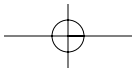
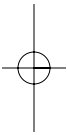
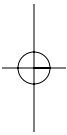


Balancing on the Edge of the World

ELIZABETH BAINES was born in South Wales and lives in Manchester. She has been a teacher and is an occasional actor as well as the prize-winning author of plays for radio and stage, and of two novels, *The Birth Machine* and *Body Cuts*. Her award-winning short stories have been published widely in magazines and anthologies. This is her first collection.



Balancing on the Edge of the World

ELIZABETH BAINES



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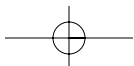
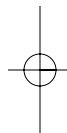
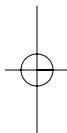
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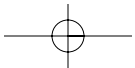
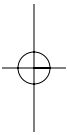
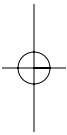
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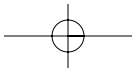
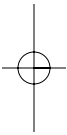
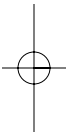
For John





Contents

Condensed Metaphysics	1
The Shooting Script	7
Daniel Smith Disappears off the Face of the Earth	27
Power	32
Holding Hands	40
Compass and Torch	46
Star Things	53
Leaf Memory	57
A Glossary of Bread	62
Going Back	67
Into the Night	75
Conundrum	78
The Way to Behave	80
Who's Singing?	88
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	97



Condensed Metaphysics

We're all drunk and Ellie's drunkest. She runs up to a guy with a begging cup outside the Babylon and asks him to lend us some money, we're hungry and want a pizza and none of us has got any cash.

He's about her own age, nineteen. He shakes his head matter-of-factly in his tight woolly hat. He doesn't find her request unreasonable. He holds out his styrofoam cup to show us only a few coins.

Ellie gets talking. He says he's been there an hour. Ellie is shocked that this is all he's got on a busy road in an hour, albeit at night. She's disgusted at this evidence of the bad side of human nature.

He puts his hand out to console her, like somebody's father. He says, 'Nah, you can't blame people. Let's face it, it's a question of empathy, and if there's one thing people aren't trained for in our society it's empathy. They just don't see the relevance of me to themselves.' He shrugs, settling his shoulders inside his army greatcoat. 'And then, if they ever make a start on having a bit of empathy, well the next stumbling block is fear. They see me, they catch a glimpse of what can happen to a person, and they just don't want to know. They shut it off. They look

BALANCING ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

through me, they prefer to make a wide circle round me into the gutter and risk getting run down.'

Ellie nods. The rest of us stand around, listening and waiting.

Ellie says, 'Yeah, and those who do give only do it to make themselves feel good.'

'Oh well,' he says, 'you can't go being picky about people's motives. Selfishness is a basic human survival technique, after all. If someone's semi-selfish action is going to get me through the night, I'm not going to go and question it.'

'Where do you spend the night?' Ellie asks.

'In an alley up Chinatown. It's OK. Take no notice of all that stuff you hear about the Triads, it's all propaganda. That's another thing: fear breeds fantasy, and fantasy's what ninety per cent of the human race is living on right now.'

Ellie says we'll get him a pizza, and we leave him outside and go on into the Babylon to buy the pizzas with a card.

Ellie goes up to a guy with lank hair at the central counter ripping into his pizza like there's no tomorrow or even tonight. He looks pleased and agitated all at once by her approach, his mouth moves about in a slipping grin. Ellie strikes up a conversation. He says he's a researcher. She asks him in what, and he seems to say condensed metaphysics.

Ellie cries, 'How d'you condense metaphysics?'

There's an old bloke at the side counter, even drunker than Ellie, his face fossilised purple. He perks up, he joins in, he says eagerly, 'I'd like to know that too.' He swivels on his stool then lurches and rights himself. 'This is a question I've thought about a lot.'

The researcher grins his haphazard grin and carries on as if he's in the eating Olympics. Maybe he wants to get out of here fast.

A thin thirtyish guy in a threadbare jacket comes over from waiting for his pizza at the counter. He says, 'What's metaphysics?'

'Ideas, man!' says the drunk guy, clinging onto the side counter to stop himself slipping again.

The young cooks behind the counter are grinning and flapping the dough about without looking. 'Isn't it morals?' asks one of them.

Condensed Metaphysics

The other, looks the elder educated brother, smiles indulgently and puts him right. 'It's all about Being.'

'Eh?' One of the drunk's legs slips off the seat again, and the thin guy goes to help him straighten up.

