

Perched on the wall at the dock, Leonard watched the last few market traders setting up – erecting tables and awnings, unloading merchandise from vans, exchanging banter – satisfied with the few quid he had earned helping the first arrivals in the rush to get the best pitches. Some punters were already out, seeking the freshest produce and bargains on the bric-a-brac and specialist stalls. A girl passed with her mother. Leonard jumped down from the wall and pursued them on the opposite side of the aisle; upon gaining a reasonable lead he crossed the aisle and, pretending to be interested in a nearby stall, waited for *them* to meet *him*.

It was not Sarah. He sighed. Ten days since he had met her. He reflected on the girl's long black hair, red dress and shoes – his strongest memories and yet the most misleading; hair could be cut and clothes changed and how many girls had he erroneously pursued with these details in mind? Of course, he could list Sarah's characteristics, she was a striking girl and he had noted them immediately: stub nose, bloodless skin, small teeth, big gums, dark rings around deep-set eyes. But these came to him as bland facts; the business of piecing them into something more substantial was getting increasingly difficult.

He shrugged and turned. A glint of light forced him to blink. He shielded his eyes. On an army surplus stall was a bayonet, unsheathed, the blade shimmering. With a hissing intake of breath he touched the wound on his forehead (healing now but still gratifyingly apparent), the gnarled skin like a minute landscape. He paused, allowing his fingertips to explore, remembering the days he searched diligently for crabs and sea anemones in rock pools on the beach, only to blast them with stones upon discovery. Similarly, the bump inspired him, made him feel heroic, brave. Its origins unknown to others, he liked to pretend it was inflicted during a fight – unfair, of course, two or three against one – or else saving a child from an onrushing danger. This revision to historical fact was the reason for the hissing inhalation (though it might just as well have been a flinch, wince or shudder) intended to imply physical and mental torment. Paradoxically, should anyone's curiosity rise, he would quickly wave aside their intrigue and mumble: 'It's nothing.' This he did, not because he did not want to share his fiction, but because to suffer in silence seemed the manly thing to do and the market was a place of men.

The market ran all week at the dock. The same sellers attended most days. A good thing, his chief theory being that Sarah was daughter of one. Why else would she have been wandering unaccompanied unless familiar with the set-up?

Initially, optimistic of finding her straight away, he had turned up the morning after his expulsion, encouraged by desperation to flee his new lodgings, sat on the wall, right by the spot of their first meeting, and waited. Heart racing, he had the impression a reunion was imminent. After a while a stallholder asked if he would lend a hand setting up. He did. Got paid. Returned to the wall. Thought nothing of it.

Then another request came. Then another.

He came to see this section of wall as his and, so others would too, chalked boundary lines on it, writing between these, on the side of the wall so all could see: LEONARD PEPPER ODD JOBS. The role – sometimes it entailed nothing more than fetching a packet of cigarettes from the newsagent – benefited him financially and allowed him to integrate with the market community, which he predicted would assist the investigation.

But no: Leonard was seen as an oddity among the traders, conversations changed or stopped when he appeared, and if he offered his service to a stall holder they either refused outright or accepted with surprising hostility. His place was on the wall, waiting to be invited.

As Leonard approached the army stall, the owner, sitting on a high stool to the side of it, watched through weary eyes, like he knew what the boy had seen and was just waiting for him to ask. Trying to appear nonchalant, Leonard went to the opposite end of the display from the bayonet and slowly worked his way toward it.

Up close the stall was a curious mix of military equipment and household tat.

He reached toward a selection of videos, exhibited discreetly on top of some shelves standing on the trestle table, then blushed and grabbed his hand back. Porn! A dirty chuckle came from the stall-owner's direction. Keeping his head down, Leonard ignored it, focused. At a glance he could not see a price on the blade. Not good. The fee would be decided on a whim. It could only work against him. He did not know this particular stall-owner but he knew exactly what he was thinking. The price would be high.

On the ground was a large box, filled with old leather boots. Abstractedly, Leonard picked one out.

‘Genuine leather,’ the man grumbled. ‘You want it?’

The question caught Leonard off guard. ‘Where’s the other?’ he squeaked.

