

*(Mopsa has chained herself naked to Mike in the Waldorf-Astoria hotel, and the manager has brought them to Holly's uncle Blundell to be freed. While waiting, Mike has read one of the stories for "Shooting Europe".....)*

And so I come to **The Battle of the Hog and Hoss**. I've not forgotten a single moment.

I laid the bulky sheets of your file down on Blundell's oriental palace's floor. My right fore-arm was cold with the effort of holding the pages up before my eyes against the pull of the cable. The blood had slipped away from my fingers and had left them white and without feeling. My hip dug into the settee and was beginning to have that atrophied sensation which comes before bed-sores. I had not moved for nearly an hour, for I was a slow reader back then. Behind me, her back pressed into soft cushions, Mopsa had dozed off. No wonder – she was comfortable and drugged up and I was neither. I don't know why Blundell's back alley should have felt cool – a July day in New York is a July day – but I imagined that the sloping canvasses of Shangri-La permitted no ray of sun to penetrate.

I made a stiff movement. Mopsa gurgled, but did not awake.

And what did I think about? “*On Torquil’s Boat*”, that’s what. An odd story, or so it seemed to me. What happened to Torquil? Did he kill them? Or did they kill him? What about Marius? Was he happy living in the Eastern Turkish hills with the separatist freedom fighters? Did they ever get there? What happened to Elani? Was he going to be a hostage? If his leg was broken, wouldn’t he die of shock, if given no treatment? That Meerza with the lisp was the son of the man who sold his kidney. So Booker wrote *his* kidney story after reading this one so that they’d link up. I thought I saw the point of that. Was I supposed to have looked for symbols? Did Western youth have more in common with the idealists of the Third World than with its parents’ self-indulgent post-war narcissism? Would the abuse by Western man of simple peoples, wrongly perceived as weaker, finally rebound upon him? Whose side was one supposed to be on? Marius was the product, like so many children, of a broken marriage, or no marriage; did that mean something? Cooper’s simple yarn seemed to have endless slanting sub-textual meanings. And you know what, Holly? I brooded that day, bound to Mopsa, on the fact that, in the stories I had read, the Brits, the Germans, the Italians, the Dutch and now the

Swedes were all as bad as each other – for it was fairly clear that, in an indefinable way, the non-European Meerza was some sort of idealised figure of austere vengeance. Once again, I made a mental note to tax Sherbert on the drift of these episode ideas for “*Shooting Europe*” which, I kept grimly reminding myself, was under-pinned by my dough.

Then it became a case of move or get gangrene of elbow and hip. So I wriggled, dragging the supine bitch up with me into a semi-seated position. Disturbed into wakefulness, she immediately began to give tongue.

‘What are you MOVING for? Think you can get away? You an’ me forever, Mikey – an’ that’s what you want deep-down if you just examine your rotten little leather-purse of a soul. This is the reality you try to escape from – this is the sort of Art you say you hate – well, the reality and the Art are one. One! Jeez, will you STOP draggin’ me, you bastard! We represent what we really are, Mikey. We are together because we ARE together, an’ that’s what I want. The key to release is IN me. In ME, you unnerstan’? IN me!’

Her hard voice dinned on in my ear, but I was listening to other sounds: a deep voice, a

door closing. Blundell? But what time was it? Had I slept? I must have done....

‘Mopsa....Shut up, can’t you?’

‘....an’ what’s IN me can’t EVER get out. That key is in my black hole, my asshole, boy, an’ you try an’ reach into me, an’....’

‘Mopsa, you cow! What is the time? Look at my watch! You can see it more easily than I can. What’s the bloody time?’

The door into the “temple” opened. Blundell’s huge form blotted out a sudden shaft of sunlight – a one-man solar eclipse. He lumbered forward, his circumference shaking. He looked, I thought, a little peeved, but also faintly amused; a tight line seemed to lie between his eyes, but a grin simultaneously writhed under that bushy beard. I know now what he was thinking; his beloved Holly had gotten herself interested in the sort of guy who is intimate with weirdo druggie bimbos from L. A. Should he help me or not? Keep his previous good opinion of me, or not?

‘You came, Blundell!’ I gasped, too het up to think of a more suitable formality to address one whom I had met but once and who was so much senior to me. I tried to twist Mopsa and myself round so that I could see him properly, for the sofa faced the long wall and the motorcycles.

‘Sure. Twinkle rang me out at Yonkers. I set out as soon as I could, but hell, I finished lunch first, Mike. Knew you’d understand that.’

‘Blundell, what’s the time?’

‘A lil’ before four, I guess.’

Good God, I had only been yoked to Bitch-machine since mid-day! It already seemed several centuries since I had, as it were, walked alone.

‘Did you bring... Er, that is... is Holly here too?’

‘She’s comin’ later, Mike.’ Again I detected disapproval. ‘I thought it best. Twink says you two have got tangled in some shit an’ need an oxy-acetylene cutter.’

Blundell stepped up and peered round the settee at us both. As he took in that Mopsa was naked, his saucer-like eyes widened into protruding globes. The he grinned – a big, big tolerant grin that spread across his moon of a face. ‘Saw this one other time in Saigon – hell, it was at Loopy Lu’s whore-house when Kam Ling was running things for the soldiers. Shit, an’ I was highern’ the Empire State that one time, and I hadn’t seen bondage like it...’

‘Blundell,’ I snapped, cutting off the ‘Nam reminiscences, ‘I’m sorry to interrupt your trip down memory-lane, but do I take it that you

think this is some sort of freaky Sunday afternoon sex-game?’

‘Twink does. Ain’t it?’

‘No, it jolly well isn’t! Mopsa, will you PLEASE explain. I’m sorry, I should have introduced you before now: Blundell, this is Mopsa Greene – Mopsa, Blundell Capitanchik.’

‘May I *interduice* you! So British!’ chuckled Blundell. ‘So this isn’t a love-game gone awry?’

‘Of course not,’ I snapped again.

Up to now, Mopsa had not spoken. I couldn’t see what she was doing, of course, but I imagined that like most people confronted with Blundell’s enormity for the first time, she had been stunned into silence. Now she cried, ‘Of course it IS!’

‘Mopsa!’

‘Mikey likes his fun real freaky. You should see his chains, his TONGS, his SPIKES at home in L A. He doesn’t really want you to try an’ release him. It’s part of his fun.’

Blundell gazed down at us. I sought his bulging, glassy eyes.

‘Blundell, I hardly know this woman. What she has done is beyond my comprehension. The last time I saw this poor, wretched girl was in a mental home in L A.’

Mopsa began shrieking wildly. ‘Yes,’ I went on, ‘in a home for the terminally deranged – in Glendale.’

‘Liar! Scum!’

‘I –er – I used to visit the inmates as my contribution to charity, you know, to bring some happiness and normality into their twisted lives. This patient developed a sad and violent attachment to me....’

‘You lying BASTARD!’ Mopsa’s fists pounded my shoulders.

