

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Gobbler

Adrian Edmondson

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About the Author

Adrian Edmondson, the son of a peripatetic geography teacher, was born in Bradford in 1957 and brought up in Cyprus, Bahrain and Uganda. After studying drama at Manchester University he moved to London where he became one of the leading lights of the burgeoning comedy scene, helping to establish the reputation of the original *Comedy Store* and *Comic Strip* clubs.

Starring as Vyvyan in the award-winning television series *The Young Ones*, he was also one of the original *The Comic Strip Presents . . .* team, notably creating the spoof heavy metal band *Bad News*. He starred in two improvised films for television, *Honest, Decent and True* and *Newshounds*, winner of the 1990 BAFTA for best single drama, and played Brad in the West End revival of *The Rocky Horror Show*, and Estragon in the first West End production of *Waiting for Godot*.

In 1991 Adrian teamed up once again with his long-time comedy partner, Rik Mayall, and created *Bottom*, their most popular sitcom to date.

Adrian Edmondson is married to Jennifer Saunders, lives in Richmond, and has three children.

The Gobbler is his first novel.

The Gobbler

Adrian Edmondson



arrow books

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JULIAN COULDN'T BELIEVE that Doctor Sachs had swallowed the lie about his drinking.

'Oh, not a lot, half a bottle of wine a day, the odd bourbon,' he'd said, as beads of whisky perspiration broke out on his forehead. He'd lightly clenched his fists to hide the slight tremor in his hands as Doctor Sachs asked him how much he smoked. 'I'm cutting down at the moment, maybe ten or fifteen a day. A couple more on an opening night,' he'd added with an ingratiating smile.

Julian Mann knew how to handle Sachs – a bronzed tailor's dummy in a Savile Row suit with more bedside charm than medical curiosity – Julian knew how to handle all the showbiz doctors whose surgery walls were chock-a-block with signed photos of the stars: you simply had to turn up on time, indulge in a bit of chit-chat about this or that gala première, answer a few simple questions to prove you weren't clinically dead, then give the doctor a quick flash of the teeth and a flattering laugh to prove he was as much a part of the great show-business aristocracy as yourself, and Bob was your uncle.

But this time it hadn't worked.

Maybe collapsing on the way out of the surgery had scuppered him, Julian thought to himself. Though he hadn't really collapsed, he'd just stumbled to the floor clutching his chest, crying out 'Oh my God, a heart attack, I knew it!'

Later, as he recovered on the couch with a cup of sweet tea and a chocolate Bath Oliver, Doctor Sachs had told him it was stress: anxiety was apparently making him breathe too shallowly, reducing the amount of oxygen in his blood,

and causing the muscles across his chest to stiffen and contract – but he'd been 'really pretty sure' that it was nothing to do with Julian's heart. However, 'on balance' Sachs had felt unable to give Julian a clean bill of health until he'd learned some breathing exercises and made some kind of effort at taking regular cardiovascular exercise.

Julian needed a clean bill of health so that Picador Pictures could effect completion insurance for their new film *Blood Train*. Film insurance underwriters required all leading players to undergo a medical as a matter of course, though Julian couldn't help taking it as some ghoulish personal slight that a doctor should have to testify whether he was going to live through the next three months or not. *And now he'd been failed!* He'd toyed with the idea of demanding a second opinion but quickly rejected it in fear of what a real doctor might find.

And that was why he was now standing in his trunks on the side of the old Chelsea Baths. He hated public baths – all cracked Victorian tiles with dirty grouting, and algae in the spittoons. The smell of the showers drifted through from the changing rooms – the smell of old wet soap and athlete's foot. The management had attempted to liven up the pool by changing the name from 'public baths' to 'sports centre' and hanging a few strings of bunting across the rafters, but it didn't work for Julian. He'd gone to his private health club first, only to find that his membership had lapsed five years before. He'd complained that he'd only ever used the club once, but they wouldn't let him in for a swim until he'd bought another membership for two and a half thousand pounds and paid subscription fees of nine hundred pounds for a year. Three and a half thousand quid seemed a bit much for a swim. Not that Julian was mean – he could be quite purposefully and senselessly extravagant at times – he just resented being made to fork out that kind of money for the sake of some upper-class twit doctor in Cadogan Square.

