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The Good Liar

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For C, always

Chapter One
Nom de guerre

1

It is, Roy thinks, perfect. Kismet, serendipity, destiny, happenstance; call it what you will. All of these things rolled into one. He is not sure he believes in fate, or whether he believes in anything but the very present. Then again, life has treated him well generally.

He stands and does the walk of his flat, checking that the windows are secure and the appliances are switched off correctly. He pats the chest of his blazer, which hangs on the back of the door: yes, his wallet is there. His keys lie ready on the console table in the hall.

This lady at any rate seems heaven-sent, at least from the résumé he has called up on the screen. At long last. He knows to anticipate the minor alterations, those moments when a slight imperfection is turned by a clever choice of words or a simple ever-so-small fi b into a positively positive attribute. This is human nature. He doubts, for example, that her name is truly Estelle, any more than his is Brian. In his view such inconsequential tweaks are to be expected and accepted. They oil the cogs. When they are revealed, he will be suitably tolerant and amused at these minor embellishments. Unlike the rather larger lies you often confront, he thinks as he places the tea bag in the recycling bin, rinses his cup and saucer and places them, upturned, on the draining board.

He takes a breath and powers the computer down, pushing the chair neatly under the desk. He has been here before, hopes held high. With this transitory reflection comes a momentary weariness. Those dreadful meetings in Beefeaters and Tobys around the Home Counties with frumpy old women in whom the bitterness of their long unfulfilled marriages with underachieving and uninspiring husbands

has in widowhood seemingly become the seed of a sense of licence to lie at will. For them there is no legacy of happy memories or the material benefit of platinum pensions in leafy Surrey mansions. They reside in poky terraces that no doubt smell of fried food, eking out an existence on state handouts, cursing Bert, or Alf, or whoever it may be, and contemplating a stolen life. They are out for what they can get now, by whatever means. And who can blame them really?

Quick inspection. Immaculate white shirt: yes. Creases of grey flannels: perfect. Spit-shined shoes: gleaming. Regimental stripe tie: well knotted. Hair: combed neatly. Blue blazer off hanger, and on. Fits like a glove. Glance in the mirror: he'd pass for seventy, sixty at a pinch. He looks at the time. The cab should be here shortly. The train journey from Paddington will take only thirty minutes or so.

For those desperate women, this is an escape. An adventure. For Roy, this dating lark is something different: a professional enterprise. He does not allow himself to become light entertainment or to let them down gently. He fixes them with his blue eyes before dismantling them forensically. He skewers them. He has done his homework and lets them know.

'I thought you said you were five foot six and slim,' he may say with incredulity, but is delicate enough not to add: rather than a clinically obese dwarf. 'Not much like your photo, are you? Was it taken a few years back, dear?' (He doesn't add the postscript: perhaps of your better-looking sister.) 'You live near Tunbridge Wells, you say. More Dartford really, isn't it?' Or, 'So what you mean by holidaying in Europe is a package trip once a year with your sister to Benidorm?'

If, as planned, he is second to the venue, he will usually conduct a discreet first reconnaissance pass to size things up. When confronted with the familiarly depressing he could simply leave without introducing himself. It is all so predictable. But he never does. He regards it as his duty to shatter their hopeless delusions. They will be the better for it, eventually. Beginning with his usual winning smile and gallant greeting, he will segue rapidly into what has become something of a core script.

'One of the things I dislike intensely,' he says, 'is dishonesty.'

Generally they smile and nod meekly.

'So, with apologies and with the odd unpleasant experience behind me' – another smile, and this is as gentle as it gets – 'let's cut to the chase, shall we?'

Generally another nod, probably no smile, and a shift in the seat that he notices but perhaps others wouldn't.

He is punctilious in splitting the bill when it is over and unambiguous about the future. No insincere pleasantries. 'Not what I was expecting at all,' he will say with a weary shake of the head. 'Oh no. What a shame. If only you'd been clearer. If only you'd described yourself more . . . accurately, shall we say? We could have both avoided wasting our energy. Which at our time of life' – here a brief twinkle of the eye and the hint of a smile to show what they will be missing – 'we can ill afford to do. If only . . .'

