

## LOST VOICES

Nicholas Houghton

*I have three bêtes noires about what is often referred to as 'serious fiction'. The first is the way some authors write self-absorbed, tail-chasing, disappearing up their own rectum stories about writing, as if anyone is interested apart from other writers, the kind who belong to small, exclusive cliques and gossip incessantly and have endless fascination with each other and their craft. Probably because they haven't mastered it, I always think. Oops, I think I ought to have written 'mistrressed it', since my last novel was criticised for using the word 'mastered'. This was described as an example of 'sexist language' in a particularly vitriolic review in the Independent on Sunday, which I shouldn't have read. It banged on about 'the male concept of genius', which for some reason I couldn't follow was supposed to be why my novel was alleged to have failed. Sally my agent, tipped me off as soon as she found out who had been given it: why do they always send my books to be reviewed by those who have a grudge against me? I tried not to read it, but I didn't have the willpower; I couldn't fail to be curious about what my ex had written about my work. Afterwards I felt mildly sick. I know that what she wrote wasn't true, but I've also learned that once the maird has been tossed in your direction it attaches to you and the untruths lodge in people's brains ever afterwards.*

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*So, I suppose I should be chastened and always use 'mistressed' instead, but as far as I'm concerned, if I think of a mistress, I think of somebody's bit on the side who he sees furtively away from the matrimonial domicile. I have no doubt that by stating this I have sunk ever further into the mire of political incorrectness. So be it. I have no wish to adopt a Kingsley Amis mantle, but nor do I intend to install Microsoft Lingapure™ to check whether anything I've written might be ever so slightly non-pc.*

*I digress. Philip's review in the TLS criticised the novel for too many digressions. When I chose to call it 'Delta' I worried because this title seemed too obvious a description of what I was attempting. Clearly not. But then Philip is unable to recognise a metaphor when it's too inches away from his dense skull, in fact I doubt he'd notice one if he was immersed up to his neck in it. But he loves stories about writing, just as much as I hate them. I always think they show up a monumental lack of imagination, not only because the author can't think of anything beyond herself/himself (NB. non-sexist language), but also because they somehow think that anyone else would be in the slightest bit interested.*

*My second hate is creative writing courses. My reasons are straightforward and shared by many writers I know. Either you can write or you can't and if you can't, you'll never acquire what some people are born with. Of course something about writing can be taught, I acknowledge that. People who attend these courses can sometimes manage to learn how to write competently. Oh, so competently, in the*

same way that muzak in the lift of an hotel is competent. This competence is so dire, so mediocre, so glaringly full of the formulae the poor, deluded students were taught. Yes, some of them are published. Don't I know it. I despair at how many mediocre novels are published, at how many untalented nobodies are encouraged to pick up the pen or switch on the computer and produce their competent piddle and how much of this ends up in print. It is so depressing to contemplate this dreadful, endless stream of mediocre novels that fill the shelves of bookshops and then to imagine thousands on thousands of dull, dire manuscripts forever being sent hither and thither by wannabe authors, most of whom have attended, or are attending creative writing classes. To realise that all those published are only a select few. And by the way, half of the manuscripts in the ever-increasing slush piles were written by authors telling trivial stories all about themselves, or their pasts and the other half are stories about attending a creative writing class. I was never good at maths, because as well as those two halves, there will always be some who have written a banal story about twins and one or two who have written something completely wacky, such as the adventures of a family of maggots as they devour the corpse of Dostoevsky.

