

## Call It Tender

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Also by John Saul

*Heron and Quin* (Aidan Ellis, 1990)

*Finistère* (Hopscotch, 2005)

# Call It Tender

JOHN SAUL



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*To Dominique*



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### G3.5

A hanging; evenings on the sofa; a twenty-minute plane ride.  
Tradition says start with the hanging.

One snowy day in December 1976, in Erie county, western New York, as Rod Stewart topped the Billboard Hot 100 with *Tonight's the Night*, Megan Mattysek kicked away a chair beside the staircase of her home in Lotus Point, twisted once or twice (it's guessed), lost consciousness (almost certainly) and, no longer spinning, her stockinged toes brushing the carpet, suffocated to death. She was found not, as she had envisaged, by her husband Ernst—though missing his wallet, he stuck to his resolve to leave the US with son Tony immediately without returning for it—but by her nine-year-old daughter Kristin.

Open a door: mother dead; father gone; brother gone.

No wonder Kristin needs something to hold onto, a place, a home, a man. No wonder she is a lover of certainties, structure, grids. Pleased at the straight county lines in her childhood home, at the clever street system of the Mannheimer Quadrate; that we take each other always strictly within the rectangle of our bed.

But chronology says move on, swiftly.

Kristin abruptly dropped her helicopter pilot career in the US navy to come to Europe to search for her father Ernst, her

long-lost brother Tony. Once located, they were strangers, not anxious to be found. Now Kristin flies a Beaver de Havilland seaplane off the Rhine and over Mannheim, pointing out the water tower and arranging souvenir photos of people's homes in streets named by numbers in the ancient grid system below. She dips a white wing and there it is, a giant waffle-iron with 144 indentations and a ringroad running like syrup round the edges, between the river Neckar and the Rhine. We have one of these photos in the living room.

We live together at G3,5, Mannheim.

It is well worth grappling with Kristin on our sofa. It stops her looking at the old film—rather a five-minute video patched together to save flaky film before it crumbled away altogether—where her mother Megan, advanced in pregnancy, holds court on her porch at Lotus Point and Ernst stands around, decidedly unrelaxed. Suddenly a tall blonde woman reaches across, her shoulders blocking the scene, before lurching back out of view. The camera pans past a tree trunk and Kristin aged seven and sweet-faced, big black curls, legs skinny as Olive Oil, enters the frame at a run. Wearing a princess's dress she's a princess with no power, finding it hard to edge between adults to get a piece of dark (must be chocolate) cake. After a hurried close-up on her father grimacing, she can be seen comically hobbledly-walking across the lawn with a piece on a plate. Acetate flickering, the camera jolts from a pair of big male shoes to sky with a corner of roof. There's a sudden shot down an empty garden, smoky trees in the distance. Next comes princess Kristin smiling her perfect smile (the smile that sheds light, that draws me to her constantly), impishly balancing some cake on the back of her hand. She appears to be told off for laying the empty plate on the bonnet of a Lincoln car (close-up on the name) parked in the driveway. Her father wags his finger but it is obviously no longer a serious scene but a re-run for the camera. Kristin runs back to the grass and does a cartwheel but the film stops with her legs and curls blurred in mid-air.

That's all.

Kristin is much less fun after watching the film. Quips are out of order. The smile fails to flash. Whatever book she has (currently Mao Zedong, biography, fifty pages in) she leaves aside for the day. We hash and rehash her father and mother and the day in '76. The video is a well-meant gift, says Kristin, but a cruel gift; there is no one left alive to go through the pictures with. Ernst died recently a millionaire with a mansion and a piece of forest above Heidelberg, leaving his daughter next to nothing—the legal minimum. But her brother Anton sent the film, pieced together from spools and cassettes found in the mansion cellar. Now Kristin, waking herself in the night, dreams of entering the house (“mom?”) carefully holding a snowflake on the back of her glove, like a ladybird, ready to show; to come up against her mother noosed to the banisters.

While enduring the pain of abandonment every time she runs the video, Kristin is struggling to decipher it. Wasn't that blonde woman Mrs Dellapenta? Was her father having an affair with her? Why did he turn against her mother so? Was this reason enough to abscond with her brother to Europe?

Kristin's young self goes on her hobbledly walk. It must have been the fiftieth rehash. I took a few nuts from the bowl.