'Being,' says the elder pizza maker, flinging the dough up. 'What it is to exist, and what you can and can't know.'

'Right!' cries the drunk triumphantly. 'Exactly what I was saying. Thing is, you get these big ideas, don't you? I did. About what I was going to be. And what I needed to know to get to be it. I was going to be famous. I had this big idea I was going to go off to college to be a painter. I had it all planned. But then this happens and that happens, sometimes through your own mistakes, sometimes through no fault of your own, you've lost your chance. Next thing you know, someone's telling you: you can't have this, you don't know that, and too bad your old man died and you had to start work at fifteen. That's what happened to me. I went straight down the pit.' He waves his hand, explanatory, drawing us all in. Everyone's listening. 'And then too bad if the government shuts the pits down. Too bad if it drives you to drink and then your old lady runs off with some bastard still in work. Kaput.' He speaks without bitterness, he stretches his arms in amiable illustration.

The thin guy nods with friendly gloom. 'Yeah, and no retraining programmes, either.'

'Blow retraining! You think anyone could ever retrain me?' He sweeps cupped hands down his front, showing himself off to us. His old raincoat, crusted and stained, was once good worsted. 'No, no, mate. This is what I'm saying. What's stopping me now is what I've become. What I *metaphysically* am.'

'So,' he concludes. 'This is what I've always thought: maybe it's better not to let your ideas get too big in the first place. Better to condense them before the bastards condense them for you.'

One of the cooks calls the thin guy for his pizza.

Ellie's so hungry she asks the researcher, 'Can I have some of yours?' He doesn't have a lot left to share. She takes a piece of pineapple, and he looks half-flattered, half-dismayed.

BALANCING ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

'Here, have some of mine, love,' says the drunk, and he gets up from his seat, surprisingly steady, reeling only once, and comes and stands between them, looking from one to the other, one hand on the shoulder of each.

A piece of green pepper drops from the researcher's pizza and rolls on the floor. The drunk cries, 'Whey!' in sympathy, and gives a dip with his knees to show he'd pick it up if bending down wouldn't finish him off.

The thin guy comes back and seats himself at the central table, spreading his pizza carton carefully. Everyone watches comfortably and waits till he's settled eating.

'You all want pineapple?' calls one of the pizza cooks to our gang.

We can't decide.

'Go on,' advises the drunk.

'What do you think?' we ask the researcher, who's had it. He grins and shrugs, both nods and shakes his head.

Some of us decide on pineapple, others decline.

'So,' the drunk asks the researcher, now that's decided: 'How d'you do it then, condense metaphysics?'

The whole room is intent, listening. The researcher swallows, chokes, coughs. He's finished his pizza now, he's pushed his carton aside. He's suddenly serious, and he's not going after all.

'You misheard me,' he says. 'I said condensed-matter physics.'

'Oh!' shouts everyone. 'Oh!' We all step back, in hilarity. There are mirrors all round the room and our falling figures loom up and away in them, tumbling and silvery. The cooks laugh, still points flinging handfuls of bright vegetables, yellow, green, red.

We converge back on the centre counter.

'So what's condensed matter?' we all want to know. We are thinking of Alice in Wonderland, and that film where a team of scientists in a submarine gets shrunk and journeys through someone's body. We are thinking of total possibilities, of other worlds and outer space where the rules might all be different. The fries sizzle behind the counter; one of the cooks spins pizza dough on his finger ends.

Condensed Metaphysics

'This,' says the researcher. He picks up a crust he left. He touches the table: 'This. Or this.' He turns up a coke can and lets the brown liquid splosh on the formica. 'Even the air.' He spreads his arms as if to hold it up. 'Solid matter, liquid and gas.'

We are disappointed. 'Oh, you mean everything. Ordinary, everyday things.'

The purple-faced guy draws his finger through the coke puddle in a contemplative, deflated way.

'No, no, not *ordinary*!' The researcher's eyes are bright beads now. 'That's just it. It's not *ordinary* at all! We know *practically nothing about it!* It's where science has gone wrong! Particle physics is the physics of reductionism! All the time and money poured into isolating particles and working on the crazy assumption that if you know about a single particle you know about the whole! As if in any practical world beyond the particle accelerator particles ever exist in isolation! I mean, you tell me, is that a clear case of bollocks or not?'

The drunk concedes cheerfully: 'Not many bollocks exist in isolation.' Then he changes his mind: 'Tell a lie. We're all castrated in this society. Pardon me,' he adds to us women: 'metaphorically speaking, that is.'