I know people who teach creative writing classes. Adam Hammond is a friend who teaches it at a university in Saskatchewan, poor man. In order to earn a living, half the year he's freezing his balls off and traipsing through snow to induct classes of eager faced Canadians into the mysteries of becoming a creative writer. And, of course,

*they never will, because they don't have the talent.*

*Adam disagrees. He's worked out the formula for successful writing and even talks about rules. I've told him: there are no rules. When I hear people talk about the rules of a good novel, I remember a biology lesson I had at my boy's grammar school when I was about thirteen or fourteen. Mr Davenport was the teacher and he was explaining that whereas animals can move their ears, humans can't. And sitting in the front row was a boy called Derek Buckle and he had large, protruding ears and as Mr Davenport made his pronouncement, Derek wagged his ears up and down and then flapped them from side to side. It was quite a performance and we all laughed and finally cheered. I always think about Derek when I hear somebody laying down the law.*

*I'm thinking of him now, because Sally recently gave me a story to read. She thought I'd enjoy it. It's not really a story, more notes and accounts about writing and a creative writing class. The author sent it to her, together with a novel. I almost didn't read it: the subject put me off so much. Whereas, in fact, it confounded my worst fears, perhaps because it confirmed my worst prejudices. This is it.*

This is the story of Helen Vaughan. Helen was a dreamer. All her life she dreamed and no one ever daydreamed quite as intensely, fervently or as thoroughly as Helen. Some people spend their lives with their noses in books and forever escape into a fictional life-world created by their authors. However, Helen found if she

began to read a book her mind would soon be taking the characters in all directions and it became a disappointment to continue with the more mundane plot the author had imposed on them. Besides which, she found it hard to concentrate on a book for any length of time before her daydreams would interject and the words on the page weren't registering.

That was how it was for Helen. Little of real life registered. She spent her schooldays gazing out of windows, lost in parallel universes, much to the consternation of her teachers. They always accused her of being lazy, of not applying herself to her work, of being scatter-brained and disorganised. How hurtful these criticisms were, because for her they weren't true. She tried her best, her very best. Always. But she was unable to articulate how difficult it was for her to concentrate. To explain how, or why, it was that while Miss Williams was drawing isosceles triangles on the board and explaining their properties, she was in Egypt, riding a camel and being chased by bandits, so that she had to ride further and further into the desert where she had a secret house in an oasis. Or as Mrs Grant droned on and on about conjunctions and prepositions, Helen was looking up at the high ceiling and the beams that criss-crossed it and she had become a circus acrobat, elegantly gliding though the air on a trapeze from one beam to the next, while the audience below gasped. And before long she was back in her caravan, which was next to the elephants and the daydream was real and vivid, whereas what a conjunction or preposition was never registered.

In History lessons, she soon parted company with her teacher as she imagined herself gallivanting with figures from history, being best friends with Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup> and sailing round the world with Francis Drake, while in Geography, Miss Tilley only had to begin to talk about the St. Lawrence Seaway and the Great Lakes to cause Helen to find herself living in her remote log cabin, where she was totally safe, because nobody else knew where it was.

As she grew older, the border between real life and her daydreams became ever more blurred. She spent much of her teen years in the certain knowledge that various stars of film or pop were in love with her. She was very thorough in her fantasies; she worked out exactly what the house they shared looked like, the way they furnished each room, the pattern of the curtains, the kinds of towels, dishes, knives and forks they used, the pictures on the wall. No detail escaped her attention. Into this secluded setting she created stories about them living together in domestic bliss.

On one occasion while at school, she made the error of boasting about her relationship with John Travolta to three girls who were looking at his picture and saying how dishy he was. They didn't believe her for a second and told everyone what she had said, so that very quickly the story got around, much to everyone's mirth. Thereafter she was teased unmercifully about it: 'Hi, Helen, how's John today?' they'd say as she walked by. Even Miss Tilley joined in by admonishing her for failing to pay attention with a snide remark about how she was at school right now and not with Mr. Travolta. Helen was mortified. In fact

she never lived it down, but she did learn never, ever to divulge her private thoughts again. She withdrew even deeper into her own world and viewed her engagements with reality as inconvenient interruptions.