He hopes today he will not have to deploy these measures. But if so he will have discharged his duty to himself, to the unfortunate other and to the system that mismatches the hopeless with the delusional and, he believes, is in severe danger of bringing itself into disrepute. All those misspent hours drinking Britvic, all that effort put into stilted conversation over glistening mixed grills and mass-produced microwaved beef and ale pies or vegetable bakes or tikka masalas, all those awkward goodbyes with false promises of future contact. Not for him. Still less, all those doomed couplings in the search for a final day in the sun.

Roy is not a pessimist, though. Brace up, be positive. Each time he starts afresh, hopeful. This time will be different, he tells himself, glossing over the fact that he has said this to himself several times before. But his sense is that it won't be the same.

The taxi is here. He straightens his back, smiles to himself and locks the door before striding to the waiting car.

2

Betty makes her final preparations, careful to keep her excitement in check. Stephen will run her to the pub and wait outside, so she has no practical concerns. No flush of heat as the train runs

dangerously late. No undue ache in the hips as she rushes inelegantly up the high street. No risk of a post-meeting sense of discomposure affecting her ability to find her way home again. And Stephen will be there should she feel an unexpected need to terminate the meeting early.

They will have to set off in a few minutes, Stephen has told her as a result of his researches of his Google and his satnav gizmo. She can manage the internet but there are so many things about it that bamboozle her. What, for example, is a tweet? How on earth did we survive without all these devices? Or, more the point, why do young people so depend on them?

She can hear Stephen padding around the lounge. He seems more nervous than she is; how sweet. While she applies her lipstick she looks at herself in the mirror. There will be no last-minute anxieties. The blue floral dress she has selected will serve perfectly well and sets off her fair hair, which is cut in a bob as fashionable as can be carried off at her age. She will not exchange the delicate silver necklace or its partner brooch for something more obvious like pearls. She will not opt for more – or less – sensible shoes. She will not require a final emboldening cup of coffee.

Betty does not consider herself to be a flutterer. She is calm; realistic too, she likes to think. Once justifiably described as beautiful, she accepts with, she hopes, good grace the effects of time. She prefers to think of them as mere effects, not ravages. Though she retains a certain radiance, she is no longer beautiful. She cannot pretend to be despite the glossies' determined attempts to create and capture a new silver market. Perhaps she is something different, nameless and ageless.

She clicks the top back on the tube of lipstick, rolls her lips together to ensure the correct coverage, fingers the necklace, gently touches her hair and gives herself one final look. She is ready. She glances at her watch: five minutes ahead of time. Stephen greets her with a delicate and decorous embrace when she enters the lounge.

'You look fabulous,' he says, and she thinks he means it.

3

Stephen drives more sedately in the rain than he might otherwise. Even more sedately, that is, since at the best of times he is not a confident driver. He drives slowly for himself, to steady his nerves, and not for her benefit. She is a resilient person, clearly much more resilient than he is despite their respective ages. She has lived a life rather than simply studying how others have lived theirs. A feisty old bird, some might say, but not he. He could not imagine anything less fitting. He would not use such language and anyway it would be inaccurate. She is fragile, though not sparrow-like, with features of porcelain and proportions of fine slenderness. It is her constitution that is strong. Unbreakable, he'd say.

They set off early to avoid any risk of lateness. He noses achingly slowly out of junctions, keeps studiously ten miles an hour below the speed limit and observes the strictures of traffic signs with an exaggerated obeisance. This is an important day, for her, for him.

'You're not at all nervous?' he asks.

'A little,' she replies. 'Not really, though. But it's easier for me, isn't it?'

'Why's that?'

'Because I'm doing it. Not waiting. Watching. I'll be there. You'll be outside in the car. Helpless.'

'But you'll be in there. With him. Who knows what he'll be like? What it'll be like for you?' He smiles.

'That's precisely it. It makes things easier. Truly. You don't see, do you? How could you? I'm past the age when anything really matters, least of all what I say or do. I can be as outrageous as I want with impunity. I'm a dangerous quantity. I'm beyond embarrassment. If it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out. I'll live to fight another day.'

'You're remarkable,' he says. 'Brave.'

'Not really. What can happen? A drink and a bite with no doubt the perfect gentleman in a busy country pub. With my knight in

shining armour waiting outside gripping his mobile phone. What can possibly happen?'

He smiles and turns off the motorway on to the slip road.

4

'Estelle,' she says, extending her hand, and her eyes twinkle as she smiles.

'Brian,' he replies. 'Delighted.'

