

LEONARD PEPPER

*by Richard Todd*

Early morning. From his bed on the settee, Leonard Pepper watched as his uncle, a stout man in his early fifties, with thin limbs and a pinched head, knelt on the living-room floor, packing his belongings. 'Not enough space here,' he muttered, folding a shirt. As if to stress the point, the two Alsatians became suddenly animated, bustling around him. He gave Leonard a look that said *see, I'm right*.

'I don't mind,' croaked Leonard.

'No? Well I do.' He yanked away the blanket covering Leonard and folded it. 'You need a place of your own.'

Leonard tucked his legs in to his chest. 'Why do I?'

'Christ Leonard! You're nearly eighteen. You're not a child anymore.'

With thumb and forefinger the boy picked the sleep from the corners of his eyes. He reached over the arm of the settee and deposited it onto the chocolate brown upholstery, then gave the hand a quick inspection to ensure the gunk was gone. 'Where'll I go?'

'Find somewhere. Other people manage, I don't see what makes you different.'

Leonard smothered a yawn.

'I'm sorry if this is boring you.'

‘No. It’s not. Not at all.’ He swung his feet onto the floor and stretched. It gave life to his hangover, setting it off in a lumber around his skull. ‘So what have I done?’

‘So wh... Hih. That’s a good one.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Nothing! Absolutely bloody nothing!’

‘I see.’ Leonard nodded. ‘Kicking us out for nothing.’

‘Don’t be a smart arse, Leonard. You don’t contribute.’

Leonard stood up and walked into the kitchen. A heap of sodden rabbits covered the draining board. He narrowed his eyes on them. Grimly, he recollected the previous night in the pub: a transaction with a bearded man in a combat jacket, jeans and black cap. Beneath the peak two yellowing eyes peered, separated by a long, bony nose.

Twenty quid he had forked out on those rabbits.

He lifted a long greasy ear, peered into the pink channel. ‘Is there a market today?’ He spoke as though expecting the creature to reply. Instead it came from the living room.

‘At the dock, same as every day’ his uncle intoned bleakly, no trace of surprise in his voice.

Leonard returned to the living room and rummaged through the packed clothing.

‘Hey!’ His uncle snapped, catching Leonard’s forearm with a harsh pinching grip.

Leonard let a look of hurt fall across his face. ‘I need clothes.’

'Where's your book?' his uncle mumbled, relinquishing his hold. He searched about, then slid a hand under the settee and pulled out a pulp detective novel. He tucked it into the case.

'Naw, don't pack that,' puffed Leonard, wrestling his legs into some trousers. 'I'll take it with us... I'll need the case too. To carry the rabbits in.'

The weather was bright and muggy. Leonard waited for the crowds to build before descending the road to the dockland. He wore a white shirt, sleeves rolled high, and grey trousers that, even with the hems down, failed to reach his brogues. His gorge rose with the market's smells: fresh fish, lobsters, crabs, hot oil from the chip van, all fused pungently with the sea air. Positioning himself against a low wall, slightly back from the other traders, he rested the suitcase on the ground. Inside it was a price sign, one empty bin bag and one containing the eight rabbits. He lined the case with the empty bag then arranged the rabbits, face-up, in an evenly spaced row. The sign, written on a scrap of card, he propped against the lid.

FRESH RABBIT. FOUR POUND EACH OR TWO FOR SIX. Around this, in spiky explosions: BARGAIN, SPECIAL OFFER, BEST IN TOWN and ALL OFFERS CONSIDERED.

He removed his book - a tattered, charity shop purchase - from his trouser pocket. After an hour or so of staring aimlessly at its pages he put it away. A further effort was needed to recoup his outlay. He took a deep breath then uttered the prices in a voice so dejected the words seemed to hurl themselves directly to the ground. Gradually he said them louder, hoisting up an example of his stock after seeing other traders make similar shows. Held

by the ears it felt flimsy, like its innards would rip out the bottom. He turned it upside down. The feet gave a more secure feel.

‘Rabbits. Four pound each or two for six.’ A few heads turned. Initially curious, subsequently dismayed.