The man, in his late sixties, shrugged. The folds of his breasts heaved up then down through the striped polo shirt he was wearing. It put Leonard in mind of the contour lines on a map. Replacing the boot he moved away from the box. His insides twisted with a desire to touch the bayonet. He took a moment to savour the thrill of anticipation, noticing, as he did so, a collection of army medals pinned to a piece of card. Wondering if the man was a war veteran, he eyeballed him blatantly: a big lobster-red head with pert lips and heavy jowls. He tried to imagine him advancing upon the enemy.

‘You win these?’

The man burped. Leonard waited for a better answer. Eventually the man spoke. ‘You want them?’

Leonard shook his head.

The man’s trousers, fastened by an elasticated belt, were pulled over his gut. The fabric was taut and the zipper nowhere near where it should be. Leonard decided the trader had never seen action of any sort. He pretended to admire the medals some more then propped them back against some tinned goods with the labels missing. The temptation to shake one of the tins, try figure out its contents, bubbled up inside him. Then, unable to repress two urges at once, he scuttled across and snatched up the bayonet. ‘How much you want for this?’

The man scrutinized the item like he was seeing it for the first time.  
'Fifteen pounds.'

Leonard forced an incredulous snort. 'Give over. I know where to get one for less than half that.'

'Go get it then,' said the man, not budging an inch from his stool. He looked in no hurry to make a sale; he looked in no hurry to do anything. 'If you're not buying it, stop hogging it,' he said.

Palms oozing sweat, Leonard gripped it tighter. 'I want it,' he said, then, alternately wiped his hands dry on his trousers.

The man repeated the price.

'I don't have that much.'

'Can't have it then.'

'It's not worth that,' he muttered sulkily.

'Ask people whose lives depended on it what it's worth.'

Putting the bayonet down, Leonard tutted, digging deep into his pockets. 'This is all I've got on us. I'll leave you this for now and go get the rest, okay?'

He held the money out to the man, who took it without comment and began counting.

'It's eight quid,' said Leonard.

The man ignored him and continued totting up, pausing at intervals to stack a neat tower of coins on the side of his stall. After a minute or two, eight towers of silver and bronze shone. 'Seven eighty-three,' he said. Removing a key from the tee shirt's breast pocket, he opened a metal cash box, swept the money into it then locked up and returned the key. 'No refunds on deposits,' he said.

‘Aren’t you going to take it off the display then?’

‘You haven’t paid for it yet.’

‘I’ve given you over half!’

The man nodded.

‘Christ! All I want is the bayonet. Is it that hard?’

‘Pay up, it’s yours. Easy,’ said the man then, tapping the side of his head with a solitary digit, added: ‘Don’t worry. I know who you are.’

Leonard frowned at the change in tone. *I know who you are.* It sounded conspiratorial, as if the purchase was predestined. But perhaps the man was just reassuring Leonard that his memory was still in full working order, or that he was privy to the gossip that went on. Accepting it as a confidence of some sort, he back-peddled away from the stall. ‘Alright,’ he said. ‘But remember, it’s mine, okay? Mine. Leonard Pepper’s.’

Slipping seamlessly back into character the trader yawned and turned away. He reached his hand under the trouser bulge and plucked at where his crotch would be. Leonard paused a second then ran out the market – no one there he could get the money from.

In the café Charlotte was clearing a table. She smiled as he burst through the door, the gold pendant he hated, yet owed so much to dangling over the top of her tee shirt and apron. This gaudy piece of jewellery – her name cut in fancy flowing letters – was to thank for their introduction. Upon moving out of his uncle’s, wanting to maintain the routine of that day with Sarah, Leonard had taken to snacking in the café whenever in the vicinity. Almost immediately, Charlotte became the focus of these visits. He began dropping in the café three or four times a day. Though the weather was hot, he tended to

buy tea or coffee because it was cheap and took longer to drink than pop. After a few meetings he spoke her name at the end of his order. It was not intentional. He was glaring at the necklace and the word attached itself to his sentence. Through her make up and spots a blush radiated. She followed his gaze to the pendant, tucking it out of sight. The adjustment made her approachable, attainable even.

