principle of the Squint,’ said Nicholas, ‘as Mr Colin no doubt knows, sir, relies on the simultaneous setting-up of interferences obtained via the rigorously synchronized oscillatory movements of two loosely connected centres of animation.’

‘I didn’t realize,’ said Colin, ‘that it was concerned with such advanced developments in physics.’

‘In this case,’ said Nicholas, ‘the dancer and his partner should attempt to maintain the minimum perceptible distance between themselves. Then their entire bodies begin to vibrate following the rhythm of the music.’

‘You don’t say,’ said Colin, looking slightly worried.

‘A series of static undulations is then set up,’ said Nicholas, ‘presenting, as in the laws of acoustics, various diaphragmatic vibrations and frictions which make a large contribution to the creation of the right atmosphere on a dance-floor.’

‘Naturally ...’ murmured Colin.

‘Experts in the Squint,’ pursued Nicholas, ‘sometimes succeed in producing subsidiary layers of subordinate waves by setting certain selected limbs and members of their anatomies into separately synchronized vibration.’

But we needn't go into that now ... I'll simply try to show Mr Colin how they do it.'

Colin chose 'Chloe', as Nicholas had suggested its suitability, and carefully centred it on the turntable of the record-player. He delicately dropped the point of the needle into the very bottom of the beginning of the first groove and watched Nicholas gradually start to shake.

8

'Mr Colin will soon get it, sir!' said Nicholas. 'Just one more time.'

'But why,' asked Colin, covered in perspiration, 'must it be done to a slow tune? It's much more difficult that way.'

'There is a reason,' said Nicholas. 'Theoretically the dancer and his partner should keep at the minimum distance from each other. With a slow tune, the undulations can be regulated in such a way that the point of maximum coincidence is situated roughly half-way up each partner, while their extremities are at liberty to improvise separate movements. That is the result that should be aimed at in theory. But unfortunately it has happened that, in practice, unscrupulous couples have tried dancing the Squint the way the coloured kids do it – to a quick tempo.'

'Which means?' asked Colin.

'Which means that with alternating centres of gravity at bottom and top, and another intermediate mobile nodal point regrettably situated in the region of the loins, the fixed points – or pseudo-articulations – become the sternum and the knees.'

Colin blushed.

‘I see,’ he said.

‘When this is done to a boogie rhythm,’ concluded Nicholas, ‘the obscenity of the dance generally dominates the hypnotic qualities of the music.’

Colin was in a trance.

‘Where did you learn the Squint?’ he asked Nicholas.

‘My niece taught me ...’ said Nicholas. ‘I worked out the complete theory of the Squint during a series of talks with my brother-in-law. He’s a practising Pythagorean, as Mr Colin is no doubt aware, sir, and did not find it very difficult to follow the method of the system. He even told me that he had calculated its principles nineteen years ago ...’

‘... Your niece is eighteen, isn’t she?’ asked Colin.

‘And three months ...’ corrected Nicholas. ‘Now if Mr Colin doesn’t need my services any more, sir, I’ll go back to have a look at what’s cooking in the kitchen.’

‘Run along, Nicholas. And thanks,’ said Colin, taking off the record that had just finished playing.

9

‘I think I’ll put on my camel suit and my noon-blue shirt, my tie with the scarlet and Sahara stripes, my punched suede shoes and my nasturtium and dromedary striped socks.

‘But first of all I’ll give myself a wash and a shave and a check-up to make sure that there’s nothing missing.

‘Then I’ll go and say to Nicholas in the kitchen “Nicholas, how would you like to come to a dance with me?”’

‘Good Lord,’ said Nicholas, ‘if Mr Colin insists, then I shall have no alternative but to go. But if he should not insist, sir, then I should be delighted to take the opportunity to put several outstanding matters in order, the urgency of which is becoming imperative.’

‘Would it be indiscreet of me, Nicholas, if I were to ask you what the hell you were talking about?’

‘I am President,’ said Nicholas, ‘of the District Housekeepers Philosophical Society, and consequently am compelled to attend the maximum number of meetings that it holds.’

‘Dare I ask, Nicholas, what the subject of today’s meeting is going to be?’

‘We shall be discussing commitment. One of our members has discovered a connection between the various forms of commitment, beginning with Jean Pulse Heartre’s conception and then going on to the commitment of suicides, commitment to total abstinence, commitment to prison, to the flames, to memory, to writing, to a lunatic asylum – or commitment to duty – in particular, by housekeepers.’

‘Chick would be very interested in that!’ said Colin.

‘I’m extremely sorry,’ said Nicholas, ‘but the membership is very limited. We couldn’t possibly let Mr Chick come in. Housekeepers only, I’m afraid, sir.’

‘Nicholas,’ asked Colin, ‘why do you always give them that ambiguous title?’

‘No doubt Mr Colin will have noticed,’ said Nicholas, ‘that whereas it might remain comparatively harmless to refer to a gentleman keeping house as a housemaster, it would be very unseemly to speak similarly of a lady as a mistress. Therefore we choose to have a designation that embraces us all ...’

