

## Preface

Snail-Arses like you, Rover 45, are the type who phone up drive-time radio.

*Ninety years, I've been driving, without a single accident!*

True, doubtless, but how many have you caused?

Sodding Christ, I touch 70 on this stretch most mornings.

Here you are, clogging it up, 35 miles-per-decade.

No wonder the Chinese vulturized Rover, if codgers like you made up their demographic.

Oh at last, at *last*, the Honey Hill straight.

Out I veer – dot-to-dot of cats' eyes winds into the pre-dawn murk.

Refrigerated hedgerows, some bent trees, possible ice.

Must remember to turn back the clocks this weekend coming.

Oncoming headlights: caution warns me to drop back behind Snail-Arse.

So I floor it.

My new Alfa Romeo Spider goes 'Oh!'

Like a woman – specifically, like Prudence – being pleased.

Oncoming headlights flash: a Ford Focus.

I flash mine back.

I'm shoulder to shoulder with Snail-Arse.

Gravel chips flying like bullets in Iraq.

Road maintenance on the cheap.

Ten seconds to impact.

*Drive into the hedge*, the Ford Focus goes pale, *or we all die*.

All sac, no bollock, the Ford Focus.

The Rover 45 is thinking how he's been driving for ninety years and hasn't had an accident once.

Five seconds to impact.  
My Spider goes 'Aaaaaaaaah!'  
At the *final* possible moment, I'm round the Rover.  
The Ford passes at the speed of a meteor, inches away.  
Behind me, Snail-Arse indignantly beeps his froggy horn.  
I slam mine harder, and keep it slammed.  
Bobsleighting through the Kentish countryside.  
Gag on my emissions.

Whenever I overtake with such a close-cropped safety margin, my thoughts go back to Clive Pike late one day in 1984, or 1985.

Me, Clive Pike, and Gary Drake, at the foot of a disused quarry.  
Gary Drake and me were Clive Pike's own private bad influence.  
Up to halfway, climbing the quarry was adventure playground stuff.  
No-one wants to be the one to say, 'Let's go down.'  
But then you find you've gone past a certain point.  
You no longer *can* go down.  
Problem is, you can't see your own footholds: only handholds.  
The only route to safety is up: via sharper danger.  
Higher up, thin grass came away in our fingers, like the hair of chemotherapy patients.  
Only the noise of stones skittering down one, two, three hundred feet.  
Only the hum of evening in the Severn valley.  
We didn't speak: all of us were on our own.  
If you look down, you'll want to kill the fear by jumping.  
Terminal velocity, a bag of blood and bone.  
Near the top, the gorse began.  
It was the only safe thing to grip.  
Our hands were warm with blood.

Gary Drake reached the top first.  
Then me.  
How dead are most of the living!  
Then this reedy voice going, *Guys... guys...*  
We grabbed his bony wrists as the ledge gave way.  
Really, Clive Pike dangled, like in a film.  
I was losing my purchase – he was about to take me down.  
I had to let go.  
His face still visits me when dreams take a turn for the worse.  
He knew, oh, he knew.  
Drake had better traction, and, miraculously, pulled him up.  
Afterwards, there was nothing to say.  
Us three never discussed it, and I've still never told anyone.

'Ciao, Mark.'

'Prudence! Surely you're not up before noon?'

'I'm surely not. I'm watching BBC 24 hour news rolling shite, in bed.'

'What's going on in the big wide world?'

'Some rather good effigies of Bush and Blair are being burnt somewhere... sandy, with flies. An Italian journalist's just been beheaded on the Internet. Lucky I've got no appetite. The only decent livelihood to be had in Baghdad these days is to kidnap a chalkie, then auction him off to whichever group of deeply religious men will pay the highest price. Much like eBay, isn't it? I've decided, Mark, people watch the news for reassurance.'

'Reassurance?'

'Reassurance. *My life may be stuck in the U-bend, but at least a suicide bomber isn't blowing me up. At least my home hasn't been flattened by an earthquake. At least the fields where I live don't look like Death Valley.* Yes,

reassurance. Anyway. Nuff o' that. I'm phoning because I've decided you should leave your wife.'

I was about to overtake a slow lorry.

A Cadbury's lorry.

I've dropped back into its slipstream.