She has found him. An appropriate ten minutes after the appointed time, owing to some judicious circling of the neighbourhood by Stephen, accompanied by glances at the building, newly constructed to look old, lit brightly in the March midday gloom.

To Roy, she is instantly recognizable. Of medium height, slight, young for her age, something of the gamine about her, an amused, delighted expression and those engaging eyes. Lovely hair. A stunning dress that shows off her figure. A real head-turner in her time no doubt. The photograph on the website did not lie. His slight annoyance that she was not there before him evaporates. He approves. Oh yes. Very much so.

'Now, what can I get you to drink?' he asks.

'I'd love a . . . vodka martini,' she says.

She does not know why; the notion has just slipped into her head. Such impetuousness will not do for the next hour or two. Control and discipline.

'Shaken or stirred?' he says with a smile and a raise of the eyebrow. Rather different from the customary sad small sherry, he thinks.

'Ha ha,' she says.

He orders her drink, suggests they sit and carries their glasses to table number 16.

'How did you recognize me?' he asks.

'I came in, looked around and there you were, standing at the bar. Tall, distinguished, smart, just as you described. Your photograph is very much like you.'

This is not so very far from the truth, she reasons. In fact in a sea of – seemingly – sixteen-year-old thrusting sales executives he was not difficult to pick out.

'Wizzywig,' he says.

'Pardon?'

'What you see is what you get. I do exactly what it says on the tin.'

'Oh,' she says, 'how very disappointing.' She smiles as if to reassure him that she is flirting.

'Ho ho ho,' he booms after a short pause, his shoulders heaving. 'Very good. I can see you're trouble. We're going to get on famously.' He appraises her frankly. 'Oh yes.'

They order their food, she a vegetarian pasta, he steak, egg and chips. Between mouthfuls of plastic conchigliette smeared with processed baby-food vegetables and a stringy cheese sauce she considers him more fully. He is indeed tall and broad-shouldered, with a shock of white hair swept back from a florid face on which the tributaries of blood vessels map a complex topography. The hair is tamed with hair cream and plastered down neatly behind the ears. His eyes are striking, alarming almost, the light blue of the irises set in their ovoid milky frames against the sea of reddening skin, watchful, darting even as they focus on her face. Were it not for the watery, diluted quality of age she might be afraid of him; indeed she is a little afraid.

At one point he was a commanding presence, she thinks: tall and authoritative. He still holds himself that way, but at the same time there is an undisguisable physical slump. The shoulders are rounded and the eyes contain a recognition that he cannot, after all, deny mortality. The evidence is now all too compelling and carries disappointment as the decay of physical and mental function accelerates. She knows something of how he must feel, though she has never been imposing: vivacious perhaps, but not infused with that peculiarly masculine vanity whose futility is cruelly exposed in the inevitable waning of virile power. She feels sorry for him, in a way.

The conversation flows easily.

'This is nice,' she says untruthfully, looking up from the mess on her plate.

'Oh yes,' he says. 'You can rely on them here.'

'How is your steak?'

'Splendid. Another drink?'

'Why, yes, Brian. I won't say no.'

'Not driving then?'

'No. My grandson drove me here.'

'Your grandson?'

'Yes. Stephen. He's waiting outside in the car. Immersed in a book no doubt.'

'Close to family, then?'

'Yes,' she says decisively. 'There aren't many of us. But we're very close.'

'Tell me about them.'

This is one of the obvious topics of conversation and she is prepared for it. Her son, Michael, the pharma executive who lives near Manchester, and his wife, Anne. Their son, Stephen, a historian working at Bristol University. Their daughter, Emma, studying English at Edinburgh. She briefly mentions Alasdair, her late husband, but she knows that now is not the time to visit the private sadnesses that have, in part, brought them to this table.

It is Brian's turn. His son, it seems, designs kitchens in Sydney and their contact is infrequent and casual if amicable. No, he has no grandchildren. It is evident that Brian is not at ease discussing his son. Brian himself was the eldest brother of three and his siblings have passed away. And then of course there was his wife, Mary. Poor, poor Mary. He looks down and Betty suspects a tear might be forming.

'You know,' he says, looking up, re-energized, 'one of the things I dislike intensely is dishonesty.' He looks at her and she returns his gaze evenly. 'It seems no one today feels a bit of shame about lying. When they're caught, of course, oh yes. But it seems dishonesty is all right if you can get away with it. I deplore that. Do you understand me?'