Must everything be pieced together? I found myself saying. Who did what when exactly, why exactly. Maybe you can't home in on some perfect explanation. Not everything is like a plane with a target.

Helicopters, said Kristin absorbed by the action on-screen. They were helicopters, not planes.

The past is not a set of stories, I challenged her; wishing she would stop beating herself this way.

What is it then? said Kristin.

This drove me into new territory. I regretted not having grappled straight after the eight o'clock news. Already, somewhere, I had gone badly wrong in this conversation. I looked at Kristin in her lumpy old sweater (what happened to the fun pink and peppermint T-shirts), then back at the screen. There's one certainty: that car is a Lincoln.

What is it then? Kristin repeated.

What is it? I don't think it is anything.

So it's a waste of time?

Her sweater was rips and holes, brown grains of coffee smudged where her irresistible sexual self used to be. Princess Kristin runs into her cartwheel.

Kristin zapped the video off. The TV came on. I pulled at a loose thread on her sweater. I had a dark feeling everything was changing for us: our bodies, our minds, how things were between us.

When Mao was a student, Kristin said taking my hand from her sweater, he lived through a freezing winter with three other students and they had one coat between them.

We're getting nowhere, I thought sighing.

I'm going to see Ludwig, I declared.

Ludwig?

Dark horses with shining flanks thundered across the screen.

I told you about Ludwig, I said. You've forgotten. He wants me to organise his birthday. I'll be gone a while. He lives at L10,1.

Kristin stared at the pictures and said, I love seeing horses cross the screen.

I know. You've told me many times.

Clint Eastwood spoke German, put a spoon in some beans.

Nick, come back soon.

We do know her family has a suicidal streak, a possible genetic disposition, but Kristin is not thought to have inherited this. No way, she says if I question her.

Little as I knew Ludwig, I found myself telling him this. I told him about the video too, the cake, the car, Mrs Dellapenta. His face up close, he listened nodding, saying yes, saying 'that's interesting'. Now I'm going to say something, he said. He pulled his hat even further down over his eyes. Apart from at work Ludwig wears a dusty black hat like a cowboy's over his eyes, indoors or out.

While her mother Megan loved her children, he said in a bumpy English, she will not have had these in her mind uppermost, or at all, at the decisive moment. So Ludwig said, and he is a doctor.

I don't see a trace of a similar attitude in Kristin, I repeated, she's too community-minded.

That's important, said Ludwig finally, that's the main point.

At any given moment, he told me, there is a main point. To grasp and hold onto.

The night had moved on, and we moved on to the business of arranging his birthday. The food, drink, music. He gave me a list of the equipment his band had to have. I told him I saw no problems.

Do you just organise, he asked close up again, or do you have an interest in music?

I organise—I said, looking aside at all the guitars and guitar cases; Ludwig had a wall of guitars at L10,1—but I wouldn't mind learning the guitar. Do you just play acoustic guitars?

I do, he said pulling his hat down as far as it could possibly go. The rest are a waste of money.

Hm, I replied. I felt the brim of his hat close to my forehead. It was getting very intense with Ludwig. The closeness was getting challenging. I recalled never having seen Ludwig with a woman. Of a sudden I longed for Kristin.

Do you . . . do you play with a pick? Or with your fingers?

That's a non-question too. I use a soft plectrum, like this.

He backed away to reach in his pocket. He showed me his plectrum.

Now for some beer, he said as if to an invisible servant.

I took a night bus from L10 to G5 and walked the rest. Past the chemist's (G4,8), a bank (G4,7): the block system of the Mannheimer Quadrate (so Kristin says to her out-of-town passengers) may sound futuristic, but predates Manhattan by more than two centuries. Otherwise (G4,4) I have been drinking a good deal of beer and, otherwise, people have always taken their own lives and otherwise other people have always been left to deal with the aftermath—themselves and the people they love and questions that cannot be answered. Otherwise (every shop has long closed; people I can't see are shouting by the bar on the corner where Kristin and I never go) there is probably always a Ludwig or someone talking about the main thing, or someone

similar to him with ideas similar to his, Joni Mitchell saying we are stardust, that's the main thing, Milan Kundera reselling the idea we are poised, as Shakespeare already put down, between something and nothing, we can choose for a short short while. Past the bakery, the hairdresser's, the newsagent's—we can pin these down with details but the only significant truth, the main point now, is that Kristin needs me to catch her and hold her as she goes through this free fall set in spin by her father.