'Prudence, are you stoned?'

'No. I want us to live together.'

'Oh yeah, sure, good idea, hang on, I'll just phone my wife up right now and tell her the news before I forget.'

'Life would be better if you did.'

'Oh come on, Prudence!'

'Come on Prudence What?'

'I mean! It'd be... irreversible!'

'I'd bloody well better be.'

'It's complex!'

'Your marriage is dead. You say so yourself. What you and I have, Mark, is not only alive, Mark. It's... once-in-a-lifetime alive. What's complex?'

Lily is what is complex.

Just this morning, in the wee small hours, I heard a voice.

*It's MY polar bear! It's MY polar bear!*

Amber could sleep through an aviation disaster.

Before I was even properly awake, I'd glided across the landing.

*It's okay Lily, Daddy's here, it's only a dream, look here's your polar bear, nobody's going to take him away, Daddy won't let them.*

Lily's got me in a koala hug, legs tight round my waist.

Hair in my face, smelling of sheets in the sun.

Already she's asleep: I clutch her for a clutch of minutes.

No human will ever trust me so unconditionally again.

Her Angelina Ballerina nightlight makes the darkness pink.

'Mark? I said, "What's so complex?"'

Now is not the day to tell Prudence that I have a daughter.

‘Prudence, what’s brought this on all of a sudden? You’ve always...  
despised the idea of “settling down”.’

Cadbury’s *Wispa*.

‘Mark, even a bone-head like you must realize by now that I love you.’

Oh *defecating* Jesus. The L-word.

‘I haven’t said that to *anyone* since I screamed it at Simon le Bon at  
Birmingham NEC when I was seventeen. Bastard never replied.’

‘And I’ve said I love you too.’ In the throes of passion. After the throes  
of passion. In unguarded moments. In Leicester Square after a film.

‘And did you mean it?’

‘... yes, but... Yes. But.’ Not monogamously. ‘Yes.’

‘That’s crystal clear, then. And *her*? Your – ’ here Prudence injects an  
unvoiced “so-called” – ‘wife?’

‘She’s nothing to do with this.’

‘She’s rather more than “nothing to do with this”!’

‘*Leaving* her though... this is...’

‘You’re a spineless coward, Badbury. That’s why it’s my job to plant  
the seed of the inevitable in your compost-filled skull, and nurture it. You’ll  
thank me. One day.’

A Teletubbyland sun appears in my rearview mirror.

Twenty miles on, I’m still in shock.

Prudence is as hardbitten as she is sensuous: one of her well-known  
installations is the word ‘love’ sculpted in soft wood and placed in a glass box  
of termites.

Londonwards, the dawn sky is spearmint.

To my right, the Isle of Sheppey rises, just above the waters of the  
Thames estuary.

Roland Taverner says the Isle of Sheppey is so inbred, the natives don't have noses or ears: just lumps and flaps, like they're made of Blu-Tak.

Drove round the Isle of Sheppey, once, with my then-soon-to-be-ex-best mate's soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend.

Caravan parks, a power station, industrial farms, rabbits.

It was in the Austin Metro my dad sold me.

Crappest car of the 1980s: its accelerator was a sort of brake.

Cramped interior: nearly broke my nose as I lost my virginity.

*Mark, you realize by now that I love you.*

How many times have Prudence and I exchanged fluids?

Which critical millilitre transmuted lust into love?

"Kiss a girl once," observes Cliff Richard in *Summer Holiday*, "she cries. Kiss a girl twice, she wants to marry you."

Too late now to regret ever having laid eyes on her.

*Bleedin' London* by Prudence Hanson was a 'chandelier' made of exactly 1001 used Tampons she had retrieved from the sanitary bins of London's public and semi-public toilets.

£10,010, thank you very much: a tenner a tampon.

Roland Taverner was huddled in an alcove with Saatchi.

'Penny for your thoughts.'

This velveteen woman was standing an inch too close.

I recognized her from a private view at the Serpentine.

'The artist should be shot,' I said, meditating on the Shelob-sized tiswas of thread, cotton and scabby menstrual blood suspended above us, 'she isn't safe. I'd shoot her myself.'

'Congratulations. You're the only male amongst these freeloaders, sycophants and imitators who truly understands where I'm coming from. Prudence Hanson.'