‘....in her deranged sort of way. She pulled this absurd stunt in the hotel – I mean actually in the foyer – this morning when I was on my way out to the park. If you don’t believe me, ring Mr – Mr – (at this juncture I nearly forgot the Efficient Manger’s name) – Mr Hepworth in his office. He’ll confirm what I say. He and Scobie, a bell-hop, brought us here. Look, that’s his coat! They couldn’t release me at The Waldorf – they hadn’t the equipment. Then I thought of you and all your tools and suchlike.’

Really, Holly, I’m ashamed even now to think of how I reeled off the fibs to poor Blundell, but I had visions at the time of his banning me from seeing you, of his writing to his old comrade, your father, of his distaste for me. I was angry with Mopsa for dragging me into such a compromising and

embarrassing farce so close to your life. I had a dreadful image of your dropping into the “temple” to find us doing our double-act if Blundell delayed much longer. I wanted to establish in Blundell’s mind how very, very sketchily I was acquainted with this naked girl attached to my back.

Now Mopsa made a mistake. So typical of her. If she had quietly explained to Blundell her prior claims over me as she saw them, and her need to take this step as a metaphor of her belonging to me, and begged him to mind his own business, the eccentric gentleman in him might have agreed. But, observing how he took my information about Mr Hepworth and seeing his eyes rest on the efficient man’s coat – that circumstantial detail in the midst of lies, so necessary to secure belief – she turned her spate of invective on him instead.

‘You fat tub of offal! You think I’m from a nut-house? You moron! You believe this slimy piece of shit, you cretinous fat pig? Well, where are you from then? A freak circus? Roll up, see the lardiest asshole in the world! Sink your arms in his blubber! Lose your best friend in his folds of greasy, stinking meat! Hey, Fatso! How long since you saw your own tiny dick?’

His expression suddenly grim – as I imagine it might have been on the day he

began spitting on his disruptive pupil – Blundell lumbered to a large wooden chest between the two motorcycles.

‘Jus’ wait a moment, Mike,’ he grunted. ‘I’ll have you outa this in no time. What an awful thing to have happened.’ And to Mopsa he said, ‘I know you can’t help everything you say, missy, but you need to learn to keep a more po-lite tongue in your head...’

‘Freak! Fat bag of pus!’

‘...or you’ll get a *spanking*.’ His threat was so like that of an Edwardian father, so unlike that of an ex ’Nam Hells Angel free-thinker that I had to smile.

‘Mind Holly’s script!’ I cried, as he pulled a gas-cylinder and cutting-torch towards the sofa. He fielded “*On Torquil’s Boat*” and shoved it onto a table.

‘Keep very still, Mike, an’ don’t either of you look at the flame. I’m gonna slip a piece of asbestos and leather between the cable and you.’ There was a sudden smack. ‘An stop wriggling, young lady, or you’re gonna burn your ass.’

‘You – hit – me – again – an’ – I’m – g-gonna – SUE YOU, FATSO!’ roared Mopsa.

Slap!

Shriek!

Slap! Slap! Smack!

Silence.

‘That’s better,’ said Blundell grimly. ‘Now hold on.’

There was a snick of a match and a hissing. ‘Don’ look at the flame,’ he warned us again.

A stench of burning plastic filled the “temple” as the covering of the cable was seared off. Then we kept very still. Even Cow-face had enough sense, I reckoned, not to invite that extremely fierce blue flame – hot, even through the thick asbestos padding – to make contact with her.

‘There,’ said Blundell. ‘Don’ move yet. It’s hot.’ He reached into his tool chest and fished out a heavy pair of metal cutters. ‘Jus’ cut through the last bit,’ he grunted. With a snap we were free of each other at last. I jumped up, slapping Blundell on his fat shoulder. My “*decreo nisi*” had come. Never had a divorced man felt at such liberty. Resisting the opportunity to taunt Mopsa, I took Blundell to one side and whispered,

‘Blundell, I can’t thank you enough. But look, I want to get her away before....’ I was going to say: before YOU arrived, and I saw that Blundell knew I was going to say it, so I changed it to: ‘...before she gets troublesome again. And I can’t take her out of here dressed only in Mr Hepworth’s coat, even in Greenwich Village.’

‘Twink’s got nothing that would fit her. And if you take something of Holly’s, you’re gonna have to tell Holly...’

Mopsa had slumped down on the sofa again and was crying noisily, her head in her hands. I wondered if the key she had so unnecessarily swallowed was cutting into some vital organ. ‘I guess I know where I can get us a pair of jeans an’ a T-shirt,’ said Blundell. ‘It’s a little place down West Houston Street, somewhere between here an’ Lafayette. It’s open Sundays – I’ve seen it.’

‘So what do I do? Out of here, take a right, left at Avenue of the Americas, down to West Houston...?’

‘No, hang on. Hang on. I’m sorry, Mike,’ hissed Blundell, ‘but I’m not stopping here alone with your lady-friend. I got Twinkle to think of. *I* go for the clothes for the little lady. *You* wait here.’

He restored the cutting equipment to its chest, carefully re-packing it and checking the taps on the gas-cylinder. Then he fumbled with the choke on his Harley and started it. ‘Pull back the doors, Mike,’ he shouted. Mopsa started up at the roar and at the daylight pouring in from up the alleyway. Blundell swung a vast leg over his hog and, letting in the clutch, paddled the machine to the doors. He slipped into neutral again. ‘Tell

Twink where I've gone, if she comes out here. Won't be long – less than quarter of an hour.'

I nodded.

Just as I did so, I felt a violent blow over my kidneys. Mopsa had kicked me and sent me toppling forward on hands and knees as if about to offer libations to Blundell's hog. Vaulting over me, she ran full tilt at Blundell, pushing at him. His left leg was holding up the bike as he straddled it. His right was on the footboard and he just put it down in time. With a roar he wobbled off on the right and the Harley leaned over onto him. He yelped as he took its weight. Mopsa seized the bars and, with the astonishing strength that she sometimes displayed, heaved the cycle fully upright. It was ticking over with its steady thudding beat – that famous, patented "potato-potato" Harley-Davidson sound. Hair streaming, eyes wild, Mopsa vaulted aboard and hauled the twist-grip round. With a clamour of valves, a blast of exhaust and an agonised wail from Blundell, she was gone!

'My hog!' roared Blundell. 'C'mon! C'mon!' He told us many times later how pole-axed he felt at the outrage – his hog ridden off under his nose – yet how his old training had honed him for action, remember?

I scrambled to my knees. 'Come? Come where? She's gone. Gone,' I kept repeating.

‘We’ll get her. Help me!’

He was tearing at the grand-piano-sized dust cover beneath which, as I recalled from my earlier visit, was his obscenely enormous second sickle: the six litre V8 Boss Hoss. ‘Help me round with her,’ he gasped. We wheeled the giant vehicle in a wide circle, round the sofa, past the table, past the chest to a position in front of the double doors. The dust from Mopsa’s passing still hung in the air. Blundell jammed the electrics on. The subsidiary hydraulics pumped juice, whirring. A second later there was power to get the clutch withdrawn. Blundell started the V8. It turned over once and a rolling, easy bellow filled the “temple”. ‘Get on. Get on!’