‘It’s your name isn’t it?’ Leonard said.

‘So?’

‘Shouldn’t put it on the necklace if you don’t want anyone knowing.’

She shrugged.

Leonard was excited. Now he was talking to her he wanted to keep talking. Beneath the acne she was not unattractive.

‘Is it because you’re forgetful?’

She smiled uncertainly - good teeth - then turned on her heels to get his order. Her gait was awkward, as if she knew he was watching. He tried to imagine her slender figure through the jog bottoms. He could have tossed off there and then.

Two days later he bumped into her leaving work. This time it was intentional, Leonard having observed the route she took home and the best place to stand to make an encounter seem accidental. Meeting outside the café it terrified him that she might act differently, more assertive, but immediately her face reddened. He took control, asked her out for a drink. She accepted.

She accepted! Intoxicated with happiness he babbled about the weather, his new lodgings, a story he heard on the radio, adding flourishes of his own, all the while passing comment on things he saw, ‘look at that dog...

that man with the...’ Ha-ha, nothing escaped his attention. Charlotte, for her part, said very little. It did not matter; he was in full flow, surprising himself with his wit, and the longer things went well, the greater his hopes became. Where might the night end? But as the weight of expectation grew, doubts emerged... He had not bathed for two days, not even deodorised his armpits, his teeth needed a brush and his breath, god he could taste it! He became jittery, cold sweat burst out all over him and he developed the need to use the toilet. Nerves. Nerves! How could it be nerves? The pressure on his bowels was real, would give way to an abhorrently tangible form, and the dampness seeping out of him, dribbling down from his armpits, over his ribcage, that was real too... His walk became stiff, arms tight to his sides, buttocks clenched, and his bad breath made it impossible to speak. The silence was unbearable. Why didn’t Charlotte say anything? A word from her and everything would be fine. Something to let him know she was happy. As it was, he could not help but wonder if she had accepted his offer because she was too timid to decline it. No need to be. If she wanted to leave he would not get in her way, rather than she string him along.

After a few minutes, unable to endure any more, he stopped dead, throwing his arms out imploringly. ‘Look, are you sure you want to go? You’ve nothing better to be getting on with?’

Charlotte nodded. ‘I can’t stay too late though.’

‘Aye well yeah, fine... I just wanted to be sure.’

Charlotte laughed. A warm tingle soothed his body, and his heart leapt excitedly. A laugh. The first she had shared with him. They began walking again. He wondered whether to hold her hand but his bliss was such he would risk nothing to ruin it. He imagined the faces of Tom and his cronies when



they entered - all double takes and eyes agog! What would they think? The usual to begin with: Here comes Leonard Pepper. Sure he's had things hard but he puts the customers off their drinks. But what's this? Ay-ay! Company - and female to boot! Maybe we were wrong about him... Tom almost drops the glass he is cleaning and the old-timers get so distracted from their domino game they clean forget whose turn it is to play. Ha-ha.

Upon reaching The Halt his confidence was higher than ever: the pressure on his backside having been nothing but wind and if he smelled a little sweaty, well clearly Charlotte was unfazed by it. He had landed on his feet with her!

She hesitated outside, raising herself on tiptoe, trying to get a glimpse of the place over the frosted glass windows at eye-level.

The Halt was the cheapest and quietest pub in the district. Its façade, panelled in wood, once appeared classy but was now cracked and weather-beaten. The pub's name was rendered in important looking block capitals, done in gold leaf, flaking now, that a row of lamps illuminated at night. A sign above the entrance said FREE PINTS TOMORROW. Inside was as dingy as the outside suggested: the seats upholstered in brown vinyl; the ceiling, low and nicotine stained; the bar chestnut coloured and the drinks mostly likewise; the walls panelled in a dark wood that the orange light nestled into rather than brightened.

Charlotte screwed her face up. 'Looks a bit grim.'

'It's a front, so the place doesn't get too popular.'

She gave him a blank look, then ran her finger along a window ledge, cutting loose a spider's web in the corner. She indicated another sign, painted

onto a blackboard by the entrance, announcing, amongst other things, that Miss Ophelia Balls performed every Thursday. 'That's tonight.'