'Not *the* – no! No way!'

I wanted Prudence Hanson. For starters, for dinner, for dessert, for coffee, for breakfast.



The spearmint west – all sixteen points of the compass – is spat-out gum-grey.

Daily life with Prudence?

I've fantasized about it, idly, but never for long.

She papers over her insecurities with tiring sarcasm.

She only cleans her kitchen if she finds mouse shit.

And if Prudence isn't having a good day, by God, nobody else can.

*Mark, you realize by now that I love you.*

I put on *The Magic Flute*.

Opera hurts my ears like a chainsaw fight, but I'm having lunch with Danny Lawlor whose mobile phone company is sponsoring the ENO, and who already has one Gloria Sabir bronze in his HQ's reception, and who might be in the market for another, and Belching Christ, my current account needs a cheque for twelve grand like a pregnant mosquito needs blood.

Even *if* Lily didn't exist – Fate, unprick those ears, I'm only speaking hypothetically – I can't afford to divorce my wife.

Forty thousand quid of her inheritance, Amber invested in the gallery, five years back when the bank was forty-eight hours from foreclosing.

But no, this is about Lily.

Will Prudence still want me to move in when she learns about Lily?

She'd never have gone on for a cocktail extravaganza with a man she hardly knew after the private view, never have shown me her messy studio-flat-space in Denmark Hill, unmade bed in the back, never, not if she'd heard the word 'daughter'.

Three lanes, three veins, pumping into London.

A rush-hour motorway is an act of unified worship.

Petroleum matins, petroleum vespers.

Death keeps one eye on the clock.

This boy racer in his ten-year old Fiat – please – has sat on my arse since the Sittingbourne exit.

I drop into the middle lane.

Boy Racer takes the bait – “Showed my ass to an Alfa Romeo today!” – and draws level.

Pasty, puffy, agrarian heavy-metal fan from the Isle of Sheppey.

As he tries to overtake, I match his speed.

70, 75, pushing 80.

Let’s try it: *Amber, I think we should get divorced.*

She’d check she heard right; go pale for thirty seconds; spew molten shit for fifteen minutes; *Is it another woman? Is it another woman?*; then I’d be out on my arse.

Practicalities: I’d have to live in the flat in the Barbican.

Until Amber sold it off, out of spite, and repossessed my Spider.

There’s a grisly p

recedent: Martin the Orthodontist, husband of Jasmine, the Gombrich clan’s youngest sister.

Martin shagged his receptionist just a few times: once actually on the dentist’s chair in his clinic.

If Martin expected Christian forgiveness in return for his full and frank confession, he was to be sadly disabused.

Martin lost custody of the two daughters; a clutch of wealthy clients; his Canterbury town-house; 40% of his salary for the term of his natural life; then had to move to cheaper premises in Margate, that clinger on Kent’s arse.

*Quite right too!* stated Amber, studying my reaction.

*Call me old-fashioned, I agreed, but some things in this life are sacrosanct. I mean, the man has children!*

Boy Racer’s Fiat is starting to wobble alarmingly.

He slows to 75, to 70: I’m feeling vicious, so I slow too.

Then, joy of joys, oily smoke blats from his bonnet.  
I undertake and swerve home to the fast lane.  
In my mirror, I see Boy Racer floundering onto the hard-shoulder.  
Fiats are only good for mowing the lawn.  
But at least Boy Racer's problems can be fixed by the AA and a few  
hundred quid.  
Whatever I do, I mustn't phone Roland Taverner.

'Hello, Taverner, it's me.'

'So what crisis has blown up in your face today, Badbury?'

'Why do you assume there's a crisis?'

'Bank threatening to sell you for glue, are they?'

'Prudence called, about half an hour ago.'

'And how,' Taverner smacks his lips, 'is that dusky maiden of the Slave  
Coast?'

'She'd flay you if she heard you speaking like that.'

'I should be so lucky.'

'She gave me a sort of... ultimatum. She wants me to leave Amber.'

'Bloody hell. Was she stoned?'

'Wish she had been.'

Roland Taverner whistles. 'Abort mission, Badbury. Pronto. She  
hasn't got your home number or address. Home-home, I mean. Has she?'