If it hadn't been a bastard medical he could have had a little drinky on the way, he thought. He'd have been more relaxed, able to breathe more easily. His blood would have been bursting with oxygen, and he wouldn't have felt the huge tightening of luggage straps around his chest, wouldn't have felt the terror and the panic, and the enormous and instantaneous sense of grief at the loss of his own life. He wouldn't have cried, wouldn't have begged for help. He'd have had his ticket to Hollywood, and he wouldn't be standing on the edge of the pool where the word 'municipal' was beginning to stand for all that was rotten and fetid and dull and unsuccessful.

The door leading from the women's changing room opened. Two lithe young figures strolled casually out and turned in Julian's direction. He pulled his stomach in. He imagined they must be nineteen or twenty - definitely above the age of consent, anyway. Julian enjoyed the look of surprise on people's faces when they saw him in places they wouldn't normally expect to find him. He pulled his easy roguish smile and waited for them to recognise him - and it was hard not to recognise Julian with his trademark eyes.

Crueller members of the press claimed that the strangely prepossessing asymmetry of his eyes was the result of a contact lens and an affectation, but although it moved synchronously with his left and looked just as functional, Julian was actually blind in his right eye - thanks to a childhood fight with his older sister in which, having run out of sucker-tipped arrows, she'd jabbed at him with the bow. In consequence his right iris was a fiercely brilliant, arresting light blue in contrast to the rather ordinary brownness of his seeing eye. The effect was at once startling and attractive - two attributes which in Julian's mind easily outweighed the sole disadvantage of only being able to see in two dimensions, and the occasional stumble that induced. He sometimes wondered, though, whether his seemingly

increased desire to touch and feel might be the result of his senses trying to balance themselves out.

The girl in the shiny, clinging, black one-piece with the long, reddish hair looked his way first. He met her gaze with an almost imperceptible widening of his seeing eye. Enough to signify his interest, yet small enough to be denied in the face of a rebuttal. She looked away. Her look had been too brief, he thought, she couldn't have seen him. She hadn't had time to let her brain assimilate the information, or perhaps her brain had dismissed it as being too fantastical to be true.

The dyed blonde bob with the heavily lipsticked mouth and prominent nipples would be next. Julian waited until she looked and then widened his eye again. She didn't react but kept on looking. Julian lifted both eyebrows in a gesture of engaging humility – *for one as famous as himself* – but she still didn't react. He was confused – was she looking at him? Or was she gazing at something behind him? Was she cross-eyed?

The two girls were approaching his corner of the pool. They were gorgeous. Their breasts somehow more discernible through the thin, stretchy lycra of their swimsuits than if they had been naked. Julian pushed his charisma button. Nothing tangible of course, just that special way he had of suddenly exuding immense physical presence – the sort of magic that had won him 'Best Light Entertainment Performance' in 1980 and '84.

The two girls passed behind.

Julian knew the sort, he thought to himself. There were some who were more polite than others – they didn't want to let him know they'd recognised him because they didn't want to embarrass him, they respected his right to freedom from public harassment. He quite liked this game – the polite ones were always the easiest to hook because they could never resist a look back. They'd wander a few yards past him, then, when they were sure they weren't going to

compromise his privacy, they'd sneak a quick glance back, and they'd be trapped, caught in the act – his smile would broaden and they'd understand that he'd known all along, that they'd been involved in playing a game with him – and in Julian's book that was practically a relationship.

He watched the two young sex angels saunter round the deep end and through the heavy swing doors to the sun-bed and sauna rooms beyond. They never looked back.

He looked down at his body. It wasn't that bad – wasn't bad at all really. There was his stomach, but he always pulled that in. His chest had a slightly doughy look to it, but it was nothing a week in the sun wouldn't put right. He knew he was pretty good-looking for a man of thirty-eight – his legs were very good, always had been, and he'd never had to do anything to keep in shape, which was surprising considering the amount he could drink. He put it down to a fast metabolism and the ability to shit the longest turds in the world.

He was no *matinée* idol, but only a very few female journalists could ever resist writing gushing accounts of his 'physicality', and the word 'electricity' was much overused in their pieces. Indeed, he was more than a *matinée* idol, for along with his acceptably roguish middle-England good looks, he had real talent. There were a lot of well-regarded, jobbing humourists in the TV comedy world, but Julian's status was down to more than just hard work. He was what they liked to call a natural, and it was this spark of genius that held the key to his attractiveness. It was the spirit of the man, the adrenalin rush of watching something dangerous, the heart-stopping way his work seemed to tread such a perilous path between uncompromising brilliance and abject failure – along with all the flattery and come-to-bed charm he poured upon his female interviewers.