Reality kept occasionally encroaching as she failed to hold down one job after another. She only survived one day as a cook at the Elmwood Nursing Home, because lunch didn't appear till nearly three in the afternoon, while she was still preparing dinner at ten when the matron took over and sent her off into the night with instructions not to return. It was pouring with rain and by the time a bus came she was soaked. Unfortunately it was the wrong bus, which deposited her on the outskirts and by then it was too late to catch another one home. Nor did she know the way and had no money for a taxi. As she trudged aimlessly in the rain through drenched, dark suburban streets that all looked alike, she was contentedly lost in the middle of the ocean on a boat with the film star who was her current obsession. It was nearly three in the morning by the time she found her way home. Elmwood didn't ever pay her for her day's work.

The job she finally managed to hold onto was as an usherette at a new, multi-screen cinema. Mel, the manager, spent most of his time in the projection booth and at first paid little attention to what she did, or didn't do. Her important duty was to direct customers to the correct cinema but few needed this instruction. She did succeed in watching all the films playing at least once and her life became a triumvirate of her private world, the film world and the real world. She found it harder and harder to tell

them apart.

Therefore, when Mel began sitting next to her as she watched films, she imagined it was Christophe Lambert, a French actor she had seen that week and fallen madly in love with. Likewise, as Mel clumsily clenched her left breast, for her Christophe was tenderly caressing it. When Mel locked and alarmed the multiplex, he didn't suspect that she saw somebody different about to drive her home. He never knew the numbers of personas she attached to him, that she forever constructed new means of covering up his inadequacies.

On her wedding day the limousine that had been booked broke down before it arrived and she had to be driven to the town hall by Mel's brother in his old van, trying not mess her dress on the filthy seat with stuffing emerging from a long gash. There was a gale blowing, which meant the photos had to be taken inside. Mel fumed and couldn't understand how placid she was, but...

'OK, stop there, that's enough,' said Mike Hunter. I put the manuscript I'd been reading to the class down on the school table in front of me. My hand was trembling; I always found it an ordeal to read my attempts at writing to the class. I clenched one hand in the other to keep it still and began fiddling idly with my wedding ring. My throat felt dry.

Mike Hunter lent back in his chair. 'I stopped it there because it was becoming a bit monotonous. Helen was a dreamer: we got that message loud and clear. Then you went

on and on hammering that message home, but I kept thinking: where is this going? You're in the third year now, after all, yet you're still ignoring plot and putting all your effort into characterisation and background. These are important, but not as important as plot. It's the plot that drives it forward, yet you tend to put in lots and lots of characterisation - too much - and then occasionally stop, give the plot a casual kick forward and then return to the characterisation. Some of your characterisation was good, but I had to stop you because it had become completely bogged down in a Sargasso Sea of characterisation. Do you understand what you need to do?'

'I think so,' I said, very quietly. I was rotating my wedding ring.

'Good. Plot and characterisation have to be integrated, but plot always leads. How many times have I had to say that? Another thing, if you're going to find your own voice, you'll have to be much less obvious. For example: 'drenched streets'. What a cliché, I mean, we all know when it rains things get drenched. That's obvious. What you have to do is find your own way of describing that, a way that nobody else would. Am I being harsh?' He paused. 'What does everyone else think?'

He didn't need to ask. They always took their cue from Mike: if he praised a piece of writing, they all liked it, if he was critical, they were likewise. At that moment I felt as if I had taken all my clothes off and everyone was closely scrutinising my body and pointing out its imperfections.

It hadn't always been that bad. During the first year

Mike had been more encouraging and during the second, when I began my first tentative steps at writing short stories for the class he was quite complementary. 'Good, very good, that's very tight writing,' he told me last February, or March, 'you're very near to finding your own voice.' Comments like this lodged in my brain, just as I found that I was unable to recall the negative things he said.