G3,7,6,5. Door to the flat.

So it's up to me now. Quietly.

Clothes off.

Kristin, you're awake? We must be well into tomorrow.

Nick, her voice from the pillow murmured: there's no point.

There is. The point is, the main point is we're here. We love each other.

We do?

We do.

How come you can speak for me?

What kind of a question is that?

A sleepy one. There's no point.

In what?

The past is past I've decided, she said in the dark. Nothing to learn from.

Yes, I said clawing, groping to combine drunkenness with affirmation, yes. There must be things. If there are things I've learned from the past they are . . . I'll tell you them tomorrow.

Why can't I sleep, she said punching the duvet. *Goddamn it.*

What?

Go to sleep.

Wait. If I've learned two things they are: 1 take the initiative; 2 never buy cheap cling-wrap.

I don't want your jokes now. Besides, you never buy *any* cling-wrap.

I'll buy some tomorrow.

OK, good.

She turned away. She slept without moving.

Days; weeks. Every night, the film. Kristin left Mao unfinished, bookmarked up a remote mountain at Dajing, having retreated from Maoping, having before that retreated from Ciping, backing up from a town to a village to a hamlet. Backtracking: I knew the feeling. Already, Kristin had stopped touching me when she passed, stopped calling me great, stopped calling me special and instead settled for saying I was unique. I didn't care for this turn from passionate to neutral. Not wanting the same fate as Mao, I sought the main point and took this to be: keep listening. I resolved to watch the video and listen to her if we watched it for ever. Weeks became more weeks. We ate, slept, we went to work, the pilot and the organiser of events. Kristin had moods, but I followed her into them. We stopped eating breakfasts, for instance. We put all the pictures we had in proper frames. We watched Megan hold court, the woman bend across; saw the shoes and the smoky trees, the plate and the car and the smile. At his birthday Ludwig sang *Gimme Some Lovin'* and *I Can See Clearly Now* and ate at a table with his hat on. Meanwhile Kristin left Mao marooned under a pile of newspapers but at least moved on, to Rosa Luxemburg (put aside), Joan Didion (aside), Matisse. We took off, circled, landed, organised. The photo business (the true profit from the flights) boomed. The action stopped mid-cartwheel.

I can't do that now.

I'm listening.

I just can't.

Is that all?

All. The main thing, as your friend Ludwig would say. My body's changed, I haven't the confidence. How come he never comes here? I don't go for this main-thing theory.

Kristin reached for her book on Matisse and stroked my cheek.

Bring Ludwig here and when he says it's the main thing that matters I shall tell him it's not.

It's not?

Matisse said: when drawing a tree, pay attention to the spaces between the leaves.

She was wearing her jacket with the green sequins.  
We grappled.

The white De Havilland bobbed at its mooring, all struts and ailerons and preening blue graphics.

You don't have to fly, Nick. You can wait in the café and watch.

Why do that, Nick? said Ludwig. You'd be crazy. *Sag mal* Kristin, how did you ever get into a thing like this?

Perfect eyesight.

Kristin—like crystal.

If you like. Fast reaction times. I got the idea at school. I like speed. Power. Precision too.

Ludwig pulled his hat tight. *Wunderbar*.

So Nick, what's it going to be? How come you've never been up with me before? I mean, what's *wrong* with you, *goddamn it*? Look at it, it's a wonderful day, what more do you want?

OK, I'm there. You, Ludwig?

Of course, for this I'm here. And I want a photo.

Get in. Shut the door and belts on.

It has one engine? Is it Pratt and Whitney?

It is. Three-blade Hartzell propeller, main tank 95 litres, additional 75-litre tanks in the wingtips, Avgas 100LL fuel. Your belts on? Anything else you want to know?

No, said Ludwig. That was the main thing. It's loud.

That's nothing. Wait till we stop taxiing.

*What?*

Of course it's *loud*, it's an old plane. Put on the headphones.

OK.

You OK?

OK. One propeller you say.

Obviously.

That's better.

What is?

With the headphones.

Check. Check.

What?

Talking to myself. Last checks.

I like it. You Ludwig?

Nick, I *love* it.

Old plane. How old?

'62. Here we go.

Ah.

All right.

*Na klar.*

Already a low barge is edging along below. A glint of sun slams at us, a bar of light off the river.

