

air, here and now. And you got to think to yourself: this is what the world is, and that's beautiful.

I mean, I used to think *new* machines were beautiful, but now . . .

I'm just thinking.

They took us to see *Toy Story*. The second one, with the lesbo cowgirl.

It was fucking traumatic. I mean, I'm probably making this teddy bear now for some deeply disturbed reason. Really.

After I saw *Toy Story* I started to have these . . . well, not really nightmares, but close enough.

'Cos I was thinking, you know, this isn't Winnie-the-Pooh.

It's not about a boy who has his stuffed toys and they're mates, the way mates are, like a pack of fucking lunatics and one's a manic depressive donkey and one's a slag rabbit and one's a fucking pretentious overbearing owl. But at least they're all outside in the woods, getting their exercise, and they're like . . . mates . . .

But *Toy Story* . . . it's fucking scary, this film. All the toys know they're toys. They know they're not unique. I mean, they have feelings, they can talk and they can think . . . but it's only to learn how to accept the fact that they're just these . . . things . . . like robots . . . these meaningless pieces of shit that can get broken and replaced . . . like slaves. And they don't pretend that it's not scary and miserable and humiliating. I mean, it's just like a two-hour advert for selling the crap toys in the film, but then you watch the toys and they're fucking depressed. And the only other option's getting their arms ripped off, stuffing pulled out, being left on a rubbish heap somewhere, unwanted, some money little insignificant thing. (*He gestures with the bear, providing a voice for it.*) Toys are fucking brutal, too, mate.

But the scene that just . . . I couldn't get it out of my head.

The stupid fucking space ranger walks into the shop and there it is . . . a wall of identical toys, all exactly the same, all

swearing that they're unique and they actually have space ranger powers, and not even turning their heads to see how completely . . . completely the opposite of unique they all really are. Worthless. Worthless is the opposite of unique.

And I started having that . . . nightmare, really. Going to . . . I dunno . . .

I guess it was Toys 'R' Us, I'm not sure, I never been there.

It was really the shop from the film with a wall of these . . . dolls. Only they weren't dolls. They were me. Or him.

It's like . . . I am totally the same as everyone else out there my age, and totally useless, a meaningless fucking robot, another up-his-own-arse space ranger who can't even fly.

He makes a final stitch on the bear, detaches the thread and needle, and considers the result.

Both eyes. The bear can almost see now. Poor fucker. Hate to do it to him, really. Better to keep them closed.

Janet asked me, 'Who's he for?'

I said, he's not *for* anyone, he's useless. That's what makes him beautiful.

Stephanie Princess Raquel and I are not currently speaking.

She'll come round. It's like Crufts. Anticipating their misbehaviour is part of the training. Then, when it occurs, you just starve them into submission. I mean, I don't know what Princess R had to eat today, but there's no food in the house and I'm going on my tod to Angus Steakhouse.

I don't feel guilty. Give that girl an inch and she takes a mile.

You could say she's spoilt. But if I have spoilt her, it's only because it's part of the plan.

See, I know I take Raquel to places that are too la-di-da for us, really. But what I'm hoping to do is to force her to acquire the taste for it. So that then she has to work harder, for the rest of her life, to satisfy that craving. I gather that's the way international drug dealers operate.

I mean, a silly example, but I have spent long evenings describing to Raquel what canapés are, and trying to make them sound particularly toothsome and enticing, in the hopes that she will start clawing her way to the top a little faster, just to taste some hot hors d'oeuvres in the company of A-list celebs. Or not long ago, after an audition, I took her for tea at the Savoy hotel. It was really very elegant. More kinds of cakes than I'd ever seen in my life. And they had a lovely cocktail pianist, an anorexic-looking blonde woman in a somewhat louche sequinned dress, and she was playing very light, very wistful, very jazzy versions of 'Millennium' and 'Crocodile Rock'. Then, just as Raquel and I were taking our seats, I looked over and found myself staring into the eyes of Bruce Forsyth, at which point I staggered backwards clutching my fanny, thinking I was going to piss myself. I whispered to Raquel – '*It's Bruce!*' But she just wasn't interested.

