
Opening Extract from...

The Rotters' Club

Written by Jonathan Coe

Published by Penguin Books

Bestselling author of *What a Carve Up!*

Jonathan COE

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'Funny, moving, exhilarating... the most enjoyable novel about growing up I've read for a long time'
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This is a limited extract from The Rotters' Club

On a clear, blueblack, starry night, in the city of Berlin, in the year 2003, two young people sat down to dinner. Their names were Sophie and Patrick.

These two people had never met, before today. Sophie was visiting Berlin with her mother, and Patrick was visiting with his father. Sophie's mother and Patrick's father had once known each other, very slightly, a long time ago. For a short while, Patrick's father had even been infatuated with Sophie's mother, when they were still at school. But it was twenty-nine years since they had last exchanged any words.

– Where do you think they've gone? Sophie asked.

– Clubbing, probably. Checking out the techno places.

– Are you serious?

– Of course not. My dad's never been to a club in his life. The last album he bought was by Barclay James Harvest.

– Who?

– Exactly.

Sophie and Patrick watched as the vast, brightly lit glass-and-concrete extravagance of the new Reichstag came into view. The restaurant they had chosen, at the top of the Fernsehturm above Alexanderplatz, revolved rather more quickly than either of them had been expecting. Apparently the speed had been doubled since reunification.

– How is your mother now? Patrick asked. Has she recovered?

– Oh, that was nothing. We went back to the hotel, and she lay down for a while. After that, she was fine. Another couple of hours and we went shopping. That's when I got this skirt.

– It looks great on you.
– Anyway, I'm glad that it happened, because otherwise your dad wouldn't have recognized her.
– I suppose not.
– So we wouldn't be sitting here, would we? It must be fate. Or something.

It was an odd situation they had been thrown into. There had seemed to be a spontaneous intimacy between their parents, even though it was so long since they had known each other. They had flung themselves into their reunion with a sort of joyous relief, as if this chance encounter in a Berlin tea-room could somehow erase the intervening decades, heal the pain of their passing. That had left Sophie and Patrick floundering in a different, more awkward kind of intimacy. They had nothing in common, they realized, except their parents' histories.
– Does your father ever talk much about his schooldays? Sophie asked.
– Well, it's funny. He never used to. But I think it's all been coming back to him, lately. Some of the people he knew back then have resurfaced. For instance, there was a boy called . . .
– Harding?
– Yes. You know about him?
– A little. I'd like to know more.
– Then I'll tell you. And Dad mentions your uncle sometimes. Your uncle Benjamin.
– Ah, yes. They were good friends, weren't they?
– Best friends, I think.
– Did you know they once played in a band together?
– No, he never mentioned that.
– What about the magazine they used to edit?
– No, he never told me about that either.
– I've heard it all from my mother, you see. She has perfect recall of those days.
– How come?
– Well . . .

And then Sophie began to explain. It was hard to know where to start. The era they were discussing seemed to belong to the dimmest recesses of history. She said to Patrick:
– Do you ever try to imagine what it was like before you were born?

– How do you mean? You mean like in the womb?
– No, I mean, what the world was like, before you came along.
– Not really. I can't get my head around it.
– But you remember how things were when you were younger. You remember John Major, for instance?
– Vaguely.
– Well, of course, that's the only way to remember him. What about Mrs Thatcher?
– No. I was only . . . five or six when she resigned. Why are you asking this, anyway?
– Because we're going to have to think further back than that. Much further.

Sophie broke off, and a frown darkened her face.
– You know, I can tell you this story, but you might get frustrated. It doesn't end. It just stops. I don't know how it ends.
– Perhaps I know the ending.
– Will you tell me, if you do?
– Of course.

They smiled at each other then, quickly and for the first time. As the crane-filled skyline, the ever-changing work-in-progress that was the Berlin cityscape unfurled behind her, Patrick looked at Sophie's face, her graceful jaw, her long black eyelashes, and felt the stirrings of something, a thankfulness that he had met her, a flicker of curiosity about what his future might suddenly hold.

Sophie poured sparkling mineral water into her glass from a navy-blue bottle and said:
– Come with me, then, Patrick. Let's go backwards. Backwards in time, all the way back to the beginning. Back to a country that neither of us would recognize, probably. Britain, 1973.
– Was it really that different, do you think?
– Completely different. Just think of it! A world without mobiles or videos or Playstations or even faxes. A world that had never heard of Princess Diana or Tony Blair, never thought for a moment of going to war in Kosovo or Afghanistan. There were only three television channels in those days, Patrick. Three! And the unions were so powerful that, if they wanted to, they could close one of them down for a whole night. Sometimes people even had to do without electricity. Imagine!