'Credit me with some intelligence.'

'So she only knows your gallery... and your nest in the Barbican, right?'

'I couldn't very well hide those from her.'

'Not the type to hire a detective to trail you back to Kent, is she?'

'Prudence? God no.'

‘She can’t be trying to shake you for money... not with the sort of price-tags *her* work attracts... right, Badbury, here’s what you tell her. You tell her, since she’s forced you to choose, so you choose your wife. She’ll go hysterical on you, but women expect no more. Then you *never contact her again*. Change your phone numbers. Month from now, it’ll all be ancient, unpleasant history. End of story.’

I wanted this reassurance.

Reassurance that for every problem there’s a solution.

‘By the way, Badbury, how about lunch at the Starlight? That charming place of my old mucker Jake, over in Bayswater. A certain celebrity chef – you notice I name no names – known for his Mockney accent, raffish charm – not unlike yours, now I think of it – and ability to sell recipe books by the container shipload – is going to be there. He just fired his last agent, and I learnt via a crony of his awful hag of wife that my name is being touted. If you’re with me, it will look more like a chance encounter.’

‘Can’t. I’m meeting a certain Danny Lawlor for lunch.’

‘Oh, *that* Vulgarian! Saw him on one of those awful reality things. *How to get Pornographically Wealthy by being a Total Shit*. Bragging about his Irish orphanage background.’

‘Ah, but woo him right and he buys art like sweeties.’

Taverner snorts.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘But for the grace of God, goes God.’

Chatham and Gillingham slip behind my right flank.

Over the River Medway, urinary tract of Kent.

Amber Gombrich – of course you kept your maiden name – here is your score-card.

Looks: *A* when we married, *B+* nowadays, on better days.

Social Skills: a straight A.  
Not for nothing her private schools and career at the National Trust.  
Love? If gruff affection counts, our marriage isn't loveless.  
But not like it was, not like it was.  
Maternal Skills: *B-*, with the aid of very plain au pairs, *C-* without.  
Sex, alas, *D*, if I'm generous.  
Sex, for Amber, is a duty, like paying the Council Tax.  
I am required to apply, some days in advance, via embarrassing hints.  
Anything unmissionary is a strict no-no.  
'There,' she says, afterwards. 'Better?'  
Then she's in the shower like she can't wash me off her quick enough.  
Back to Fanny Burney or *Bleak House*.  
I'm 36, women like me, my body has needs, and I have rights.  
Prudence wakes *me* up and says, 'I want you again.'  
If Amber and I got divorced, yes, it would be messy. But.  
*Mark, you realize by now that I love you.*  
It'd be a relief to kiss the gallery goodbye.  
But *Lily*. Lily. Always Lily.  
Losing my daughter, like Martin the Inept Monogamist lost his?  
Become a weekend-custody dad, like those sadsacks at LegoLand,  
smiling to hide that excavating pain?  
First, steer me and my Spider, at 120mph, into the concrete pillar of a  
motorway bridge.

~

Exit 2 North for Rochester.

Rochester started going downhill when the Romans pulled out.  
It should be surgically extracted, like an appendix.  
Those clouds over the black castle are looking mighty pissed off.  
If cities and castles succumb to time – just another word for change,  
now I think of it – what chance does the human heart have?  
None: if you can live with all the alterations, your marriage survives.  
If you can't, or don't wish to, it doesn't.  
Traffic clots as the M2 squeezes itself into the A2.  
Still, a steady 70, not too bad for this time of the morning.  
A navy Passat sits in the fast lane.  
I perch on his arse until he gets the hint and drops a lane.  
He's a rather attractive she.  
There is a drug for men, an anti-Viagra.  
Its abuse is so widespread, so rampant, in castrated societies like ours,  
that the junkies outnumber the non-addicted.  
In fact, *not* to be a junkie is verging on the criminal.  
This drug's trade name is MONOGAMY: a synthetic compound of  
feminism, hypocrisy and political correctness.  
Its ad agency churns out these catchy slogans.  
*Sex without love isn't as fulfilling, because you don't know each other.*  
If sex isn't fulfilling, Junkie, you're doing it wrong.  
*The older you get, the tackier skirt-chasing becomes.*  
"Chase"? The healthy, wealthy and wise never need to "chase".  
*Men who can't commit are such sad wankers.*  
Oh? Well, without conducting a survey, *my* money says monogamy  
junkies get through more boxes of tissues alone than my discreet clan do in  
company.  
New housing estate going up on this hillside.  
High density, tarmacked front for lower-insurance off-road parking.  
Back garden too small to skin, let along swing, a cat.  
Give it a decade, the whole South East will be one giant car-park.