Looking down at his reflection in the water he was pleased to see the dark sweep of his full head of hair staring back up at him intermittently through the ripples. 'God of Comedy'

by David Hockney, he thought to himself, then laughed quietly at his own presumption.

The pool was empty save for a pair of geriatrics inching their way noiselessly up and down. Julian dived to the bottom of the deep end and exhaled. Not all his air, but enough to keep him comfortably balanced at the bottom. He closed his eyes, and enjoyed the silence. He'd stumbled upon the joy of lying at the bottom of a pool whilst in a drunken sulk on holiday in the Seychelles. It was like lying in space; it gave him a sense of peace and equilibrium, half-satisfying the impulse he often felt to kill himself, without going through any of the pain. If he didn't panic he could stay there for a surprisingly long time, floating like an astronaut on the end of his line – a long way away from the struggle. He could shut down his physical senses and just think.

Julian thought about the mesmerising rise and fall of the two girls' tantalisingly athletic buttocks. He remembered their cruel lack of recognition and tried to blot out his unfulfilled sexual fantasies – he must have got their ages wrong. He preferred his slightly older fans anyway, he thought to himself, the ones who'd discovered him when they were teenagers and who were now in their twenties; they were young, independent and firm-breasted, and they still thought of him as their very own, the one they'd laughed at first, the one who'd taken away their comic virginity; they were much more amenable to his casual groping and not as easily diverted by the new pretenders to the comedy crown.

The comedy crown! Memories of the BAFTA awards shindig of the night before came flooding back into his mind and all thought of the girls vanished in a mist of anger.

Why had he even gone? Why had they lied to him? If they'd told him they were going to give Best Comedy to some load of old bollocks about two pensioners in a

houseboat he wouldn't have been there and he could have saved them all the embarrassment!

He should have guessed, he thought to himself – his sitcom *Richard the Nerd* was into its fifth series and they'd never give a BAFTA to such an established programme, even if they managed to see through the regular battering the show suffered at the hands of broadsheet reviewers, the cries of horror and alarm that seven million people could so regularly tune into his 'crass' and 'banally obvious' characterisation of a monumentally evil but staggeringly stupid King Richard III; even though it was BBC 2's most popular series; even though it had been voted the No. 1 comedy by *Daily Mirror* readers for three years in a row.

Mind you, they'd chosen the wrong clip so it hadn't stood a chance in the first place! *Why show the episode with the crap child actors coming back to haunt him as the Princes from the Tower, when they had Julian falling into the giant malmsey tub whilst trying to murder the Duke of Clarence in the bank? There was a half-hour virtuoso solo performance, a blinding giddy roller-coaster ride through farcical paranoia and overweening ambition, and an obvious comedy classic!*

Julian hated the BAFTAs – the great dining hall of the Dorchester crammed with his professional enemies and the sea of media executives and their lackeys either trying to cash in on his success or gloat at his failure. He hadn't been since his defeat in '85, and though he'd been nominated four times since, he'd always made it quite clear that he wouldn't turn up unless they could promise him that he'd won. *The cheating, lying bastards!* Still, at least neither Harry Enfield nor Steve Coogan had won it.

'And what did you get for your last Christmas Special?' the sneering LWT Light Entertainment lackey sitting next to him had asked towards the end of the increasingly drunken evening.

'Almost ten.'

'*Almost* ten, but not quite?'

‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘Cilia gets seventeen, Barrymore gets eighteen.’

‘Yeah – but I’m *funny*!’

The pinch-faced lackey hadn’t even flinched, but casually retrieved another cheap cigar from the depths of his rented dinner jacket. ‘That’s the trouble with you alternatives – you strut about as if you own the place but you never get the viewing figures do you?’

‘I’m not an alternative! There’re the fucking alternatives!’ Julian had shouted, stabbing his finger at a tableful of shabby-suited revellers basking in the warm sun of the Establishment.

‘That’s part of the Oxbridge lot, that is,’ sneered the lackey.

‘Yeah? Well, I’m not one of them either! I’m a comic actor – I’m *funny*!’

‘Yes, but it’s not popular comedy is it?’

Provocative bastard! ‘It is.’

‘You’re not universal.’

‘I am!’

‘No, you haven’t got the common touch, you’re too educated.’

‘I’ve got an ‘A’ level – what the fuck’s that got to do with it? I’m the same tradition as Hancock, and Williams,’ Julian had slurred, his elbow crashing into the collection of glasses on the table in front of him and attracting the attention of the rest of his table and a couple of tables beyond. ‘What the fuck’s class got to do with it? My comedy goes beyond class – I’m just *funny*.’