The Chick and the Hairy Guy

WINTER

1

Imagine!

November the 15th, 1973. A Thursday evening, drizzle whispering against the window-panes, and the family gathered in the living room. All except Colin, who is out on business, and has told his wife and children not to wait up. Weak light from a pair of wrought-iron standard lamps. The coal-effect fire hisses.

Sheila Trotter is reading the *Daily Mail*: '*"To have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health" – these are the promises which do in fact sustain most married couples through the bad patches.*'

Lois is reading *Sounds*: '*Guy, 18, cat lover, seeks London chick, into Sabbath. Only Freaks please.*'

Paul, precociously, is reading *Watership Down*: '*Simple African villagers, who have never left their remote homes, may not be particularly surprised by their first sight of an aeroplane: it is outside their comprehension.*'

As for Benjamin . . . I suppose he is doing his homework at the dining table. The frown of concentration, the slightly protruding tongue (a family trait, of course: I've seen my mother look the same way, crouched over her laptop). History, probably. Or maybe physics. Something which doesn't come easily, at any rate. He looks across at the clock on the mantelpiece. The organized type, he has set himself a deadline. He has ten minutes to go. Ten more minutes in which to write up the experiment.

I'm doing my best, Patrick. Really I am. But it's not an easy

one to tell, the story of my family. Uncle Benjamin's story, if you like.

I'm not even sure this is the right place to start. But perhaps one place is as good as any other. And this is the one I've chosen. Mid-November, the dark promise of an English winter, almost thirty years ago.

November the 15th, 1973.

*

Long periods of silence were common. They were a family who had never learned the art of talking to one another. All of them inscrutable, even to themselves: all except Lois, of course. Her needs were simple, defined, and in the end she was punished for it. That's how I see things, anyway.

I don't think she wanted much, at this stage of her life. I think she only wanted companionship, and the occasional babble of voices around her. She would have had a craving for chatter, coming from that family; but she was not the sort to lose herself in a giggling circus of friends. She knew what she was looking for, I'm sure of that; already knew, even then, even at the age of sixteen. And she knew where to look for it, too. Ever since her brother had started buying *Sounds* every Thursday, on the way home from school, it had become her furtive weekly ritual to feign interest in the back-page adverts for posters and clothes ('*Cotton drill shirts in black, navy, flame-red, cranberry – great to team with loons*') when her real focus of attention was the personal column. She was looking for a man.

*

She had read nearly all of the personals by now. She was beginning to despair.

'*Freaky Guy (20) wants crazy chick (16+) for love. Into Quo and Zep.*'

Once again, not exactly ideal. Did she want her guy to be freaky? Could she honestly describe herself as crazy? Who were Quo and Zep, anyway?

'*Great guy wishes groovy chick to write, into Tull, Pink Floyd, 17–28.*'

'*Two freaky guys seek heavy chicks. 16+, love and affection.*'

'*Guy (20), back in Kidderminster area, seeks attractive chick(s).*'

Kidderminster was only a few miles away, so this last one might have been promising, if it weren't for the giveaway plural in parentheses. He'd definitely blown his cover, there. Out for a good time, and little else. Though perhaps that was preferable, in a way, to the whiff of desperation that came off some of the other messages.

'*Disenchanted, lonely guy (21), long dark hair, would like communication with aware, thoughtful girl, appreciate anything creative like: progressive, folk, fine art.*'

'*Lonely, unattractive guy (22), needs female companionship, looks unimportant. Into Moodies, BJH, Camel etc.*'

'*Lonely Hairy, Who and Floyd freak, needs a chick for friendship, love and peace. Stockport area.*'

Her mother put the newspaper aside and said: 'Cup of tea, anyone? Lemonade?'

When she had gone to the kitchen, Paul laid down his rabbit saga and picked up the *Daily Mail*. He began reading it with a tired, sceptical smile on his face.