Thank Christ *real* money – Amber’s real money – can still buy hilltop  
oast-house conversions in the green, green breasts of Kent.

These estate-dwellers are everywhere.

Choking our motorways, the airports, the checkout lanes.

They are the Clive Pikes, the Gary Drakes, they are who we went to  
school with, they are Modern England.

*Friends Reunited?*

Not if I see you coming first.

‘Daddy!’

‘*Lily?*’

‘Daddy, Mummy says you shouldn’t talk when you’re driving.’

‘I’ve got a special no-hands set. Where *is* Mummy?’

‘In the shower.’

‘Where’s Lenka?’

‘Putting washing in the airing cupboard.’

‘Then who called my number?’

‘Bad Boy Frank.’

‘*You* used the telephone?’

Four years old and my daughter can already use telephones!

‘No. Bad Boy Frank did it. Then he gave me the reseed.’

‘Ah, so Bad Boy Frank’s to blame, is he?’

‘Now he’s hiding up the chimney.’

‘And how did Bad Boy Frank manage to use the phone, all by himself?’

‘Well, you press the noughts and crosses button, then the one called

“Mark... Car... Mob...” and then *you* answer, Daddy.’

‘You’re a child genius.’

‘What’s a genius?’

‘A genius is a very clever Lily.’

‘Daddy, why don’t spiders get stuck in their own webs?’

‘They have tiny special non-stick shoes.’

‘Spiders don’t wear shoes.’

‘Here’s the truth. Spiders don’t get stuck in their own webs because not all of the strings in the cobweb are sticky. Spiders know which are which.’

My darling thinks about this.

Roland Taverner’s right:

Prudence, I am afraid, is going to have a bad morning.

‘Prudence, it’s me.’

‘I know.’

The veneer of calm has gone now: she knows what’s coming.

‘I want to talk about what you said in your last call.’

‘I didn’t think it would be about the cricket.’

‘There’s someth-’

‘Oh fuck it Mark, before you go on, there’s one more tiny detail. I was hoping...’

‘Go on.’

‘Oh I don’t know what I was hoping.’

Suddenly I’m very worried without being sure why.

‘Well, Mark, it’s like this: you’re a daddy.’

She knows about Lily?

‘I mean, you’re *going* to be a daddy. I’m due March 1<sup>st</sup>.’

Mozart is suddenly unbearable.

I switch it off.

How can the world go on *exactly* the same as it was three seconds ago?

Same cars, in the same relative positions.

Five seconds ago?

Twenty seconds ago?

‘And... you know for sure... it’s... mine.’

‘Just because my work is about sex, that automatically means I put it about? Is that what you *mean* to imply?’

‘No, I didn’t mean *that!* But... you’re on the pill, right?’

‘I am, and the pill is 99.9% safe, and welcome to nought point one. That night I sicked up the raw steak.’

‘And it’s not just... your period’s late, or anything...’

‘I took a home test, the blue line said yes, so I went to the GP, and the GP said yes, so I went to a private clinic and they did a scan and it showed our baby who’s the size of a cashew nut and the woman, she was from Snowdonia or somewhere Welsh I could barely understand a word, she asked me if I wanted to keep the baby and I had to get her to repeat it and she did and I told her of course I’m keeping my sodding baby you crazy Welsh bat, she’s already the size of cashew nut and I’m calling her Hope because it’s a hopelessly unfashionable name but it’s still what the world needs more of and I’m sorry I didn’t mean to be rude! So the woman said we couldn’t be sure about if it’s a boy or girl this early on and I... laughed and burst into tears and the woman got a cup of tea and a Penguin biscuit.’

An elderly Saab wants to overtake me.

‘I see.’

I let the Saab pass.

‘I see.’

Big bad bitch of a roundabout upstream.