'That's ancient. Nothing like that happens here now.' Smiling tentatively, he held open the door. She could not change her mind, not now! 'It's nice,' he said. 'Really it is.'

She went inside.

Cursory glances. All they received. Tom, hunched over a newspaper at the bar, hardly even made the effort to do that. Leonard instructed Charlotte to sit down and went to the bar, above which a portable television, volume off, showed the news. After a minute Tom stepped across to serve him.

'Leonard,' he said flatly.

'A pint of Guinness and a... Hold on a second.'

Charlotte was sitting in a corner at the back of the room, a slot machine flashed and bleeped nearby. Leonard pondered whether she wanted the machine to draw attention to her or take it away.

He took her order – disappointingly, a half pint – and relayed it to Tom, then nodded across his shoulder and said, quietly, so Charlotte would not hear, '*For my girlfriend*'.

Keeping his eyes on the pint he was pulling, Tom laughed to himself and shook his head. 'Your uncle's been in asking after you,' he said, placing the pint heavily down so some sloshed over the rim. 'He said 'feel free to drop in'. He told us to tell you that.'

Blah, blah, blah, Leonard's uncle, what about Charlotte, when was Tom going to mention her?

'That's two eighty you owe us.'

Two quid eighty. He could have offered the exact amount but in a final bid to make an impression decided on a ten-pound note, peeling it nonchalantly away from the remainder of his giro. 'I've nothing smaller.'

'It's fine.'

Fine! As though he had handed over coppers. Cursing Tom's indifference, he seated himself opposite Charlotte. She smiled, thanking him for the drink. He opened some crisps, put them in the centre of the table.

'You're right, it is grim.'

'It's alright.'

'Sometimes.'

In silence they both went for the crisps. Charlotte took one, Leonard as many as he could. 'So what are you doing tonight then?'

Charlotte, holding a beer-mat upright on the table, rotating it from corner to corner, shrugged. 'Babysitting me little sister.'

Little sister? Leonard leant forward. 'What's she called?' he said.

'Scarlet.' Then shrugged, as if the name needed explaining: 'It rhymes with Charlotte.'

Scarlet! Initial S! His S? The name suited his girl well. Old fashioned, like her clothes. He sipped his Guinness. Wiped his hand over his mouth. 'Does she look like you?' Excited, the words left his mouth in a garbled unintelligible rush. He blushed, took a breath, then repeated the question.

'No...'. Charlotte's description was a disappointment and relief. Scarlet was all wrong. Blond. Heart faced. Leggings. He disliked her immediately.

Charlotte removed a packet of cigarettes from her handbag and offered him one. He declined. Smoking killed his mum. Telling this to Charlotte, he felt perversely heroic and, without thinking, touched the wound on his head.

'What's that off?'

'Me uncle kicked us out.'

'He did that?'

Leonard shrugged, awkward with the misunderstanding but liking the impact.

'What about your dad, where's he?'

Leonard's dad had vanished. He did not know where or if he was coming back, just that one morning he had awakened to find his uncle in the kitchen of their council house. He told Leonard to pack his belongings, he would be living with him a while. A few weeks later Leonard returned to the house but someone else had moved in.

Charlotte nodded and inhaled, making the cigarette appear deliciously tasty. Leonard rose from his seat. 'I'm just going to the toilet.'

The toilet was narrow with a solitary cubicle and a trough-like steel urinal. Standing at this Leonard was struck by the notion that if, by pissing, he could push the two slimy fresheners - like pineapple cubes with the sugar coating sucked off - to the opposite end from where they were settled then things with Charlotte would be a success. Unzipping his fly, he got to work. The piss emerged in two streams. He pulled back his foreskin, uniting the jets, giving improved power and accuracy, but the cubes were not as slick as he had imagined, moving jerkily and only if met by a direct hit... Electing to move two was a mistake, an unfair contest, one was more like it. He put his full force behind the furthest forward; chasing it along the urinal to ensure the pressure did not diminish. Just past half way his bladder felt almost empty, he grunted and strained to ensure the last squirts came out all at once. Then, with the cube three quarters along, his piss petered out. Failed... But perhaps

to do the task in one go was not what he had meant. Yes, now he came to reflect upon it, the idea was for him to move the cube over the course of the evening, however many trips to the toilet that might involve.