'*Any chick want to go to India. Split end of Dec, no Straights.*'

'*Any chick who wants to see the world, please write.*'

Yes, she did want to see the world, now that she thought of it. The slow awareness had been growing inside her, fuelled by holiday programmes on the television and colour photos in the *Sunday Times* magazine, that a universe existed beyond the confines of Longbridge, beyond the terminus of the 62 bus route, beyond Birmingham, beyond England, even. What's more, she wanted to see it, and she wanted to share it with someone. She wanted someone to hold her hand as she watched the moon rise over the Taj Mahal. She wanted to be kissed, softly but at great length, against the magnificent backdrop of the Canadian Rockies. She wanted to climb Ayers Rock at dawn. She wanted someone to propose marriage to her as the setting sun draped its blood-red fingers over the rose-tinted minarets of the Alhambra.

'*Leeds boy with scooter, looks OK, seeks girlfriend 17–21 for discos, concerts. Photo appreciated.*'

'*Wanted girl friend, any age, but 4 ft. 10 in. or under, all letters answered.*'

'Finished.'

Benjamin slammed his exercise book shut and made a big show

of packing his pens and books away in the little briefcase he always took to school. His physics text book had started to come apart, so he had re-covered it with a remnant of the anaglypta his father had used to wallpaper the living room two years ago. On the front of his English book he had drawn a big cartoon foot, like the one at the end of the *Monty Python* signature tune.

'That's me done for the night.' He stood over his sister, who was sprawled across both halves of the settee. 'Gimme that.'

It always annoyed him when Lois got to read *Sounds* before he did. He seemed to think this gave her privileged access to top-secret information. But in truth she cared nothing for the news pages over which he was ready to pore so avidly. Most of the headlines she didn't even understand. '*Beefheart here in May*.' '*New Heep album due*.' '*Another split in Fanny*.'

'What's a Freak?' she asked, handing him the magazine.

Benjamin laughed tartly and pointed at their nine-year-old brother, whose face was aglow with amused contempt as he perused the *Daily Mail*. 'You're looking at one.'

'I know that. But a Freak with a capital "F". I mean, it's obviously some sort of technical term.'

Benjamin did not reply; and he somehow managed to leave Lois with the impression that he knew the answer well enough, but had chosen to withhold it, for reasons of his own. People always tended to regard him as knowledgeable, well-informed, even though the evidence was plainly to the contrary. There must have been some air about him, some indefinable sense of confidence, which it was easy to mistake for youthful wisdom.

'Mother,' said Paul, when she came in with his fizzy drink, 'why do we take this newspaper?'

Sheila glared at him, obscurely resentful. She had told him many times before to call her 'Mum', not 'Mother'.

'No reason,' she said. 'Why shouldn't we?'

'Because it's full,' said Paul, flicking through the pages, 'of platitudinous codswallop.'

Ben and Lois giggled helplessly. 'I thought "platitudinous" was an animal they had in Australia,' she said.

'The lesser-spotted platitudinous,' said Benjamin, honking and squawking in imitation of this mythical beast.

'Take this leading article, for instance,' Paul continued, unde-

terred. ' "*That precise pageantry which Britain manages so well keeps its hold on our hearts. There's nothing like a Royal Wedding for lifting our spirits.*" '

'What about it?' said Sheila, stirring sugar into her tea. 'I don't agree with everything I read in there.'

' "*As Princess Anne and Mark Phillips walked out of the Abbey, their faces broke into that slow, spreading smile of people who are really happy.*" Pass the sick bag, *please*! "*The Prayer Book may be three hundred years old, but its promises are as clear as yesterday's sunlight.*" Pukerocious! " '*To have and to hold, for better for worse –* ' "'

'That's quite enough from *you*, Mr Know-All.' The quiver in Sheila's voice was enough to expose, just for a second, the sudden panic her youngest son was learning to inspire in her. 'Drink that up and put your pyjamas on.'

More squabbling ensued, with Benjamin making his own shrill interventions, but Lois did not listen to any of it. These were not the voices with which she longed to surround herself. She left them to it and withdrew to her bedroom, where she was able to re-enter her world of romantic daydreams, a kingdom of infinite colour and possibility. As for Benjamin's copy of *Sounds*, she had found what she was looking for there, and had no further use for it. She would not even need to sneak down later and take another look, for the box number was easy to remember (it was 247, the same as the Radio One waveband), and the message she had seized upon was one of perfect, magical simplicity. Perhaps that was how she knew that it was meant for her, and her alone.