The devilish poacher resurfaced in his mind. The way he spread himself around Leonard’s table, poised, with the drop of a shoulder, to block any attempt by him to flee. Talking in a wheedling manner, cordial enough to the casual observer, he guaranteed Leonard would double his money, claiming unforeseen circumstances prevented him selling the game himself. Leonard could not lose.

But he was losing. People edged away from the case as soon as they saw it. The bastard had lied.

An elderly man, on his wife’s arm, pointed at the rabbits. ‘He looks like the bleeding gallows,’ she screeched, steering him towards a butcher’s stall a little further along the way; skinned rabbits and game birds hanging from the struts and crossbeam, eggs and pre-packed meats on the table display. Leonard called out they could have two for five, knowing from the day his dad sold the family car that a sale at a loss was better than no sale at all. The couple kept walking. Leonard winced; his arm ached. He glimpsed at the puny bicep trembling. At times he could convince himself that this muscle, flattered by a lack of surrounding flesh, was strong. This was not one of them. He gasped and doubled over, rubbing his shoulder.

Skinned. That was the problem. Should have skinned the rabbits, plucked out the eyes and cut off the ears.

A pair of small red shoes, with scuffed toes and shiny buckles, stepped into his field of vision. He looked up. A little girl with severe, pointed features

and long black hair scrutinized Leonard, then the rabbits. 'They're asleep,' he stated, straightening up. The girl - in a dainty red dress, with lace frills around the cuffs and hem - pointed to the creature hanging upside down by his leg, its ears bent against the ground. 'I'm just about to put him to bed,' said Leonard.

He waited a second for her to leave but she remained rooted in front of him, a limbless grey doll tucked between her arm and chest. He snorted incredulously and made to call the prices out. As he did so the child tugged on his arm, lifting her feet clear of the ground so she could utilise the full weight of her body.

He jolted down. 'What?' he cried.

She gestured to the case then, putting the doll down and using both hands, tried to prise his grip from the rabbit: concentrating all her strength on a solitary finger, whining determinedly.

Leonard was uneasy with children, his voice possessing neither the authority nor charm they responded to. He wanted to push the girl away and scream at her. But people were watching. To give the impression a game was being played, he grinned. This annoyed the girl even more, her eyes blazing with furious determination. She bared her teeth, parting her lips to expose her gums, and savagely dug her fingernails into him. He gulped. He could feel the rabbit being wrenched away. His face reddened through the effort of keeping it and the potential shame of losing it.

'Alright!' he gasped in her ear.

She let go but remained poised to resume the assault if she did not get her own way.

A couple of flies picked their way over the seven bodies in the case, dispersing when number eight was dropped alongside them. The girl squatted and straightened out its posture. Leonard shook his arm as if ridding it of a bad memory then removed a ball of tissue from his pocket and mopped the sweat from his brow and neck. He called the prices out.

'Shh!' the girl scolded him.

'I've got to find them homes before they wake up,' he explained, then repeated his spiel in a ridiculously low register.

The child, sitting cross-legged by the case, began to warble tunelessly, the doll cradled in her arms. Leonard stared. One of the doll's eyes was shut while the other remained vigilant. As if it had seen things on the girl's behalf she looked up and stuck her tongue out at Leonard. He turned away, pulling the book from his trouser pocket. But he did not read. He simply stared at the cover illustration: a woman straddling a chair. Her emerald green dress was hiked provocatively high, bunched between her thighs, concealing her crotch but giving a teasing glimpse of milky skin above each stocking, one of which had a small handgun tucked into it. A cigarette blazed between her fingers. Her hair was bright orange, lips scarlet, slightly open. The hero was off the page but his shadow fell between the woman's legs. He was wearing a hat and you knew he was taking a moment to drink in the scene before dismissing it with a world-weary one liner.