It's not like I fritter away the money she's earning but if you let it sit in the bank it does take the edge off, doesn't it? She needs a reason to get out of bed in the morning. She'll be a much more eager performer if she has to sing for her supper, essentially.

But she's become so . . . gloomy, lately. I don't understand it.

So much for being best friends.

I wonder if it's overwork.

I'd suspect it was overwork, only I maintain a far more punishing schedule than she does. I'm the one who's responsible for every appointment, every meet-and-greet, every audition that she ruins for us, by refusing to sparkle.

It might look as though things had taken a definite downturn but they haven't. We've just fallen into a bit of a rut, that's all, as one does in this business. With Raquel, it's getting stuck doing modelling work, mainly. Which pays far less, although you do occasionally get some freebies out of it. I mean, Raquel modelled junior lingerie for M&S and they gave us all sorts of free clothing for her in addition to the cheque, but I traded that in for an M&S gift certificate and used that to buy ready-meals.

Still . . . Raquel and I get into these . . . stand-offs, really, it just feeds on itself and gets worse and worse. Because I will take her in for our first audition of the day, and she'll *already* be in a bad mood, and then she'll bollocks up the audition and that makes me livid, and so we just end up like now. It's no surprise that we aren't speaking.

I mean, today was unforgivable really. They're changing casts, right? In *Les Miz*. And you can't imagine how hard I fought to get the audition, I mean, it would have been slightly easier if Raquel signed with a better known theatrical agent, but I do feel she's the kind of talent that won't get hidden under a bushel so why piss away that extra ten per cent? Nonetheless. For an old warhorse like *Les Miz* they really don't want someone like me demanding an audition. But I did, and I coached Raquel into poignant perfection, with choreography and everything. . .

She sings, with her own choreography.

There is a castle on a clouid,
I like to go there in my sleep,
Nobody shouts or talks too loud . . .

I mean, you know the show, you know Raquel, wouldn't she be perfect? The pathos. Imagine. And that's what I said to Raquel before she went on, I said, I want you to make them fucking *wweep*, torture them, stick them with pins, I don't want there to be a dry seat in that house when you're through. And I gave her a Chinese burn and pushed her on to the stage.

And she was . . . spellbinding. Little hairs on the back of my neck standing up. Booble and Showenberg have never been so thrillingly interpreted, not since Michael Ball, and I realised that Raquel does honestly, honestly have what it takes.

Until the last verse. When she actually started to cry, and it was a nice effect, but then she stopped singing and just started saying 'Mummy, Mummy' . . . And the stage manager comes to fetch me and they say thank you very much and it's just . . . evaporated. That magic. It's clear that she's not really a pro, she's only six, but if she can't fucking do it now when is she going to do it? That's what *enrages* me. I mean, here she is, she sings that song like the world is going to end, they must've known that . . . then she starts crying for her mummy! Raquel ruined it for herself. It's like the old story of she curtsied then she farted. You forget the graceful bit, you forget the talent, I was just mortified. So when we got out the stage door, I pulled her aside, and there on the Charing Cross Road I said, 'Raquel, I'm here as your agent and manager, I can't have you whingeing like you shat yourself and calling me mummy in front of all those professionals. Stop letting me down and maybe I'll want to be your mummy, you spiteful little bitch.'

She says, 'Fine, I don't want to call you Mummy any more.'
So I said, 'Well, I am your fucking mummy and you'll call me Mummy when I tell you to.'

She says, 'Well, you always say you're half mum and half dad, anyway.'

I tell her that, 'cos I'm raising her on my own, but I said, so what does that mean you want to call me?'

And she says, 'Dumb and Mad.'

Thinking about it now actually it's quite nice and precocious, or maybe it was just a fortuitous mispronunciation . . . but when she said it I was so fucked off I slapped her cross the face and she fell over.

She didn't cry, though.

She is a trouper, you know. I mean, I am proving that she has nerves of steel, 'cos she didn't even bat an eyelid, she just said, 'Slap me again I'll call you slapper.'

Six years old, can you believe it?

I don't know what's got into her.

Things just get worse and worse.

I don't know what side of the nature-nurture debate this will put me on, but I now have definitive proof that a six-year-old girl can be a raging hysterical werewolf bitch. Fucking terrifying. She doesn't even seem like my own flesh and blood. I'm so hard done by her. And the only thing that runs through my head is, bloody hell, she doesn't even have hormones in her yet, I might need to have her put down for the public good before PMT unleashes another Godzilla in a few years.

