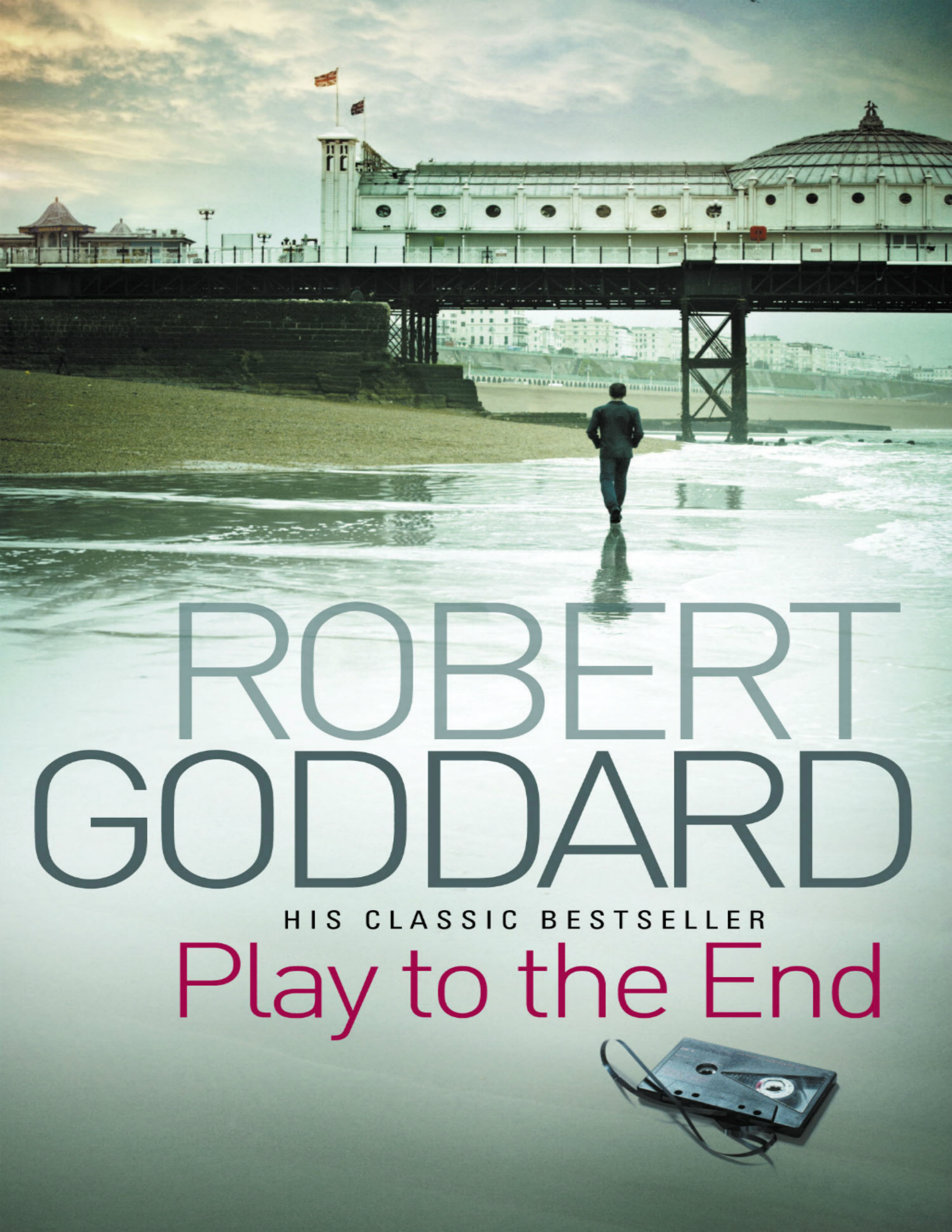




ROBERT GODDARD

HIS CLASSIC BESTSELLER

Play to the End



About the Book

For actor Toby Flood, Brighton is the final week of a long tour. One night he is visited at the theatre by his estranged wife, Jenny, who, visibly scared, thinks she is being stalked. She asks Toby, for old times' sake, to find out what is going on.

Alarmingly he discovers a sinister connection with Jenny's new partner. Spurred on by a desire to win Jenny back, Toby begins to ask some difficult questions. Before he fully understands the risks he is running, he finds himself caught up in a mysterious - and dangerous - tangle of family rivalries and murderous intent. Suddenly the prospects for his survival start to look very far from good ...