Scrutinising the cover, Leonard imagined it was his shadow falling between the woman's legs. Without fail, the same questions perturbed him. Why was she in his office (though not explicit on the cover he always imagined it so) and how did she get in? Was she *in* trouble or was *she* trouble? What should he say, do? Sometimes he found an answer agreeable

enough to progress his fantasy, other times his shadow never shifted from between the woman's legs, as if she had it clamped somehow. On these occasions the woman smoked cigarette after cigarette, cocking an eyebrow at him upon the last draw of each then flicking the live butt against his chest. In spite of his humiliation, Leonard never failed to register how beautiful the sparks were and how grimy the butts gathering at his feet. She was never happy... But this girl with the doll was happy, appeasing her was a triumph, his first of the day, perhaps it promised a change in his fortunes... But what had his uncle meant by grabbing him that morning? Surely he was not serious about him leaving? By disposition a quiet, tolerant man, Leonard's uncle had no children of his own and his displays of severity were an attempt to emulate the strict nature of Leonard's dad. He recalled other instances of histrionics carried out with a vague intention of motivating him in some unspecified direction. There were many. But never had there been a show of force, however slight.

'Nice doll!' someone shouted, in a high-pitched, sneering voice.

Across the way a teenage boy, plainly on tenterhooks for Leonard's attention, exploded into peals of laughter. A quick glance revealed the cause of his hilarity. The girl was gone. Seven bodies lay in the case, the doll taking the place of the eighth. Cursing under his breath Leonard snatched up the toy.

'Hare today gone tomorrow!' whooped the boy. He had broad shoulders and a thin waist and when the breeze picked up and ruffled his yellow shirt he resembled a kite.

Leonard's cheeks flushed. He wanted to point out they were rabbits not hares but felt too mortified to speak. Standing on tiptoe he looked for the girl. The boy hee-hawed even more, slapping his leg and hunching over like it was

all too much to take. Leonard snapped shut the suitcase. With a lopsided gait, he strode away, then, thinking he caught a glimpse of the girl disappearing between two stalls, gave chase, but by the time he passed through the aisle whoever it was had gone. Half-heartedly he continued searching until clear of the market and crowds.

He crossed the road to a café and, seeing it empty, entered. A bell rang. A spotty girl, watching television behind the counter, peered across at him then back at her programme.

He sat by the window with his back to the wall, the doll still in his hands. He tipped it back and forth. The functioning eyelid flicked shut then open. An intrigued look fell across his face. Visible through the sockets for the arms and legs was a piece of paper folded inside the torso. Pinching thumb and forefinger together he attempted to tweeze it out, but whenever he was close a slight lapse in concentration allowed it to drop away. For a while he persisted then gave up and pulled the head off. The bigger hole produced immediate results.

It was a child's drawing of a man outside a house. The house, a triangle on top of a square, had three windows and a red door with a back-to-front number four on it. The man, standing in the foreground, was frowning, his mouth down-turned. Looking at the drawing Leonard realised he was mimicking the man's expression and contrived an impassive look.

He relaxed back in the chair, captivated by the picture: drawn in line, using various colours of crayon and pencil to discriminate between the different elements. Night was implied by a crescent moon, sketched in yellow, and a two-inch deep band of vertically zigzagging black scribble running

across the top edge of the paper. The man appeared to have a bloody left thumb, its size exaggerated, as if struck by a hammer in a cartoon. A clumsy attempt at perspective had been made via a widening path running from the house door to the man and a horizon line upon which the house was balanced as though on a tight rope. At the bottom right window the paper was close to wearing through. Something had been repeatedly drawn in, erased and then, eventually, given up on. Still the faintest trace of orange and pink lines remained. What was it? A face? A body?

A squiggle in the corner he mistook for a snake before realising it was an S. S for what? Suzanne sounded too robust; Sally, too posh; Sharon, too common... She was not boyish enough for Samantha, or old enough for Stephanie. What was she then? Sophie? Hmm... perhaps... but better still Sarah. Yes. Sarah suited her perfectly. And had... yes, perhaps... the name had been used to call the girl away at the market. Yes! He could hear it dimly in his head now. The father's voice. No wonder the name felt so right.