And her latest technique? For domestic terrorism? Wetting the bed. It's absolutely foul. This is the third time we've had it this week, so now I'm simply refusing to change the sheet.

I mean, that's not normal, is it?

It's ingratitude, is what it is. And as far as I'm concerned, ungrateful little girls have made their bed to lie in.

Timmy sits with a tape recorder in front of him.

Timmy This is how you do it. Modern technology. Helping you get normal.

Janet said to me . . . I don't know why she said it, must be on her mind that the time's coming up, but she said, 'Some day I won't be there, you know that, and anyway I don't think anything you have to say right now really needs me to hear it. So I want you to make a tape and then, when you've said what you need to say, you can destroy it.'

It might help.

It would help more, of course, if your whole life was on tape, and you could destroy the right bits. As if someone was watching everything, recording it on cassette, or like God. I don't really believe in God, or if He is up there He must be a particularly nasty piece of work, but that is one thing you think about . . . that somewhere, somehow, everything can be accounted for . . . but then there's all the embarrassing stuff as well, like, just watching your whole life flash before you on a telly screen, and then they freeze the frame and say, 'There! Explain that!' Like something really stupid, you're trying to wear the toilet roll on your knob or something.

Actually it would be worse if they say, 'Explain that,' and you're not doing anything. Just . . . wasting your life.

But if you've made some mistake, I guess, imagine, if you could take what there is of your life, right up to that point, and then just pull the cassette out and stamp on it, shatter the plastic, rip the tape.

Everybody lives as though that was possible. As though your life was a crap film that you could walk out on at any time, but you're just sticking around for the end 'cos it might get better . . .

But if it doesn't, well, destroy the tape.

So here goes.

He presses the button to start recording.

I don't really know what to say to myself.

I mean, I know what I'm supposed to say.

It's like . . . surprise! Here's the moment. Timmy comes in and he says what we want him to say. It all makes sense. Like playing Cluedo. Mrs Peacock did it in the conservatory with the lead piping. The nice thing about that game, of course, is that it makes it all seem logical. You go through

and figure it out, by process of elimination, but the one thing you don't get in Cluedo is a *motif*.

Why?

And that's what I don't have.

They made me act it out, they made me think how he felt, what it was like, what I did, how she felt when she couldn't find him . . . what she screamed like . . .

If I've got an imagination at least they made me use it till I sweat and use it for the right things now.

But actually . . . doing it . . .

It was just . . . nothing really.

It was . . .

It was interesting. I guess.

Sometimes you see something and it just, it might be wrong, it might be flashy, it might just make no sense but you just have to . . . look . . . like fireworks, or Torvill and Dean, or just the colours in a puddle where there's petrol spilt . . . and you just *look*.

I don't know if I knew what it was . . . they . . .

Like when a toy stops going.

He just . . .

Broken.

He stopped making noise. He stopped moving.

And it was like something was gone.

And I took the battery, it's not what they said, I just . . .

I put it in his mouth, that's where I put it.
Because I thought maybe he'd come back . . . come back
on, he'd start moving.

It wasn't dirty . . . it was just . . .

And that's when she was wandering around, screaming,
while we were doing that.

And I know what she must've sounded like, looked like . . .

Terrible.

She wasn't beautiful the way a mum should be, I ruined her,
I put her there.

But we're both paying for the same five minutes for the rest
of our lives.

Me, because of what I did, and I don't know why. You got
to believe that, I don't know why I did it, honest.

But her because she turned away for five minutes, to –
what? Look at something? Shoplift? Buy some iced buns at
the baker's? It doesn't matter what it was, even just for five
minutes, no excuse will ever be good enough, for the rest of
her life she'll be going back over that, thinking, food, you
need food to go on, I was only getting food, for me, for him,
and I never want to taste a single thing in my mouth again, I
don't want to go on, but I have to, I have to . . .

It won't ever stop. For either of us.

And there she is saying, I'll be looking over my shoulder for
the rest of my life, thinking they'll come back for my other
children . . . thinking they want to find me . . .