Hands rinsed, wiping them dry on his trousers, he paused by a white metal box, rusted on the edges, attached to the wall. CONDOMS: TWO FOR £1. He had never bought condoms before but remembered seeing an AIDS awareness film at school in which a solemn man rolled one onto a banana. He had disliked bananas ever since. He rifled through his pocket for a quid coin and hurriedly put it in the machine. Ribbed Arouser or Extra Safe? He pressed the button for Ribbed Arouser. Nothing. He pressed again. Ditto. He hit the button to get his money back. It did not come. Teeth clenched he shook his fist at the machine. Well that was that, either the machine was broken or the arousers were out of stock. Who was buying them? Tom? The domino players? Surely they were not sexually active. Unless the machine was intentionally empty, Tom playing upon the knowledge that folk would be too embarrassed to ask for a refund. Thinking this to be the most likely explanation he decided not to attempt vending the extra safe.

They stayed for one more round, Charlotte requesting a pint instead of a half, which Leonard considered a victory. He told her all about his eviction and the landlady's house but, having observed the stink and flies surrounding the café's bin, mentioned nothing of the rabbits or Sarah. Charlotte laughed so he thought of other misfortunes to entertain her with, gladdened when she chipped in with one or two of her own.

In bed that evening, delighting in his recollections of the date (Charlotte had such a funny way with the crisps, appearing to soften them in her mouth before chewing, as if embarrassed to make a noise), Leonard's eyes suddenly

popped open and, heart galloping, he pushed himself up on his elbows. The toilet freshener! He had forgot to sluice it the rest of the way along the urinal!

Since then they had been out together twice but were yet to really touch. Leonard wanted to – on one occasion squeezing her thigh with the pretence of getting her attention but recoiling as soon as she turned, unable to interpret the look she cast him. Expensive too, dating. Ate right into his dole money. Only because the landlady was willing to wait for his housing benefit to come through, and bills and meals were inclusive, could he afford it.

Charlotte lifted the tray of dirty crockery then cocked an thinly plucked eyebrow. 'What's up?'

'You couldn't lend us ten quid?' He said, breathless from the run.

'I haven't got ten quid.'

A woman frowned through the service hatch. The cook. Charlotte's boss. She disliked Leonard. Possibly suspected him of putting the rabbits in the cafe's bin. 'Prove it!' he felt like shouting whenever she narrowed her eyes on him. 'Prove it!'

He lowered his voice. 'Seven-fifty. I'll give it back to you tonight.'

'Are we doing something tonight?'

'Lend us the money and I'll treat you.'

'What to?'

'I don't know, a surprise,' he said, adding illogically: 'What do you want to do?'

She shrugged. 'Go to the cinema?'

Leonard approved. Going to the cinema was something they had not done yet. Maybe the dark would help them get closer.

Jubilant, clutching the bayonet through a white carrier bag, Leonard bounded through the streets. He crossed the road, a car horn blared, he didn't blink or break stride. All his senses were buried deep inside, concentrating on the flesh of his hand moulding around the bayonet handle, his arm accepting its new weight.

Quietly, not wanting his mood broken by conversation, he entered his lodgings. As well as stairs leading to his bedroom there was a gloomy passage with three doors: the nearest opened onto the living room, the furthest onto the kitchen, and, between these, the door to the landlady's bedroom. Though dismissive of this at the time of his arrival, its proximity to the other rooms (communal rooms after all) and to the front door (which he believed a tenant should be able to enter and exit freely, without fear of prying ears) disturbed Leonard. More frustratingly her room was beneath his. Inviting Charlotte back was impossible.

He made for the stairs. The first step creaked while the second gave an agonizingly low groan. The third harmonised with the kitchen door opening. A thick cloud of steam puffed into the passage, a smell of boiled vegetables and damp washing carried in the wave of heat.

'That you Mister Pepper?' He froze in the darkness. Switching on the passage light, the landlady located him and grinned. 'Dinner soon,' she said. 'Hope you've kept a good appetite.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Not hungry! A big lad like you!' Hands on hips, the landlady shook her head, looking at him aghast. 'Surely you can squeeze a bit in?'