'*Hairy Guy seeks Chick. Birmingham area.*'

2

Meanwhile, Lois's father Colin was sitting in a pub called The Bull's Head in King's Norton. His boss, Jack Forrest, had gone to the bar to get three pints of Brew XI, leaving Colin to make halting conversation with Bill Anderton, a shop steward in the Longbridge underseal section. A fourth member of the party, Roy Slater, was yet to arrive. It was a great relief when Jack came back from the bar.

'Cheers,' said Colin, Bill and Jack, drinking from their pints of Brew. After drinking in unison they let out a collective sigh, and wiped the froth from their upper lips. Then they fell silent.

'I want this to be nice and informal,' said Jack Forrest, suddenly, when the silence had become too long and too settled for comfort.

'Informal. Absolutely,' said Colin.

'Suits me,' said Bill. 'Suits me fine.'

Informally, they sipped on their Brew. Colin looked around the pub, intending to make a comment about the décor, but couldn't think of one. Bill Anderton stared into his beer.

'They brew a good pint, don't they?' said Jack.

'Eh?' said Bill.

'I said they serve a good pint, in this place.'

'Not bad,' said Bill. 'I've had worse.'

This was in the days before men learned to discuss their feelings, of course. And in the days before bonding sessions between management and workforce were at all common. They were pioneers, in a way, these three.

Colin bought another round, and there was still no sign of Roy. They sat and drank their pints. The tables in which their faces were dimly reflected were dark brown, the darkest brown, the colour of Bournville chocolate. The walls were a lighter brown, the colour of Dairy Milk. The carpet was brown, with little hexagons of a slightly different brown, if you looked closely. The ceiling was meant to be off-white, but was in fact brown, browned by the nicotine smoke of a million unfiltered cigarettes. Most of the cars in the car park were brown, as were most of the clothes worn by the patrons. Nobody in the pub really noticed the predominance of brown, or if they did, thought it worth remarking upon. These were brown times.

'Well then, you two – have you worked it out yet?' Jack Forrest asked.

'Worked what out?' said Bill.

'There's a reason for this evening, you know,' said Jack. 'I didn't just pick you out at random. I could have got any personnel officer, and any shop steward, and set this evening up for them. But I didn't do that. I chose you two for a reason.'

Bill and Colin looked at each other.

'You have something in common, you see.' Jack regarded them both in turn, pleased with himself. 'Don't you know what it is?'

They shrugged.

'You've both got kids at the same school.'

This information sank in, gradually, and Colin was the first to manage a smile.

'Anderton – of course. My Ben's got a friend called Anderton. They're in the same form. Talks about him from time to time.' He looked at Bill, now, with something almost approaching warmth. 'Is that your boy?'

'That's him, yes: Duggie. And your son must be Bent.'

Colin seemed puzzled by this, if not a little shocked. 'No, *Ben*,' he corrected. 'Ben Trotter. Short for Benjamin.'

'I know his name's Benjamin,' said Bill. 'But that's what they call him. Bent Rotter. Ben Trotter. D'you get it?'

After a few seconds, Colin got it. He pursed his lips, wounded on his son's behalf.

'Boys can be very cruel,' he said.

Jack's face had relaxed into a look of satisfaction. 'You know, this tells you something about the country we live in today,' he said. 'Britain in the 1970s. The old distinctions just don't mean anything any more, do they? This is a country where a union man and a junior manager – soon to be senior, Colin, I'm sure – can send their sons to the same school and nobody thinks anything of it. Both bright lads, both good enough to have got through the entrance exam, and now there they are: side by side in the cradle of learning. What does that tell you about the class war? It's over. Truce. Armistice.' He clasped his pint of Brew and raised it solemnly. 'Equality of opportunity.'

Colin murmured a shy echo of these words, and drank from his glass. Bill said nothing: as far as he was concerned, the class war was alive and well and being waged with some ferocity at British Leyland, even in Ted Heath's egalitarian 1970s, but he couldn't rouse himself to argue the point. His mind was on other things that evening. He put his hand inside his jacket pocket and fingered the cheque and wondered once again if he was going mad.