And I'd tell her . . .

I'd tell her: why?

Why can't you let go?

My mum let go before I was born.

I know you keep saying you'll be looking over your shoulder
the rest of your life, to see if I'm coming back.

And you're not far off.

'Cos I think about it.

One night, no one there, just you . . . to turn up . . . on your
doorstep. On my own.

But not to do you any more harm.

To make a swap.

'Cos when they said make something beautiful that's what I
thought . . . but it's so fucking hard to talk about how we
feel when . . . You wanted him so much, it's what a mum's
supposed to be like, that love . . . like a . . . like a light that
just keeps shining all night . . . something that won't be
satisfied, 'cos you got so much to give . . . so give it to me, if
I'm still alive . . . and if you can do that I can be what you
want, I'd never make a mistake, I'd never leave your side,
I'll do what you want a boy to do and let me take care of
you, I mean . . . isn't it better that someone loves somebody
somewhere . . .

It wouldn't be easy.

I know it wouldn't be easy.

But what else can I do?

People looked at me when I was his age and I know what
they were thinking, with no dad, and they thought better off
dead with a mother like that and maybe, y'know, just maybe
I thought that with you. Or maybe I just thought, people are
dying to get out of this town, is it that much worse to kill?

*He puts his head to the table and weeps. Then he removes the cassette
and breaks it.*

Think what the Sun would've paid to get hold of that.

Stephanie For the first time I'm thinking it might be
possible . . . that dreams might actually come true! Because

Raquel and I have now learned there is a God and his name is Desmond Varady.

It also shows the funny way this industry works because really, it comes down to who you know socially, not whether you can give a competent audition. It's all about networking.

Raquel and I just happened to be sitting on the grass in, there's a little park in Colliers Wood, and when I want to sun myself, as is my wont, I bring her along and she plays in the dirt or something.

And we were sitting there, when a distinguished-looking older man came strolling up and just started . . . looking at Raquel.

And she didn't even look her best. I mean, it wasn't even an outfit I'd made for her, it was an old jumper which she'd stretched out of shape so much it was practically falling off her. But the man was just stopped, dead in his tracks, watching Raquel.

That's star quality.

And then he said to me, 'Madam, you have a beautiful daughter.'

And I said, Tell that to Sir Cameron Bloody Mackintosh, she just got turned down for *Les Miz*.

And this man just gave a deep rolling chuckle, I mean SO sexy, and then he said, 'Ah, don't put your daughter on the stage, Mrs Worthington.'

So I shook his hand and said, Dunn, actually, *Miss* Stephanie Dunn, and this is Raquel.

'Raquel, eh?' he said. 'Such a classically beautiful name.'

And I felt so much better then and there, it made me glad I'd decided on the name Raquel. Because I feel it has glamour. And back when I was making up my mind it was

either that or Yaz, and I'm so pleased with my choice in retrospect.

And then he reached into the pocket of his suit and removed a silver case, from which he extracted a business card . . . Desmond Varady. Director. Film and Television.

And I thought, fucking hell, this is the answer to our prayers, he's only a bloody director!

Well, we got to talking, and as it turns out he directs mainly adverts. But there's a lot of money in that, he assures me. And he says, he's been on the lookout for a young girl, someone who can really *sell*. That's the way he puts it. With an advert, he says, you're selling a product, and you're selling yourself, and that's difficult. 'Cos he also says that there's a youth market now, and of course I know this, but he says that for the first time in history you're part of a demographic from cradle to grave, and of course it's easy to convince a three-year-old to ask for a product by name, but it's harder to find a three-year-old who can perform well enough to sell that product to his or her contemporaries. And this makes perfect sense to me, because Raquel has always been a natural leader, she could do that.

It's the youth market, Mr Varady says. The youth market. Where they sell, and are sold.

And before I know, Robert is your mother's brother, and Mr Varady has cast Raquel as the featured role in a Persil advert!

I can tell you now, we're never going back to panto. In the green room there, you're lucky to get a second-hand tea bag and a kick in the teeth. But in the studio . . . in the studio . . . I had girls in sleek black jumpers bringing me espresso. Someone even massaged my shoulders. And Mr Varady was so attentive to Raquel. And the money! Let's just say the contract was very, very generous. *And*, says Des, he'd very much like to work with Raquel again. Make her part of his stable, he put it.

