

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, **Love**reading will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

---

**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Ruby Slippers**

Written by Keir Alexander

Published by Corsair

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to **Love**reading.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

---

Constable & Robinson Ltd  
55–56 Russell Square  
London WC1B 4HP  
www.constablerobinson.com

First published in the UK by Corsair,  
an imprint of Constable & Robinson Ltd., 2014

Copyright © Keir Alexander, 2014

The right of Keir Alexander to be identified as the author of this  
work has been asserted by him in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

All rights reserved. This book is sold subject to the condition  
that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold,  
hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or  
cover other than that in which it is published and without a  
similar condition including this condition being imposed  
on the subsequent purchaser.

A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in  
Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-4721-0807-4 (paperback)  
ISBN: 978-1-47210-811-1 (ebook)

Printed and bound in the UK

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

## CHAPTER ONE

SHE stinks. It has to be said. Stinks to high heaven. No, worse, stinks like death. This is not just a smell, an unpleasant odour to be carried away on the next breeze, it's a stench, a pestilence that violates the space she enters and damns the air where she has been. The rest of her spells death, too: the funeral-dark clothes, head to foot, and the dry knot of hair which has surely been borrowed from a corpse, not to mention the skinny marbled wrists sticking out of her black shell, making her look like some great wounded bug dragging itself away somewhere to die.

She has the dog for company, of course. His name is Barrell – another great black thing, padding ahead of

her. If you see him coming along the street, get away and downwind pronto before Old Rosa arrives. Why he puts up with her is a real mystery. She has never petted him, or made him stand on his hind legs for treats, or tickled his tummy. He has never known the restraint of a leash, so how come he never ran barking for the hills? Maybe he likes the smell and wears it with pride, like a doggy badge. All the same, you don't see too many other mutts running up to sniff his old balls. Even animals seem to give Old Rosa a wide berth.

Why the authorities have not taken it upon themselves to *do something* about the woman is another mystery. They could surely take her in, scrub her down, and dress her up and perch her on a floral chair in some nice old folks' home. But they don't. Maybe the neighbourhood possesses an unconscious collective wisdom and somehow they need Old Rosa to walk among them. This creeping intimation of mortality, accompanied by the dog and the once-tartan shopping cart, with its squeaking wheel so simply and eloquently mocking all the vanities that flesh is heir to. *Memento mori*.

So she is free to roam. Here she is coming along 98<sup>th</sup> towards Fifth. The dog is there at the kerb, mooning for the grass in the Park, slavishly looking back over his shoulder for the next intervention. With barely a nod, Rosa sends him on and steps straight off after him, looking neither right nor left. She's canny enough to

know the police have already blocked off the traffic from the Avenue. People are out already – happy families and a few early-worm Paddies-for-all-occasions, huddling, flapping and stamping against the cold before the sun gets up. As Rosa hauls the cart up the far kerb, a little girl holding a green flag leans over to pat the dog. Rosa walks on, wilfully oblivious. She does not see when the child doubles over, retching, and she escapes the dagger of a look that the mother hurls at her back. Rosa has conditioned herself never to look back or to take account of the reactions of others. She just walks on, never turning to confront the chaos churning in her wake.

But all of these awful things about Rosa are far from the whole story. For within the cavern of her spirit, Old Rosa, the bag lady, carries a thing of infinite beauty. A secret, shining treasure.



Michael Marcinkus shuffles out of the shop door, carrying a long pole with a brass hook, which he uses to draw down the tired striped awning from its recess. Rain or shine he does this; the weather is not the point. What matters is that these things are done and that they are *seen* to be done. It's the same with the striped canvas apron that he wears round his tubby waist. It's the same with the lettering, which makes a tarnished dawn across the window: Sunrise Deli and Grocery

Store. It's the same with the open/closed sign that must at all times give the correct message. And it's the same with the polishing and priming of the 'ridiculous' old weighing machine that, as his wife Grace has complained every day for the last forty years, takes up so much space in the doorway.