But during the third year he became much more critical of everyone, except Trish. Writing was becoming harder and harder as a result. I'd sit down and think to myself: what is my voice? Where can I find it and how? Is this my voice and if not, whose is it? Every sentence I would compose I'd be thinking: what will Mike think? He dislikes too many adjectives and hates all adverbs: 'Adverbs are a lazy way of not looking for the right verb,' he would say, 'they are evidence of slovenly writing. I'm always rejecting stories for Splash only because of the adverbs.' I would recall his words and take some out, although only with reluctance. And it even crossed my mind whether I was searching for my voice or his.

Well, actually, that thought didn't come till recently, as I began trying to extricate myself once and for all from his influence and deliberately write in a way I knew he wouldn't approve of. For example:

It was late August and all over Europe summer ended abruptly. Gales lashed beaches with such ferocity that deckchairs were swept out to sea, together with sundry

beach furniture and some people. At Rimini, eight Italians who were engulfed by a giant wave lost their lives, in Corsica a beach café was destroyed and four people who had been trapped in it died, while a campsite near Tarragona was flooded in the middle of the night, killing thirteen Dutch and two Germans.

Throughout Europe drenched, disconsolate holidaymakers deserted the littoral en masse and headed home. There were major hold-ups and a spate of serious accidents on French roads. Uprooted trees and power lines lying limply in the ground added to the extreme chaos. Major airports were closed, stranding many thousands. A new suspension bridge near Mannheim was seriously damaged and the Meuse broke its banks, flooding large areas of Dutch and Belgian Limburg. Meanwhile, in Silesia a mudslide swept through two apartment buildings, killing 'at least forty-five' as the news reports put it, as if hoping for more casualties to increase the impact.

In the Alps blizzards closed passes and stranded cows near the top of mountains. The Swiss government sent army helicopters to rescue them in slings, but this operation had to be suspended when poor visibility caused one to crash into the mountainside, killing the crew, although miraculously the cow escaped.

There were calls in the press for politicians to do something. In England newspaper leaders demanded that the UK parliament be recalled. There was much discussion about who was to blame and what could be done to prevent a similar catastrophe. Television schedules were changed to accommodate extended news bulletins. And while all this

was going on Jennie Fillan ventured out into this hostile world and enrolled on an adult education creative writing course.

This wasn't a sudden decision; Jennie had been contemplating doing this for at least four years. It was a combination of Daniel and lack of confidence that had prevented her. When she had mooted the idea to Dan he had been vehemently opposed, although she hadn't actually said it was a writing course, just an English course, that's how she had described it. He didn't know that she wrote. Nobody did. It was her secret. She filled exercise book after exercise book during the evenings, while he was at work but was careful to hide them before he came home. She was terrified of what he would do if he ever found them.

She knew instinctively he would be angry if he discovered she had been writing. In fact, she felt guilty about this herself, felt she was letting him down, going behind his back. But evening after evening she felt compelled to pick up a pen and continue. Who was she writing this for, she often wondered. She concluded she did this for herself; it was the one thing she had that was totally her own. After all, Dan chose the house, chose everything that went in it, decided where and when they went shopping and what went in the trolley. They went to bed and got up when he wanted to and he would never allow her to go up or get up before him. He was the boss in everything. Except when it came to the stories she wrote.

The weather that year was exceptionally fickle, because September brought a succession of warm, sunny days. It was a glorious evening with a golden sun low in the sky when

she furtively left for her first class. She hoped against hope that nobody Daniel knew would see her and report back.

The classes were held at Westbury Community School. Jennie hadn't been to a school since she left and it felt very strange. Deeply engrained fears resurfaced and she had to keep telling herself that this would be totally different.

The school was tucked away at the end of a cul-de-sac of new houses; she learned later that they had been built on what had once been the playing fields. The main building consisted of a long, two storey, dilapidated, flat roofed slab, with two monotonous rows of ill-fitting windows instead of walls, which on the west side were smudged with violet, vermilion, crimson, orange, pink, purple and mauve from the setting sun. Scattered around this building was a collection of decrepit huts: temporary classrooms that had become permanent.