It was all so . . . nice, really. Like being part of a wealthy successful family. Finally.

He's handsome, too. And the other really nice things, and I'm sure some of you know why I'm saying this, is that Mr Varady is not a shirtlifter. I mean, I don't have any prejudice in that department because it seems to me that God has already taken care of making them totally unattractive. So why hate them, when you should pity them. But it's a bit difficult when the theatrical universe is full of them, I mean, somewhere the other day I just read Ernie Wise too . . . Ernie Wise, Bum Bandit, OBE . . . and I thought, is nothing sacred?

But you get the sense this Mr Varady is like a gentleman of the old school, with a twinkle in his eye and a real sweet tooth for female beauty. He's not old, I don't want you to think that, he's probably in his fifties. But there's no Mrs Varady ever mentioned and I reckon it's because he still leads a bit of a player lifestyle. I mean, considering the money that Raquel and I have got . . . and he must get more . . . well, I'm sure he's minted. And he does have this certain . . . raffish charm . . . it's like Maurice Chevalier in *Gigi*, I suppose, a sort of gentlemanly quality. And when he looks into my eyes I get goose pimples, I do, when he takes my hand.

That's what he did when we first got to the studio, I had to fill out a whole sheaf of forms giving my permission for Raquel to be filmed, and promising not to sue them if she gets hit by a lorry, et cetera, et cetera. And I'm just sitting there with Mr Varady, and finally I get to a sheet that says 'Consent'. As in parental consent. But I said, 'Ooh, Mr Varady, does this have something to do with the age of consent? Because I'm not as young as I look, you know.'

And Mr Varady took my hand, and tickled his fingers across my palm, and he smiled and said, 'Miss Dunn . . . we're living in an age of consent.'

I'm sure I don't know what that means, but he certainly has lovely teeth.

And now that Raquel's advert has gone out, I'm on cloud nine. As I watched the Persil going sudsy, and saw Raquel's angelic features troubled for a moment at the prospect of stubborn grass-stains, I just thought of . . . soiled white tennis socks . . . wondering whether there's a way to get them truly white again. And now I know there is.

Timmy They used to think I was depressed. Few years back. They tried Prozac. So I stopped wanking, I got fatter, it made no difference. Nothing was ever said, but I think they know, I'm not so much depressed as realistic. And alone.

Today was the anniversary.

Something we went through in our sessions, me and Janet the Gannet. I said, if I'm being let out maybe I ought to know what it's like out there . . . I mean, we had our little trips, to go visit a shopping centre and to go visit a DIY shop and going to the cinema and . . . I mean, they just want to make sure that you're not going to lunge and bite some shop girl on the leg or start running around and pissing in other people's popcorn . . . it's to make sure that you're just . . . OK to be around people. And I said to Janet, don't I need to know what the world would really be like *for me* . . . like, shouldn't you start letting me read the papers? Like when I'm in there? But when I say I want to read the papers . . . she doesn't exactly go pale but I can see it in her eyes, really. And she's honest, she says, 'I don't know what you'll think about what you read, I don't know if it's the right thing, but if it's what you want . . .' I mean, she has to face it, if I'm out of here that soon I'll be reading them on my own.

So she thought about it for a day and then said yes.

And there it is.

It's like reading a story you never read before, then you get told that it's you, that's your life, that's what you were doing . . . but you look and you just don't know the person. Who the fuck is this? This sarky, vicious ten-year-old . . . what he was like . . . is that still me? Can you expect me to understand who he was . . .

Why did he do it, they're saying.

What's the answer to that then?

And why . . . And . . .

AND I DON'T FUCKING KNOW WHY I DID IT.
DON'T YOU THINK I'D LIKE TO KNOW?

Don't you think I've spent almost ten fucking years thinking about nothing but?

But there's fucking nothing that gets published about it that MEANS anything.

A picture of me with evil written underneath. And what's the point? What is the point of me in every tabloid?

It's only so that you, any of you, all of you, can find your own way into the story. But there's no room for you here. Don't you see? I might as well have committed suicide.