A small man shouldering big burdens, Michael straightens the chairs at the outside table, squints up at the cold slice of sun peeping out from behind the block and throws a glance in the direction of Fifth. Trade will be brisk today. In days gone by, the thought would have made him happy, but now that he is older and tired it means the day will drag all the more. He flips the sign to open, wipes his feet, goes back inside to see that all is as it should be in a deli store preserved exactly as it was in the Twenties. Faded marble counters, big swishing slicers, grinders and ranks of knives. The stock itself – myriad meats, cheeses and fruits – all laid out on trays, set out on stands, hanging on hooks. Then there are the invisible but equally important things that give the promise of things: the cool, sad aromas of olives, garlic and anchovies; the warm, seductive invitation of coffee, oranges and spices. And all these items to be in their places at their appointed hours. Bread, bagels and bakery goods – in and arranged in their cases by five thirty. Ham, poultry, sides of beef – up from the cold room by six; pared, sliced and under the glass by seven. Cans, bottles and cartons – up from the cellar,

tagged and onto the shelves by seven thirty. All of these separate things are part of the whole, and the whole must be preserved each day in the same way, because that's how it has been and how it shall continue to be. Articles of faith.

A blemished piece of fruit leers at him from an otherwise spotless battalion of apples on a stand. Michael stoops and studies it from all angles, his head twitching like a canary contemplating a seed. He tuts: the boy should have spotted that. He walks back into the store, ruefully holding out the apple for Grace to see as she mops the floor. Imperiously, he calls out, 'Benjy!' and looks towards the cellar door, where he knows he will emerge. Grace squeezes out the mop and sighs. She is less religious about these things. She's tired, too; she's been doing this for a lifetime now, and all she would like to do is lie on a beach in Hawaii for a month and watch her toenails grow. Fat chance. She watches blearily as Benjy clunks up the stairs and inches through the door, juggling a box of Wesseltoft's Luxury Cat Litter. Michael holds out the apple like it's Exhibit A. 'Would you care to explain?'

Benjy looks at the inadequate apple, shocked, as if it's a dead rat, then sticks out his bottom lip as if he's going to cry, which is the signal for soft-hearted Michael to back-pedal. Grace knows that once Michael is off his back, Benjy will go round behind the racks and laugh himself silly, and she doesn't blame him for this; he's a

nice boy. She herself so often feels the same way about her husband. Why must he persist in being such a funny little man?

Michael continues, half-hearted now, to berate the boy. 'You have to be on the lookout for these things, young man. The devil is in the detail.'

Grace rolls her eyes. My God, so now we have St Michael the Evangelist! Why does he have to be so damn right and proper all the time? All these rules and regs on top of the crippling day. What do they gain by it? It's an issue, a real issue. Grace shakes herself out of her daydream monologue but already he has marched off to find the next abomination – some item wrongly shelved, or particle of dust gathering where particles of dust are forbidden to gather.

A brown-haired, dapper-looking man of forty or so walks in the door and waits meekly at the counter. With the turned-up collar and his mackintosh belt tied just so, he looks stylish, jaunty even. But look close enough and you'd see that his keen blue eyes are drawn tight and shuttered against the day. Grace, who has gone back to mopping the floor, looks up and calls out, 'A moment, please.' And then she yells for her old man to get up front. For the past five years and just about every day, this same nice polite man has been coming to the deli to have a coffee or buy some choice thing to eat. He has become a friendly regular, but still Grace does not address him by his name, which



is James, and still James does not have many words for her, either, though each of them has nothing but kind thoughts for the other. Instead, he smiles and stands there until Mr Marcinkus comes shuffling up, wiping his hands on his apron. ‘James, James, how are you? Macchiato, yes?’