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About the Author
Also by Robert Goddard
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PLAY TO THE END

Robert Goddard

*For
Marcus Palliser
1948-2002
Sailor, writer, debater, debunker and much missed friend*

Acknowledgements

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*A transcription of tape recordings made in Brighton during
the first week of December 2002*

SUNDAY

WHAT I FELT as I got off the train this afternoon wasn't what I'd expected to feel. The journey had been as grim and tardy as I suppose it was bound to be on a December Sunday. Most of the others have chosen to go via London and they won't be coming down here until tomorrow. I could have joined them. Instead I volunteered for the slow South Central shuffle along the coast. I had plenty of opportunity to analyse my state of mind as a seamless succession of drab back gardens drifted past the grimy train window. I knew why I hadn't gone up to London, of course. I knew exactly why bright lights and brash company weren't what the doctor had ordered. The truth is that if I *had* fled to the big city, I might never have made it to Brighton at all. I might have opted out of the last week of this ever more desperate tour and let Gauntlett sue me if he could be bothered to. So, I came the only way I could be sure would get me here. Which it did. Late, cold and depressed. But *here*. And then, as I stepped out onto the platform ...

That feeling is why I'm talking into this machine. I can't quite describe it. Not foreboding, exactly. Not excitement. Not even anticipation. Something slipping between all three, I suppose. A thrill; a shiver; a prickling of the hairs on the back of the neck; a ghost tiptoeing across my grave. There wasn't supposed to be anything but a protraction of a big disappointment waiting for me in Brighton. But already, before I'd even cleared the ticket barrier, I sensed strongly enough for certainty that there was more than that preparing a welcome for me. More that might be better or worse, but, either way, was preferable.

I didn't trust the sensation, of course. Why would I? I do now, though. Because it's already started to happen. Maybe

I should have realized sooner that the tour was a journey. And this is journey's end.

The tapes were my agent's idea. Well, a diary was what she actually suggested, back in those bright summer days when this donkey of a play looked like a stallion that could run and run and the mere prospect merited a lunch at the River Café. A chronicle of how actors refine their roles and discover the deeper profundities of a script before they reach the West End is what Moira had in mind. She reckoned there might be a newspaper serialization in it to supplement the two thou a week Gauntlett is ever more reluctantly paying me. It sounded good. (A lot of what Moira says does.) I bought this pocket audio doodah on the strength of it, while the Cloudy Bay was still swirling around my thought processes. I'm glad I did now.

But it's more or less the first time I have been. I abandoned the diary before I'd even started it, up in Guildford, where the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre hosted the world première of our proud production. Is it only nine weeks ago? It feels more like nine months, the span of a difficult pregnancy, with a stillbirth the foregone conclusion since we had word from Gauntlett that there was to be no West End transfer. I thank God for the panto season, without which he might have been tempted to keep us on the road in the hopes of some magical improvement. As it is, the curtain comes down next Saturday and seems likely to stay there.

It shouldn't have turned out this way. When it was announced last year that a previously unknown play by the late and lauded Joe Orton had been discovered, it was widely assumed to be a masterpiece on no other basis than its authorship. What greater proof was needed, after all? This was the man who gave us *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw*. This was also the man who sealed his reputation as an anarchic genius by dying young, murdered by his lover, Kenneth Halliwell, at their flat in

Islington in August 1967. I have all the facts of his extraordinary life at my fingertips thanks to carting his biography and an edition of his diaries around with me. I thought they might inspire me. I thought lots of things. None of them have quite worked out.

The script of *Lodger in the Throat* was found by a plumber under some floorboards in the flat where Orton and Halliwell used to live. I imagine Orton would have been amused by the circumstances of its discovery. Maybe he actually planted it there as a joke. Or maybe – my preferred theory – Halliwell hid it during the final phase of his mental disintegration, not long before he bashed Orton's brains out with a hammer and then killed himself by swallowing a fatal quantity of Nembutal tablets. The Orton experts date the play to the winter of 1965/66 and reason he gave up on it when *Loot* was revived after a disastrous initial tour. Now I come to think about it, that tour bore eerie similarities to the experiences of the cast I've been trying to lead this autumn. *Loot* worked second time around, of course, because Orton was alive and well and willing to revise it. The irony is that he's not available to salvage *Lodger in the Throat*, the play he consigned to a bottom drawer (or maybe the floor-space) in order to return to *Loot*. We're on our own. And, boy, does it feel like it.