'You're quite right, of course, Nicholas. Now, in your opinion, do you think I'm likely to meet my soulmate today? ... I'd like to meet one exactly identical to your niece ...'

'Mr Colin is making a grave mistake in thinking so much about my niece, sir,' said Nicholas, 'since from the accounts of recent events it would appear that Mr Chick has chosen her first.'

'Oh, but Nicholas,' said Colin, 'I do so much want to be in love ...'

A puff of steam sprang out of the spout of the kettle and Nicholas went to open the door. The caretaker had brought up two letters.

'Is there some mail?' said Colin.

'I'm sorry, sir,' said Nicholas, 'but they're both for me. Is Mr Colin expecting a letter?'

'I wish a pretty girl would write to me,' said Colin. 'That's all I was hoping for.'

'It's lunchtime,' concluded Nicholas. 'Would Mr Colin like his breakfast now? There's minced oxtail, a bowl of spiced punch, and anchovy butter on toast.'

'Nicholas, why won't Chick bring your niece home here to lunch unless I invite another girl too?'

'Mr Colin must forgive me, sir,' said Nicholas, 'but under the circumstances, I would do exactly the same. Mr Colin is a very good-looking fellow ...'

'Nicholas,' said Colin, 'if I'm not in love by this evening – really and truly in love – then I'll start a collection of the works of the Marchioness Thighbone de Mauvoir ... and see if some of my friend Chick's luck rubs off on me!'

10

‘I wish I were in love,’ said Colin. ‘The butcher-boy wishes he were in love. And the baker-boy wishes exactly ditto (i.e. that he were in love). The candlestick-maker’s-boy and everybody in the street wishes and wishes that I were and they were and you were and we were and that the whole wide world were too. And even those that are left wish that they could fall in love as well ...’

He was tying his tie in front of the bathroom mirror. ‘All I have to do now is put on my jacket, my overcoat and my scarf, then my right glove followed by my left glove. But I won’t have to put on my hat because I don’t want to spoil my hair. Hey, what are you doing there?’

He made this last remark to the little grey mouse with the black whiskers who was certainly far from home, nonchalantly leaning on its elbows over the rim of the tooth-glass.

‘Just suppose,’ he said, sitting on the edge of the bath (rectangular, and made of yellow vitreous enamel) in order to get closer to the mouse, ‘that I should meet my old friend Whatsisname at the High-Pottinuice’s ...!’

The mouse nodded understandingly.

‘And suppose ... Well, why not? ... that he should have a pretty little cousin ... dressed in a white tee-shirt, with a yellow skirt ... and that her name was Aly ... Baba ...’

The mouse uncrossed its paws and looked shocked.

‘It’s not a very pretty name for a girl, I know,’ said Colin. ‘But then you’re a sweet little mouse – and yet you’ve got black whiskers. So ...?’

He stood up.

‘It’s three o’clock already! Look, you’re making me late. Chick and ... I mean Chick is bound to get there very early.’

He wetted his finger and held it up over his head, then brought it down again very smartly. It was burnt as severely as if he had put it in the fire.

‘There’s love in the air,’ he decided. ‘It’s boiling! I stand up, the butcher-boy stands up, the baker-boy stands up. And with the candlestick-maker’s-boy we all stand up, stand up, stand up. Do you want to be helped out of the glass?’

The mouse proved that it needed help from nobody by scrambling out on its own and nibbling off a lolly-shaped piece of soap for itself.

‘Don’t make a mess over everything with that,’ said Colin. ‘You’re disgustingly greedy.’

He went out of the bathroom and into the bedroom and slipped on his jacket, picked himself up, and put it on.

‘Nicholas must have gone ... He must know some crazy girls ... They say that all the girls where he comes from go to work as maids of practically all trades for philosophers ...’

He closed the bedroom door behind him.

‘There’s a slight tear in the lining of my left sleeve ... And there’s no insulating tape left ... Too bad, I’ll use a nail.’

The flat door slammed behind him with a noise like a naked hand slapping a bare bottom ... He began to tremble ...

‘I must think of something else ... Suppose I break my neck going down the stairs ...’

The staircase carpet – very pale mauve – only showed signs of wear on every third tread because Colin always went down four at a time. He caught his feet in a chromium stairrod and became entangled in the banisters.

‘That’ll teach me to think nonsense. Serves me right. I am stupid, the butcher-boy is stupid, the ...’

There was pain in his back. He understood why when he

reached the bottom and threw away the banister that was sticking out from the back of his overcoat collar.

The street door closed behind him with a sound that was like a kiss on an uncovered shoulder.

‘What is there to see in the street?’

First of all there were two road-menders playing cricket. The fattest one’s belly wobbled up and down contrapuntally as its owner jumped down and up. For a ball they had a crucifix painted red with the cross missing.

Colin walked on.