James sits down at one of three stools just inside the door, while Michael busies himself at the espresso machine, a magician conjuring aromatic delights in a swirl of steam. He was in here only yesterday, and shadows have gathered inside James even since then, but the Sunrise always gives him such pleasure. Delis like this are rare now, so many of the smaller places having been gutted and ruined in the eighties and nineties, and the big downtown ones made over all fake and flashy. He takes it all in: the old-fashioned letters across the window, so beautifully crafted, and the mouldings, tired now and in need of TLC but retaining their Twenties charm. He adores the old weighing machine in the doorway, and above all he loves the whole mysterious interior – light in creamy marble counters; dark in mahogany, with curved glass cases held in flowing chromium and the vast array of products so abundant with their shapes, colours and aromas. More than once, it has occurred to him that the shelves here mirror in a more sensual way the shelves in his own workplace, the New York Public Library, both endeavouring to connect people with offerings from other places, to

bring them closer to a bygone age. Yes, here time can pass, here he can be something more like himself.

As if to underline the fact, Michael strikes up, friendly and comforting, ‘So, James, up and about early. Out to see the Parade?’

‘I was on my way to the hospital.’

‘Ah, yes, of course . . .’ Michael can see by the new lines on James’s honest face that it’s a subject best steered away from. He brings over a steaming cup and sets it down, saying, ‘I’m sorry, I should have realized.’

‘It’s OK,’ is as much as James can say. How could he explain to this kindly old man that at this very moment all of his thoughts are calcified around one simple, horrible proposition? That as soon as he has finished his coffee he will turn out of this place along East 99<sup>th</sup>. Turn left across from the Park and walk two blocks along to Fifth and 97<sup>th</sup>. That he will then crane his neck to look up at the dark tower of the hospital, will take an elevator to the fourteenth floor and there enter an unnervingly pleasant room. And lying in this room he will find the beloved person who, as is the way of things, is likely this very day to die. This unspeakable knowledge slides round his guts like a blade. Death will soon come roaring for Paolo, his partner, and inside James burns to scream out at the wickedness of it. It would be so glorious to take hold of his dying lover, rip him from the web of tubes that have softened him for

the end and crash with him through the glass into the blazing corona of the sun.

But these are not the kind of things you say over coffee. James looks up and sees Michael gazing at him, all downcast. He takes a last sip, neatly replaces the cup on its saucer, lines up spoon and cup and stands down from the stool.

‘Please give Paolo my best wishes,’ Michael ventures, pointlessly, because James has already moved off through the door and back into a closed world of his own making. Michael sighs, slides away the cup and saucer and gives the spotless table a precautionary wipe-down.



In a city built so high into the sky, people don't allow their vision to stray much above eye level. Only fools, romantics and children walk around with faces raised. For the rest of us, compelled by the daily grind, the must-gets and the must-dos, the sidewalk is the place to stare. But, if we were to lift up our eyes . . .

On a balcony, high up in one of those tombstone buildings for the rich on Fifth, sits a man in a wheelchair, the two fused into one, statue and plinth – the appearance so weighty you fear for the balcony's safety. Malachi McBride sits and glowers down upon the Parade as if it passes at his command, as if he could turn down his thumb and bring the whole teetering

juggernaut to a halt. The beginning of a smile creeps like a seismic crack from the fault line of his jaw. But before it can take hold and climb to the upper reaches, he quickly bulldozes it flat, burying it in the jowly foothills. He wheels the chair round and heads back into the lounge; time for fun and games. A woman, an agency nurse, stands in the cold room watching the Parade too, on the TV. Inez is her name. Next to McBride, in her corn-blue frock, she looks like a tiny Madonna, stolen from a wayside shrine. But McBride shows no respect for her frail saintliness. With a hawkish jerk of the head, he makes his intentions clear.

‘Well, don’t it just make you swell up with pride.’

His words come out like bile, and Inez knows that darker, more poisonous stuff will follow. She turns away with a sad little dip – the eye contact thing – and struggles to keep the mask blank.

‘We’re all fucking Irish today,’ he continues.

She closes her eyes and breathes deep. Of course, she knows why he is like this. He is sick; he knows he is going to die sooner rather than later (God willing and heaven forgive her!); and he is angry with his Maker. She braces herself to receive the next toxic secretion, but instead he tries a different tack: ‘They show this stuff back in that tin-pot tropical fart of a country of yours, Inez?’

Inwardly, she stirs at this surprise tactic – when did he ever call her by her first name? – but outwardly she doesn’t give a twitch, because he is looking for the

smallest chink, a tiny drawbridge of tenderness she might let down, and then he will storm it.