Don't pretend I haven't thought I should've done, thought it every day, just lying in bed here, alone, with that word, suicide suicide, clicking along in my head like train tracks at night, suicide. 'Cos it would have made the same point. Doing something that says everything and says nothing and shuts you out completely. Thinking maybe suicide is the only real chance you get to be on your own and have some privacy in this world.

But there's no privacy because you need a way in, don't you, so you come and start attacking . . . like you got the facts but really want the *reasons* and it's me alone who has the reasons, what you're thinking, so you press, you take me up to squeeze the answers out, but all I've got is telling you the facts, the things that happened and that's not enough.

It's WHY, you need an answer, WHY, and if I say I don't know why you'll break me open like a piggy bank. But you won't have an answer then. And you still won't be satisfied. I know why I care. But why does anyone else?

'Cos the papers tell them to care?

It's like people get more emotional about a fucking . . . bunny rabbit, a puppy that's cute and adorable but hasn't got a fucking brain in its head and can't do anything useful, than they do about things that matter. 'Cos they think, oh, this poor little helpless thing. When it's *people* who are helpless. On housing estates, or wherever, poor people, the ones who in years of trying can't get anything accomplished that would make their life easier, can't get someone elected who even gives a fuck, so they just stop trying. I mean, who gives a shit about a doggy or a hedgehog or a baby, even, when at least they're all blessed with a goldfish memory and a total ignorance of just how shit the world is. It's harder when you got to work all day every day at fighting or forgetting how shit it is. I remember going three days with no food 'cos we were fucking broke, I remember getting sent home from school 'cos my shoes had worn through, I remember my mum bringing boyfriend friends over that you'd be glad if they just kicked you in the stomach. And there's cities full of people living like that and *you* get worried about cuddly little animals.

I mean, what if I said, you ask me what I think of puppies or kittens, if I said honestly, kill them all, whack them with fucking shovels, because as long as you're willing to shed tears over a stupid animal, like it was a person, then it's gonna be even easier for you to take a person and treat him like a stupid fucking animal.

But it's easy to ignore. Because how do you know the truth? What you read in a fucking newspaper? And I can just imagine who writes them, the people who write that shit about me, I can just imagine some pig-eyed bastard in a shiny suit, swilling his pint of Guinness, thinking, 'Well, this

is what the poor people should be outraged about, you know, won't it be fun to see them getting up in arms about this one . . . evil children . . . that'll entertain them, let them get v'glante about the evil children of Britain.' It even gives him something extra to be smug about, the shit who writes the story, 'cos first he tells the poor people what to think . . . then he gets to go home at night and think, 'Isn't it rather clever, actually, that I'm still so much more *liberal* than all these stupid fucking animals? Who are always missing the point, banging on about something stupid? I wanted them to believe what I said, and now that they do, I hate them even more.'

So when you think about it.

Being helpless. People like me, or my mum, any family like mine. That's not the sort of thing to make you *sentimental*.

But a puppy, a kitten, a toddler. That gets you worked up. 'Cos they aren't clever enough to know yet. That somebody ought to come slit your throats at night while you lie sleeping.

I'm sorry I just . . .

What's going to happen when they let me out?

I'm not depressed, I'm not, really.

I told you. I'm realistic.

Stephanie When mothers dream they dream of peace and quiet.

And solitude.

I've got it now, for the time being, at least. I couldn't be happier.

But it's almost like . . . imagine raising your child so well that she responds to your demands before you make them. Imagine being so successful as a parent that you find your

little ones can suss out what you wish they'd do . . . and then they start becoming, slowly and silently, what you want.

I had been so angry with Raquel. The number of things she did for sheer spite, like the talking back, and the pissing. But now . . . she's like a dream of perfect obedience. When we did our next advert with Desmond, this time for 'T oys 'R' Us, she didn't say a word the whole time. Apart from her lines. It's like she'd finally understood what I wanted from her.

And Desmond, well, he's perfectly enchanted with his little leading lady. He says he can think of any number of film roles for which she'd be suitable, but as far as I can gather he hasn't actually directed a proper feature film. He says he prefers the steady money of directing adverts, and frankly, so do I. Since he said to me, 'Miss Dunn, you realise that I intend to continue using your daughter indefinitely. Provided that she and I can maintain the proper working relationship we now enjoy.'