At a height of six hundred metres the wing straightens out, broad and true. We feel fat and confident astride the air. Kristin dips the wing and somewhere below are L10,1 and G3,5, between the Neckar and the Rhine.

## Alice Balancing

They say I was clever to have painted the Alice figure. I used my daughter Francesca. She knows I have great powers; she has inherited many of them herself. I put into the picture many of the things I've gathered and treasured over the years, which is why the bookcase behind her has mikado sticks, charts crumpled and creased, puzzles, a paperweight and a bright toucan made of clay, a book titled Egypt and a jam jar simply labelled orange marmalade and not, as some would like, something strange and unlikely, such as Murano glass or Hotel de Ville. There are feathers, vials, bones, keys, a box marked Cairo. There are leaves in the air and no ground beneath her feet because she is falling. A blue urn descends through the picture with her. Nonetheless this Alice has her legs astride and firm, her gaze is unflinching, and the way she holds out one arm and the other up, with a wand with coloured streamers, makes her message clear: I am conducting the affairs of the world.

The powers she has exceed even mine. They enable her to see many miles beyond the centre of Devizes. She can see big Pete, for example, training his video camera on a plaque in front of Silbury hill. He is thinking about Daria and imagining them both on a sofa looking at this plaque and reading it. He is asking himself if Daria will want him again. But my Alice figure,

whom I may as well call Alice, if my daughter Francesca doesn't mind, will not have Daria love Pete. She ordains that big Pete will keep seeing Daria but Daria will not change her mind. A torture, which has nothing to do with what he deserves or does not deserve.

They say my depiction of her silken blue dress, the simple red shoes and long white socks, her pale complexion and pale blue eyes, can be compared to works by Piero della Francesca. Rightly. This is why my daughter was christened with that name.

Big Pete stumbled awkwardly there and almost fell. He was caught up with the viewfinder and not watching the ground. His friend Maurice is eating a sandwich from the greaseproof paper bags the two of them have put on the car roof. He shows Maurice how to work the camera.

They say I am prone to moods and changes of mind, and I will prove them right, as I'm not happy to call my creation Alice. Francesca, as I will call her if my daughter doesn't mind, decrees the wind will blow an empty bag towards the field and Maurice will chase it for a hundred yards, wait, she has relented to make that ten yards. Enough to put Maurice in front of the field and see the perfect undulations, the perfect furrows in the perfect earth, the lone tree in the distance that is perfection itself.

This sight will persuade him he is right to explore natural materials, it's a turning point. He will start a late career sculpting different woods.

That is just beautiful, Maurice says to big Pete.

It is, says Pete.

Can you get it on film? That tree way over there, for instance. Hardly. The distances are confusing for the camera.

That's a shame.

I'll try it just the same. Since you're a friend of mine.

As they clear up their picnic it seems their minds are blank. Francesca is not pleased at this lack of life. She has to do something or gets restless. She has this from me, they say. No signals from the car park. But the car is backing up. The butterfly in my Alice picture, there on the right of the bookcase, signifies it is permissible to turn to something else for a second. Francesca's favourite butterflying move is to go back and forth

in time. She moves herself forward to the age of nineteen where she is painted once again, adopting the pseudonym Faraway. They say I'm not clever to use such names but this is the name she wants. I would have preferred Marianne. Or if an F had to be used, Francine, Freya. She takes off her shirt and puts on a hat with flowers round it. Her shoulders are strong. The hat covers her eyes. Hides her blonde hair, although it is still fine and straight. Her lips, her chin and her unflinchingness alone verify this is the same person.

I set one rule, the thirty-year rule, for fear she might be disappointed. She may move forward no more than thirty years.

The vision of Pete and the car has turned hazy, it's a pity there aren't more spies in the world. But the car is leaving the Silbury hill car park, going west towards Somerset. Some music is playing inside it. Maurice wants to hear Jackson Browne, because he and Jackson Browne are almost exactly the same age, a week separates them, but Francesca is not having this, she wants Tangled Up in Blue by Bob Dylan and they motor along listening to Tangled Up in Blue by Bob Dylan.

Francesca likes blue a great deal, but has yet to see bougainvillea. I'll be painting this once I have it mastered.

Big Pete is driving. A traffic report cuts out the music but Francesca cuts out the traffic report. She can't hear exactly what they're saying, but Maurice has asked about Daria.