‘Hey, maybe the kids are watching right now, right there in Manila – if they show this kind of shit there. How are the rickety little coolie babies?’

How dare he strike her in the womb like this! Holy Jesus forgive him. McBride allows himself a sly sideways glance to see if she will react to his jibe. Inez bites her tongue, refuses to give him the satisfaction of her humiliation. It is at times like these, good Catholic though she is, that she would gladly see this man dead.

He makes the mistake of introducing a pause to the proceedings as he sits, staring her down, waiting for a new line of assault to open up. It becomes a bridge for her to cross. Meek but cunning, she seizes her moment: ‘I think I go now and buy something nice for your lunch, Mr McBride.’

She walks straight to the door and takes her coat. He can’t reach her here, and if he says something, she will pretend not to hear. McBride vents a snigger, a gloating celebration of his own wickedness, but he knows he’s beaten – for the moment. Her hand on the latch, Inez takes in a great bucket of air to feed the sigh she’ll let out with sweet relief on the other side of the door.



17 Pinto Mews, Riverhead, Long Island sounds a good address, but it’s no great place to live: a row of

apartments, box-square and drained of colour, like cartons that have been left out in the rain. It's the kind of building you would pass by a hundred times and never recall its being there. From inside, you would have to poke your head impossibly far out of the window to catch a view of anything more uplifting than the used-car lot on the one side, and the scrubby patch behind the run-down old theatre on the other.

Two women sit poles apart at either end of a table that serves every purpose. Siobhan King, a girl with merry freckles, hair like tangled brass and bright blue eyes that somehow do not belong to her surroundings, follows the Parade on TV. She is fix-faced, her eyes flickering side to side, as if impelled to memorize every face in the crowd. A TV guy burbles on all folksy about this proud platoon of officers and that happily marching band, but to her his voice is just a wasp trapped in a jar, so total is her concentration. Even so, one thing is really getting to her: the woman at the other end of the table. Her mother.

A handsome but overburdened woman, Corinne sits rifling through racks of display cards studded with cheap jewellery, all the time mumbling and muttering, 'Agate, agate, agate, amethyst . . . amethyst . . . Shit!'

Last week, at the Newton Harbour Monday Market, she sold so many of this particular semi-precious stone that she made her best profit ever.

'Shit!'

Now, the night before she is due to set off for the same weekly event, she discovers that she has cleared her supplies, forgetting meantime to buy in more of her bestselling line.

‘Shit!’

It’s not like her. She’s normally so ahead of the game. But she has no choice, the stall is booked. She will just have to fall back on the agates, opals and moonstones that she knows do not sell so readily – it’s that or risk losing her place altogether.

‘Shit!’

Siobhan turns away from the TV and looks straight through Corinne, saying, ‘Could you please be quiet, Mommy, and kindly do something about your language.’

Corinne looks up, caught out. At fourteen Siobhan has taken up indefinite occupation of the moral high ground and Corinne feels compelled to account for herself: ‘You don’t understand. I’m out of amethyst, it’s Sunday night, and if I don’t have the right stuff to sell tomorrow, I don’t make enough even to pay for the pitch. It’s catastrophic!’

Siobhan shakes her head with practised forbearance. ‘Annoying; frustrating; a total pisser even; but catastrophic? Hmm . . .’

The superior manner of this remark unsettles Corinne all the more – not because Siobhan is being so damn high and mighty, or because basically she is right, but in reality because it confirms that her

daughter sees their whole goddamn situation for what it is: the shabby apartment excused by bohemian trappings, the not quite respectable neighbourhood, and the whole shitty territory that goes with being a single mother making her own way by the sweat of her brow, always, always bogged down in tiresome details that mount up and weigh so heavy in the balance. Corinne steers the conversation to matters practical: 'Listen, if I have to get up and go at the crack of dawn, you'll just have to walk to the bus with Kelly.'