I hesitated.

‘What about Twink...?’

‘Get ON, frig you!’ shouted Blundell. So commanding was his tone that I found myself behind him on the bare few inches of saddle left unoccupied by his immense buttocks. ‘I need you to ride the hog back when we get it!’ he yelled. As Mopsa had done before him, he hauled twist-grip and, a bare minute after the fleeing Harley, we too were barrelling up the alley to the street. ‘She turned left!’ cried Blundell back at me. ‘I heard her!’ So left we went up to Seventh Avenue. We careered out on it. Blundell took a quick glance down the

curve towards West Houston, then slewed right and roared up, crossing West 14<sup>th</sup> Street at, I thought, 80 mph. I had no time for any reflection other than that I was on the world's biggest sickle with the world's fattest man, in deadly pursuit of the world's maddest woman, on the tiniest portion of seat imaginable and without a crash helmet. 'We gotta catch up before Times Square!' raved Blundell. 'Why! There she is!'

Mopsa was pulling away from the traffic lights at West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, making a middle-finger gesture at the pedestrians gaping after her. Why she had stopped for a red light, I couldn't imagine, but the fact that she had done so had given us a chance. Over Blundell's rounded hump of a shoulder, I saw her look back for an instant, peer into one of her mirrors and then suddenly accelerate. I understood that it was only *then* that she knew she was pursued by us. She had not known, of course, about the second bike. To match her speed, we accelerated too, and I was nearly thrown off. I dug my fingers desperately into Blundell's fat. 'Aaah! Ha, haaa, no, no, don't!' shrieked my pilot. 'Gee whiz, don't do that!' The Hoss slewed wildly on the road.

'What?' I screamed, as the wind buffeted my face.

‘Don’ grab me, Mike. I’m ticklish!’ howled Blundell.

Speechless, I pressed myself to him – but without clinging on – as the old Statler Hilton flew past on our right, then West 34<sup>th</sup> Street; then we boomed into the tired precincts of Times Square.

‘She’s going round again,’ I shouted.

‘Where’d she learn to ride like that?’

‘She had a bike in L A,’

‘What bike?’ roared Blundell.

‘Yamaha Virago, I think it was called,’ I screeched into his ear.

‘Pile of Jap shit, eh?’

‘Eh? What did you say?’ I screamed.

‘Pile of.... Hell, never mind.’

Blundell flung the Hoss into a sharp left turn. The heavy machine rose up on the edge of its twelve-inch wide rear tire, squealing squidgily as Blundell kept the gas on. The strong tendency of such a tire to self-centre kept my pilot yanking on the bars. I felt that the rear would squirm from under us at any moment. The Hoss, with a clattering shout, whisked up level with Mopsa.

I made slowing-down movements. ‘Mopsa! Mopsa! Stop!’

Mopsa’s mouth moved in an obscenity – I couldn’t make out what – then, after looking momentarily ahead, she screamed. Her hog

had nearly gone into the back of a yellow cab. A plume of rubber smoke came from her back wheel as she stood on the brake pedal. Deftly, she swept round the taxi, on round the square, bumping up onto the pedestrian area and sending howling onlookers fleeing. I saw a young Japanese man rush out to stand for an instant posing, with Mopsa's naked form rocking away behind him. Before his friend's Canon could take the video, Blundell had bumped him over. I had a confused impression of glasses, buck teeth and T-shirt going down under our rumbling wheels. Mopsa blasted round once more and then went off out of the square down 42<sup>nd</sup> Street.

'She's maybe headin' for the airports!' cried Blundell.

'Queens Tunnel?' I shouted.

'Yeah, perhaps. God! My poor hog! But that bitch can ride! Who'da thought it?'

Past Grand Central, Mopsa took a look behind through her flying hair and suddenly hurtled up Lexington Avenue.

'Hold on!' gasped Blundell, forcing the Hoss into a turn and finding that the bike wouldn't be coaxed round quickly enough. We had to jump onto the sidewalk and, because the traffic was thickening, and Mopsa gaining, and the Hoss too wide to slip through the spaces she could get through, we stuck on

that sidewalk for six blocks, horn blaring continuously and Blundell barely pausing to cross the intersecting streets. People came out of buildings and leapt back into them. I thought I heard a police siren behind us. The pressure waves kept the note constant, so I assumed that at last we had been spotted and that someone was on our trail. Unable to grip Blundell's wobbling rounds of flesh, I hooked my feet under the pegs and tightened my stomach muscles. It was like doing lengthy isometric exercise and I began to pour with sweat. An insect – a big one – hit me in the eye. But for the fact that it was a summer Sunday and New York traffic habitually runs slowly, we should have killed or been killed. Useless to appeal to my pilot; his blood was up, his precious hog ahead, and, no doubt, a thousand memories of pursuing 'Cong filled his fat brain.

At 50<sup>th</sup> Street, Mopsa was once more in sight. Blundell gunned the Hoss up to, I should have said, about 90 mph, dived off the sidewalk and thundered up behind her. He tried to swerve in and trap the hog. She wrenched the grip open and tore off left. We followed, keeping level.

'Get off my HOG!' Blundell shouted, turning the Hoss's wheel in towards the Harley. Mopsa was forced to wobble to a halt

by St Patrick's. She looked amazingly like a picture of Lady Godiva I had once liked in a "*Ladybird*" book of British history – except for the horse. Her hair streamed down her shoulders. I can tell you this now, Holly; after all, it's long ago now, but I thought that she still had a nice figure. Her legs bulged shapely against the Harley's fat tank. I suppose one can admire what a person looks like without in the least liking them – and any residual liking I had had for the mad bitch had long evaporated. Then I saw blood on her foot. Steadying that heavy bike without boots! Poor idiot.

'Mopsa, please. What's the point? Just turn the motor off and we'll talk.' I pleaded. We were practically abreast of the Waldorf: full circle. 'Look, if you want to come up to my suite to talk things over, you're welcome – and I'll get you some clothes.' For a fantastic second a vision of Hepworth's and Scobie's faces as Mopsa sailed back naked into their foyer for the second time that day came into my brain.

'Yeah,' added Blundell.' Just switch off like a good girl. We can come to some agreeance. There's no need to go on like this.'

Blundell had rested his boot on the ground. I had begun to dismount. The Hog and the Hoss ticked over together, one with emphatic

thuds, the other with rolling, complex baritone – a conversation of machines paused in chivalric combat. Already the police siren was getting distinct again. A crowd, jeering and jabbering, gazing with wonder, had appeared from nowhere off Fifth Avenue. As if making up her mind to continue the impossible in preference to the insupportable, Mopsa shook her head violently from side to side, jammed the Harley back into gear, rammed the Hoss's front wheel, so that the handle-bars shoved Blundell back into me and, hanging a sudden right, roared the hog away up Fifth Avenue.