With care, Leonard folded the paper and slid it into his back pocket. He screwed the two sections of doll back together. It was in atrocious condition: the creases in the plastic embedded with dirt, the hair hacked off. Sarah hardly had the makings of a good parent. He rubbed his arm as if she had just that second released it. The squabble with his uncle flared in his mind. His mood dampened and he felt frustrated, impatient to be home but unable to spur his body to take him there. Perching his elbows on the table he rested his face on his palms, pressing down to omit any light. He was not going back to the market, the twenty quid was gone, better forget all about it.

‘Ready to order?’

The faint squelch when Leonard pulled his head away from his hands suggested they might have been in the process of grafting together. The girl was standing with a pen and pad, her mouth hanging open in a slack manner, feet fidgeting: she had stood there for longer than she wanted. She raised her eyebrows in mock encouragement. 'Yes?' Her gaze shifted from Leonard to the doll, then back to Leonard.

The girl's double-take was all the incentive he needed. He mumbled an apology, gathered his things and left.

Outside, he went to the back lane, glanced furtively about, then dispensed his merchandise into one of the cafe's steel rubbish bins. He put the doll in the empty suitcase, paused, then took back one of the rabbits.

The new weight filled him with a short spell of joy but after a while even it seemed cumbersome. His body ached and armpits were clammy. The case handle chafed his right hand but rather than pause for a break or switch the burden to his left he persevered, hoping the pain would make good the troubles at home.

It was an understanding he had grown up with.

One winter, when he was nine, he had filled a bucket with ice and cold water, took it out into the yard and timed himself to stand in it for five minutes. Before the first minute was through he was buckled over and gripping the rim of the bucket to stop himself leaping out. 'No cancer, no cancer, no cancer,' he muttered. Cancer had killed his mam and her mam before her. It seemed to be what that side of the family was passing down. After five minutes he dropped to his knees, tipping the bucket over, and crawled into the house. His teeth were chattering and feet were blue but he felt certain the line of inheritance had come to an end.

Upon arriving at his street he moved so wildly it seemed the slightest force would topple him to the side. He attempted to ease open the waist-high metal yard gate with his foot but, too tired to control his movements, caught it with a surprising firmness. It screeched against the concrete, hit the wall then rattled menacingly back at him.

The dogs barked and the back door opened. His uncle stepped into the yard, a mug of coffee in his hands, the Alsatians in tow. Neither person met the other's gaze. After a second his uncle cleared his throat. 'Sell the rabbits?'

'Naw.'

His uncle nodded, then sniffed a couple of times. 'Kettle's just boiled if you want it.'

'I'll have a sit down first,' said Leonard, but remained by the gate.

Silence. His uncle looked into his mug, turning it this way then that. 'I found you a place,' he muttered.

Leonard stiffened. His sensation of defeat blistered into indignation. 'What?' he wailed.

'I did say.'

'What did you say?'

'You'd have to go.'

'You always say that!' He shook his head. 'What would me dad think eh, about this?'

'Naw Leonard.'

'Naw. Naw bloody what?'

His uncle drank from his mug, swallowing with difficulty. 'She's expecting you tonight.'

'Who is?'

‘The landlady.’

Leonard paced back and forth, blood pounding into his temples. ‘Oh I see, the landlady’s expecting us eh, just like that, the landlady’s expecting us.’ He took a breath. ‘I live here! I haven’t got a landlady!’

‘Leonard!’ his uncle hissed, looking coyly about. ‘Calm down! You’re getting hysterical.’

‘I’m homeless! You’d be hysterical too.’

‘You’re not homeless.’

Leonard made to say more but his tongue stuck to his teeth. Tears welled in his eyes and mouth. He threw his hands feebly into the air. ‘Can I go inside please?’ he murmured. His uncle stepped aside to let him pass.

On the drop-leaf table a newspaper lay open at the classifieds: ads circled and scribbled out with red pen. One stood out from the rest, the paper almost worn through and an address written above it.

‘This it?’

His uncle nodded. ‘Far more space than you’ve got here. A bedroom for a start. Better than sleeping on the settee.’

‘I wouldn’t have to if...’

‘That’s not even an option.’

‘Naw, it’s a room.’

‘Occupied.’

‘With toys.’

‘With trains.’