Siobhan rolls her eyes at this feeble tug of the apron strings, but secretly she is delighted. With her mother off her back the next morning, she will be at complete liberty to work her own wondrous plan, and won't that be so cool? Inwardly relaxed now, she goes back to watching the Parade, her beady-eyed search suddenly less urgent. Every year for the past five years she has followed the Parade, not for pleasure, not for the pomp and the ceremony, but in the dear desperate hope that one day she will catch a glimpse of *him*, standing in the crowd. Yes, she would surely recognize him – his face, the way he holds his head and the kind of clothing he would wear. She has only her hazy memories and one crumpled photograph to go on – the one she sneaked out of the bottom of her mother's drawer – but she would know him anywhere. In a way, none of that matters now, because tomorrow, or the day after maybe, she will go there, to the heart



of the city where he lives, and she will not come home until she has tracked him down, and found him and won him back.



Sure enough, trade has picked up, and Michael has never before set eyes on half the customers wandering in. So many saying, ‘Well, just look at this!’ and ‘Oh, doesn’t this just take you back?’ It pleases him to greet these people coming from every corner; it gives him purpose to see them squinting through the glass, their senses awakening to the fine things on display. He loves to see them drift away from their busy routines, slowing down and finding the time to enjoy a coffee and a Danish, turn the pages of the newspaper, even fall into conversation with one another. It has long given him a kind of wistful pleasure to think about the countless people who have arranged to meet here at the Sunrise, to sit outside and eat bagels and sandwiches, or enjoy a smoke. It is as if he has played his own small part in their exchanges, the ideas generated, the projects born, the deals struck. He looks across at Grace, behind the counter. All very well for her to accuse him of running a museum, but is it so terrible a thing? After all, it was precisely because he had the foresight all those years ago to keep the place exactly as it once was that it is so very special now. If being a museum-keeper also means being a carer, a provider of comfort, a preserver

of worlds, then it's a sad day when such a thing should amount to an insult.

Michael sniffs; Benjy is hovering at his heels, expecting no doubt to take his break five minutes early. He waves him on to go down and fetch more cartons, then wanders over to the cold-meats counter. A little girl jumps out from behind the counter where she has been hiding. Sylvie, his granddaughter, girl of his girl. 'Boo!' she shouts, and, 'Oh my goodness!' he exclaims, making a show of looking shocked to the core, all of a quiver and fanning his face. She shrieks again, delighted to have such fantastic power over her old grampa. Michael catches her, both hands on her waist, and hoists her up towards the ceiling – he is strong for a tubby little man, and he tilts her so she is nose to nose with him and giggling. His daughter Jenny is somewhere out back. He lowers Sylvie to the ground. 'Here, honey,' he says, and hands her a Sesame Snap out of his top pocket. 'Now, what did your mommy say you should be doing?'

Although Sylvie can yell things like 'Boo!' and 'Hey!' and 'Ow!', and can giggle louder than a passing train, Sylvie does not yet have words, or at least she chooses not to use them. At the age of three it is, of course, her prerogative. So in answer to Grampa's question, Sylvie silently toddles off behind one of the shelves and brings back the colouring book she left there, holding it up for him to see.

‘Ah good,’ he says. ‘OK. Oh look, did you do this? Was that really you?’ She nods energetically, pride glowing on her face. ‘Splendido!’ he says, ruffling her golden hair and sauntering away from her to the window, where the brightness fades from his face as quickly as it had sprung. There they are again, across the street, just in front of the boarded-up entrance to the disused record store – the three black boys, loitering and gassing all the time and hopping on and off the kerb without a care for the cars – the tall one, the small one and the one who once worked for them and gave them pain. He glances over at Grace, who sucks her teeth. ‘What do they want, just hanging around there every other day and doing nothing?’ she says, drawing in a sigh. She’s all set to dredge up more tired old complaints, but then she sees through the window the black ragged shape of a dog and is suddenly propelled into her own urgent exclamation: ‘Michael, your eccentric relative is outside!’ This prompts a shudder from Michael, who looks to see for himself and confirms that Old Rosa is indeed luring on the sidewalk opposite the store. His back stiffens, his lips purse and he gives a shrill whistle to summon Benjy, who magically appears, alert and ready – these minute actions part of a practised response to impending disaster. Michael raises an eyebrow of command, and Benjy, reluctant but mindful of duty, obeys. He wheels round, lines up with his master and marches stiffly in time with him to