‘You went to university.’

‘I did not! I went to fucking drama school!’

‘Yes, well it’s all the same, isn’t it?’

He remembered grabbing the man’s throat and pushing him back in his chair. ‘Look you cunt,’ he’d said, feeling the alcohol surge into his eyebrows and hood his eyes, ‘I’ve really got no fucking interest in the views of some lowest

common denominator producer like you who pitches every boring fucking show he makes at incontinent grannies and shop assistants – because d’you know what I am? I’m the new Peter Sellers, that’s what I am – I’m making a film, not some stupid, fucking, English, bastard, half-cocked, pretend film, but a real film, an American film, an American *funny* film and you bastards in television can just sit there and eat your own parochial shit and choke to fucking death!’

‘You’ll never work at LWT again,’ the man had croaked, clawing at Julian’s hand, as three of his friends rose half-heartedly to break up the impromptu entertainment.

‘I wouldn’t work there if you got Cilla Black to suck my cock!’ Julian had shouted, eliciting a small round of applause from the Oxbridge table.

The lifeguard’s smoothly muscular arm took Julian by surprise at the bottom of the pool as it snaked round his chest and squeezed the reserve oxygen supply from his lungs. Julian gasped and his lungs filled with water. He could feel the chlorine burning his throat. He panicked, choking underwater as he struggled to fight off his supposed attacker, and finally passed out as the lifeguard’s elbow accidentally jabbed into his temple.

Coming round on the side of the pool Julian was aware of the vicious rasping of the man’s unshaven chin on his cheek, and the overpowering smell of pilchard and tomato paste on the breath he was blowing into his lungs. Later, Julian was to swear that it had been the fish paste, not the lungful of water, that made him vomit.

As he lay retching onto the cracked tiles of the poolside Julian noticed two pairs of pretty young feet skipping back to avoid the splash of his spew, and glanced up into two lycra-wrapped pudenda.

‘The girl on the desk said it was Julian Mann,’ said the shiny, clinging, black one-piece.

‘Yes, look at his eye,’ said the high-cut scarlet peach.

‘He’s a lot fatter than he looks on the telly, isn’t he?’

‘And older – he must be nearly fifty.’

Julian slumped to the floor and pretended to have passed out to avoid having to make a response – not just to the comments of the two girls but to the barrage of concerned questions coming from the over-eager lifeguard. In retrospect this was a mistake, for by the time they were wheeling him out to the ambulance on a stretcher the press had arrived, and the next day he was front-page news in most of the tabloids for his supposed ‘suicide attempt’.

JULIAN WAS ONE of the last to learn of his 'suicide attempt' as he rarely rose from his bed until lunchtime unless he was working, and he was generally a few hours, sometimes days, behind everyone else, because he had a policy of never answering the phone unless he was drunk. This habit had formed simply from having few real friends and realising that most of the phone calls he received spelled trouble – most were *business* calls from his agent or his accountant and he hated *business*, and the few calls from his parents and his sister made him feel so unutterably guilty at not having called them first that he preferred the less damning, insistent ringing of the unanswered phone.

On the morning the papers splashed photographs of an ashen-faced and seemingly unconscious Julian being loaded into the back of an ambulance the phone started ringing at half past eight, and didn't stop until Julian pulled it out of the wall socket about two hours later. He then swallowed an antacid tablet and a hundred milligram Vitamin C lozenge – to counter the effects of the drinking binge he'd embarked upon on his almost immediate release from casualty the day before – turned over, and went back to sleep.

He was awoken ten minutes later by his wife, Wendy, who'd just returned from taking their twin six-year-old sons to school and from doing the weekly supermarket shop.

Wendy was a full ten years younger than Julian though he thought she somehow looked older. It wasn't that she had more wrinkles or grey hairs than he had, it was the way she carried herself. She'd been a young, girlishly vibrant, excitable twenty-year-old when they'd married eight years

before, yet now her every movement seemed burdened by the weight of premature middle age. Julian might not have been the most sprightly thirty-eight-year-old in the world, but his soul was still ready to whoop and holler at the faintest whisper of a party or 'good times' – whereas Wendy now seemed consumed by leaden-footed pragmatism.