Everybody else seemed to be arriving by car. When Jennie saw them walking briskly from the car park towards the entrance she walked slower, until she came to a stop. She stood there watching and wondering whether she shouldn't go straight back home.

She looked down at her feet. She was wearing her best shoes they'd bought in the spring. Although Dan had chosen them, she liked them too. Now, looking at everyone entering, she fretted in case she was wearing the wrong kind of clothes; everyone else seemed to be dressed so casually. As she looked at her feet she was aware that they were walking forward. She was going in!

Inside the door was a throng of people reading information that had been attached to a blackboard on an easel. On the wall was a glass cabinet with a crack, behind which were a few neglected silver cups and trophies. Beside it another cabinet displayed a white England Schoolboys football shirt, worn, the inscription underneath informed her, by a pupil from the school in 1967. She recalled playing hockey at school, her chapped, freezing fingers having to hold that loathsome stick, the cold wind turning her exposed thighs red, her teacher and other girls admonishing her for not trying.

Creative Writing 1 was being held in the Art block. She hadn't seen this building when she arrived, because it was round the back. Downstairs, a pottery class was beginning. She tentatively entered classroom A7, then stopped. Tables that were slightly too small for an adult were arranged in five rows and sitting at them were about fifteen women. Facing them, a tall, dark haired man was sitting behind a much larger teacher's desk. He had close-cropped hair and beard and was wearing jeans, a T-shirt and a leather jacket. Noticing Jennie, he asked: 'Creative Writing, Year 1?'

She nodded.

'Then stop lurking at the door and come in,' he said, 'have a seat, anywhere you can find one free - of paint that is. I don't know why they put us in this room.'

Two women were talking in whispers. Everyone else was quiet. The teacher was looking at some papers. Jennie looked around the room. She was definitely dressed too formally. She walked towards the back of the class. There

was a cupboard with piles of paper on top and next to it a butler's sink that looked as if it had rarely been washed. On an adjacent shelf there were several rows of wine bottles, a pair of old bicycles, an old sewing machine, a guitar that was missing its back and a broken violin; to Jennie its limp shape seemed to be silently lamenting the music it could no longer make. Beside this junk was a large, ailing rubber plant and untidy piles of books and magazines. Everywhere looked grimy and dishevelled. Daniel would go spare if he saw a room like this, Jennie pondered.

As I wrote that, I heard Danny parking his car. My senses had become so acutely trained to his arrival that I could always recognise the sound of the engine. I stuffed the manuscript under a cushion and replaced the pen, then made my way to the kitchen.

Next day, I was impatient for Dan to go to work, so that I could carry on with the story. However, in the afternoon when I did pick up the exercise book and read it, I was dismayed. The beginning was too portentous. All of it was over-written. It was obvious to me that I had been trying too hard: trying too hard to write well, to write with my own voice. Instead it had become a compendium of the voices of numerous authors I had read. Each sentence was dripping with effort, like a weightlifter straining under the burden he is attempting to hold aloft. In the past I had been attempting to write in a way that would please my teacher, but I still hadn't

found my own voice. I wondered if I shouldn't abandon the whole idea of writing. But I was determined to tell this story and tell it well. What I needed to do was forget all about Mike Hunter. Except he had such a prominent role in the story.

I kept starting afresh, but it wasn't working. I would go to the kitchen, lean on the fridge door and debate with myself whether I should eat something. The illuminated, colourful food, arranged neatly on shelves looked so tempting. Once I took out the wherewithal to make myself a sandwich, but changed my mind and put it all back again. Drank a coffee instead. Then another. For once I was relieved when Daniel came home and I didn't have to worry about writing any more that day.