Francesca looks into Maurice's head to see what he thinks of Daria. He thinks Daria is quite amusing. Daria tries to suntan and it doesn't work. Her legs get orange blotches which are really offputting.

She looks again to see what his take is on the question of Pete and Daria.

Maurice strokes his beard and thinks. Daria is Pete's only option. No one else is in sight for him. She will never have him again in bed. He will just torture himself with false hopes. But there is no obvious alternative.

She looks in Pete's head.

Daria is his only option. No one else is in sight. She will never have him again, in bed. He will just torture himself with false hopes. But there is no obvious way out.

Francesca stretches out her arm to detect if Daria herself is within range. She is not. Where is Daria? She persuades Pete to think about where Daria is now.

Apparently Daria is in Norfolk.

That is far too far away. Norwich. Can my father paint a Norwich scene, quickly. No.

By now they have reached Devizes. The signals are strong. They are entering Devizes museum. I knew all along they would come in here, where I am hanging. Next to me is another picture of myself, *Alice Balancing*. I face into the wall in this. Rather, my face looks into the scene, at our old pear tree; only the back of my head is visible. Past the pear tree there's a lovely shamanic flower bed composed not of plant or vegetable anything but of sparkling little red, blue and silver squares. I'm holding a big pole and balancing on this stick of wood in the grass.

I like that, says Maurice. It's very life-like.

But look at that flower bed.

I like that too.

She'll get wet. It's going to rain. See the clouds behind.

Pete, says Maurice, you can be so fanciful at times. What are you going to do about Daria?

Only the gods know, I don't. I can't live with her and I can't imagine living without her. And I still love her.

He looks at the picture: It's a balancing act, you might say.

Maurice: It's not a balancing act.

No, you're right, it's not.

Pete and Maurice turn back to the picture of me falling, where I am conducting the affairs of the world.

I almost wish someone would tell me what to do, says Pete.

Or just flip a coin.

I'm too old for that.

Anyone can flip a coin. Put yourself in the hands of the gods.

You flip it.

All right. Heads.

I stare at Maurice and he stares at me. I am falling, falling. The bookcase is falling too, but it's solid. Falling free are the urn, two leaves and a five of diamonds.

Heads what?

Heads you stay.

I may be falling but I'm firm. My feet touch nowhere but my father has me squarely the right way up. He had my hair combed down my back, straight and true, not ruffled by the rush of the air. The falling doesn't trouble me, I'm strong.

Flip it again.

Heads.

All right, says Pete. I'll stay.

I move forward fifteen years. We park the car. We sit in the dark. There's a starry sky; the stars are large and close. Something calls, hoots. Suddenly a great brown owl flies across the slope of Silbury hill.

## Sisters

Stand waiting to sing at the silvery microphone. The song text is taped to the stand, the backing music will come through the headphones. Check your distance. Not the yards to the gates and the road, lined by the dark cypresses, where at some time Michael will arrive. I don't mean, either, that two miles to the nearest town, pale Lluçmajor, where Michael might pass through. Check simply those careful centimetres to the microphone. Look down to your feet: your spot has been marked by yellow tape on the floor. Willy himself jerked the tape from a roll, cut strips with scissors and stuck them there. (He held me by the arms showing me where to stand, held me in his blue-eyed gaze. I smelled his hair gel. He deliberately brushed my nipples; that's Willy. But I ignored this because I know I am too strong for him, he will not have me, nor my sister.)

I'm alone with Willy and Terry the dog at his studio outside pale Lluçmajor, in the middle of nowhere.

The town at least is on maps. Far from tourist trails, it's a dusty *pueblo* of closed shutters in the statutory Mallorcan green. Where are we geographically? Splice Mallorca down the middle and you would go cleanly through Lluçmajor's Plaça d'Espanya, on Sundays turning it to a rubble of apricots and almond shells and fine shoes; on days like today turning it to

plain dust; leaving an Iberian Mediterranean to the left and Italian Med to the right. (Think Mediterranean without the water: olives, citrus, fireflies, but no blue seas thick with life; this is dry land on the Mallorcan plain.)

It is the final day for recording, set aside for putting down the last singing track and a piano solo.

My sister Chrissie will pass through that dusty square with Michael, whom we are extremely lucky to have, *excited* to have. I'm willing them to arrive, don't let them stop in Lluçmajor.