Leonard squirmed uncomfortably. The magic of the bayonet gone, he struggled for composure, the confidence to say no.

The landlady raised her thumb and forefinger, a tiny gap between them. 'Just a little bit,' she simpered.

'Alright, just a little bit.'

She smiled, then saw the bag. Her bronzed hand slipped through the balustrades, her countless bracelets, unable to make the squeeze, forced back until they collected around her elbow. 'What's that you've been getting yourself, eh?' she said, wiggling her fingers to coax the item nearer.

'Nothing,' he said, snatching the bag away from her and darting up the stairs.

The landlady laughed mischievously. 'Dinner will be half an hour,' she called after him.

The upstairs comprised three rooms: the bathroom, Thomas, the landlady's son's bedroom, and, between the two, Leonard's. His was a double room. After her husband died the landlady had given it up, moving downstairs into what was once the dining area. When Leonard arrived she had passed comment on every item his lodging contained: a mismatched cupboard and chest of drawers, 'Good wood, solid, not like the cheap stuff what you get nowadays,' a double bed, 'A new mattress on that but you might as well have it now. Far too big for me alone,' the yellowing woodchip wallpaper, 'A coat of gloss'll see that right,' and a portrait of the landlady's step mother and father hanging over the bed, 'Probably antique. Ugly enough.'

That first night, too bewildered to rebut her attentions, Leonard had eaten everything she put in front of him, allowed her to tend the cut on his head with antiseptic and a plaster and even accepted a glass of wine but, thankfully, possessed the strength to stop her unpacking his cases and - other



than grunting in the affirmative or negative - never talked, never opened up. Still, he blamed these first exchanges for their awkward relationship.

Darting a glance left and right he eased opened his bedroom door. From between the top of the door and the frame, a grubby fold of paper fluttered to the ground. He picked it up, pocketed it, then squeezed through the miserly gap he permitted himself, glancing back as he did so – a final check for prying eyes. Once inside he heaved the chest of drawers towards the door, just close enough to block it should it be opened more than a crack. There was a lock but the landlady claimed to have misplaced the key. A constant source of torment to Leonard who never doubted for a second it was in her possession. He turned on the light, then shut the curtains. Though excited, his movements were unhurried. He wanted everything to be right before the unveiling. Everything. He straightened the bed sheets, plumped his pillows, tidied away his clothes and disposed of food wrappers and pop cans in a small waste paper basket. Then, sitting on the edge of his bed, he removed the carrier bag from over the bayonet. The blade was cloaked in a matt black sheath. Catching his breath Leonard gripped the handle and pulled to reveal the shiny steel edge that had first drawn his eye. He ran his fingers along it. Admired the details. Not elaborate but functional. A hollow in the butt enabled it to be fitted to a rifle. A guard at the top of the handle, ribbed to improve one's grip, for hand-to-hand combat. A groove ran down the centre of the blade. Decorative? Maybe guttering the victim's blood, though hard to imagine what difference it would make.

Putting himself in different positions around the room he practised pulling knife from its scabbard, relishing the deadly swishing sound and smoothness of the draw.

He worried for a second that the lack of sharpness might be a problem but decided that fate had selected the bayonet and if fate had wanted it to be sharper fate would have provided him with a sharper one.

A knock at the door startled him. He stabbed the bayonet into the sheath and hid it under his pillow.

‘Mister Pepper?’

‘What?’

‘Dinner’s ready. I’ve been shouting it for the past five minutes.’

Doubtful. Even when he was listening he never heard her. Something bound her to make the journey to his door, perhaps just nosiness but more likely something else.

‘I’ll be down in a second,’ he said.

At the foot of the stairs he turned and walked the narrow passage to the kitchen. The floorboards squawked and squeaked like there was a tussle between a hawk and mouse going on beneath. Midway, passing beneath the light, he observed his shadow switch from behind him to in front. It rose onto the kitchen door. Reaching forward, his hand and shade converged on the door handle and, together, twisted it open.