So I sat her down when we got home and I said, 'Listen carefully. I know you get it in your head to be Little Miss Contrary sometimes, but don't you dare. More than your life depends on it. Mr Varady can make us rich. So you do whatever he asks. As they say in Hollywood, if you're not kissing his arse, you should be wiping his arse. He tells you to jump, you say how high.'

Raquel didn't say anything. Didn't even nod.

But I knew she understood.

And of course, the contracts keep rolling in! The last one -- a far cry from our first gig in Basingstoke, let me tell you -- we had Raquel filming a spot for Sunny D in Tuscany! They even flew me out. It was beautiful, an old crumbling villa, with olive trees and goats and gentle grassy hills. And for a girl like me, it was like walking on the surface of the moon! So much . . . peace. It was about halfway between Florence and Prato, we landed at Florence. Raquel flew business class

with Desmond because she's the turn. I sat in economy – but it's all right, my legs are immune to the cramping!

And they put us up right there in the villa, where they were shooting. So romantic. I said that to Desmond, in the evening, as we waited out on the terrace, sipping *vino rosso* with the sun going down, and Raquel taking a bit too long in the bathtub for my liking. Thinks she's a star now, and insists on these long luxurious baths. But I said to Desmond, 'This is a country for romance, innit. A passionate man like you. I know you feel it.'

And he said, 'Miss Dunn. Passion is the air I breathe.'

I was kind of hoping he might, you know, overpower me then and there, but we realised Raquel had turned up and was staring at us, in that way she has these days, kind of accusatory and macabre, popping her eyes at you like an Anglo-Saxon golliwog.

This morning they decided not to film for some reason, and I was just going to lay out and get some sun, when Desmond comes up, carrying a small hamper, and says, 'Miss Dunn . . . where's Raquel?'

She was hiding under the patio table so we fetched her out, and Desmond said, 'Little lady, I've come to invite you for a picnic.' Raquel seemed a bit reluctant, but he opened the hamper and showed her . . . and it was perfectly elegant. The man is class. There was a hunk of pecorino cheese, and some Parma ham, and a nice loaf of Italian bread. Some Monster Munch for Raquel. A bottle of claret. And two glasses.

And off they went.

An artist and his muse going off to celebrate.

If Mr Varady weren't so nice in so many other ways, if I hadn't already received so many compliments about the Persil ad, and the Toys 'R' Us . . . I might think that . . . might think he was taking pity on me. Thinking I needed a

holiday. Thinking the stress of being a single mother was getting on top of me.

But really, it's not about pity, I think he just knows a good thing when he sees it. He can't stop praising Raquel. And as I watched them walk down to his car, him with the picnic hamper, and her with her little hand reaching up to clutch his pinky finger, I just thought . . .

He's done so much. I know I'll never forget this man. And you hope Raquel won't forget it either.

And as for now . . .

You have no idea how nice it is to have a bit of time to myself.

You have no idea how nice it is to be alone.

Timmy has a *suitcase*.

Timmy Well. I'm packed. It's a matter of minutes now.

And after this, who knows?

Halfway house and then . . .

Janet the Gannet came round last night. She's not normally here then, but I think she wanted to . . . calm me down, y'know. She said, 'It's all right, Tim. You can go with us tomorrow.'

I tried to think who's us . . . 'cos it's not like anyone else here has known me that long. I'm thinking, what, do I get a police escort to move into the halfway house? And she says, like she's reading my mind, I guess, 'My partner Kary and I. We'll take you in our Golf.'

So there's the answer. I think she thought, if I'm going out there to die, at least she can give me a little something of herself. Let me know she's a lesbo. Which is fine, I mean, I got nothing against people like that. In fact I find it sort of . . . comforting. That some people don't have kids. Or

maybe they do have kids, with like, a turkey baster. I don't know. I don't care. Live and let live, that's my motto now, and you're just hoping it might be everybody else's motto too. Though I doubt it.

But after she told me that, I just . . . I went back to my room and started to cry. I don't know why, at first, I mean, it's not like she was my mum or something and she turned out to be a dyke. It's more like . . . like why would she tell me that now? And it's 'cos she wasn't thinking I was being set free. She was thinking I was going to die.