Then, that night, I found I wanted to write again. I knew this was an absurd notion, with Danny not only in the house but so close to me. But the desire got the better of me. I went downstairs, extracted the current exercise book, picked up a pen and crept upstairs again. Having checked Dan was still asleep, I locked myself in the bathroom, sat on the toilet and began to write. The words flowed out effortlessly. That was Monday night. On Wednesday evening, I went with my new story to what I knew would be my last ever creative writing class.

It was May and I hadn't been since November. I noticed there were different pictures displayed on the classroom wall, mostly drawings of bottles. Mike looked very surprised to see me; I was glad to observe my presence made him uncomfortable, as it gave me courage. I went straight up to his desk, looked him in the eye and told

him I wanted to read a new short story tonight. So far so good: my anger was giving me strength.

'Yes, well, why not? That'll be excellent,' he said, avoiding my gaze and without asking me where I'd been in the intervening months. He looked older. Yet he hadn't changed: I had. I was acutely aware of the scrunched up skin around his eyes, the pimples at the base of his beard and then lines criss-crossing his neck, like the hide of a rhino. I was determined not to allow him to divine how nervous I was, how hard I found it to even set eyes on him.

I sat at the back, as usual, and was aware of a general air of surprise that I'd reappeared. I half expected he would make me wait till last and then say there was no time, but instead I was told to read first, which I wasn't expecting. I thought I was ready for this moment but now I wasn't. Nerves came rushing into me, my heart was racing. I picked up the manuscript, swallowed, took a deep breath and began reading.

I am absolutely, completely, entirely and utterly fed up with being told what is, or to be precise what is not, my own voice. It makes no sense at all. It's ridiculous. It's illogical. How can anyone declare what is, or is not, one's own voice? Perhaps I have several voices. Perhaps nobody has one. Perhaps, as Martha's friend suggested to me recently, the process of acculturation precludes the possibility of there being such a thing: I'm still thinking about that. Or perhaps the more I sought my own

voice, the more fervently I tried to find it, the further away I went from it.

For years I wrote. But one day I began to ask myself who I was writing for. I concluded that I think for myself, but if I put my thoughts on paper, I must be writing for an audience. That's why I took the plunge and began studying creative writing, to help me make the transition from the private to the public. But from the very first exercise we were given I was writing for one person only: the teacher. I so much, absolutely, yes, really, really wanted to please him. When he said take out the adjectives, I systematically removed them all, when he said extract all the adverbs, I filleted my writing of every last one. When he insisted on writing in the present tense I did that, when he told us to use shorter sentences, I wrote with the shortest of short, staccato sentences. I never doubted there might be anything amiss with this sparse, spare, snippy, snappy, sharp, shredded, serrated prose. Whatever he said he liked I tried to oblige him by producing. Yet I never succeeded and he admonished me for not being myself when I wrote.

In one class Trish stood up and read a story about a doomed love affair that took place during a holiday in Italy. Mike, the teacher, praised it, even though she admitted it was based on her own experience. Later, the story was published in Splash. It began to be evident that being yourself meant writing about yourself. I had always wondered to what extent the stories everyone was writing had been made up and concluded very little. So I decided to also write about myself.

In my case, although I could easily imagine having a romance and writing about it, in reality I wouldn't do it, because I'm married and this is a line I wouldn't ever cross. I wouldn't even put myself in a position where this could become a possibility. Or so I thought.

One evening at the creative writing class we were having the break. I was in the school canteen, which incongruously had a large poster proclaiming HEALTHY EATING above a series of machines dispensing fizzy drinks, chocolate bars, sweets and other snacks stuffed full of calories. I always got a hot chocolate from the machine. It's something I never normally have and drinking it contributed to the specialness of these classes. I realised just how special when holidays came and Wednesdays reverted to the same status as any other day, filled exclusively with ordinariness.

While I was clutching my plastic cup, Mike Hunter the teacher came over to me.

[At this point - and many others - I half expected Mike to tell me to stop reading, but he said nothing. Perhaps he had guessed that I had already decided that if he told me to stop I would refuse.]