*

Perhaps it had been a mistake to invite Roy Slater along. The thing about Slater was that everybody hated him, including Bill

Anderton, who might have been expected to show some solidarity with his putative comrade-in-arms. But Slater was the worst kind of shop steward, as far as Bill was concerned. He had no talent for negotiation, no imaginative sympathy with the men he was supposed to represent, no grasp of the wider political issues. He was just a loudmouth and a troublemaker, always looking for confrontation, and always coming out of it badly. In union terms he was a nobody, way down the hierarchy of the TGWU's junior stewards at Longbridge. It was all Bill could do to be civil to him, most of the time, and tonight he was expected to do more than that: honour demanded that the two of them put up some sort of united front against these alluring management overtures. It was enough to make him suspect calculation on Jack's part. What, after all, could be more effective than to divide the opposition by pairing up two shop stewards who famously couldn't stand each other?

'Bit of all right, this, isn't it?' said Roy, nudging Bill fiercely in the ribs as they studied the menus in their red leather wallets. They had adjourned, by now, to a Berni Inn on the Stratford Road.

'Don't wet yourself, Slater,' said Bill, taking out his reading glasses. 'There's no such thing as a free lunch in this business, in case you hadn't noticed.'

'On this occasion,' said Jack, 'that's exactly where you're wrong. You're all here as my guests, and you can order anything you like. The tab for this is being picked up by the British Leyland Motor Corporation, so expense is no object. Go for it, chaps. Let your imaginations run wild.'

Roy ordered fillet steak and chips, Colin ordered fillet steak and chips, Bill ordered fillet steak, chips and peas and Jack, who went to the South of France for his holidays, ordered fillet steak with chips, peas and mushrooms on the side, a touch of sophistication that was not lost on the others. As they waited for the food to arrive, Jack tried to instigate a discussion about the marital prospects of Princess Anne and Captain Mark Phillips, but it failed to catch fire. Roy seemed to have no strong views on the subject, Bill wasn't interested ('Bread and circuses, Jack, bread and circuses') and Colin's attention was beginning to wander. He stared out at the night, beyond the car park, into the charcoal distance, the cars

winking past on the Stratford Road, and it was impossible to know what he was thinking. Worrying about Ben, and his school nickname? Missing Sheila, and the hiss of the coal-effect fire? Or perhaps longing to go back to those days in the design room, before he had taken this job, this stupid job that had looked like a step up the ladder but turned out to be a nightmare of human complication.

'You know, this won't work, Jack,' Bill was saying, his tone friendly but combative, his fifth pint of Brew now having a decidedly mellowing influence. 'You can't wipe out social injustice by taking the enemy out for steak and chips every so often.'

'Oh, this is nothing, Bill. This is just the beginning. In a couple of years' time, employee participation is going to be codified. It's going to be government policy.'

'Which government?'

'It doesn't matter. Doesn't make a blind bit of difference. I'm telling you, we're going to be entering a whole new phase. Management and workers – elected representatives, that is – are going to sit around the table and take decisions *together*. Looking at the forward plans of the company *together*. Mutual interests. Common ground. That's what we're looking for. And it's got to happen because at the moment confrontation is crippling the industry.'

'This,' said Slater, suddenly and irrelevantly, 'is a bloody good steak.' His meal had arrived first, and he hadn't waited for the others before starting. 'Give me something like this every day of the week and we might be talking, do you know what I'm saying?'

Bill ignored him. 'The point is, Jack, that it's not confrontation for the sake of it. That's what you people never seem to understand. There are grievances, you see. Real, proper grievances.'

'And they'll be addressed.'

Bill paused for a while, sipping his beer, his eyes narrowed. A waitress arrived with their food and he was distracted, momentarily, by the sight of his steak and then, more extensively, by the sight of her calves and slender thighs encased in sheer nylon, the promise of an untried body insinuated by the fall of her white blouse. The old habit. Never shaken. He forced his gaze away from her and towards Jack, coating his chips with salt and tomato ketchup as if there were no tomorrow. Bill cut off a wedge of steak,

chewed on it with undeniable relish (you didn't get this at home) and said:

'Of course, I can see where this is leading.'

'How do you mean?'

'It's the usual tactic, isn't it? Divide and rule. Take a few shop stewards, invite them upstairs, sit them round the conference table, make them feel important. Let them in on a few secrets – nothing too sensitive, mind, just a few little titbits to make them think they're in the know. And suddenly they're feeling very full of themselves, suddenly they're beginning to see things from the management's point of view, and as for their members . . . Well, they're beginning to wonder why these guys are spending half the day up in the boardroom, why they're not around on the shop floor any more when there's a problem to solve. Isn't that the way it'll be, Jack?'