Prudence will be curled up in a ball, on her stained sofa-bed.

Dreaming about a little girl who looks like us.

Believing that once I’ve got over the shock, I’ll slip out of my loveless marriage like a worn-out dressing-gown, come to her, and we’ll buy a flat

overlooking a park, a mobile, a Moses basket, and an Angelina Ballerina nightlight to make the darkness pink.

Turbulence at the confluence of the A2, the tributary A289, and the M2.

I switch on the wipers.

A shower, I need, a spiritual shower.

The wipers still squark.

That uppity jerk-off at the dealership said he'd fixed it.

Ordinal sin of us English: we confuse service with servitude.

Normally, I'd enjoy phoning up and firing a rocket up his arse.

"Normally" has been suspended until further notice.

My unborn daughter, Hope, is growing, by long multiplication, inside the uterus of a woman who isn't Amber.

*Stop! I want to tell it, Go back! Divide back down!*

Clive Pike must remember the quarry-climb too.

And in Clive Pike's nightmares, Mark Badbury is still a boy of fourteen.

Forever, just as he is in mine, as if we both died that evening.

Roland Taverner, drunk on port, at a lapdancing club in Putney full of sullen Slavic waifs: *Our childhoods, Badbury, are our Old Testaments. Our Books of Genesis, our Deuteronomies. It's all written down there. And once writ, it can't be unwrit.*

Concentrate!

This roundabout's a total nightmare.

*Well, Mark, it's like this: you're a daddy.*

Madmen, truckers and nervy learners coming at you from all angles.

~

Gravesend, Northfleet, Dartford Tunnel and M25 (Anticlockwise).

Stay on the A2 for London.

Back in the early 1980s, back when I was a boy, back when Great Britain could win wars singlehandedly, back when Labour were commies and Maggie was Maggie, this land was made of hamlets and towns and cities and valleys and beacons and dales and national parks and rivers and tow-paths and lochs and tarns and mudflats and tumuli and estuaries.

Now it's just a road atlas of routes.

Oh, sod it, the traffic's slowing.

60... 55... 50... 45... 40...

Something must have flipped over.

35... 30... 25...

Steady 25 mph.

I no longer have a secretary to phone and tell I'll be late.

Up on that rise: the last hillside of cows before London.

*Look, Lily! Cows!*

A biker weaves by, bound for infinity.

Down to 20, down to 15, sod it, I should park here and *jog* to the gallery.

Two lanes merging, bad-temperedly, into one.

Knew it: big container truck on its side, tossed like a toy.

People slowing to take a good look.

Here are the PC Plods, waving their batons.

Wonder if anyone died?

*Reassurance.*

'Mark! You dark horse!'

'Amber! Is Lily okay?'

'Calm down, Mark. Of course Lily's all right. Lenka just took her to kindergarten. Am I only allowed to call my husband in the event of an emergency?'

‘No! No.’ I nearly tell her about Lily’s phone call, but don’t. ‘It’s nice to, uh, hear you. So... why am I a dark horse?’

‘Now don’t be cross, but a certain cat’s out of a certain bag...’

Not Prudence: Amber sounds playful, not apoplectic.

‘What cat? What bag?’

‘Well, your friend Prudence phoned twenty minutes ago.’

It’s freezing in here.

‘Prudence? Prudence Who?’

It’s boiling in here.

‘Prudence the Artist, you dope! And when the poor woman found out that I didn’t *know* and that the commission was a *surprise*, she spent a whole minute apologising – I could practically *hear* her blushing – but I told her it’s *just* like you to arrange something like this behind my back without *telling* her it was a surprise – ’

What in hell is this about?

‘ – but it doesn’t matter at all because... *darling*... you’re *amazing*! A portrait, by a real live artist! The whole idea makes me feel like, I don’t know, one of the Medici Wives. I tried to call you straight away but your line was busy so I’ve just been yacking with Coral – had to tell *somebody* – and Coral’s looked Prudence Hanson up on Google and she’s *green* with envy! Her installations sound pretty ‘way out’ but she can obviously do oils, too, not like that Tracey Emin character. We should be tactful about telling Jasmine, because of the Martin business. Anyway Coral says Prudence is *quite* the rising star in the YBA scene, but’s she’s *ever* so down-to-earth on the phone. I... I’ve never had a birthday present *remotely* as... exciting! Oh, Mark, I’m so thrilled! One sitting will be enough, Prudence says, as she takes dozens of photographs and works from them. But then you’ll know all this. So Prudence is coming on Sunday. She has friends just outside Canterbury she’ll visit the night before, so we can make an early start. Darling?’