He liked to remember the halcyon days of their courtship; dancing together on the pool table of the Strathallan Hotel in Aberdeen; deliberately capsizing a pedalo on the boating lake in Scarborough (a difficult feat which had taken all their combined strength and initiative, and a bottle of cherry brandy); making love in the woods behind her parents' house on the very first time she'd taken him home to meet them.

Nowadays Julian often reflected ruefully on how the pert young sex goddess he'd married had turned into such a frumpy housewife. He hated her cardigans. He'd once collected them all, taken them into the back garden, and tried to set fire to them – but he'd been too drunk and it had been raining too hard. Confronted with the soggy pile of wool in the sober light of the next morning he'd tried to work up the courage simply and honestly to discuss how much he disliked them, but hadn't been able to.

Wendy could be a difficult woman to reason with, even for people other than Julian. Her father had been a Reader in Psychology at Reading University where her mother still worked as a librarian, and being the only child in that fiercely academic and logical household Wendy had learned to argue with a pedantic zeal that had left even her tutors begging for release. In the face of her parents' overbearing scholasticism she had also learned an unfortunate inability to let go, and a scepticism about her own natural beauty, and though leaving home and going to university had helped her overcome these to some extent, and her subsequent elopement with Julian had excited her more impetuous side, she now seemed to be slipping once more

towards the humdrum. It seemed to Julian that Wendy's rebellion had never gone far enough – after the initial excitement of the coup things had evened out and gradually returned to the status quo, and now he felt that the young firebrand he'd married might as well have joined the civil service.

He knew that bringing up two wilful young boys had taken its toll on Wendy. She had wanted a girl, had imagined herself with a daughter, playing with her and dressing her as if she were an outsize doll, and so she had been slightly perturbed when the ultrascan had detected *two* foetuses, and most confused when two little *boys* had very painfully emerged.

She'd decorated their nursery with lace and frills all the same and had enjoyed the first eighteen months or so when she could legitimately dress them in smocks and dresses without public disapproval. Even now, at the age of six, the boys still had their blond hair cut in feminine bobs, each looking like a miniature version of Sarah Bernhardt playing Hamlet. But that didn't prevent them from being boys – boys who seemed intent on testing the breaking strength of anything and everything, including their mother.

Now, in the linen-swagged marriage bed on the fourth floor of their house, Julian was lying sprawled amongst a cornucopia of broderie anglaise pillows. He felt his shoulder being shaken and as his mind wrestled itself into consciousness he instinctively put out an arm and pulled Wendy towards him. She didn't resist. He could smell the cigarette smoke in her hair and found it unpleasant. He was a heavy smoker himself but was constantly amazed at how Wendy could smell so much like an over-full ashtray. Other people smelled of smoke, he thought, Wendy smelled of dog-ends. It was a far cry from the days when she'd resolutely made them both munch their way through a whole packet of polos whenever they'd visited her parents. He stroked her tangled shoulder-length hair, brittle and wiry

from being dyed strawberry blonde continuously since her first term away from home, then took to patting her softly on the back of her head, slowly and rhythmically, tenderly, lovingly; the consummate actor at work and at home, he thought to himself.

‘I didn’t know you’d taken up swimming,’ Wendy murmured.

Julian wondered whether she could feel his heartbeat quicken through the quilt. Had she found his wet trunks? He couldn’t recollect having them with him when he’d escaped through the busy service bay of the hospital. In any case, he was sure they’d never have survived the subsequent evening’s entertainment in Soho.

‘Well, I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, you know, need to get into shape really,’ he said noncommittally – when Wendy murmured she was usually scrabbling around on the edge of something big.

‘How many lengths did you manage?’

‘Not many,’ he said. At least he hadn’t lied yet.

Wendy lifted her head and looked into his eyes. She leaned forward and kissed him – a fulsome, loving kiss, their lips squashing together for a good five seconds before she peeled off and buried her face in his neck with a huge sigh. Julian’s head filled with the image of a hand grenade rolling pinless across the bed and lodging itself under his ear.

‘Bit of an incident at the pool, actually,’ he said.

‘Oh yes.’

He was encouraged by her seemingly casual interest. ‘I was just doing a couple of widths underwater when the bloody lifeguard jumped in and tried to save me! Thought I was drowning apparently. Stupid twat. And you’ll never guess what happened next . . .’

‘They called an ambulance, and the press, and as you were wheeled out the photographers took lots of lurid snaps of you which they splashed across the front pages of this

morning's newspapers under banner headlines announcing that you'd tried to commit suicide.'

Julian was so busy listening to the tone of Wendy's voice – searching vainly for any sign of vindictiveness – that he had to replay her words in his head to take in what she'd said.