'Now I am getting SERIOUSLY annoyed,' articulated Blundell, and, deaf to any protest I might have made, he righted the Hoss under his great buttocks, nodded for me to re-mount which, as if in a trance, I did, and, with a bellow from the exhausts that must have been heard all over Manhattan, rotated his grip to the stop. In less than five seconds the Hoss was doing, it seemed, 100 mph, running dead centre up the wide avenue between the slow, wallowing cars, and gaining almost instantly on Mopsa. I slid right back under the fierce forces, off the seat onto the rear fender, and was only prevented from shooting onto the tarmac by the rear licence plate which jammed into my crutch agonisingly. I clutched desperately at Blundell's flapping shirt. Up

the side of the Park we boomed and, at the Metropolitan Museum, had to decelerate violently, throwing me back up against my pilot again. A crocodile of students was strung out between the “Walk” signs. Burning rubber came up to my nose as it rammed into Blundell’s podgy neck.

‘C’mon! C’mon!’ roared Blundell. The last of the party scampered onto the sidewalk and, without waiting for the lights to change, we rocketed forth once more. This time I very nearly did come off. Only a clutch at Blundell’s collar saved me. ‘Wurrrh!’ gasped he, fighting to control the swerving Hoss. ‘Wharrer you tryin’ to do?’ A second later he cried, ‘Look! Look!’ A well-known shape, aboard a cream Electra-Glide, was glimpsed whisking right into 88<sup>th</sup> Street. We shot round after it.

Then the surprise.

The road ahead was empty!

The usual desultory cabs and sedans were gliding up and down, of course, but of the familiar flying hair, bare butt and cream and blue machine there was no sign. Blundell screeched to a halt, the V8 shuddering under us, the exhaust banging. ‘We can’t have lost her!’ he shouted. ‘She came up this way!’ He turned his head round and round on its plump neck until I fancied for a moment that his

bulging eyes and bristling beard would go right round 360 degrees.

Well, well. Home, sweet home again. There, over the street was the frontage of the Guggenheim Museum. Round the corner was Sherbert's borrowed office. I could hardly believe that I had been in New York only a few short days – several months seemed to have lain between the chase on which Blundell and I were engaged and our stroll with Sherbert round the Gugg.

Blundell, blipping the throttle, continued to stare around him.

Then, as I gazed over the road at Frank Lloyd Wright's bizarre edifice, as I stared at its soft white layers and the entrance set back from the sidewalk, I knew! Confused noises, screams, audible even over the traffic and the Hoss's tickover, were coming from the public entryway. People were running out and then running in again.

'Blundell! Blundell! She's gone into the museum!'

'Eh? Gone in there! Hey, yeah, I guess it's open a while longer. Yeah, but what's she done with the hog?'

'No! NO! She's gone in ON THE BIKE!'

Blundell's head again oscillated 180 degrees so that his eyes met mine.

'On my *hog*?' he whispered.

He gunned the mighty V8 and dragged the Hoss round in a semi-circle so that it faced the doorway of the Gugg. ‘Steady the sickle.’ A foot clumped into my stomach as he dismounted. I kept the bike upright. There was a snap behind me. Blundell clambered back onto the saddle, stuffing the Hoss’s licence plate into his shirt. ‘Shoulda done that earlier,’ he said. ‘Y’know – in case the pigs spot us.’ Then, in a strange, sacerdotal voice, he intoned, ‘SO – BE – IT!’

I closed my eyes.

The Boss Hoss bounded across the street towards the museum entrance. The dark aperture awaited us like the gateway of Destiny. I breathed deeply. With pipes bellowing, we cannoned up and over the steps and, on the track of the irrepressible Mopsa, plunged after her into the unknown.

Let me call this bit: **Interlude about Ventura**, in which I learnt so much more about you.

‘So – where do you come from?’ I recall asking you in the only slot we had had together at the Capitanchik’s, back on the occasion of my first visit there. Twinkle had put her bird-like head round the living-room door after Blundell, standing, and filling the space between table and wall, had spooned the last whirls of chocolate tart into his capacious insides. She had cried,

‘Blun! C’mon here. I want you.’

‘Hey – ahey. I guess I was gonna take Mike and Holly out back to the “temple”, Twink.’

‘That can wait. Washing-up ‘n’ tidying comes first.’

I had jumped to my feet at the appearance of the pointy head. Not many men of my age do things like that anymore; ‘70s feminism probably killed off the chivalric urge. Anthony told me he had offered his seat to a girl with shopping on the London underground in the late ‘80s and she had called him a patronising prick. But I sensed that Twinkle would see it as gentlemanly.

‘Let me help,’ I had cried. ‘I’m very domesticated.’

‘No, not at all. You jus’ sit an’ talk to Holly. Blun’ can earn his supper.’

Blundell had steadied himself on his substantial feet, placing giant fingers on the table to counterbalance his weight.

‘I guess I’ll be out in a few minutes. Holly, offer our guest a lee-cure and a little more coffee. Excuse me, Mike.’

Thanks to Twink’s tact, he had lumbered off and the room immediately seemed to double in size. Above our heads, a very bright Tiffany-style lamp made the table a bowl of light. Clearly the Capitanchiks liked to see what they were eating. You and I, I remember, regarded each other in silence, and you looked away first. Then you rose and went out of the glare to the *escritoire*.

‘I don’t know what Blundell has got in,’ you said. ‘I don’t really drink spirits. But there’s a bottle of Southern Comfort and what looks like apricot brandy.’ You fished out a tall bottle of colourless liquid. The writing on the label was unfamiliar. Polish? Czech? Yugoslavian? You were no doubt right in ascribing its contents to apricot, for a large yellow fruit was blazoned below the script. ‘Mind you, it could be radio-active plum,’ you laughed. ‘So which is it to be?’

‘Oh, I think it’s a bit tame to swig Southern Comfort,’ I replied. ‘So I’ll try a slosh or two of the Chernobyl plum.’

You poured a big measure of the mysterious drink into a glass on a stem and returned to the table. I took a sip.

‘Brave you,’ you smiled.

And you know why I remember this so well, Holly? It was when I sensed inside that you and I had something – some quirky and kindly love of the absurd, perhaps – which was drawing us together; when I sensed that I was falling in love with you. Nothing in my long years in L A had prepared me for the impact you had made. I guess that many families just don’t have members that set to, marry at the expected times, produce grandchildren, live near each other, and come together at the great Christian feasts in close – if not necessarily loving – conglomeration. Anthony is just not the marrying type; I don’t recall his ever having had a girlfriend, unless one counts his affectionate relationship with Peter Buchan’s sister Meriel in the summer holidays of our shared childhood in Scotland. Didn’t you feel, when you knew him briefly, that he was happy as a bachelor in that rambling house of our grandfather’s? He was, and is, as little travelled as I was restless. In his entire adult life I shouldn’t think he has

been close to more than five women, and that includes Ma and you, Holly. He always doted on you; as I said back on page one, he told me to write all this – and so I'm writing it.