'You're always on your own,' Mike said, sitting down without asking if he could join me. 'You sit by yourself at the back of the class and you rush off afterwards and always turn down invitations to go out for a drink.'

'Yes,' I said, 'why? What do you want? I have to get home after class.'

'You're missing out. You see, the classes are the formal part and the pub afterwards in the informal part. We go every week, you know and in the Black Swan we discuss writing in a different way.' He smiled wistfully.

'I really have to get home afterwards.'

'Why? Kids?'

'I just do,' I said.

'Fine, no problem, it's up to you.' He paused, then said: 'You know you really intrigue me. I see you sitting there and I think: God, she has so much potential as a writer. You should get to know your classmates better. That's such an important part of education, what you learn from your fellow students. If you ever change your mind and come, I'm sure you'll get a lot out of it.'

I was flattered by what he'd said and curious about what went on at the pub, although I knew I'd never find out. Except, as the weeks went by I began thinking the unthinkable, because my husband was due to attend a management training course near Bedford. By the time he left, I knew I would go.

I felt guilty going, but this was only an extension of the guilt I felt at attending the classes, which in turn was an extension of my guilt at secretly writing in the first place. That's how it is. A major event may seem to appear out of the blue, but afterwards you can trace back a trail of small steps that led to it and made it inevitable and moreover, meant it wasn't so much a big event as a culmination of all the little bits that had gone before and out of which it was built.

And so it was, on Wednesday the eighth of November that

I took the first step by going up to Mike even before class had begun and telling him I'd like to go to the Black Swan afterwards.

'Great, that's fantastic, you're really coming out of your shell,' he had said.

Each successive step that evening is less distinct, like a document being printed by a machine that's running out of ink. The next was being driven to the pub by Trish. It was drizzling and particularly dark. She was wiping the windscreen with a cloth and telling me about her job as a conference organiser, which made me think about my husband attending his course.

'What do you do?' she asked me.

'I don't work these days,' I replied, 'I used to work at the same place as my husband and after we married he didn't want me to do that any more.'

'Do you always do what your husband tells you?' I found the question out of place and didn't reply.

Perhaps it was the dim light, or perhaps the way my senses were bombarded, or maybe the alcohol that makes my time at the pub so hard to recall in any detail. It was different from what I had expected. Very. For a start, whereas from what Mike had told me I had imagined almost the entire class there avidly engaged in earnest conversation, there were only three others sitting at a table with Mike. What is more the pub had a giant video jukebox with two large screens at each end and loud music filling every crook and cranny. This seemed completely the wrong sort of venue to discuss writing, or just about anything else. The flickering, flashing images of prancing

pop stars were impossible to ignore, while the pounding music meant you had to shout to be heard.

The conversation that did take place was not about writing or the class, except in an oblique way as they joked about other members. I remember thinking that they probably had enjoyed a good chuckle at my expense from time to time.

I made a decision to leave as soon as I politely could and was just about to go when I found another drink placed in front of me. When I did mention going, Trish offered to drive me home. Then Mike returned from the Gents, sat down next to me and began talking into my ear about his work for the British Council in Barbados, describing in some detail how he helped writers there to find their authentic, post-colonial voices. Next he joked about hobby-writers, who would always only ever be mere hobby writers, just as the hobby-potters downstairs would only ever be hobby-potters. The pottery teacher sometimes talked to him and told him that on three hours a week, they would never learn to throw properly, but as long as they never learned to throw they would keep coming back and as long as they kept coming back a real potter like him could afford to feed himself.

I looked up and became aware that Trish wasn't there.

'Where's Trish?' I yelled.

'I think I saw her leaving a while ago,' Mike said to me and then addressing the others asked: 'Did Trish go?' They confirmed that she had and said they would also be leaving. I would have gone as well, except he promptly asked me a question about my writing and followed this up

by expressing interest in the novel I had been writing for years and years but never finished, because I was always changing and revising it. This conversation continued till closing time.