the door and out onto the sidewalk. There, he strikes his pose, keen and attentive, like a minor figure on a war memorial, as Michael raises a defiant hand and says, ‘Stay right there, Rosa!’ Rosa isn’t actually going anywhere, but just saying the words makes Michael feel he is in control. Then, exactly as she has done for the past ten years, Rosa reaches towards him – arms stretching forward, hands open, palms up, as if he should go and embrace her. As if all would be well. This, he has never been able to handle. He cannot do it. And so, shaking his head, he ignores her. Out of the corner of his eye he can see the three black boys watching, sniggering from their safe distance. He drops his voice in search of a gentler tone, but it comes out weary and patronizing: ‘OK, Rosa, send it over.’

With clock-stopping slowness, Old Rosa produces a rolled-up piece of paper and tucks it under the dog’s collar. Michael watches with studied forbearance before issuing the next instruction: ‘Let go the dog.’ She hasn’t in fact had a hold of the dog, there being no leash, but she says not a word. Instead she glares at him in her thick foreign accent. Michael hasn’t heard his old aunt speak in fifteen years, but he knows how the words would sound: painful, with the vowels impossibly long and at war with the hard, clipped consonants – the whole effect comic and at the same time strangely noble. Barrell, apparently without prompting, now steps up to play his part in the dumbshow

and plods across the street. Benjy shoots forward like a quarterback, snatches the list and scoots back inside the store, where it is his job to interpret the tortured handwriting and to obey the sentences that come from some cold, old foreign place:

*1 small rye bread. Please to make sure that this was fresh today.*

*A large jar of dill pickel. I do not prefer the one from Hungary the one from Poland is much more to my liking.*

*Half a pound of smoke ham slice acord to existing arrangment.*

*1 ripe tomato but not to ripe.*

*For Barell a bone.*

Michael peers across at Rosa, who bows her head, permitting no more communication. He turns away wearily, but then swings round again, unable to resist the words he has said so many times before: 'For God's sake, Aunt Rosa, take a bath, then we wouldn't have this performance.'

Even as he says it, he sees his words are wasted. She gives away nothing, not a thing – or was that just the glimmer of a smile? Michael blinks in defeat. Inside the store he sees his daughter standing protectively at the shoulder of his granddaughter, and his wife next to her, that same old stern look on her face. He feels as

if he has somehow failed them all; as if he could have said something; as if he could have done anything at all.

He steals a glance at Rosa before turning back for the warmth of the store, taking his time, of course, to thoroughly wipe his feet at the door.



And that is why the three youths are hanging there outside the record store: to be in place to witness, again, the cheesy old comedy show play out between the stinking old woman, the uptight grocer man and the wide-eyed shop boy. To them, it's a performance every bit as entertaining as the razzle-dazzle of the St Patrick's Day Parade.

The smallest of them, Floyd, is by nature likeable and easy-going. The huge one, Dale, is clumsy and strong but harmless, though not bright. It is only the third guy, Harrison, who is remotely mean and dangerous; but the worst of them stands for them all. If Harrison draws long and lethal on a cigarette, and spits in that terrible way that he does, they're a bunch of no-goods. If he curses out loud, they're a fearsome gang; and if Harrison by chance meets the gaze of a passer-by and is too proud to turn away and conceal the hurting years that have made him what he is, then that stranger is going to conclude that this is a hateful bunch of guys. A loner by habit, Harrison prefers to

walk alone, especially by night, seeking he knows not what and finding whatever he finds. But there is still enough generosity of spirit in him to be able to enjoy hanging out with the guys, laughing about stuff and taking some interest in what's going down.

The moment Rosa's sad figure has retreated away, it begins: the worn-out old argument that has happened as often as Old Rosa has come along this street and they have been there – which is just about every other day. They cannot resist, each taking his habitual position.

Floyd, who likes stories because they contain surprises, is quick to revive the legend that is the source of their differences: 'She rich, I telling you. My old man tell me this, since I was so high.'