"Wait for it, Denise." My eyes meet Willy's blue-eyed gaze, black and silver bristle, his glistening tan. "Before you give me soul—" I give him a quizzical look: Soul? "You know what I mean, Denise—your soul. Before you do, first I have to cut back that echo. Give me one minute. Two."

Two minutes to imagine Michael and Chrissie on the Harley-Davidson. I picture them already leaving the square, passing the statue in homage to the shoemakers of Lluçmajor before building up speed. I imagine them glimpsing, laid out on trays, apricots which have been halved to look like ears; revving past the empty outskirts of the town at siesta. Soon to draw up at the studio, to buzz the intercom. It takes a minute for Willy to go to the gates with Terry, a golden Labrador, an unlikely breed to protect recording equipment in the middle of nowhere.

Terry is the same colour as the town. Terry and Willy, two lone dogs.

Our souls are very small and difficult to see and find. This is because they are not in our hearts but in a drop of blood. This drop of blood may be used once in a lifetime.

The drop of blood is encircled by barbed wire.

Listen: the technology is perfect. Listening through the headphones is like hearing outer space, hearing nothing. When I push the headphones half-off both ears: not even the air-conditioning, nothing. If Lluçmajor is on maps, the studio is on nothing, amid nothing. Beyond the silvery microphone, past the sliding glass doors of the studio: *nada*. The half-dozen cypresses, rippling and waving. Indigo-grey clouds, set fast in

the sky. To the right, a patio with a white table and chairs. No life the other side of the glass doors except sporadic forays by Terry, sniffing and searching the haphazard searches of a dog. Beyond him, in the driveway of cracked concrete, between kerbs of cheap brown tiles: still nothing. Panning left, there is that old Citroen stopped in the grass, between bamboo clumps; a delivery van with rusted blue and silver panels, halted for ever just short of the swimming pool, an indecipherable name above its twin windscreens. An *N*, a *G*, possibly *IR* at the end.

Still Willy is sliding the switches at the console. Captain on the bridge, he adjusts dials, swivels aside on his black leather chair. What are we waiting for? Where are Michael and Chrissie at this very moment? “Nearly there, Denise.” He and Michael are so different. Yesterday Willy said: I would like a young air hostess—as if he was hungry for some juicy chicken.

“Ready. Watch the third line again,” he says pushing his sunglasses firmly up in his hair. “My brother knows where the *best bars* are. Aim for *best bars* the whole time. So it’s *best bars*.”

But a phone rings: Willy disappears from his place at the console. A bridge with no captain. I re-tape the text (*Crescent City* by Lucinda Williams) to the music stand, hang the headphones on the headphone stand.

I leave the room to stroll to the Citroen. It’s warm out. Years before, the van must have been driven across the neighbouring plot to stop at the pool. At its tail the rusted roof of a rusted counter is propped open still, like a roadside stall selling fish, eggs. I hear the cypresses. I walk over and touch one as cars zip by, headed west towards Palma, causing the branches to spring back and forth. Terry barks and I head back past the pool, a pit of leaves and brown stains. There goes a red dragonfly, quivering. I stroke Terry behind the ears and he beats his tail against some bamboo. Other than the Citroen, he’s the only attraction. The count of activities between takes is: three strolls to the Citroen to two playing with Terry, to one encounter listening to takes and watching the seismographs of sound on the screen, fielding Willy’s flirtations. I see there’s a tree with blue plums beside the studio wall.

Slipping through the sliding doors I reinstall myself at the stands and the headphones and the tape on the floor and the silvery microphone.

Willy comes back brashly, ripping the wrapper off a Mars bar, a panther with a lump of meat. Energised, as if he's been vigorously showering. As if he and his hostess have been fucking. Something I don't want to think about. "OK Denise. How come you don't look really like your sister, by the way?" I don't answer; I dangle my arms. "I mean, you *are* twins, mm?" "What's that to do with you?" "Just wondering, Denise. No sweat." "Chrissie was in a bad way for a long time; ill. That's what made her so thin." "You two are so different," says Willy ignoring this information, "yesterday it crossed my mind you might have been after Michael; *interested*. Today I thought: So how come Chrissie's the one on the motorbike?" He stops chewing and scrunches the wrapper, dropping it carefully in a bin. "Denise?" "She likes motorbikes. Can't you spare me your inanities?" "Sure, I'm very short on inanities." "Well then." "We're all set. Sing into the mike from any side, any way you want. Could be the last take. Best bars."