The researcher grabs his arm. 'No, no. Even if you chopped 'em off, your bollocks wouldn't exist in isolation. To put it crudely, I mean crudely in terms of physics: they'd be affected by wherever you put them, and vice-versa: think of the molecules of air they'd displace when you whipped 'em away.'

The thin man winces, and even Ellie draws a breath.

The researcher's voice lowers. 'It's an area of science that's hardly begun to be studied. What happens in solid condensed matter to the *relation between the particles* when outer forces are brought to bear on it? Do they spiral, what kind of changes occur in their lattice work? And how far from the source does the chain reaction stop? You simply can't find out about relationships by studying components in isolation.'

We all sit thinking about it.

Our pizzas are ready, suddenly.

We grab them, share them out.

BALANCING ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

'Where's the one for the guy outside?' asks Ellie, looking round.

We haven't ordered it.

Ellie's full of remorse. It was her idea and she went and forgot. She asks us each to save him a piece.

'Sod that,' says Anne. She's been very quiet up to now. She takes her pizza off to the end of the counter in the corner. She looks back, challenging our stares. She says, 'Look. I'm unemployed, I'm a single parent, I'm living off benefits, though I'd hardly call it living. On Saturdays I clean up other people's dirt to pay for my kid's school shoes. I don't get treats like this often, this pizza's a treat I can't really afford. Let me tell you, however bad I might feel about not sharing it with a beggar, doing so would make me feel a whole lot worse.'

Now everyone's subdued. The researcher looks around uncertainly, and then gets up. A piece of sweetcorn stuck in his lapel drops off. He goes without so much as a see-ya. The cooks have their backs turned, indifferent cooks now for anonymous crowds.

We eat up in silence.

All except Anne, we each keep a piece of pizza, and gather them together.

When we get outside, the guy with the cup has gone: the spot where he stood is vibrating with blankness, and Oxford Road's a dark vacuum, sweeping towards Chinatown.

The Shooting Script

Sometimes I think I see Bob Deal, glimpse him in a bar or just before he turns a corner, but it can't be, can it? He'll have a whole new life by now, a new name I bet, in a different city where no one's on to him yet.

Everyone wants to make a film, don't they? So it wasn't such a daft thing to do, answer that ad in the listings mag: a chance for nobodies (as long as they were women or black or disabled or homosexual) to get into film making, with a leg-up and a stamp of approval from professional bodies and a guarantee of a TV slot if you were chosen.

I was a woman. I was preparing lessons for my part-time low-paid teaching job, after putting the kids to bed and hanging up Sam's PE kit to dry for next day, when the phone call came with the news that I was one of the chosen. Bob Deal congratulated me in that light, reasonable and respectful man's voice I'd got used to from the commune in the house next door, though with an additional warmth and, I don't know, something glamorous . . . *urbanity* . . . and explained that the scheme had been carefully and specifically constructed to counteract cultural disadvantage by taking full account of participants' life obstacles, with timetables drawn up accordingly and in full

BALANCING ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

consultation. Then he said I was required to attend the first scheduled meeting a week today, when he would like me to have a full treatment ready for presentation.

I almost explained that in those six days I would have several life obstacles to writing a treatment—among them three full days at work and Sam’s school concert which as a single parent it was my sole bounden duty to attend; but I didn’t. Bear with me: it was always possible that there were crossed lines somewhere, and any man who could be hooked (as he said he was) by my idea for a film about a woman who wreaks revenge on men could only be given the benefit of the doubt. Besides, I was flattered; the man clearly thought me capable of it, and it had the smack of Hollywood, didn’t it, sitting up all night at the computer and bugger the routines, and having a good excuse to tell the kids to get their own tea.

Bob Deal had an office in a building let out entirely to community-based and grant-aided projects; there were grilles across the windows and once you’d got past the intercom blackish nylon carpets and a smell of damp earth coming off the cream walls. But Bob Deal came sweeping in (rather late, half an hour actually) and transcended the surroundings: short and round but impressive in an ankle-length greatcoat and a trilby raked dramatically, pale-blue eyes beaming contact and meaning from a face fringed with a long moustache and shoulder-length hair. He gripped my hand. ‘I’m so *sorry!* I can’t tell you how bad I feel . . . I’ve had a problem . . . my partner actually. . . But there’s no excuse, how can *I* expect *you* to make allowance for *me!*’

Well of course *I could* make allowance—if anyone knew the pressures of relationships on creative endeavour it was me! I clutched my treatment, mercifully finished, but over which one of my relationships had caused me quite some problem, the beeping of the spellcheck having woken Janey in the night.