To right and left rose elegant and fantastic mud-huts with large bay windows. A woman was leaning out of one of them. Colin blew her a kiss and she shook on his head the hearthrug of black and silver swansdown that her husband couldn’t stand.

Shops brightened up the stark appearance of the big buildings. A display of supplies for fakirs caught Colin’s attention. He noted that the price of broken glass and long nails had gone up since last week.

He passed a dog and two other people. People were being kept indoors by the cold. Those who managed to tear themselves from its clutches escaped minus most of their clothes and died of pneumonia.

The traffic policeman at the crossroads had hidden his head in his cape. He looked like a big black umbrella. Waiters from the cafés ran round him in circles to keep themselves warm.

A boy and a girl were kissing in a doorway.

‘Don’t let me see them ... Don’t ... Don’t let me see them ... They’re driving me mad.’

Colin crossed over. A boy and a girl were kissing in a doorway.

He closed his eyes and began to run.

He opened them again very quickly because, under his eyelids, he could see thousands and thousands of girls going round – and such a vision would make him lose his way. There was still one right in front of him, walking in the same direction. You could see her pretty legs in little white lamb booties under her coat of unglazed panda-skin and her matching hat. Red hair under the hat. Her coat flew out from her shoulders and danced all round her as she walked.

‘I must overtake her. I must see her face ...’

He got ahead of her and burst into tears. She was at least fifty-nine. He sat on the kerb until the tears stopped flowing. It made him feel a lot better. With a little crackle his tears froze and shattered like glass as they fell on to the hard granite pavement.

After five minutes or so he realized that he was sitting in front of Isis High-Pottinuice’s house. A pair of girls walked past him and went straight in.

His heart swelled up to ten times its normal size, became completely weightless, lifted him up above the earth, and he went straight in after them.

11

A rumble of sounds from the party being thrown upstairs by Isis’s parents could already be heard from the first floor. The staircase spiralled round three times, thereby trebling any sounds that ventured into it, each stair acting like a tiny fin in the cylindrical sound-box of the vibes. Colin went up,

with his head close on the heels of the pair of girls. Pretty reinforced heels of flesh-coloured nylon, high-heeled shoes of fine leather, and slender delicate ankles. Then the seams of the stockings, imperceptibly meandering, like fabulously long slinky caterpillars leading to the articulated concave curves between suspender and knee. Colin stopped to let them get two steps ahead, then he set off again. From his new position he could see the tops of their stockings, the extra thickness there, and the shadowy whiteness of the thighs of the one on the left. The other girl's skirt, tightly pleated, did not allow him such advantageous views, but under her beaver-lamb coat her hips swivelled with greater symmetry than those of the first girl, making another little rival pleat ... Out of decency Colin began to look down at his feet, and watched them as they arrived at the second floor.

He was right behind the pair of girls just as they were being let in.

'Hallo, Colin!' said Isis. 'How are you?' He drew her towards him and kissed her between her hair and her cheek. Her perfume was tantalizing.

'But it isn't *my* birthday!' she protested. 'It's Wry-Tangle's! ...'

'Where is Wry-Tangle? I want to congratulate him! ...'

'Isn't it disgusting,' said Isis. 'This morning we took him to the trimmer's to have his coat clipped and make him handsome. They gave him a bath and the whole treatment ... And then at two o'clock three of his friends came round with four bundles of horrible old bones and off he went with them. He's bound to come back in a terrible state! ...'

'It is *his* birthday, after all,' frowned Colin.

Through the opening between the double doors he

could see the other boys and girls. A dozen of them were dancing, but most of the others were standing close to each other, with their hands behind their backs, in pairs of the same sex, exchanging extremely unconvincing impressions with even more unconvincing expressions.

‘Take off your coat,’ said Isis. ‘Follow me and I’ll show you the way to the boys’ cloakroom.’

He followed her, squeezing past another pair of girls who were emerging, in the opposite direction, along with the compacted sounds of snapping bags and puffing powder, from Isis’s bedroom which had been transformed into a girls’ cloakroom for the occasion. Iron hooks and rails, borrowed from the butcher’s, hung from the ceiling, and as decorations Isis had also borrowed a couple of closely skinned sheep’s heads to grin at the end of each row.

The boys’ cloakroom, which had been set up in Isis’s father’s study, consisted solely of the suppression of all the furniture in the said room. One simply unwrapped one’s carcass on the floor – and that was that. Colin gave a brilliant performance, but lingered for a second in front of a mirror.

‘Come on! Hurry up!’ said Isis impatiently. ‘I want to take you to meet some really charming girls.’

He held both her wrists and drew her towards him.

‘Your dress is a dream,’ he said.

It was a simple little dress of almond-green cashmere, with great gilded ceramic buttons, and the low back was filled in with a wrought-iron portcullis.

‘Do you like it?’ said Isis.

‘It’s a dream of a dream,’ said Colin. ‘Can you put your hand through the bars without being bitten?’

‘Better not try,’ said Isis.