Burly Michael is astride his Harley-Davidson with Chrissie behind clutching what she can of his great girth. Barely able to see in front of him, she drops her head to look back one last time at the valley of Sóller, the sprawl of town and sprinkling of orange plantations. She looks up and the silvery forks of the handlebars dip and twist through a narrow gorge. She leans with Michael. Under the mountains the road is clear; they roar through the cool tunnel connecting Sóller with the Mallorcan plain. Michael accelerates. Chrissie shuts her eyes, trying not to suck in tarry air. Underground video cameras would catch big Michael in sunglasses, turning to grey his French-blue aertex shirt; would see Chrissie in a sweatshirt, without the pink hoops on grey. It seems they are below the mountains only a matter of instants, before Chrissie, eyes still shut, feels her eyelids turn orange, filtering light. Out of the tunnel, back in the sun—still ten miles from pale Lluçmajor—and groves of olive and almond trees fly by, attached to pale *fincas* set back from the road. Chrissie feels magnetised by a sense of adventure.

For a few hundred yards they draw alongside the rattling carriages of the old Sóller train. Michael glances at it; a boy waves; the boy would see Michael's greying hair beneath his helmet, Chrissie's blondness fluttering. The Harley veers back to the centre line. They bear down on a station; the road arcs away from the tracks. Chrissie inhales lungfuls of happiness. She looks at her watch: they are making excellent time. They speed on, over the plain of La Pla towards the mountains of Randa and Lluçmajor, where Michael is to lay down his piano solo.

People say Michael is a musical genius.

I said to Chrissie: Chrissie, I hope for poetry. I pray.

After that: I pray he will want me.

Willy's studio may be in the middle of nowhere but access to it is dangerous. The blue gates with their spikes and alarms (for show, admits Willy) shut directly onto the road. As a car waits at the intercom, its rear blocks the road and a sudden chicane forms on the C171, the fast straight crossing the dry fields between Palma and pale Lluçmajor. Those Spanish cars fly past at eighty, ninety miles an hour. A crazy car could crash into you as you wait. Does Willy care? Willy? Willy cares about Willy. He has Terry and he has glacier-blue eyes and an expensive studio and no other cares; he has no wife or air hostess in the back or anywhere.

Nonetheless he is worth having for his work, his energy. Willy is energy, Chrissie reckons. Sometimes misdirected. But energy is good, good for making music. Energy is good for lovemaking, but not always enough. Chrissie says he would not be tender with a woman.

Would Michael be tender?

I can see my sister leaning, catching sight of him, unable to make out his words, and him leaning back, guessing at hers. The Harley decelerates majestically to turn off the main highway, for Bunyola.

She presses a hand on Michael's great shoulder. I want to stop, she shouts in his ear.

Here?

I've been loving it so much, she says as the revs die. I want to feel there's a second ride to come.

The Harley pop-pops to a halt by a field. They lift off their helmets. Michael's shoulders are brown against the blue of his shirt. Chrissie walks about, stretching and shaking her legs. Michael sits against a grey stone wall, his hands behind his head.

Chrissie, he says, you and I can go for a ride any time.

My sister—Denise is wondering if you're going straight back home. After the recordings are done.

No, I don't think so.

She'll be pleased. We'll all be pleased.

Ah, don't tell me, Chrissie, you are trying to precipitate events—

We are sisters.

I like Denise, of course.

God what are *those*?

Those are watermelons.

On the *ground*? Like *that*? I thought they always had stripes.

We can take one with us. Or look for a striped one in Llucmajor. They'll have all kinds.

Let's not stop there.

We should. It's a historical town.

Chrissie reaches over and strokes him on the chin, her hand barely touching. Or does she? Would she do this?

Historical? she says. As in what?

This would be a familiar talk, I heard it from him last night as we ate fish from the grill and drank wine. Chrissie had turned in, leaving us alone at the big hotel table under the vines and the fairy lights. It was warm out still.

Does history matter? Michael can make you think it does.

It was just our second encounter.

He sat across from me. There were dishes and bottles and paper and pieces of bread strewn about the table.

I recognised you by the beach this afternoon, I said. You were deep in a book.

Yes, he said. Getting my bearings in Mallorca.