She looks at him and smiles, saying, 'Yes. I think so.'

'So I have to confess to you an act of deception on my part. In meeting you.' He pauses and adopts a solemn expression. 'I'm afraid my name is in fact not Brian. It's Roy. Roy Courtnay. Brian was a kind of nom de plume for this meeting. If you see what I mean. One feels so exposed.'

Nom de guerre, she thinks, mildly irritated.

'Oh, that,' she says with cheerful dismissiveness. 'I've never done this before but I more or less assumed it's par for the course. Natural self-protection. I suppose now's the moment where I confess that my name's not Estelle. I'm Betty.'

They look at each other seriously for a moment before laughing in unison.

'I can promise that was the last time I will lie to you, Betty. Everything I say to you from now on will be the truth. Total honesty I can promise you, Betty. Total honesty.' He grins broadly.

Steady on, she thinks, but returns his smile with neither reserve nor equivocation. She says, 'I'm glad to hear it.'

They have crossed a line, each feels privately, and they relax. They chat, talking about young people. It is safe territory and in platitudes they can share bemusement at life these days.

'They're so brave,' she says. 'I'd never have dared do some of the things they get up to.'

'But so casual,' he replies, 'everything's so easy for them. No perseverance.'

'I know. They haven't a care in the world. Not like us. I'm glad they're like that.'

Betty supposes this must be a necessary part of the process, a step on the path to greater intimacy. She believes little of what she is saying; she is making it up as she goes.

She tells Roy that Stephen doesn't even have a telephone in his flat; his mobile smart thingummy is all he seems to require. He carries his life in his back pocket. When they were young, they agree, the ultimate status symbol was a telephone in the house. Now it's a social faux pas. Her son owns three cars. And there are only two people in the household now both of the children are away. Or rather he doesn't own them but pays an extortionate amount each

month to a finance company and simply cashes each in for another at the end of three years, an abstruse arrangement he has patiently explained a number of times but which she fails to 'get', as he puts it. No one would dream of actually saving up to buy something these days. Her granddaughter is twenty years old and has visited more countries than Betty has in her lifetime. She is burbling, rushing headlong, she realizes, but it doesn't matter. It is all right.

Stephen is duly summoned and approved of. 'A fine young man,' says Roy while said young man is visiting the lavatory. 'A tribute to you, Betty. A fine young man.'

Telephone numbers are exchanged as well as genuine expressions of intent to meet again, very shortly. They offer Roy a lift to the station but he declines. 'Not quite decrepit yet,' he says. 'It's only a short walk.' He stands as they leave and kisses Betty on the cheek. She reciprocates, squeezes his arm and pulls him slightly closer, though not yet to the intimacy of an embrace. Then she extends her arms, holds him there and looks into his eyes.

'Until next time, then,' she says.

'Au revoir, Betty,' he says.

Chapter Two
Mistletoe and Wine

I

Here they come. The innocents abroad, toddling down the street. The sun has got his hat on and all is well with the world.

They tumble and rush shrilly over the cobbles, ties askew, satchels flying, shirts out of trousers, hair tousled. School shoes clatter on ancient stone as they find their way down cut-throughs from the school towards the pedestrian shopping zone, flowing like liquid, and young voices clamour and vie in excitement.

The girls come more slowly, and more neatly. Well, girls always are better-behaved, more circumspect. Except for the naughty ones. And they can be very naughty. Oh yes.

The Green is bathed in placid sunlight, with its refuges of shade under the venerable trees. This is how it has been for centuries: young people flooding out of the cathedral school with not a thought, brimming with life, eager to resume their dodges and weaves, while old men regard them with ill-disguised envy from their mews cottages and contemplate bitterly their own youth.

With interest but no compassion, he watches them from his chair in the corner of the living room. The girls are particularly fascinating. Boys of secondary school age are mere blustering rhinos, carried on a wave of hormonal surges of which they are the helpless victims and to which they are utterly oblivious. Their female peers have gained an awareness. And with awareness comes uncertainty, expressed in various ways. The plain and studious invest their faith that diligence and intelligence may help them to navigate the horrors, away from loneliness and failure. The fresh-faced, pretty girls of the class – pretty vacuous too, most of them – sense inchoately

that their attractiveness may be ephemeral and dependent on the vagaries of their coming physical development. And the little tarts, who aren't especially clever but are smart enough to know that they aren't bright or in the first ranks of prettiness, use cunning, hitching up their skirts as soon as they leave the house, teasing the males. They know that thing called sex lurks somewhere close by; and they quickly learn their power. Oh yes.