I was so different from him. Up in Glenturret's time-capsule, he stoked his narrow-gauge engines. At school I had a difficult love-affair – painful to speak about, even now. In London I had disasters with Susie, that hippy Helen, Septic Spider, Melanie, the other Melanie and Lucille. They were all dolly-birds with silly names, scented with cannabis, with lime flares and white lipstick, clumping on platform soles. Some I knew for barely a month. I liked none of them very much. Anthony may not have fallen in love, but he does *like* women. I had assumed for years that his sense of the ridiculous (which I think I share), his capacity for irony, his boarding-school ethos, his schoolmaster's display of arcane knowledge, his clergymanish enthusiasm for trains and old toys and that once-upon-a-time queer sense of his destiny as a national preserver of such things, left him no time for people and relationships. He seemed to me, when I thought I knew him best – if I have ever known him – to be more at ease with machines, with objects; more interested in past than present (and women, if I've got it

right, live for the present – nostalgia is a male disease) and inorganic rather than organic. I believed, when we were younger, that Anthony saw women as grotesques, as objects of schoolboy ironies. PC, as practised in Cali-forn-eye-ay, would have had a field day with his many opinions and infelicities. He doesn't mind things a little battered, things that have to be fixed. He is tolerant, and has low expectations. For years as children he would dread going to parties, and then would come home having had a wonderful time and been the hit of the occasion. I would look forward to them with feverish hope, and return with the acid of disappointment in my mucus. I considered him stolid, unadventurous, cut-off, like Tibby in "*Howard's End*", as a friend of ours once said. This is, as I say, is what I thought back in the last century. Now, Holly, I perceive him to have been on the emotional high ground. He will never need a shrink, as I do now. He will never contract AIDS, commit a murder, destroy the happiness of a woman. He is, I now see, happy, with a happiness born of a species of lay chastity, a refusal to act out a part assigned by society, a refusal to be enslaved by the world's demands on personal identity. He is free. I am the prisoner.

Few of the females I knew were what our grandmother would have termed “nice girls”. She’d have thought *you* a nice girl, but not those unfixed, self-obsessed, insecure, manipulative, fantasising organisms, as unsettled as I was. Helen left me in Tangiers, on a trajectory to dissolution. Melanie II (“Son of Melanie”, as my brother called her, because she came after Melanie I, and her name was thus easy to remember) was the best of them. Yet my only memory of her is one wet eyelash hanging off as she curled up in a wet foetus of misery at the Gare du Nord. As for Lucille - how sordid were my attempts to buy her once I had come into grandpa’s money. And at the end of the line: Mopsa. But you must get the point, Holly. I was a bad chooser, until I chose you.

It all relates baldly now, on the page, but the storms whipped up by my own writhing, posturing and genius for digging relationship graveyards had in them the gales that drove me far from home. And London was always, even as late as ’99, home.

You sat across the table in your halo of silence. You had no idea, I’m sure, that thoughts of my failures were whistling through me. Our talk that night lives on in my mind. I remember every word.

‘So, where do you come from?’ I had asked, feeling it time that I found out something about you.

‘From Ventura, California.’

‘Really? How extraordinary. Well, it’s not in the least extraordinary, I mean. But I actually know it fairly well.’

‘Do you?’

‘Didn’t Sherbert tell you? I’ve been living in L A for twelve years – no, thirteen years coming up.’

You smiled. Your smile’s attraction lay, I thought in its commingled wisdom and innocence.

‘I *did* ask David about you,’ you grinned, not entirely coyly at this admission of interest in me, but not escaping the delicate blooming of a blush, ‘but he mainly confined himself to your boyhood, to that place in Scotland where you both met.’

‘Glenturret – my grandfather’s house.’

‘....Glenturret, that’s it. And about how bloated a plutocrat you had become and how he needed your backing for “*Shooting Europe*”.’

‘Hm. Ventura. It’s got a nice pier. I thought that was rather a British touch when I first saw it, but then Santa Monica reminded me straightaway of Torquay.’

‘....which is?’

‘A seaside town in Devon, England.’

‘I guess Ventura’s a very ordinary place, Mike.’

‘It’s got a hideous freeway.’

‘Oh yes – but that’s always been there. Must have been built before I was born.’

‘Fancy putting it right slap-bang-wallop on the front.’

‘Front?’

‘Oh, that’s what we call it in England. The bit where town and beach meet. In fact, in the UK, it might be called Marine Parade.’

‘Over here it’s Ocean Boulevard, as I guess you know – much the same.’

‘Won’t you have some of this Three Mile Island juice? It’s quite pleasantly anaesthetic once the lips have gone numb.’

‘David also told me all about your grandfather – the haughty old gent who left you a lot of dough, and all that.’

‘He left my brother Anthony a lot more. We think he did it to ensure his old house would be kept in the family and preserved. Anthony went to school there, you know, after Grandpa was forced to move back to London and the place became a Boys’ Academy. He taught English there after university too, so he practically IS Glenturret. But tell me, what are *your* parents?’

‘Dad’s an attorney. He deals mainly with local property transactions. Mom teaches school. That’s how she and Blundell met years ago. They were students together. And then, to make it almost seem like the hand of Fate, Blun got friendly with my Dad over in Vietnam. I suppose you could say Blun was a sort of fairy godmother because he brought them both together. Without him I wouldn’t be here.’

‘A toast to Blundell then,’ said I, raising my glass and taking a swig of the DDT, ‘but your parents are elderly then, comparatively, I mean?’

‘I guess not. Dad’s fifty-four and Mom’s fifty-two.’

‘Did you live in Ventura throughout childhood?’

‘I went to High School there, but I was at UCLA. I majored in English Literature.’

‘In English! Why did you pick that particular subject? I mean, I didn’t go to university myself – although Anthony did – and he read English too, with History, I think.’ (That was the second time, you may recall, that I had mentioned that my brother had gone to university, as if to prove that we were not all uneducated money-grubbers in our family.)

‘I guess I could never cope with numbers,’

you had gone on,’ so that ruled out Math, and I had no feel for chemistry or electricity or things like that thing....what do you call that thing....?’ And you cupped your hands in the air while the Tiffany light picked out the few tiny etchings of lines round the corners of your eyes and mouth and I calculated that you must have been about twenty-six or twenty-seven. ‘....oh gee, what *did* they call it? Yes, a Van Der Graaf generator.’

‘There used to be a rock band at home with that name. My brother knew their lead singer.’

‘Fancy that. Before my time, I guess. Anyway, my lack of feel for Van Der Graaf generators ruled out Physics. I nearly fell for Geography because I thought it would be about studying Europe, but someone told me it was all about Malaysian population censuses and earthquakes in Mexico at university level, so I thought: “Presume not the works of God to scan; the proper study of mankind is Man” and I did Eng lit.’

‘That’s very well put,’ I remember replying. ‘Who said that?’

‘Pope,’ you said.

‘The Pope? Which one?’

‘No, not THE Pope. Your Pope. Alexander Pope. Your English poet.’