Because I realise now that dying . . . it's like trading off something important, when you know you're never going to see somebody again . . . like a friend. I only ever had one friend really, unless you count the Gannet but she's getting paid for it. But I had one once. And so before they told us we'd never see each other again, we just . . . and I don't know why we did it . . . we just swapped these . . . things . . . he gave me one of those troll dolls 'cos that's what I used to collect, and I gave him a Man U keyring.

Pointless, really, 'cos a keyring is something you definitely don't need in prison. But I did it because it was something I liked, something my dad gave me before he . . .

Or maybe it was hopeful. Like: Some day you too will have keys.

But what it really was is that, when somebody dies, you got . . . you got to give them something of yourself, you got to rip something out from your heart and leave it there to swap, and that *hurts* . . . doesn't matter what . . . it can be something you remember, remember really well, and what you're giving them is the promise that you'll never forget . . . or it can just be the truth. But you swap it. You got to let a little part of yourself die with them, and then something of them stays alive with you. And it keeps a balance.

But what could I swap really? For what I done.

I know she says, she doesn't really want to see me hanged. Or like that bloke in America, tied down to a table and stuck with a needle until I fall asleep for ever. All she wants is for me to be back in, for another five years, or seven, or . . . or just long enough, really, so that when I get out I'll be so broken and dead that it will hardly matter . . . that I'll just be sitting in a dark bedsit somewhere watching *Family Affairs* until I do the job for them . . . why hang a kid when you can convince him to hang himself? It saves the cost of a hangman. And it proves what we always thought . . . he didn't belong in this world. He wasn't natural.

But I can't do that. I won't.

I'm strong. I'm clever. If they want to keep hitting me then it's like hitting a coil or a bedspring or something, the harder you hit, the more strength it has to bounce back at you. If there's infinity in what they hit me with, there's got to be fucking infinity inside me too.

I mean, the Gannet said with my A level in English and the other stuff, I'd be an excellent candidate for university. Which I could do. I could apply. I think I would get in. I hope I would. That's what I'm going on . . . hope. That's the infinity.

And why shouldn't it be possible?

Why shouldn't I be good enough and clever enough to do that, if I want to?

So I go out that door, with just my small suitcase. To university, then. To prepare for . . . what?

I'll be one of the crowd then. The people you pass on the street, and you're one of them too. Nobodies, blankly staring, on the dole or not, eating your chicken and chips on the street after a piss-up, next morning watch *Breakfast News*, clean the limescale from the kettle, do the Hoovering if it's a Tuesday or a Friday, have a garibaldi biscuit and count the raisins, wonder about whether to go for a walk and decide not to . . .

No different, just I get to be a nobody eighteen years later than the rest of you.

But if you think about it, what better can we ask for? Hope and glory? Truth? Or what they keep demanding with me: justice? Depends if you think justice is being fair, because they were more than fair with me, even if they're never fair with you.

Depends if you think that justice is taking the happiness and spreading it equally over everybody, like . . . fucking *marmite*, of if you think there's not enough marmite to go round, and rationing will have to be imposed, and we attack people who get more than their share . . . like me, since now I have an education . . . just enough of one to realise how hopeless the whole thing is . . . and to ask well who should be happy if not everyone . . . which is hopeless . . . not that you care it only makes me more and more unhappy asking it.

But it hardly matters now.

After this you won't see me in the headlines anymore, or on the telly. You'll forget my face and the sound of my voice, but that's all good. My life depends on it.

So: I pick up the suitcase, walk out the door, and overnight I'm not unique anymore. I'll be . . . whatever the opposite of unique is, right?

I'll be one of you.

See, you've listened to me for a while, but once I'm gone, no one will ever listen to me again. I'll be one of the people whose voices don't get heard, one of those people who never speak up or speak out. And next time we meet, I'll be in the audience with you. Jostling elbows in the queue, spilling Maltesers on the floor. One more anonymous punter among the millions. Burns on seats.

So you might as well do it, since this is your only chance. Applaud. For yourselves. Clap hands for you and me and all of us whose voices count for nothing in this world. I mean,

we made it this far in silence, didn't we? We might do something about it yet. Know what I mean?