'Suicide?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Front page?'

He could feel her head nodding against his cheek.

'All the papers?'

'Lead story in the *Mirror*, the *Star* and the *Mail*, Wendy breathed into his ear. 'You even get a mention on the front of the *Telegraph*,' she said, sitting up, 'with a small photo. And Matt's cartoon has you and John Major sitting together at the bottom of a swimming pool – but I didn't get the joke.'

'*The bastards!*' Julian shouted, making the necessary public show of outrage at this monumental intrusion into his private life, but secretly proud at making it onto the front pages at all and getting to be the subject of a pocket cartoon. *That was one in the eye for the anonymous Best Comedy-winning pensioners on their houseboat.* He was overcome with curiosity to know how they'd labelled him – was he still 'Britain's Funniest *Mann*'? He was never annoyed by the press as long as they prefaced any article they wrote about him with the words 'comic genius'.

'Why didn't you tell me last night when you came in?' asked Wendy, taking one of his hands in hers and stroking it gently.

'Well, you were asleep.'

'What time did you get in?'

'About three o'clock,' Julian lied.

'Oh,' said Wendy, keeping her eyes fixed on his hand.

He could see immediately that he'd given the wrong answer. *So why didn't she pick him up on it?* He could do without a full-scale inquiry into his movements of the night before, he thought to himself, but at that moment the

embarrassment at leaving his obvious deceit just hanging in the air between them seemed even more excruciating.

‘Didn’t you see all the paparazzi when they wheeled you out of the pool?’ asked Wendy, breaking the awful silence.

Julian thought hard for a moment. ‘I must have had my eyes closed,’ he said.

The corners of her mouth relaxed in a fleeting smile. He could still make her laugh.

‘You see, I’m so bloody famous I can grab the headlines with my eyes closed – because I’m the King of Comedy,’ sang Julian, picking up on Wendy’s short-lived smile as the first recognisable chink in her armour, and flashing one of his irresistible childish grins, ‘and, “When you’re the King you can do anything you bloody well like!”,’ he added, reciting Richard the Nerd’s catchphrase.

Wendy’s grim expression relaxed into a philosophical grin. ‘That might not be strictly true. Paul’s holding on the phone for you, says it’s very important.’

‘Holding on the phone?’ asked Julian, ‘but I pulled the socket out.’

Wendy fixed him with a long-suffering stare.

‘Yes, but it still rings downstairs, Julian. It was ringing when I came in. He’s been trying to get you since half past eight this morning.’ She plugged the bedroom extension back into its socket and picked up the receiver. ‘Hello, Paul? Sorry it took so long, I’ve got him here.’ She carried the phone around to Julian’s side of the bed, but as she reached him she hesitated and pushed the mute button on the console. ‘Look, I’m not cross, I’m really not cross. I’d just really rather you told me things before some arsehole of a *Sun* reporter does, that’s all. They were all waiting by the door when I brought Sean and Jamie home from school yesterday . . .’

His family – door-stepped! A flash-flood of guilt swept over Julian and he shot out a comforting hand for Wendy to hold. She ignored it, and looking up into her face he detected a

tiny quiver in her bottom lip as she struggled to keep a lid on her emotions.

‘. . . there were about ten of them and it was really quite frightening for the boys. They kept shouting through the letter box after we’d got in and the boys got very confused – I was in their room till midnight explaining that you weren’t dead. Of course, I didn’t really know how hurt you were, or whether you’d hurt yourself at all, or whether you’d meant to hurt yourself . . .’

She seemed about to carry on, then obviously thought better of it. Julian could see she was trying hard not to press home her advantage and bawl him out. *Why was she always so fucking reasonable?* If she’d only get angry he’d have something to fight against, he thought to himself. Her reasonableness just left him feeling castrated.

‘Are they still outside?’ he asked, ready to bound down the stairs and take out his frustration on *them*.

‘No, I told them you’d gone to France, and when you hadn’t shown up by four this morning I think they believed me and left.’

‘France?’

‘Well, I don’t know, Julian!’ She was on the edge of losing her cool but fought valiantly to regain control. ‘I didn’t know where you were,’ she said in heavily measured tones, ‘and it was the first place that came into my head.’

‘You could have said Hollywood,’ he muttered under his breath, then immediately regretted it.

She let her head fall forward with a sigh, pressed the mute button again and handed the phone to Julian, then walked to his chair and began to sort through his washing.