Now the older ones. Pimply youths with lank long hair and doleful expressions dance attendance on unattainable girls. Roy likes the girls' disdain, though his scorn for the hopeless male specimens exceeds even the girls'. With flashed mascara glances between them – they tend to walk in pairs – and grins that are intended to appear shy but which Roy knows to be smirks, the girls disguise their feelings.

He cannot see himself in the boys. You fools, he thinks; you fools. I was not one of you. I was bold and handsome. I did not falter or trip.

He is no longer fifteen. Or fifty, or eighty for that matter. But your instincts never change. Once a charmer, ineffably attractive to the opposite sex, always a charmer. He could not help it even if he wanted to.

There she is. The one he has selected for singular attention. Regulation short black skirt and black tights encasing slender womanly legs. The tights are at odds with the school uniform, yet, he thinks knowingly, perfectly congruent given context. Perhaps fifteen, maybe as young as a well-developed thirteen; they grow so quickly these days. Petite anyway, with that wild blonde-streaked Medusa hair that seems never to go out of fashion. Eyeshadow daubed inexpertly but to good effect from where he is sitting. She thinks she is a rebel, an individual, but she is simply treading a familiar path to eventual conformity. If only he were younger he could teach her a thing or two. She might feign haughtiness and indifference, a languorous pretence of experience. She might be enthusiastic as she ventured on the path of discovery, but eventually she would show fear. Roy can deal with fear. Oh yes.

⋆

Stephen, meanwhile, is running late. Story of his life. He has promised to deliver some books to Betty and then he must be back for a meeting with Gerald at six that is sure to be gruelling. He can predict the questions: Everything on track? All the corners covered? All the boxes ticked? Let's just sit down and make doubly sure, shall we? This project is pretty damned important, after all.

To be honest, the questions are pertinent and Stephen requires supervision. This, not Gerald, is what troubles Stephen. Gerald is all right, though he does revel somewhat in his position. The fundamental issue is, though, that Stephen does not know whether everything is on track. He can't see the track, let alone the corners. He hasn't yet worked out what the boxes are that need to be ticked. This thing seems to have a life of its own.

Project management is not Stephen's thing. Management isn't his thing. Purpose, mental exertion, careful research, the joy of winkling out new facts that change the terrain, a sense of creating something worthwhile, these are the important things, not dry process. Gerald is a necessary evil, he supposes. What would he do without him?

He finds the alleyway between the chemist's and the estate agent's that connects the new town with the old and hastens up it from standard issue high street to centuries-old cobblestones and the Green. The clock is chiming the half-hour somewhere behind the screen of oaks whose leaves rustle in the breeze and dapple the sunlight, casting undulating light and shade over the fine verdant carpet.

It is a gorgeous day in England, one of few so far this summer. The sun is high in a blue sky and pristine white powder-puff clouds skim on the breeze. Children swarm busily from their daily endeavours, the adrenalin of release fuelling their exuberance. At a distance their uniforms look neat and tidy but as he approaches he can see that the demands of the day, as well as sundry attempts to declaim individuality, have taken their toll. Blazers are tossed on shoulders, shirts are crumpled and grubby, shoes are scuffed. And there is the smell of schoolchildren, their sweat and urine and dirt intermingled with heavy-duty synthetic fabrics and that odd faint reek that seeps

from the institution itself, combining the almost metallic smell of cleaning fluid and polish with the aroma of dusty wooded age exuding from its parquet floors and the august panelling of the main hall.

There is a cheeriness about the children that bolsters his optimism. He passes through the melee of boys and behind them are the various phalanxes of girls, more cliquey, quieter, more guarded. Older in fact, and more self-aware.

Stephen is careful to be careful about the way he regards the girls, for he knows of the suspicion of every male that must reside in each female heart these days. Was it ever so? He does not know but cannot risk his look being mistaken for a leer.

He is interested in the phenomenon of youth, though not quite sure why. It could be simple curiosity about the human condition, piqued by these young things in that phase of growing, as they observe, mimic, experiment, revise, adapt and finally begin to achieve identity. Perhaps it is because he himself has not yet completed that final phase, despite pushing thirty.