I was surprised to find no other participants present at this inaugural meeting, but in his office Bob Deal swiftly explained that, obviously, the prime purpose—the prime *concern*—of any first meeting would be to draw up individual timetables according to specific life needs.

The Shooting Script

‘But first.’ He leaned intently across the desk towards me and tugged me with those meaningful pale-blue eyes. ‘There’s something I have to ask you.’

He paused, with an air of sympathy tempered by reassuring shrewdness.

I nodded and waited.

‘I have to know. As a *woman*, telling a *woman’s* story, are you prepared to work on this film with a *man*?’

I opened my mouth to answer.

‘Because I understand the problems completely. Let me put my cards on the table. I’m gay. Which of course gives me first-hand knowledge of minority discrimination. But however aware a man is, he *has* to have his blind spots. Though let me assure you, I’m willing to be guided by you, *keen* to be guided by you. When it comes to the script, or the technicalities of a camera in this project, I’ll be the tutor; but as for the *issues*, as for your *meanings*, well, *you* must be *mine*.’

I was entranced. I opened my mouth again but he put up his hand.

‘Don’t answer. I must give you the means to make your judgment. I must tell you exactly who I am, and where I’m coming from, so that you can make an informed decision.’

And then he told me about his background in film and gay activism—Derek Jarman had been a *friend*—and that (‘And this is important in where I’m coming from’) he had learned all about the tyranny of minority groups. ‘I mean, this was the most *painful* period of my *life*!’ (He flicked his hair with the back of his hand in a quick gesture of despair.) ‘I can tell you, from personal, *bitter*, experience that a gay man need write only *one* honest appraisal of a crap film by another gay-activist group member and, hey presto, he’s the Enemy Within! Me! *Me* who had poured my *guts*, all my creativity, into the cause; working for nothing, plodding my way round the TV stations, building up contacts, dressing up the cause in a way the establishment could swallow—though that was my greatest *sin*, of course. The *contacts* I could have got them! I mean, I’m *known* in those TV channels, I’m the godfather of the daughter of a Head of Drama, for goodness’ sake.’

BALANCING ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

He paused, shaking his head slowly, and then sharply to rid himself of bad memories and the past and address the present. 'Which is why I've ended up in these parts. I've *had* it with the metropolis, and I've had it with splinter groups, and I'm offering my talents to a wider constituency.'

My heart was thudding, with gratitude, and sympathy, and above all with panic-stricken memory: I told him how I too had suffered such persecution, been expelled from my Greenham group for having a man drive me to the women's camp at the missile base. I could see we were fellow souls. Of course I wanted to work with him, and how!, and it seemed quite beside the point that since (as it now turned out) Bob Deal was the scheme's sole tutor and assessor as well as its originator, that if I *didn't* feel I could work with a *man* then I may as well leave the scheme right now.

He then told me with charmingly cheeky confidentiality of several scandals involving adultery and rival Executive TV Producers, and his sense of irony and mastery of pace and timing won my artistic confidence entirely and made me laugh.

He suddenly looked at his watch. Our hour was up. 'Hasn't it *rushed* by—even though we *did* lose some time at the start!' (Here he flashed me a look of friendly and ironically rueful apology.) 'And aren't we getting on famously! I can see this is going to be a fruitful artistic collaboration!' He said his partner would be waiting, and the way things were at the moment between them . . . well, he wouldn't bore me. He grimaced, and gave a sigh of long-suffering though affectionate exasperation.

I said that of course I understood.

I said, but what about my schedule, and come to that my contract (which he'd promised to bring for discussion today).

He said, 'Sure!' and sat up as though confronted by a gun. He said, as for the contract, contrary to his expectations it wasn't quite completed, and this was only because he was so anxious to get it right from the participants'—the *artists*'—point of view. He'd send it out to me tomorrow, and I could bring up any points about it next time we met.

I said, but we hadn't got a schedule, we hadn't decided when we'd next meet.

The Shooting Script

He said, no we hadn't, but he was sure I would agree that this meeting had been best spent getting these really important issues thrashed out between us. We'd plan a schedule next week—same time, same place, when we'd also work together on a character breakdown.

I felt confused. I clutched my treatment (about which up until then I'd forgotten) and which I'd read in a how-to book should already include a character breakdown. I handed it over, laying it on his desk.

He looked down as if I'd stuck a dead cat there.