‘I’m sorry, Holly. Forgive me. My ignorance is too shaming.’ I recall scanning

your face closely for signs of intellectual arrogance and scorn, but found none. Your lovely mouth, with that quizzical smile, did curve amusedly as you asked,

‘You have never come across Pope – the Rolls Royce of poets?’

‘No, I don’t think so. No, I’m afraid not.’

Do you remember clapping your hand to your forehead in feigned exasperation?

‘And you from London too!’

Actually, I think I leant back grinning. I was then already a little too old to feel really abashed by my failure to have registered Alexander Pope’s existence. That’s one of the pleasures of not being twenty anymore; one cares less about being shown not to know things, especially if one has been fairly successful in one’s field.

‘Did you study a great deal about Britain? During your work for the English degree, I mean?’

‘I did indeed. But then I’ve always been fascinated by it. It’s why I chose to major in English in the first place. My favourites are Pope, Keats, the early Tennyson, Owen, Lawrence and Betjeman among the poets.’

‘You’ll be chuffed to know that I’ve heard of ALL of them – even admitting that Pope is a late acquisition,’ I laughed. ‘And as for Betjeman, isn’t he still alive?’

‘No.’

‘Oh, I thought he was. Plump, old-fashioned, posh, toothy, wears a hat? I’m sure I saw him on TV once before I left England. Don’t tell me I’m thinking of someone else?’

‘No, you’re not. But he’s dead now.’

‘Ah.’

‘And Dickens, Eliot, Conrad – everyone does Conrad in California since “*Apocalypse Now*” – Galsworthy, Trollope, Buchan, Scott, Hardy, Lawrence and Waugh among the novelists. I have masculine tastes. I’m named after a character in Galsworthy, you know; my Mom loves him.’

I must say, I had wondered why you were named Holly, but presumed it was after Buddy, or the girl in “*Breakfast at Tiffany’s*”.

‘I *must* do some reading,’ said I, not meaning it with quite the emphasis that I said it.

‘And Marlowe, Jonson, Webster, Pinter, Priestley, Bolt and Arden among the playwrights,’ you continued, warming to the Cook’s Tour of Great Brits for Ignorant Real Estate Guys.

‘Aha,’ I recall saying. ‘And what about the one you’ve missed?’

‘Whom have I missed?’

‘Shakespeare,’ I smiled.

‘Oh, of *course* Shakespeare. He “bestrides the narrow world like a Colossus”, doesn’t he?’

‘Y-e-s. Although I found him a little tiresome at school. All those “*thees*” and “*thous*”.’

‘No credit to your school, Mike.’

‘Holly, what are your long-term plans? You’re not going to be Sherbert’s Girl Friday for life, I imagine?’

‘No, I imagine not,’ you replied, looking up from the glass, the rim of which you had been stroking.

‘I’m sorry I seem to be putting you through third degree. I don’t know why I’m being the Spanish Inquisition.’

I did know why, though. I wanted you to be how I saw you – unsullied, good, fresh. I wanted to hear that you were free. I wanted to look down the hall of mirrors and see your reflection next to mine. I had not felt quite like I felt then, under Blundell’s Tiffany lamp, for over fifteen years. Do you remember, all this time later, how I blurted out, ‘And are you....? That is, is there anyone with whom you are....?’ With a feeling of absurdity I realised that I had just stopped short of asking if there was a “young man” in your life, like some maiden great-aunt. You cocked your

calm, ironical eye at me – and I still see that moment, here at Cleeve, as I type this....

‘No, there isn’t,’ you said quietly.

Before I could think of what to say next, there had been a lumbering at the door, and Blundell had elephantined back into the room.

‘I gotta fetch out the glasses,’ he said. ‘You finished your lee-cures?’

I swigged away the last gooey drop of Isotope B plum and handed my glass over to him. When he had squeezed his way out again, I resumed the inquisition with greater urbanity.

‘Well, what DID make you take on old Sherbert? Not an easy guy to keep in order, I can tell you.’

‘If there was one thing I wanted to do after majoring, it was to get over to England – and I haven’t done so yet, what with one thing and another.’

‘Surely....? With a jet every few hours from L A?’

‘Yes, but I didn’t want to don the mantle of female Yank tourist doing Europe on twenty dollars a day. I know they serve Big Macs on the Champs Elysee in Paris, France – and that upsets me. It’s the one side of Europe, especially in Britain, that I didn’t want to see. So I intended to wait until I could select-a-dial the right kind of experience.’

‘So that meant some kind of job?’

‘Yup. Teaching school on an exchange, a scholarship bursary, transfer to a London office from an American firm....but, like everything else, much easier said than done. So seven years skipped past and then David – Sherbert to you – comes along with his idea for “*Shooting Europe*”. The White Knight. I’d been working for Apogee Films for five years by then.’

‘Ah, so you never worked with PSBTV? Somehow I thought you did.’

‘No. Gee, no way. Independent TV for me. I’ve got ambition and like to eat.’

‘So this trip over to London will be your first?’ Something simple and exultant gave a lurch inside me as I said this; rather like remembering as a child that you are going to the pantomime tomorrow night. You were flying to London. Any doubts that lingered about how far and how deep I was going to get, and there were many doubts about the whole project, as you know now, vanished. By your side in London would, I determined, be me. ‘I hope,’ I continued, ‘that you will let me show you around a little?’

‘Why thank you, Mike. I’d like that very much – if there’s time. I hope we get some slack before shooting in Europe. David wants to do work in Rome at Cinecitta fairly

near the beginning. But I think he's budgeting about four weeks in the UK. We've got interiors to film at a place called Ealing.'

'Not Ealing Studios! My God, I thought they'd closed years ago!'

'Oh, no. apparently they're new. David said something about their being famous years ago and being refurbished.'

'Huh. "Years ago"! You're talking about my childhood; well, infanthood. I suppose you're going to sit there and say you've never seen "*The Lavender Hill Mob*"?'

'I am.'

'Nor "*The Ladykillers*"?'

'Nor them.'

'Ignoramus.'

'Dinosaur.'

'Barbarian.'

'Those black 'n' white days, eh?'

'What's wrong with black and white? Look at "*Schindler's List*".'

'Never said there was. Nothing wrong with silent pictures either – except you can't hear anything. But we've got what I hope is plenty of time in the UK. And you know where I'd quite like to go? Where you and David talk about. Scotland.'

'Well, I can help you there, Sherbert's schedule permitting. I'll take you up to

Glenturret to stay with Anthony. No Holiday Inn for you, Holly.'

'I was looking at the map. Why, London to Edinburgh is only the distance between L A and San Fran. From novels I sort of got the impression that it was a long way away.'

'It IS a long way by European standards, Holly. I hope you won't be disappointed.'

Those intelligent eyes of yours took on a film. You seemed, I thought, to be seeing way beyond Blundell's cramped dining-room. I gazed at you, but I'm not sure you noticed the admiration in that gaze. I was thinking that you weren't like an American at all. Then you spoiled it a tiny bit by sighing,

'Disappointed? Gee – no way, buster.'