‘Toy trains.’

‘Models... Anyway, they’re staying. End of story.’

He tried to muster the energy to voice resentment but it would not come. He was horrified to find some part of his brain making sense of it all. 'I'm going to clean up,' he muttered, knocking into the table then the settee in his haste to get to the bathroom.

The door locked, he turned on the cold tap and drank, gulping until it pained him to swallow. Splashing his face and raking back his loosely parted bowl of straight blond hair, he glimpsed his reflection for the first time that day: tired eyes, sunken cheeks, pasty face, bloodless lips, stubble sharp, evenly spread.

The water still running, he lowered himself onto the rim of the tub. Everything was in tatters. The ad had finished him off, put paid to any hope of an inspirational comeback. He let his head drop against his chest, settling his gaze on his long brown brogues, the fine detail on the toes like winding mazes. Imagining himself inside he plotted a route from one end to the other.

He took Sarah's drawing from his pocket, held it up to the light and concentrated on the rubbed-out patch. What had it been? Nothing suggested itself. He was not even certain it was a cry for help. Probably the most innocent thing in the world: A vase of flowers, tricky to draw, little wonder Sarah's frustrations got the better of her. And the angry man... Well if his guess was correct and he had hit his thumb with a hammer, what man would keep his cool after that? To let off some steam is probably the healthiest thing to do in the circumstances. Yes, yes, and wouldn't it be funny if the purpose of the nail he had been hammering was to hang a picture frame and that picture frame was intended to hold this drawing? Sarah, unable to perfect her vase of flowers, screeches in irritation with herself. It shocks her dad who turns to see

what and hey presto... one red thumb. He swears and curses, blaming the girl before disappearing to tend his wound. This outburst upsets poor Sarah – who, after all, had wanted nothing more than to do a beautiful sketch for the house wall – and, forgetting the flowers, she takes the pencil and, in an act of revenge, draws her demonic dad ... The picture, now so ugly, never hangs but is hidden away in the doll's torso, a childish spell to stave off the evil that possessed her dad. Yes. Ha-ha. Problem solved. Now on to his own while he was on a roll...

So he was to be evicted. Why? The rabbits? No longer an issue. The lack of space... After almost six years in cramped conditions, that was little more than an excuse. Unless... Yes! Unless his uncle had a new need for the space. A sweetheart. Sure. It made perfect sense. Some floozy was behind this, manipulating his uncle, putting ideas in his head... He could hear her now: 'It'd be lovely if we could live together but... Three people in that little place, oh no, far too cramped... My friend says moving out was the making of her son. He didn't want to at first, she says, but now she says she never sees him, always out enjoying himself...' Enjoying himself, ha, did Leonard look like he was enjoying himself? It made him sick to think how easily his uncle had been won over.

But who was she?

Patience. Play along. Catch them red-handed.

Satisfied by his brainwork – at times he was stunningly insightful! – he permitted himself a moment's shut-eye.

He pondered the identity of the mystery woman... The poacher's head appeared on a tart's body... No, wrong, leave that... Outside Sarah's house, night... No not night, just dark, pitch black, an absence of anything other than

the building... The bottom right window glowed. A face appeared. Sarah? He waved to greet her but as soon as he did so she shrank from view. Did she think he was still angry? He ran to tell her otherwise. The sensation was one of falling...

A musty smell...

He awoke on the floor, in a heap, a throbbing in his skull, gathering intensity over the left eye. Using the sink for support, he climbed to his feet and looked in the mirror. A ruddy-pink lump shone on his forehead, flecks of blood on the peak where the skin had cracked. Ever so lightly he touched the tender egg. It raged something rotten. He jerked back, as if the pain were detachable, then dampened a flannel to soothe it. He glared at the corner of the sink he had hit against and slapped it angrily. Then glanced down. Two tiny red dots stained the carpet. Feeling a strange sense of melancholy, he found some nail scissors, cut loose the bloodied fibres and wrapped them in tissue. No part of him must remain here.

‘Leonard? You alright in there?’

‘Ah-ha. I’ll be out in a minute.’