Harrison, who hates stories because experience has shown him that life holds no surprises, is fierce to deny it: 'Don't give me no shit!'

Big Dale, as usual, is content to listen, nodding his head, eyes growing wide on the meat of the quarrel as the guys battle to outdo each other with their own versions of the living truth.

'She rich! That apartment she live in, man it stinks and it's all shit an' everything, just like you would imagine it, but she got big bucks in there too.'

'So who seen it, Bro? Show me the man who seen it?' At this, even Big Dale can't resist chiming in, 'I heard that. I heard that, too. I heard she got the money in the mattress.' Which makes Harrison spit with contempt:

‘So, like she tell every nigger this? Like I say, show me the man; tell me the name of the person who seen it, cause it sure as shit ain’t so.’ Floyd, though, sticks with his side of the story: ‘There’s people been in there, like nurses and social workers an’ stuff. They say that once upon a time she been some kind of aristocrat an’ stuff. She got a whole lotta money, that for sure.’

But it’s Harrison who wins the day with a perfect one-liner: ‘An’ I got a crocka gold up my black ass!’ The others crack up at this. Impressed by his unaccustomed turn of phrase, they concede the last word to him, and he heads off down the road, feeling pretty cool about himself.



The hospital is just around the next corner on Fifth and still his inner fury is not spent. But James knows when it comes to it that he will bow his head as a nurse dispenses here and a doctor deliberates there, and that he will speak with a small, holy voice as men do at *times like this*, and that he will put on the meek, sneaky role he has been allotted to play. For it is a sad fact that no one has told Paolo that he is going to die, nor has Paolo ever come close to asking. So if, by chance, he has not yet slipped into the cold embrace of a coma, James has prepared himself to talk to his dying lover about small, sweet things that have passed in the hours since his last visit. How the rain came



down like hushed cymbals in the night. How he forgot altogether to eat and never noticed the passing of time. How the marmalade cat from downstairs crept into the apartment and curled up on Paolo's vacant side of the bed. With each ephemeral phrase James knows that he will surrender Paolo to the great emptiness, and with each hollow utterance, something of the keen edge of his own humanity will be blunted.

In his savage preoccupation, James does not take in the weather, which, as it happens, is cold but sunny. Nearing the Park, he's oblivious to the people hurrying past him so eagerly: the mother with her unruly brood; the old couple sharing a thrilling squeeze of hands; the ramrod man wearing medals. And all of them sporting faces made vacant for anticipated pleasures. James simply is not prepared, then, when a fat, brassy blast of music bounces along the Park railings, shaking him from his private stone. And then he sees it.

'My God, the Parade!'

There it is, flouncing up the Avenue towards him. A teeming sea of banners and badges, of chests puffed like sails to fill tunic and tabard, of batons leaping like Masai competing for the sky.

Fine things are sometimes best encountered obliquely, when our senses are trained elsewhere: a beautiful woman glimpsed across a crowded carriage; a heavenly aroma beckoning from a rusty grate. Delights stumbled across can sometimes entice us from

the hermit-cell of the mind. And so, all in a moment, James is alive with the knowledge that he is at the heart of a delicious thing. He stands in the bristling fuzz of people lining the sidewalk and gawks like a child. He catches the infection of smiles and laughs, as row upon row of heads go by, like coloured beads spilling from a box. Then he moves along with the thing, marries his own step to the serpentine train of humanity; marches with the drums and rides high with the pipes as they waft silkily along the bright avenue. What a wonder that a human spirit can, in the span of a sigh, soar from the darkest pit to the most rarefied peak.

Nor has James abandoned reality. In a few moments he will turn away from the Parade and continue his sober journey. But now he will be able to go into Paolo and – if he is not already gone – tell him that on the way to the hospital today he witnessed a fine, lovely thing. Indeed, he is duty-bound to take the glory of it with him. Maybe it will bring a smile to Paolo's harrowed face, or perhaps he will be in that place where words and gestures cannot reach. But either way, James is certain it will mean something, it will mean something.