Julian felt ashamed. He’d been thoughtless, irresponsible and selfish, perhaps even cruel. It struck him, not for the first time, that if he didn’t live with her he wouldn’t feel this way – as a carefree bachelor he could attempt to drown himself as often as he liked.

He could hear an ant-like voice shouting 'Hello' from the phone and put the receiver to his ear. 'Paul?'

'Julian?'

'Yes.'

'Look, it's all getting a bit hot and we need to talk.'

'What time is it?' asked Julian.

'It's nearly eleven.'

'Is it? It's a bit early.'

'We have to meet,' said Paul, surprising Julian with his assertiveness. Usually Paul was unseemingly deferential. 'Do you want to come to the office or do you want me to come over to you?'

Julian looked over at Wendy – she was standing with her back to him dropping his socks into the laundry bin. From the drooping raglan shoulders to half-way down her thighs she was one big grey amorphous mass of martyrdom.

'I'll come to you. I'll be there in about forty-five minutes,' he said, then put the phone down, nudged his head under his pillows and waited for Wendy to go away.

Wendy busied herself tidying up the room and changing the towels in the *en-suite* bathroom before heading for the door where she turned and looked at the unruly shape of Julian hiding beneath the bedclothes.

When she'd first interviewed him for the Student Union newspaper at Bristol University, she'd been a high-flying third-year English undergraduate with a glittering academic future, and Julian had been the bright young brash Prince of Comedy, the man who arrogantly proclaimed himself the leading comic force in Britain on the strength of the ten overblown characters he trotted out on his TV sketch show every week. He'd been in Bristol on a UK tour, taking easy money off the students with five comic monologues and a support act.

As a champion of political correctness and scourge of low-brow entertainment, Wendy had armed herself with three typewritten sheets of hard-hitting questions, but he'd

amused her into bed right there in his dressing room, and from there onto his tour bus. She'd forgone her final term and her degree, and joined him on his twelve-week tour of one-night stands, enjoying the first (and last) reckless decision of her life, and desperately believing their joint assertion that she didn't need her degree because she was going to become a prize-winning novelist.

Though their life together had been brilliant at first it could never have barrelled along at that breakneck pace for ever, and she knew the responsibility of the twins had helped to curb their spontaneity. But she was intelligent enough to realise that relationships could see-saw up and down, and that they needed work, and although theirs had only ever 'see-d' and the 'sawing' still seemed some distance away she liked to tell herself that at heart Julian was the warmest, most loving and most exciting man she had ever met and that she still wanted him to be her companion for life.

She crept up to the bed and stood there for five minutes quietly watching Julian's sleeping form until his face rose up slowly out of the sea of pillows to see if she had gone.

'Don't forget it's Tom's first night tonight,' she said, 'so we'll have to leave here at about six thirty, OK?' Then she walked back to the door and closed it quietly behind her as she left the room.

3

AN HOUR LATER, dressed in his favourite, beaten-up, light-brown leather bomber jacket with a chunky logging shirt, jeans and brogues, Julian closed the door of the house behind him and headed for Gloucester Road tube station.

Julian liked travelling by tube – to him it re-emphasised the fashionably working-class credentials he'd adopted as a young interviewee. Admittedly these had been whittled down over the years until only two remained – drinking in pubs and occasionally travelling by tube – but if interviewers casually asked how he'd travelled to wherever it was they were, he enjoyed answering, 'Well, public transport of course. Why? Didn't you?' Though of course he only ever used the tube between eleven in the morning and two in the afternoon, when the network was deserted save for foreign students and a peculiar breed of anachronously dressed, middle-aged Londoners who never seemed to recognise him.

His stride was brisk and purposeful as he stepped out against the light autumnal breeze and it hardly faltered as he nipped into the Hereford Arms for a quick pint of Kronenbourg and a large Wild Turkey – his preferred bourbon that they stocked especially for him – and from there to the Seven-Eleven four doors along where he had to settle for a quarter bottle of Bell's and a packet of Rothmans. But marching out of the shop his determined gait was brought to a sudden halt as he came face to face once again with his screwed-up disciple – the psycho fan.

'Hi Julian,' she said, her voice weedily thin and annoyingly familiar, her accent strangely cosmopolitan.

'Hi,' Julian mumbled. He'd tried pushing past her once but she'd doggedly kept up with him along the whole length of Piccadilly, back and forth across four lanes of traffic, shouting out 'Please wait, please wait' at the top of her shaky little voice, and finally trapping him in a perfumerie in the Burlington Arcade.