Thomas was sitting at the dining table, swatting at a bluebottle with his long bony hands. As ever, there were only three chairs at the table and these, along with the cutlery and place mats, were huddled ridiculously close in light of the table’s size, which could quite easily seat six. On the landlady’s say-so Leonard always sat at the head, with herself and Thomas at either side.

A flimsy looking gas cooker, all four rings blazing beneath pans of various sizes, rattled to the washing machine’s rhythm. The landlady smiled and wagged a dripping ladle at Leonard. ‘I waited so we could eat together.’

Her make-up appeared to cut through the steam and made the announcement separate from her face.

‘I haven’t time for much. I’ve got to go out somewhere.’

‘Somewhere nice?’

Leonard stood dumbly. He remembered his promise to Charlotte. It depressed him. He had no desire to go out, just to end the meal and return to his room, the bayonet. ‘I don’t know,’ he said dully. ‘I might not be going anywhere. I’ve just got to be ready in case I am.’

‘Where Lenny?’ said Thomas. The boy was ten and a blank canvas with the exception of two deliciously evil eyes.

Leonard dragged his chair out and sat down. ‘I’ve told you not to call us that name.’

‘It’s an affectionate term,’ said the landlady.

‘I don’t want his affection.’ He opened his detective book and pretended to read. The landlady had been against this at first (‘No reading at the table Mister Pepper’) but now attributed it to his moody character.

‘Who got out the wrong side of bed today?’

‘I got out the same side I always get out, wall stops us getting out any other.’

‘Suit yourself Mister Huffy.’

Shaking his head, he lowered his book and picked a slice of buttered bread from a plate in the middle of the table. He flavoured it with a blob of tomato sauce, then folded it over and bit into it. He tugged at his shirt-collar and spoke through a full mouth. ‘Can’t you open a window or something?’

‘You’re full of it today,’ said the landlady, but did as he asked.

Leonard sighed. He folded the remaining bread and pushed it into his gob. Such was the size of the mouthful it required he chew and swallow it in two parts. After the final gulp he hiccupped.

'Ha ha,' scoffed Thomas.

'Christ,' Leonard griped, then hiccupped again.

'Mam Leonard swore... then squeaked!'

The landlady slid a plate loaded with mince and vegetables in front of the boy. 'Eat your dinner and behave yourself,' she said.

After a minute a plate and glass of water were put in front of Leonard. He probed the food with his fork.

'Drink the water first, get rid of your hiccups.'

Leonard put the glass to his lips.

'All in one remember. No breathing.'

He drank. Then hiccupped.

'We'll have to try and scare you.'

'Boo!' shouted Thomas, predictably.

Following the meal Leonard returned to his room, repeating his entrance ritual. He got the bayonet from under the pillow, then moved a wooden chair from the corner by the window and rolled back the carpet. Kneeling down, he lifted away two short sections of floorboard and took a shoebox out the cavity beneath. He shuffled over to the bed and opened the box. Inside it were the doll, the parcel of bloodied carpet fibres and the rabbit's skull. Initially, it had been Leonard's intention to stuff and mount the rabbit but an ill-considered attempt at removing the skin had left the whole thing hideously mangled, so he had salvaged the head and boiled the remaining flesh off in an electric kettle discovered in the blue suitcase.

Rabbit skull, doll, fibres and bayonet arranged in a neat line on his bed, he stood up and unhooked Sarah's picture from the wall. It was in the gilded wooden frame with the portrait of the Landlady's husband's parents. The frame's size was not ideal and a good portion of the painting, a ghastly, morbid piece with eyes that chased Leonard about the room, was still visible. Originally Leonard had inserted Sarah's drawing over the couple's eyes but no sooner was it on the wall than the paper slipped down and the brooding black beads took vigil once more. An inscription on a brass plate, in a delicate, cursive hand, read: *Tom & Mary, 1967*.

He settled the frame on the turquoise quilt then made a quick grab for his pillow. As he covered Tom and Mary's eyes his own dilated and he curled his fingers into a fist. Of course! It was not a thumb on the man's hand but a knife in it. Clumsily drawn but undoubtedly. He wondered how he could ever have thought otherwise.