Across the Green he sees a young girl, maybe fourteen, walking on her own, gawky, uncertain, meaninglessly defiant. Her skirt is short, her eyes blackened, her chin juts with attitude, yet she is just a child and in her eyes he sees fear. Her affectation provokes a series of emotions: a flood of something he can only think of as love, an acknowledgement of her vulnerability and a desire, despite his powerlessness to do so and the absurdity of the proposition, to protect. He examines his motives, searching for the shadow of lust contorted into more palatable expressions. He can honestly say that it does not lurk, but it is interesting that he needs to check.

And then he sees him, in Betty's chair by the window. Roy, who has been living at Betty's for two months now. Those lizard eyes are fixed on this girl, acquisitive, hungry. She continues to walk, oblivious as she composes a text. As she passes Stephen, Roy sees him and their eyes lock. Inside a second Roy's expression changes from incredulity to hostility and finally to the sad old man harmlessly passing his days looking out on the world. Roy smiles experimentally and Stephen returns the smile, waving diffidently. He thinks: I know you. However much I dislike you.

2

'I'd be very careful if I were you,' says Roy when Stephen enters the room.

'Sorry?' says Stephen.

'I said you want to be careful,' repeats Roy, jerking his head theatrically towards the window.

Stephen frowns in puzzlement, opens his mouth to say something, but thinks better of it. Roy's eyes are on his face.

He says, 'Cup of tea?'

'Don't mind if I do,' replies Roy, leaning back in his chair again.

When Stephen has brought the mugs of tea – terracotta-strong with three sugars for Roy, milky-white with none for himself – Roy resumes.

He says, 'Can't be too careful.'

The words hang in the air for a moment.

'Er, yes,' says Stephen finally. 'Pardon?'

Away with the fairies, thinks Roy. Mind off somewhere else. Hopeless. All over the place. Typical academic.

'Misunderstandings,' he says.

'Oh, yes,' says Stephen, inattentive, smiling weakly. 'Yes.'

'Don't patronize me, son.'

Stephen stares at him blankly and says nothing.

'Betty not around?' he comes up with finally.

Roy backs off. Like being cruel to a puppy. Not, necessarily, that that would stop him. But Stephen bores him. Unlikely to be any sport there. 'No,' he says. 'Out meeting a friend for tea.'

'Oh, right. Any idea when she'll be back?'

'Oh no. She's a law to herself, that one.' Roy chuckles. 'I'm not her keeper.'

'No. Of course not.'

'You in a hurry? You seem distracted.'

'A lot on at the moment. I just dropped by with these books I promised Betty.' He holds out the orange carrier bag as evidence. 'She said she'd like to borrow them.'

'Oh yes,' says Roy, looking at him steadily.

Stephen places himself on the edge of the sofa, leaning forward, elbows on thighs, jacket still on despite the heat, ready to leave.

After a pause Roy asks, 'Your work going OK?'

'Fine,' replies Stephen. 'It's going well. I'm on my way to a meeting with my supervisor, actually.'

'Hard taskmaster ,is he?'

'He's all right, Gerald. Keeps me on the straight and narrow. I need that.'

'I can see that,' says Roy, and they fall silent.

'What is it exactly you're studying?'

'The Jacobite Rebellion,' says Stephen eagerly. 'Specifically John Graham, his role in the instigation of the movement and his influence on the Fifteen and the Forty-Five.'

'Really?'

'It's a pivotal period in our history, with the Hanoverian succession and the struggle between Scottish Catholicism and Presbyterianism.'

'Very interesting I'm sure. I never was one for history. Not the academic type. What's the point of looking back? I ask myself. What's done is done in my humble opinion. You'll never undo it.'

'But you may begin to understand it.'

'Oh yes. I suppose so. I don't mean to knock it,' says Roy. 'I bow to your greater knowledge. Just not for me, that's all. All that living in the past.'

The clock ticks, measuring the distance between them.

'Oh well,' says Roy, 'each to his own.'

'I'd better be getting on,' says Stephen. 'I said I'd be at Gerald's by six.'

'Righty-ho,' says Roy, and turns to the window again. In his head Stephen has already left.

3

The beginning of autumn, as is customary after a summer whose occasional promise failed to materialize, is perversely fine and warm.