How did she always know where he was? Where he was going to be? She had always been able to find him in the most unlikely places and over the last few months especially she'd seemed to be onto his every move.

'Just seven things to sign today,' she said with a nervous laugh, delving into her large woven shoulder bag.

She wasn't a psycho really - 'psycho fan' was just a term Julian had invented as a shorthand way of referring to this incredibly avid admirer who frittered her entire life away waiting for him at every TV studio, every stage door, and more recently it seemed like every street corner; 'psycho fan' was a way of expressing his resentment at her clogging up five or ten minutes of his day every time they met with her mind-numbingly inane chatter and her bagful of new mementoes to sign.

'This is the cover to the Australian video release of *The End of the Pier*,' she said, handing him a clipboard with a pen attached and placing the video jacket upon it. *The End of the Pier* was a series of half-hour dramas he'd made in between the last series of *Mann of the Moment* and the first of *Richard the Nerd* - it had been his pioneering attempt to make the transition from comic to dramatic actor - and it had been a complete flop. Being reminded of it again made him even grumpier. He scrawled 'Best wishes, Julian Mann' across it with such venom that he almost tore the glossy paper.

'Thanking you,' said the psycho fan, oblivious to his anger, neatly folding the jacket along the spine and slotting it into her bag. 'And then there's this from last time,' she said, handing him a ten-by-eight photograph she'd asked a

passerby to take of Julian and herself outside the offices of Carlton Television the week before. *How had she known he'd be there?*

'I had it enlarged because it came out so well,' she grinned.

Julian scribbled 'Best wishes' across his resigned and resentful face in the photograph – *what did she see in this picture?* – he'd stopped signing 'Love and kisses' six years before in a pathetic attempt to get her off his back, as if that would negate the intimacy she obviously felt existed between them. 'Julian Mann', he scratched across her face and his neck, going back to dot the 'i' and landing it plumb in the middle of her forehead, making her look like a Hindu.

'Just got to get these out without tearing them, sorry to be taking so long,' she said, struggling to ease some sheets of newspaper from her crowded bag – a task made more difficult by her shaking hands.

Why was she still shaking in his presence after eight years of this?

Julian looked back at her image peering out through the curlicues of his signature – she wasn't an unattractive girl, not an obvious trainspotter like some of the keener fans. She must have been in her late twenties and was dressed in a high street version of the New Age look. She had long, hennaed hair with two braids hanging forward of her ears, framing a very pale-skinned face intersected by a long, thin, heavily lipsticked and rather crooked mouth, and a pair of straight black eyebrows which almost met in the middle above blue eyes outlined in kohl. She didn't meet Julian's most fanciful conception of attractiveness but early on in their acquaintance, at least, she had held an appeal of her own.

The first time he had had his photograph taken with her he'd put his arm around her shoulder and felt her tremble under his grasp. He'd known she'd been ripe for a kiss and had obliged her on the spur of the moment – it was

something he liked to do and it always raised a pleasing caw of jealousy from the other girls hanging around the stage door. The psycho fan had responded with enormous physicality, pressing her body so hard into his that he'd thought she had been trying to meld them into one. The kiss became a regular occurrence thereafter, and it was only after a year or so that Julian had begun not to enjoy it. It began to feel dangerous. He had few maxims in life but one that seemed to click was 'Never fuck a fan' – it was a saying he'd heard attributed to John Lennon, and he'd thought it a remarkably wise one. The desperation in ardent fans was unattractive and frankly quite scary. They couldn't be labelled mentally ill for simply turning up at stage doors repeatedly but there was definitely something touched about that kind of behaviour.

And it wasn't as if Julian was short of other people to fuck with. Naturally he'd like them to be fans of his – he wanted *everyone* to think him a genius and be in awe of his talent and magnetic personality – but they had to have something else in their lives as well. He couldn't entertain the notion of them being solely dependent on him for their existence – it gave him too much responsibility. He knew that from being married with children.

'Here we are,' she said at last, carefully unfolding the front page of that morning's *Daily Mail* and smoothing it across the clipboard. 'That's your first front page since the twenty-fourth of March 1988 when the twins were born and you gave a free glass of champagne to everyone in the audience at the Globe.'

Julian looked at himself being loaded into the ambulance on the stretcher. He looked awful – although the mean quality of the newsprint hadn't done him any favours either.

'You were doing *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and it was the seventy-ninth performance of the run,' the psycho fan babbled on.