As soon as you had brought Scotland back to the forefront of my mind once more, the lens of my interior camera re-focussed away from the persistent image of a London street in mid-winter. The internal cassette tape playing my songs of home selected another track. Surely Glenturret had been nearly as much home as London? I saw, as if it were on a screen at the end of Blundell's room, the first-class compartment on the express from Euston to the North, paid for by Grandpa's money: that warm, speeding, magic room, with the family all around me. I had been too

young to have appreciated those shrieking whistles, clanging couplings and cold sooty air at the very end of steam haulage which had always enraptured Anthony, but nevertheless I found the big diesels and, later, the electric locos on the West Coast main line, impressive.

‘We really ought to go and see Anthony by *train*,’ I said. ‘There is no other way to go. We always went to Glenturret by train for the summer vacation.’

I was surprised that your eyes were slowly losing their shine. They became cloudy and troubled and a frown appeared on your intelligent forehead.

‘I guess I’m putting a lot on you, Mike. You won’t want to be saddled with me when you’re back home. Things look different when you’re on the spot.’

I could understand that you were preparing yourself for me to back away from the promises I had been making to be your guide to Britain. I could also see that you were steadying yourself against the disappointment of that eventuality. After all, what did you know of me then, Holly? You, with the greater reticence of femininity and youth had not asked me if I were unattached, whether or not I were free of entanglements. You knew nothing of Mopsa then – and I was determined

to keep it that way. I hardly knew how I would have answered you if you *had* asked. If being locked in a miserable box of guilt, responsibility and lost affection was an attachment, then I was indeed attached elsewhere. The long shadow of that bitch threw a chill into the pool of light under which we sat. Surely the fact that Mopsa and I had not shown each other anything more than the twisted face of the torturer for years....that we were bound by no vows, custom or family expectation....were united only by sloth, habit and a typically Californian/Mexican laziness masquerading as tolerance.....meant that I would not be playing the traitor if.....

At the reflection that you *wanted* me to accompany you on your voyage of discovery, that I would complement, not rend, the fabric of your dreams, a bubble of real happiness rose in me, round and twinkling, like laughing gas from the bottom of a deep cylinder of glycerine. The bubble rose and rose from the cold, sluggish depths, undeterred even by the noisy re-entry of Blundell – freed from his domestic chores – into the bright room.

I'm now going to tell you all about **Auto-Destruct America**, which you were not at the Gugg to witness.

Round and round, up and up, we roared. A raging hubbub of screams rose above the bellow of exhausts – like the squeal of seabirds heard over the grinding ocean. Ahead of us, always just in sight, but never nearer, Mopsa's bare back leant the Harley towards the spaces of the atrium as she cannoned upwards. I peered through the fluffy tangle of Blundell's hair and over the swelling fat of his shoulder. From my perch on the rear of the Boss Hoss I saw the same view: Mopsa's buttocks, the chrome pipes of the hog and the gradually ascending balustrade of Frank Lloyd Wright's great gallery. The only thing that changed, every micro-second it must have been, for we were only on the ramp for seconds, were the faces that we passed, and the paintings they had been studying on the walls – a blur of modern art, better for being indistinct.

Mopsa, flat-footedly humping the hog over and through the entry gates, had chosen, with that sure and fallacious instinct of the pursued, to go upwards. As if designed for the purpose of providing a gentle spiralling climb for two heavy-weight American cruiser motorcycles,

the Guggenheim's main gallery turned upon itself towards the roof.

'We damn well got her, Mike!' yelled Blundell, his words causing a shower of excited spittle to spatter my eyes. 'Why do they always go *up*? See James Cagney? Remember how he went up? A gas-holder, wasn't it? "*Top o' the world!*" Yeah, we got the goddam bitch!'

There are few, if any, museums which actively welcome games of pursuit by powerful road vehicles on their premises, but from what I had seen of what the Gugg had to offer on my stays in New York, it was probably one of them. It was not so much an unusually enlightened attitude on the part of the authorities – although I gathered that the recent curators have been so regarded in museum circles, according to "*The New York Times*" – as a willingness to accept the avant-garde by the museum's clientele. The shrieks of horror, which had greeted the Hog's and the Hoss's thunderous arrival, had come from foreigners: serious South Koreans, earnest Japanese, introverted Swedes and Danes, hysterical Latins, all with pre-conceived ideas about art galleries. These tourists had not taken Mopsa's and Blundell's great pursuit in the correct spirit. The right sort of Gugg connoisseur, the American modernist with a

child's thirst for novelty, had. Very soon I was aware that we were chugging past appreciatively clapping couples. On several faces I glimpsed that wise nod of understanding which only those who are masters of the mystery feel entitled to give; the sort of nod which implies: I see what you're up to – most interesting. Those very same seekers after True Art who would have carefully trodden through Pintin's Living-sculpture Show, wondering if they should hope that he would be electrocuted, who would have instinctively understood Excremental Kinetics and the chopping off of fingers without anaesthetic – these realised at once that here was a piece of the Real Thing. Two men, one extraordinarily fat, the other clearly deranged, chasing a naked girl on 'sickles from the bottom to the top just on closing-time? Why, this was the latest in a long line of thought-provoking ideas from that smart new director! Hadn't he brought in that scaffolding sculpture? The rusting sheets of corrugated iron called "The Transfiguration of Capital"? Those photos of dead men with light bulbs twinkling in their mouths? Hey, it's ART, man!

Suddenly I was aware that I could no longer see Mopsa's back. She had accelerated

beyond us while Blundell had slowed the Hoss through our smiling admirers.

‘She’s gone!’ I cried, digging my finger into his podgy ribs.

‘Huh?’ he grunted, in the act of giving the peace grip to a man as bearded and as dishevelled as himself – another ‘Nam vet, no doubt.

‘Can she go down?’ I shouted. ‘Down! Down! Can she get down from up here?’

Blundell took in what I was saying in a second and wrenched the throttle open. The Hoss jumped forward, roaring. The low-roofed spiral became choked with exhaust fumes. With a swish of twelve-inch wide tyres, we rounded the curve to the top of the spiral under the atrium.

Then occurred one of those things which afterwards one can only claim to have seen, but for which there is no proof. To our right was a smallish passage opening out of the spiral near the elevators into a rear part of the complex. From this, with bewildering velocity, shot a cream and blue Electra-Glide. It hit the curved balustrade wall, smashed through the concrete and plaster and, back wheel spinning, tipped over into empty space. Blundell spun the Hoss to the hole and kicked it onto the prop-stand, leaving the V8 ticking over majestically. He and I raced to the gap

and peered out. With monumental purpose, Blundell's hog held its vertical posture in mid-air, plummeting downward with engine still running, rear wheel slowly turning. Some petrol was spurting from the carburettor, crystalline and seeming to fall more slowly than the machine in the still air of the gallery. To my horrified glance, its fall seemed to last far longer than it can have done. Face after face, shock of hair after shock of hair, poked out from the spiral below at different levels and followed its earthbound rush – falling like a comet in the elegant space between roof and floor of Lloyd Wright's masterwork.