He said (with a shaming hint of pity), 'Let's crawl, shall we, before we have a go at running?' He said I must have misheard. He reminded me that the scheme was constructed to take us through *all* of the stages.

He took it anyway, though, my treatment for a film about male abuse of female bodies, and handed me a tape of *Caravaggio*, a film about a man obsessed with other men's bodies, and said that once I'd seen it I'd know exactly how to make my film.

I watched the film, I tried (unsuccessfully) to see its connections with my own, and the following week took it back through the wind and rain (on three buses, into town and out the other side again).

Bob Deal didn't turn up. When I inquired at the desk, the desk clerk's face lit up at the sound of Bob Deal's name as at that of a long-lost buddy, and I knew myself included in the general bonhomie. A girl in a very short skirt and clonky big shoes passed through. 'Seen anything of Bob Deal this morning?' the desk clerk asked her, and she lost her snooty bored arts-worker expression and twinkled at me like I was one of the club. 'No, I haven't yet,' she smiled apologetically, and with affection. They made me feel lucky to be the one kept waiting by him. They seemed so touched, so even *excited*, that Bob Deal could almost have been there in person after all.

In the end the desk clerk suggested I ring him at home.

His voice sounded lighter than ever, and very far away. I had a vision of him surfacing, from water. Or bed. He sounded . . . well, I was reluctant to think *offended*. He said, 'I'm ill!'

BALANCING ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

I asked what was wrong, though with a strangely guilty feeling that I should have known already.

He said, 'I've got *flu!*' He said in a pained voice: 'I've been *trying* to ring you at home—though really I ought to be *asleep*—but you must have left already.' He sounded peeved at my having done so. Then, with a sudden note of accusation: 'Have you *done* your character breakdown?'

I said, 'But I thought we were doing it *together!*' (crawling before I ran).

I *heard* him sigh. I *felt* him take a deep breath and modulate his voice before explaining patiently and kindly (though not without a frosty hint of reprimand) that we would need something to work *on* together, when we did. He said, more frostily still, that I would need to get it done by the following week, same time.

I hardly liked to bring up the subject of the contract, which had never arrived as promised, but I did.

Now he got animated, and at the same time confidential. He said that it *still* wasn't ready; he said some of the artists who had seen it already had insisted on having a couple of points changed; it was nit-picking only, but he was naturally anxious to observe the rights of artists—this was an artist-*centred* scheme. 'Though you *can* go too far! Some of these artists, they're so *precious*, you've no idea!'

So I didn't have the nerve to say that for me the same time next week would mean changing a clinic appointment of Sam's.

I changed the clinic appointment, I worked on my character breakdown.

Next week Bob Deal was there.

He kept me waiting.

He didn't come through to the foyer, when the desk clerk buzzed him he asked him to send me through.

Bob Deal was seated at his desk in a manner that could almost be said to be grave. He greeted me formally.

I handed him my character breakdown. He scanned it in silence.

These were my main characters: a damaged heroine and her two dastardly lovers, one a plain selfish brute and the other a

The Shooting Script

dangerous emotional manipulator on whom she takes revenge in the end.

Bob Deal looked up gravely. He said, 'I don't think you've made the best choice of characters.'

I said, 'Sorry?'

He said, 'You need to drop one of the lovers, the one called Bill. It's uneconomical, it's a repetition.' His eyes softened, powder-blue, to the expression of a kindly doctor with a painful but miracle cure. 'I suggest you make Bill gay.'

I was icy, but I didn't get as far as reminding him of his reassurance regarding *meanings*. He was one step ahead of me. He didn't miss a beat, he jumped up from his seat, he rushed to a cupboard from which he pulled out his trilby and put it on his head. He said, 'The form changes the meaning. Visual representation changes the meaning.' He said, 'Watch this.' And he cocked his hat back and swaggered towards me like a cowboy; halfway there he turned away and then swirled back again, transformed, the hat pulled low over his brow, shoulders hunched and, as far as it was visible, a brooding expression. He whipped the hat off and his brown fringed face was blithe as a clown's. 'See? A different visual twist, a different meaning!' I had to admit he looked like a different man every time.

My mouth was open, and I guess he missed the meaning, that I was on to him. He seemed not to notice the icy temperature of my response. He told me happily that since I was a novice with the visuals, then that was the area on which we'd concentrate (the scheme being constructed to cater for individual gaps in experience) and since lipstick was a main motif in my film I should pin a picture of a lipstick on my corkboard to remind me, and stick another on my fridge, and put one in the bathroom—I had to learn to live and *breathe* this film! Could I draw? I said I could. He said, Well, it didn't matter if I couldn't, we would meet that bridge (ie the storyboard) when we came to it, that was to say in a fortnight, but in the meantime could I write a first draft script by then?