Incredulous, Jack Forrest laid down his cutlery and said to Colin, 'Do you hear that, though? Do you hear the kind of thing we're up against? That typical trade-union paranoid mentality.'

'Look, mate,' said Roy to Bill, speaking indistinctly through a mouthful of chips, 'if these two gentlemen want to treat us to a nice dinner every now and again, put their point of view across, what's the problem, eh? You've got to take what you can in this life, mate. It's every man for himself as far as I can see.'

'Spoken like a true pillar of the Labour movement,' said Bill.

'What do you think, Colin?'

Colin glanced at his boss nervously. He had a hatred of confrontation, an undoubted drawback for someone saddled with a job in industrial relations.

'It's the strikes that are holding this company back,' he said at last, talking into his plate, giving voice, reluctantly, to a firm conviction that nevertheless had to be dredged up from somewhere remote and unvisited, in his profoundest depths. 'I don't know if this is the way to stop them, but they've got to be stopped somehow. It doesn't happen in Germany or Italy or Japan. Only here.'

Bill stopped eating, and held Colin in a thoughtful, penetrating gaze. Of all the things he could have said, he chose only: 'I wonder what your son and my son talk about on the bus home.'

Jack saw the chance to inject a note of levity. 'Girls and pop

music, I expect,' he said, and after that Bill gave up, turning his attention to the food and his sixth pint of Brew. A steak was a steak, after all.

*

Bill and Roy, their paths lying in the same direction, were obliged to share a minicab home. Roy pulled a face when he saw the turbaned driver sitting behind the wheel, and turned to his companion, ready to share some blokey, insulting witticism. But Bill wasn't having any of it. He let Roy get into the back and then pointedly made for the passenger seat, where he chatted to the driver for most of the twenty-minute journey. He learned that he and his wife were second-generation immigrants, living in Small Heath; that they liked Birmingham because it was full of parks and you didn't have to drive far to get out into the hills; that his eldest son was training to be a doctor, but the youngest was having trouble with bullies at school.

Overhearing this last fragment, and sensing a lull in the conversation, Roy leaned forward and said to Bill:

'That thing you said to Trotter, about your kids talking on the bus home: what was that about?'

'It was just a comment, that's all,' Bill answered.

'Your kids go to the same school, then? Is that it?'

'What's it to you, Slater?'

'Trotter's boy goes to King William's, doesn't he? That fucking . . . toffs' academy in Edgbaston.'

Bill snorted. 'You don't know what you're talking about. We don't pay anything for him to go there. It's a direct-grant school. He's a bright lad and he passed the exam. All I'm doing is giving him the best start in life.'

Roy didn't reply to this, but sat back, satisfied, believing apparently that he had located some chink in his colleague's armour. They said nothing more to each other that night, apart from the most cursory goodbyes.

When Bill got home he found that Irene had already gone to bed. He scowled at the heap of paperwork waiting for him on the dining-room table and decided that he would leave it for another day. It was almost midnight. But he took the cheque out of his jacket pocket one more time and examined it again by the light of his reading lamp.

It continued to puzzle him. A cheque for £145, drawn on the Charity Committee account, made out to a name he didn't even recognize. Signed not by Harry, the chairman, or by Miriam, the highly fanciable secretary (and was it his imagination, by the way, or had she been staring at him through most of the meeting the other night?) but by himself. And yet he could remember nothing about it. What was more, the bank had returned this cheque because the amount had only been written out in words, not figures: again, a mistake he was very unlikely to make. Unless he was cracking up. Unless the pressure was getting to him.

He filed the cheque away in his bureau and poured himself one more beer before going to bed.

*

Jack Forrest and Colin had said goodnight in the restaurant car park. Jack seemed ambivalent about the evening, not sure that it had been worthwhile. 'Was that a success, d'you reckon?' His breath was cloudy in the winter air. There would be frost before morning.

'I think so,' said Colin, who always wanted everything to be for the best. 'I think it was, well . . .'

'Constructive?'

'Yes. I think so.'

'Good. Yes, I think you're right. I think it was constructive.' He rubbed his hands, clicked back the knuckles of his long fingers. 'There's a nip in the air tonight, though, isn't there? Hope the wife's remembered to put the blanket on.'

They shook hands and parted. Their cars were on opposite sides of the car park. Colin tutted, then allowed himself a few mild swear words as he wrestled with the lock of his brown Austin 1800, struggling to free the obstinate catch he had personally designed, a few years ago, with such confidence.