‘I’ve made you some sandwiches.’

‘Aye man, in a minute!’

He snatched Sarah’s drawing from the floor and recollected the dream, how scared she had been. He was too quick to dismiss her plight. Sheepishly - the bump would elicit sympathy he no longer cared to receive – he exited the bathroom.

Immediately his uncle drew a sharp breath and raised his hand to inspect the knock. Leonard recoiled to let him know this was not permissible.

On the table was a plate of cheese and pickle sandwiches. The suitcase lay empty on the floor.

‘Where’s the doll and rabbit?’

His uncle shrugged matter-of-factly. ‘I threw them out.’

Reeling from the blow, Leonard shuffled into the kitchen, salvaged the mementos from the pedal bin then cleared a space for them on the table. The dogs snuffled greedily about him. ‘Piss off,’ he hissed, slapping the nearest across its twitching snout. It whimpered, watching self-pityingly as Leonard tore the landlady’s address out the newspaper and wrapped the rabbit in the rest, deliberately nudging the plate of sandwiches onto the floor as he did so. Food! The dogs pounced. Leonard turned to make sure his uncle had seen. ‘An accident,’ he said with an ugly self-satisfied expression.

‘I’d have thought you’d have taken a bit better care of the case.’

The suitcase was an inheritance, given to Leonard by his dad, having originally belonged to his granddad, a Second World War survivor. As a boy he amused himself with tales of the adventures his granddad and the case shared, pointing to minor tears and marks as proof of their rugged authenticity. A scrape on the green canvas veneer became the graze of a bullet, a rip in the brown leather edging - a tumble through barbed wire. Then one day, as another caper kicked in, his granddad’s cockiness - a grin and swagger straight out of a Hollywood action movie - incensed Leonard. How could he have created such an arse? To correct this ugly characteristic, he had his star captured and tortured. What a thrill! From then on such scenes were irresistible; his granddad’s escapades used purely as a reason for the enemy to harm him further. Ah, the dread on the old man’s face as he was marched down the sloping corridor to room thirteen. ‘Unlucky for some,’

quipped the guard, opening the door to reveal a terrifying new device. His granddad – who, in spite of the fact he would have been in his twenties during the war, Leonard could never imagine as anything other than a pensioner – took a moment to comprehend the contraption that would maim him.

Then screamed.

In due course the stories found their way into Leonard's schoolwork; shocking the teacher so much she called his dad in for a chat. He simply laughed; the world was full of horrors, the sooner the boy learnt to face them the better.

Right. The world was full of horrors. Here was one now. To be faced up to, dealt with.

The clothes – still folded from the morning – were in a pile on the settee. He lifted them over the suitcase; let them fall.

'You can't pack your stuff in that,' his uncle complained. 'Not until it's been cleaned.'

Next in were the swathed rabbit and the doll, these Leonard placed more carefully, crafting a compartment in the centre of the clothing to hold them snugly in position. All the while devising a place for his uncle in room thirteen.

A car horn honked three times in quick succession. The taxi. Leonard stood up from the settee.

'You got everything?' his uncle asked, rising with him from the chair opposite.

Leonard gave him a sidelong glance and snorted.

'Aye well, you can always come back if you've forgot something.'

They each carried a case outside. One contained Leonard's personal belongings, the other, odds and ends his uncle deemed useful (but not so much that *he* needed them) or homely (a final hint that this place was no longer that). The driver - a small ratty man with slicked back hair and tinted glasses - leapt up to lend a hand. He had on a black leather jacket, elasticated and buttoned at the waist, opening in a V towards his shoulders, a pink shirt, and grey trousers that flared slightly from the knee down. The jacket and shirtsleeves were pulled above his elbows, flaunting a tattoo on each forearm. Reluctantly, Leonard surrendered his suitcase. 'Careful,' he mumbled. 'It's got fragile things in.'

The driver – who may or may not have been called Brian, in accordance with the sign on the cab roof – showed a set of dirty brown teeth. 'Best crockery eh?' His voice was cracked but surprisingly soft.

Without responding Leonard got in the back of the car.