He didn't seem to notice the unfriendly tone of my goodbye, or my steely resolve.

BALANCING ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

I rang one the alleged funders of the scheme. Yes, of *course* they were funding him! The young female arts officer spoke with warmth, and even a ripple of excitement (they were so *lucky* to be funding him!) followed by a tone of amazement that I should question it—question *him!* Her tone grew swiftly censorious. She could assure me categorically of the professional nature of this scheme, and all of them, Bob Deal (here she flipped into coyness), herself and the representatives of the several professional bodies including the TV channel (here she grew briefly unctuous) were working in close co-operation to ensure its success. No, (tightening up again) she hadn't *seen* the contract, but she *did* know *all* about the hitch with it, and it was a mark of Bob Deal's professionalism that he should make such accommodation in respecting the wishes of participants who'd asked for changes, and yes she could confirm (hostile: *why should* she; how could I doubt it?) that *as long as the participants fulfilled their part of the bargain, and in the allotted time-span*, then a TV broadcast was guaranteed.

I felt like the nobody that I was. Who would ever be surprised if a nobody set impossible tasks failed?

I decided to beat Bob Deal at his own game.

I sent the kids to stay with their father and sat up twenty hours a day (it was half-term, luckily) and hammered away and called Bob Deal's bluff and within a week completed a draft for a two-hour film. Then I mailed it to his home address, making clear that I required him to read it before we next met.

Next meeting Bob Deal swept into the foyer in a long flowing shot-silk purple shirt (it was a hot March day), flicking his hair as he came through the door against the light, and pumped quickly on his little legs up the four nylon steps, calling 'Darling!' and planted a smacking kiss on my cheek.

There were a few other people in the foyer, and though my back was turned I could sense them noticing and thrilling, and Bob turned to them and preened, showing off his shirt, and they grinned and plucked and stroked it, a goofy girl in leggings, a tall New Age-type guy involved in one of the free papers, and of course the desk clerk.

The Shooting Script

Then Bob swept back and grabbed me and pulled me to him and among them, and said to them, 'Do you like my *escort*, isn't she a *darling*?' and they grinned at me goofily. 'She's a *genius*, I'm telling you!'

He dropped them suddenly, turned his back on them and ignored them, and swept me up in his arms. 'Darling, I'm taking you out to lunch!'

I began to protest: the (so far unspecified) *allotted time*, my life obstacles as a single parent, which meant we had to take every moment we could get. He brushed it aside, he brushed my hair from my face (with a familiarity no heterosexist brute would have dared). He said, 'We've *bags* of time! We're miles ahead! You're a genius! You've cut through all the crap!' He said, 'We're made! This film will make us, you and me both, Darling!' He said (cuffing me over-familiarly), 'Hey anyway, lighten up, you've got to stop hanging onto those life obstacles quite so grimly.' He said with a grin, 'Don't be a pain.' And then he put his hand on various bits of me, my arm, my shoulder, my back, my head, while instructing the desk clerk to call us a taxi.

He held my arm as we went through the door which, in breach of security regulations, he'd left wide open; he ushered me fussily and studiously into the taxi, so elaborately camp that I took the angry revving away of a nearby bronze Escort as an expression of homophobic disgust.

We went to an expensive Italian restaurant. He ordered the most expensive wine. He saw my face: he said, 'Don't worry, the scheme will pay. It'll come off expenses.' I guess my face only changed for the worse. He took my hand. He said, 'Look. This is business. But it's also our reward. We can *afford* it. We could have spent *weeks*—weeks of time in the office which would have had to be paid for, and weeks of *my* time, my skilled tuition—getting to where you've got in just days at home on your own! And I'm telling you now, confidentially, that not much money will be being spent where some of the other artists are concerned. They've no *idea*! They can't complete the simplest task, understand the simplest instruction! Some of them haven't turned in a thing! There are those I've hardly *seen*!' He said it was all very well making provision for the disadvantaged, but the trouble

BALANCING ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

with the disadvantaged was that they just didn't know how to avail themselves of that provision—let's face it, some of them were trained to expect things on a plate. He was a *facilitator*, for god's sake, not a fucking spoonfeeder, and it was downright patronizing to deny that there were wankers in the ranks of the disadvantaged as well as everywhere else. To be honest, he doubted he'd get a single film out of any of the others. I was his only hope. I was head and shoulders. (He poured me another glass of expensive wine.) I could see, couldn't I, why he'd been unable to set up the communal workshops he'd planned on, and which I'd asked him about once or twice. There was just no common ground. And it would be like trying to organize a swarm of bluebottles onto one turd in a midden.