‘She said she’s coming to our *house*?’

‘That’s what she said you’d arranged...’

I have the right to feel fury.

All I can muster is the consternation of the duped.

‘Darling? Have I lost you?’

Amber hasn’t ‘darlined’ me like this for many *many* a moon.

‘No, I’m... glad you’re... glad. Yeah... um, Sunday sounds good. Did you tell her about... Lily?’

‘Tell her what about Lily?’

‘I mean, did you mention that we have a daughter?’

‘Why wouldn’t I have mentioned Lily?’

So Prudence knows.

‘My idea was to have a portrait of just you – ’

‘What an abysmal idea! *I* assumed you’d commissioned a family portrait. That’s the understanding now, anyway. That’s what I’m having. I can’t *wait!* I’ll have to plan a dinner. Maybe I’ll do venison. No, steak. Unless she’s a vegetarian?’

No worse way for Prudence to learn about Lily.

First, she will have made a coffee fated to go cold.

Second, she will have calmly smashed something irreplaceable.

Next, she will go for a very long walk, with Lily’s half-sister snug in her womb, until she has not an inkling of where she is.

No worse way.

*Please let nothing bad happen to them.*

‘Uh... no idea. Don’t think so. Venison sounds great.’

‘Mark, you aren’t cross?’

‘Of course not.’

‘You mustn’t be. I’m *already* enjoying this gift. Honestly. I don’t think I’ve been so... happy since... well, since Lily was born.’

‘That’s great.’

‘Mark, are you sure you’re okay? You do sound odd.’

‘Just a dodgy throat. I’ll be fine.’

I wipe my mouth, and look at my once-young face in the dirty mirror.

The stinking bog has a missing wall.

Gusty, semi-abandoned car-park.

Dirty great truck: EDDIE O'DRISCOLL HAULAGE.

Shiny little computer van: SOLUTION SOLUTIONS.

An Austin Metro with advanced venereal disease.

Drifting rain that never reaches the oily ground.

'Service Station'? A Texaco, a peeling shop, sub-chicken nuggets served by a boot-polish black kid whose badge says 'Francois' probably just arrived clinging to the underside of the Eurostar, and the filthiest toilet this side of Bristol coach station?

Oh, I'm going to be sick.

What did Prudence hope to achieve by visiting the oast-house?

Checking my marriage was safely dead?

No, I'm not going to be sick.

And when she learnt about Lily, why didn't she back out?

Yes, I'm definitely going to be sick.

Perhaps she was too stunned to think of an excuse?

No, I'm *not* going to be sick.

Fifty yards away, traffic roars by, to the Tower Bridge Roundabout.

The beginning of the A2, or the end.

On the slip-road, a shaggy hitch-hiker is holding out a sign.

Driving home from LegoLand, I told Lily how animals love motorway verges: my darling little hobbit asked, *Why?*

*Because people aren't allowed there.*

Lily thought about it.

*Is that where the unicorns all live?*

Amber and I answered *Yes* at the same moment, we laughed for a moment and our eyes met, and I remembered why we got married.

Lily spent until Honey Hill looking for mythological animals.

No, I'm too numb to be sick.

Back in my Spider, I turn the key: she purrs.

Wipers on: first, second, out of this shit-hole, down the slip-road, third.

The hitch-hiker knows an Alfa Romeo is not going to pick him up.

Wet filthy coat: dry leather upholstery.

He glowers at my tinted windscreen to where he guesses – correctly –  
my eyes are: *Guilty as charged*.

I have no clever reply.

So what *did* become of Clive Pike?

Up ahead is pain, solid as the Thames Barrier, inescapable as debt.

The hitch-hiker may have more luck with Eddie O'Driscoll.

*End of story*, said Roland Taverner.

Roland Taverner is wrong for once.

All this is just the preface.

I tried to read your soggy sign, Hitch-hiker.

But your words had disappeared in the rain.