A stale nicotine odour agitated his nostrils. Covering his nose and mouth with the flannel, he wound his window down, then, hungry, regretting his show with the sandwiches, he began to nibble the facecloth, sucking some of the moisture out as he went. The act was strangely comforting, the flavour agreeable. A couple of minutes passed in this manner, then he turned to find out what his uncle and the driver were up to, but they were hidden from view by the open boot, talking quietly, with familiarity. He strained to grab a snatch of their conversation but as he did so the boot slammed shut. His uncle slipped the fare into the driver's palm and patted him gratefully on the shoulder. The driver broke into a bout of coughing.

Only now, as it dwindled, did Leonard acknowledge his desire for his uncle to change his mind – the reason he had played along with things:

optimistic his cooperation would appeal to his uncle, like as a child he had believed that by pandering to a bully they could become friends.

Still wheezing, the cabbie swung himself into his seat, bringing with him a distinct whiff of sweat and exposing a bald patch, thinly veiled by the backcombed hairstyle, on the crown of his head. He turned the key in the ignition.

‘Don’t be a stranger,’ his uncle hollered over the splutter then roar of the engine.

They pulled away. Leonard felt sick, wishing for the strength to walk.

‘He’s waving,’ said the driver.

Grudgingly, Leonard turned to reciprocate through the rear window, only to find his uncle not waving but returning to the house.

‘Too late,’ the driver said disappointedly, as though Leonard were waving goodbye for both of them.

A strong draught blew in – the driver’s window open too. Leonard parted his lips to admit as much air as possible, keeping his eyes, bleary from the gust, on the price counter. His uncle had paid with a note so a fare of five pound had been covered at the very least. After a bit, his gaze wandered lazily to the driver: fading blue crosses inked onto his knuckles, a crudely drawn dagger on his left forearm, a serpent, emerging from the jacket sleeve, on the right. Leonard speculated at the total length of the snake - did it end on the upper arm or did it writhe across the driver’s entire body?

Outside, the town moved past, familiar yet distant.

They stopped. Traffic lights. The driver lifted a packet of cigarettes from the dashboard, tapped one out and snatched it between his lips. ‘Don’t mind if I smoke?’ he asked, the cigarette - which he had already lit - wagging up and

down as he did so. The traffic light turned green. He inhaled, moving jerkily through the gears, then released the smoke onto an air-freshener dangling from the rear view mirror. As the grey whirls cleared he caught sight of Leonard's reflection. 'Nasty bump you've got there.'

'Aye.' Leonard looked out of the window.

'Leaving home?'

'Eh?'

'Moving out?'

'Aw er aye.'

'I left home when I was sixteen. No choice.' The driver flicked a length of ash out the window, it blew straight back in through Leonard's, showering his face. He ducked his head, spitting and spluttering to clear his mouth, dusting himself with the flannel.

'Stop the car!'

'Sorry mate, I didn't think.'

'Just stop will you!' he shrieked. 'I need to be sick.'

'We're nearly there now.'

'Stop!' He opened his door, forcing the cab to pull over, and jumped out, whooping and gasping wretchedly, clutching his throat with both hands. Thick threads of saliva plopped to the pavement – nothing else inside him to throw out.

The driver hastily lifted the cases from the trunk, then touched Leonard lightly on the back. 'You'll be alright aye?'

Leonard nodded, raising a hand to dismiss him. The driver wasted no time accepting the offer.

Overlooking a lush green valley, rife with trees and foliage, the house, an old semi-detached, cast a long, hungry shadow that craned over the front garden, girded by a low wooden fence, and swallowed Leonard whole. The gate creaked open. On either side of the garden path an overgrown patch of grass was bordered by neglected flowerbeds. Three ugly sunflowers vied for the attention of a dithering bumblebee. A huddle of gnomes grinned malevolently and, like a plaything they had tired of, a half trodden worm struggled across the concrete. At the door, he lowered his cases. A wrought iron knocker was held in a lion's mouth. Before he had a chance to use it the door opened and a tall, busty lady, of about forty, smiled through a thick application of make up. 'Mister Pepper!'