I asked who they were.

He said, 'You don't want to know.'

I said I did.

He said, OK then, with a look as if to say *I'd been warned*. For a start, there was a lesbian who hadn't yet turned in a basic outline; there was a black guy who insisted on making a rap film although *that wasn't what had been agreed*, and they simply couldn't get past that sticking point. There was a disabled woman who claimed that the disabled access in the offices (though pride of place with the disabled-access planners) was inadequate, and insisted on holding the meetings in her house, and when he got there on showing off her cooking prowess, so they never got any work done. These people just weren't *serious*. . .

Believe me, I saw through it.

But (don't laugh) I thought I was the better Machiavelli.

By the time he'd talked about all the other (awful) artists, and we'd drunk another bottle of expensive wine, it was getting on for five. He said, 'Don't go, the night's young,' and we went on a tour of the gay bars.

At first we were sociable, swapping compliments with the bar folks, and comparing hairstyles, but then in what he said was his favourite bar we settled down. He told me about his tough childhood: his brutal father and his self-destructive mother (you see, he could *really* understand where my film was coming from)

The Shooting Script

and the damaging relationships he seemed to be doomed to since. His lip trembled as he lit a fag.

Well, I was a Machiavelli, but I also had a heart, and I sympathized and told him my tale in turn: the cold husband (he slid an arm round my shoulder) and the poisonous possessive lover (he pulled me nearer). I snuggled up and felt protected. I was pretty drunk by now, and through my fug I also had a vague impression of the whole pub watching—a gaunt shaven-headed man at the bar glaring evilly, and a huge transvestite nearby in button earrings, white stilettos and a wide grey knife-pleat nylon skirt (the exact outfit of one of my old teachers) skewed as if to get a better view of me and watching with anticipation or amusement as if for a denouement. I snuggled up to Bob Deal and told him about the hardship, after all the tugs-of-love and passion, of ending up passionless and alone with two kids.

He said, 'You know, you're such a fucking drama queen.'

His voice was malicious. I tried to sit up to see his face; he held me tighter so I couldn't.

He said into my hair, but perfectly audibly and publicly: 'You're so fucking *Marianne Faithfull*.'

He kissed me full on the lips.

Someone snorted, and someone else banged a glass down sharply.

Next thing I knew, he was putting me in a taxi and paying in advance. 'Take care of her,' he told the taximan with what sounded like feeling. He clipped the seatbelt around me solicitously.

He jumped back out. He held the door. He said, 'By the way, I meant to say. Your script needs work. The mother ought to commit suicide at the start.'

I was suddenly wide-awake sober. I said: 'But that would change *everything!*'

He nodded. He grinned gaily. 'Name of the game, Darling!' And he slammed the taxi door shut.

If he thought I was going to crawl away defeated he was going to be disappointed. When I turned up next meeting and the desk clerk buzzed him I *heard* the long silence before he

BALANCING ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

collected himself. When I entered the room I saw the blue-white look of panic before he had a flash of inspiration and rummaged beneath the desk and brought up a plastic bag, and, camp and giggling, showed me his recent purchases of boxed underwear: tight black knitted boxer-shorts, a fish-net jock-strap and some kind of bondage thing with buckles. Which did I like best?

I said in a steely voice that I could honestly never choose, and proceeded to reiterate *the need to respect the meanings*, and to state clearly—as he had so enjoined me—what those *meanings* for me, as a *woman* were. I announced that in consequence we would work on my draft *as it stood*. I added (if he could lie, then so could I) that I had now joined a professional artists' organization and had been advised to insist on a contract right away, and instructed to hand it to them for their perusal before I signed.

He gulped.