The next step was being driven home on his motorbike. It seemed exhilarating and irresponsible and this feeling was enhanced by the fact I wasn't wearing a helmet. I must have been quite drunk, because I didn't even consider the possible consequences had we been stopped by the police.

The next step was perhaps the biggest. I'm not very worldly wise but I'm savvy enough to know you don't invite a man into your home close to bedtime. But, I have to explain that at the time, strange as it now seems, I trusted and admired him without qualification. If I haven't managed to convey this in what I've written so far, it's because I lack the ability to discard the scorn and hatred I now feel for him.

You see, he had expressed this desire to hear a passage from my novel I'd been telling him about and I thought this might be my one and only chance. There was no other motive. Well - if he'd firmly but gently put his arm around me, told me he was madly in love with me, who knows? That's how it is for a writer: fantasy is forever lurking over the horizon of reality. And when reality becomes unbearable we can leave it behind and take refuge in this fantasy world.

At first, that's what I did when he raped me. I'm good at it. I switch off my senses, pretend it isn't happening, go somewhere else. But on this occasion his beard kept scratching me and for some reason that was both pulling me

back to the horror of the here and now and also a time long ago that I had no previous recollection of, when I was a child and there was also a beard against my face, my father's beard, I was back there and remembering that it had happened often and sometimes my mother would be at my bedroom door and be saying: 'Leave her alone now and come to bed'. These memories, like that of my evening with Mike emerge from darkness with dim, flickering lights and then just blackness extending to every horizon and no fantasy anywhere to offer me any escape.

I didn't report the rape, although Martha at the Women's Centre kept telling me I ought to. How could I, without my husband finding out? And I was petrified of the consequences of that. Martha assured me I could stay somewhere safe, if I chose to leave my husband. I said I wouldn't, but I'm considering it. These days my furtive trips out are to see Martha, who's counselling me. I've just been looking at my novel again. Martha says I always had my own voice and I think she's right.

I stopped reading. Everyone was looking at me, but nobody was actually looking me in the eyes. There was an eerie silence in the room, just the sounds from outside such as of clay being thumped from underneath and a blackbird beginning his crepuscular serenade. After someone had read, Mike always spoke first; now he was tongue-tied. I wanted to look at him but couldn't. I had been so tense and now I began to cry. This was going to ruin the desired effect, so I pulled myself together and walked out the room, continued out of the school and

headed home.

*Sally agreed to take the author on and even managed to find a publisher for the novel. However soon after the contract had been signed Sally learned that she had been battered to death by her husband, the cinema manager.*

*'It barely made the national press,' she told me over dinner, 'nobody ever wants to intrude too much into family violence, although it's often the worst. And,' she added, 'her family have scuppered the book deal. They are adamant, but apparently they have the right. It makes me so angry. They abuse her like that and then, when she's dead, they still have the whip-hand and what she wanted counts for nothing.'*

*I made a glib remark about how one novel more or less would be no loss for the literary world but had clearly misjudged Sally's mood.*

*'How can you say something like that?' she snapped, 'you're so arrogant.'*

*'Oh come on,' I protested, 'you feel the same way. Don't be so serious.' But she was not to be appeased.*

*'No you're arrogant - a typical man. Well I've got news for you. It's time you stopped reading the publicity blurb on your dust jackets. You need to heed the reviews. Because you think you're so special you believe everything you write is brilliant. Actually your work has been sliding for years.'*

*I didn't reply and there was an abundance of tension between us.*

*After that conversation I thought about changing my*

*agent and she must have known she'd gone too far because she went out of her way to apologise and retract.*

*The trouble is that since then, I've been unable to write another word of fiction. Some authors try to write their way out of being blocked by describing it all in graphic detail. But that's the last thing I would ever do, because that's my third bête noire.*

*Written in London, 2001*

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