When it hit the ground, the camera of my perception speeded up. Pointing down, as it still was, the machine crumpled its front forks, front wheel, head-lamp and fender. Chromed metal shot outwards from the impact. The flooring cracked, the headstock drove in to the surface and the Harley came to a rending, crashing, shocking halt. It stuck there, engine silent at last, mufflers pointing straight up – as remarkably still as so recently it had been remarkably speeding. Like slow-motion leaf-fall, the trim-ring from the shattered lamp, switch-gear torn loose, bolts and plates and gauges bounced down around it; the dust settled and there was a great quiet in the gallery. In that

quiet, the Hoss's motor still turned over with a lazy, throaty rumble.

Suddenly, someone started to clap.

Then *everyone* began to clap.

I was shocked and unable to move from the smashed balustrade because I had thought that Mopsa had gone down with her machine. I was *absolutely positive*, Holly, that I had seen her plummet over, still clinging to the Harley. Yet, as I jerked my head downwards, there was no sign of a bloody, dislocated naked body on the museum floor.

Where had she gone?

Blundell grabbed my arm.

'Oh God!' he howled. 'My hog! My Christ! My sickle!'

Leaving the Boss Hoss turning over, he began to run, lumbering, back down the gentle slopes to ground level, shoving gaping people out of the way as he did so. I followed, stupidly, for I would have been wiser to have remained up above and hunted for Mopsa. Clearly, I had been mistaken in fancying that she had gone down with the hog. When I retraced my steps, leaving Blundell to pant on down, and went back to the little passage from which the hog had been propelled, there was no sign of her. A grudging admiration

crept over me that she had had the presence of mind at the end of a long chase to find some means of jamming the bike's twist-grip open against the carb springs, for only at full bellow could it have had enough momentum and equilibrium to have gone straight through the wall. Later, I found out how. Blundell had had a *Throttle Meister* cruise-control fitted for hands-off freeway cruising. Easy.

Slowly, I went on down again after Blundell. I caught up with him standing, shaking his head next to the shattered heap.

'Oh, jeez, jeez,' he kept muttering.

The majestic ruin of the big machine stuck up out of the floor, the height of a man. Around its headstock and twisted forks lay a pile of bright metallic debris. Above the headstock nothing was damaged at all – paint gleamed, oil glistened, chrome sparkled, leather shone. I saw a tear steal into Blundell's beard. 'Oh jeez. Friggin' jeez.'

High above us, near the roof, the Hoss's big pistons continued to pump out sound. It reached us here below like some far-off thunder in cloud-canyons.

'Come on, Blundell,' I said. 'Presumably it's insured?'

He nodded.

Sadly, he tramped through the wondering crowd back up the spiral. At the top we

mounted the Hoss - I had gone up with him, for it had not occurred to me to wait at the bottom – and Blundell carefully steered it round the spirals to the exit.

As we reached the desk, there was a twin commotion. From the street, came in two patrolmen in peaked caps and shades. From further back in the building came a tall, light-haired man in tortoise-shell spectacles with three jabbering, grey-suited acolytes at his side. Remorselessly the forces of Law and Curatorship closed upon us. Blundell clutched his handle-bars, and I clutched Blundell. I could tell he was thinking of making a run for it. A second hectic chase in one day was unendurable, but if he was going to blast through the cordon I wanted to blast with him. Staying in the Guggenheim on my own and trying to explain everything in a British accent was, I knew, beyond what I could face.

The posse of curators came up to us. The tall, light-haired man held up his hand. The gesture was more what I would have expected from the policemen, but they, I could see, were still trying to assimilate what had been

going on. Their round, bulging eyes moved from Hog to Hoss, from atrium to floor, from Blundell to the crowd. Perhaps they had too great a choice of felonies to charge us with to

know quite where to begin. While they thus gazed, they were paralysed, it seemed.

Around the edges of our little group the press of the public grew. There was animated talk. Forbidden photographs were taken in a stuttering of blue light. A Japanese student was making notes, standing in front of the wrecked Harley. Already, cultured voices were being upraised: ‘My dear, it’s the new form of kinetic sculpture...’, ‘...Art as *plastic* statement, not *static* statement, is how I would define it....’, ‘...a clear metaphor for the fall of industrialisation....’

The Curator stared round at the seekers after culture. Then, hand still upheld, he strode forward. I ducked, absurdly feeling that he was going to box my ears, or Blundell’s. The policemen awoke from their trance at the same instant and closed in, loosening their pistols. Blundell’s right hand blipped the Hoss’s throttle. Cops and Curator sought each other’s eyes over the rumbling Hoss – then glared at us.

‘Jes what the frig is goin’ on?’

‘Are you responsible for...?’

‘Oh, I guess I’m sorry, sir, but I wanted to caution these guys...’

‘Not at all. I just wanted to ask them....’

‘Hey, you! Is this your shit here?’

‘.....how much they would be prepared to *take* for this sculpture?’

The Curator’s words won by a short head; the resonance of his high, academic, New England tones seemed to linger longer in the air than growled Brooklyn. Blundell turned off the Hoss’s engine. He and the Curator smiled at each other. The policemen looked baffled.

‘Ain’t you gonna register a complaint?’ one of them asked.

‘A *complaint?*’ said the Curator freezingly, arching his eyebrows way up above his tortoise-shell glasses. ‘What on *earth* about?’ The cops’ eyes bulged at each other, at the shattered floor, at the wrecked bike, at the Hoss, with its missing registration plate, at the tyre marks all over the terrazzo, at the evident signs of a high-speed motorcycle chase inside New York’s premier shrine of modern art. ‘Nonsense,’ snapped the Curator. ‘This,’ he went on loudly, for the benefit of the crowd, ‘is the first of several new exhibitions of – of Mechano/energistic Sculpture. The title of this piece is – is....’

Blundell smoothed his beard with a podgy hand and his loud gurgle was heard, ‘.... it is called “Auto-Destruct America”,’ he said clearly. ‘And I am empowered to sell it to the Guggenheim for fift...’ I dug him in the ribs.

It was a time for moderation. ‘...for ten thousand dollars.’

One of the cops let out a sound like a stifled wail.

‘I would be obliged,’ said the Curator to Blundell and me, ‘if you gentlemen would step into the office so that we might formalise this purchase for the gallery.’

We dismounted. The cops were already on their way out. I almost felt sorry for them.

I expect you remember, Holly, that “*The Art of the Motorcycle*”, the display of 114 bikes and the Gugg’s biggest success, had just closed in ’98. The press speculated that this latest acquisition might be the beginning of further expansion of the theme – this time featuring movement and crashes. It says a lot for Blundell’s nerve and luck that “Auto-Destruct America” (sculptor: B. Capitanchik) was still drawing crowds and rave notices when, eighteen days later, I left the USA forever.