He nodded vigorously. He clasped his hands on the desk. His cheeks were flushed. He said, Absolutely: I was quite right of course, he was on my side in this completely, and there was no excuse. It was simply a matter of his computer having crashed—had he really not explained that?—halfway through making the changes which had been asked for, so that (just for the moment) there was no complete version, neither the original nor the new. Then he suddenly plunged into the desk drawer and brought out a bottle of perfume which he squirted liberally on his neck, flicking his head and his hair from side to side as he did. He stopped, sniffed, looked ecstatic, said: 'Don't you *love* this perfume?' and held it up, mutely offering me a squirt. I shook my head stonily, but my heart was sinking, and he must have seen it, because he gathered steam, he said: 'This perfume is so *calming*! I mean, I have to tell you that I'm upset. I know you're angry about the contract, and you have every right to be, but I *am* upset by your lack of trust! I'm *asking* you—I mean, we *discussed* this—to understand my blind spots.'

He paused. He shut his eyes. And (yes, I *know*. . .!) I thought for a moment he'd given in.

He opened his eyes. 'My personal problems. You can't imagine. . .' He flicked me a look of animated revelation. 'I've been up all night, you know! I think *you* know what it's like to

The Shooting Script

be on the other end of possessiveness. . . I mean, really, this morning I'm in no fit state.'

I said evenly, 'Shall we begin?'

We began.

We worked through the first short scene where the heroine as a little girl watches her mother pandering to her cheating scheming father. We got to the end of it.

Bob Deal looked suddenly distracted, even agitated. He said, 'Do you mind if?' and picked up the phone and dialled. He seemed embarrassed and tense as he waited for an answer. He twitched round the receiver suddenly and said with what I *witnessed* as nervous gaiety: 'Trev!' Then he was all tentative and soothing appeasement: 'Listen, Trev, I'll be back about two.'

There was a question at the other end which he clearly decided not to answer, then he told Trev brightly: 'I'm working on a *marvellous* script, with a fantastically *gifted* filmmaker. . .' Pause, then (with quite *genuine* surprised delight at Trev's making the connection) 'Yes, that's right! The one you know about . . .' And for some reason he rolled his eyes at me, cocked his head sideways at the receiver and pointed to it: *Get him*.

I was still trying to work it out, and we were going through the second short scene where the little girl sees her father with a vampish lipsticked Other Woman, when the door burst open behind me, hitting the cupboard with a crack like a gun going off.

There was a shaven-headed man in the doorway, poised and tense as a cowboy with his hands curled, but also stalled in furious despair. High spots of emotion flared on his cheekbones, gaunt cheekbones I'd seen before, through my drunken fug in the gay bar. . .

Bob Deal cried, 'Trev!'

Trev threw a look like molten metal in my direction, and then for a long scary moment he and Bob Deal held each others' gaze. Bob Deal (*honestly*) was flushed and trembling.

Trev growled: 'I thought you were coming home.'

Visibly, Bob Deal *made* himself calm, controlled the tenor of his voice. 'Trev, I told you. We're working.'

BALANCING ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

He went on kindly, but firmly and unmistakably ticking him off: 'We're on a tight schedule here, and I think you *know* that. We're going through a script.'

He waved his hand over the desk to demonstrate, inadvertently drawing attention to the boxes of underwear still sitting there, with their pictures of fit jocks with bulging packets. The reek of sultry perfume, I realized, still filled the room.

Trev wheeled round and slammed. Bob Deal's hat dived off the cupboard.

Bob Deal collapsed. He put his head in his hands, then wiped them slowly down his face as he raised it. He said, 'Look,' and held out his hands, and yes, they *were* trembling.

He took a shuddering breath. He said, 'Do you mind if we break for coffee? I need to recover.'

And so we went to the canteen, where some worn-looking housewives from the Women's Aid group lit up like footlights when he entered and called him over with lascivious offers to come and sample their cherry tarts and big cream puffs, hooting delightedly when he said he was sorely tempted but more partial to rock buns or something with nuts.

They did him a world of good. He was quite cheered up, and regaled them with the story of how he'd recently shocked everyone by turning up to his sister's wedding in a shift dress and high heels, on the arm of Trev in full nineteenth-century colonel's regalia.

A call was put through to the canteen for him. He took the receiver with a flourish. He froze. He said stiffly: 'I told you *three weeks* ago that I need a shooting script by tomorrow.' His tone was so cold that the housewives went quiet at the stature of the misdemeanour he was clearly dealing with. 'Look, I'm sorry if it's a problem, but *you* have a side to keep in this bargain. We have funders waiting for results, we have a deadline with a TV station. You can't mess about with these things—' he stalled an interruption '—and by next week I want a camera crew booked and actors signed, and if you can't do *that* we'll have to call it a day.' He put the phone down. He said to me with feeling, 'These other *artists!*'

I said, 'What deadline? *I'm* nowhere near a shooting script!'