Enough about the play. We've analysed its potential and its problems, my fellow performers and I, till we're sick of the subject. Sick *and* tired. It was supposed to put my career back on the rails, or at any rate haul it out of the siding into which it was unaccountably shunted a few years ago. I'm the man who was in with a chance of being the new James Bond when Roger Moore packed it in, something I now find hard to believe, even though I know it's true. What's also true is that you don't realize you've stopped going up until you start going down.

There are plenty of signs if you're smart enough to spot them, of course, or if you're willing to let yourself spot

them. My name tops the bill, but Martin Donohue, who plays the part of my younger brother, has somehow managed to emerge from our dismal run with enough credit to make my primacy look shaky if we were ever cast together again – which, naturally, I'd move heaven and earth to prevent. Time was when Mandy Pringle, our ambitious deputy stage manager, would have set her sights on me, not Donohue. But that time is past. Not long past, but past none the less. Maybe they're looking forward to a week in Brighton. What they certainly won't be thinking is that I'm looking forward to our week in Sussex-by-the-sea. But I am. At least, I am now.

It rained all last night in Poole and was still raining when I got on the train this morning. Brighton must have caught the deluge too, but it was dry when I left the station and trudged south along Queen's Road through the mild grey dusk towards the darker grey slab of the sea. I'd already written off my weird presentiment. I'd accepted the exact and unappetizing character of the next six days. And the idea of making any kind of a record of them was about as remote as it could be.

I turned east along Church Street, a fair enough route to take to my destination, but one that also permitted a detour along New Road, past the familiar period frontage of the Theatre Royal. This will be my fourth professional engagement on its antique boards and I'd happily swap any one of the others for the eight renderings of *Lodger in the Throat* that the near future holds.

I stopped and examined the poster, wondering whether I'd visibly aged since the photograph was taken three months ago. It was hard to tell, not least because I haven't been taking any lingering looks at myself in the mirror lately. But it was me all right. And there was my name, listed with the others, to prove it. *Leo S. Gauntlett presents Lodger in the Throat, by Joe Orton, starring Toby Flood,*

Jocasta Haysman, Martin Donohue, Elsa Houghton and Frederick Durrance, Monday 2 to Saturday 7 December. Evenings at 7.45 p.m. Thursday and Saturday matinées at 2.30 p.m. Part of me longed to see a cancelled sticker across the poster, but it wasn't there and it isn't going to be. We're on. There's no way out. Until the end of the week.

I didn't linger, cutting round by the Royal Pavilion to the Old Steine, then heading east along St James's Street. The Sea Air Hotel is neither the chicest nor the cheapest B & B establishment in Madeira Place, one of the guesthouse-filled streets running down to Marine Parade, but Eunice is as actor-friendly a landlady as they come, willing to suspend her winter closure just for me. As the tour's gone from bad to worse and the play's immediate future has shrunk, I've started economizing on accommodation in order to have some dosh to show for my efforts even if kudos is out of the question. I'd probably have opted to stay with Eunice anyway, but just now the Sea Air has a number of crucial advantages apart from the tariff, principal among them being the fact that none of the others will be staying here. I have Eunice's word on it. 'I couldn't cope with a party, Toby. All that coming and going. All that bathwater. I reckon you'll do for me.'

I've only ever been here out of season, to share the dining room with the ghosts of summer holidaymakers. It's a peaceful house, thanks to Eunice's serene temperament and aversion to noise of all kinds. Even Binky, her cat, has learned not to purr loudly. Eunice is *Mrs* Rowlandson, complete with wedding and engagement rings, but Mr Rowlandson is a subject never touched upon, sometime existence presumed but fate unspecified. It's true to say, mind you, that Eunice might not be able to discard the rings even if she wanted to. A thin woman she is not. And less thin than ever. An aroma of baking wafted up from her basement flat as she ushered me into the speckless, flock-papered hall and up the Axminster-carpeted stairs to the

first-floor front bedroom, furnished like an Art Deco museum and with a bay-windowed view of its shabby twin on the other side of the street.

‘Do you want some tea?’ Eunice asked, watching me from the doorway as I dumped my bag and returned the room’s silent welcome.

‘That’d be great,’ I replied.

‘And some cake? You look as if you need building up.’

She was right there. She was indeed spot-on. I smiled. ‘Cake would be great too. Oh, and do you have yesterday’s *Argus*, Eunice?’

‘I dare say I could put my hand on it. You’ll not find much in it to interest you, though.’

‘I only want the cinema schedules. I thought I might catch a film tonight.’

‘Mmm.’ She looked seriously doubtful.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I wouldn’t make any definite plans if I were you.’

‘Why not?’

‘There was a phone call for you earlier.’

I was puzzled by that. Those who knew where I was staying were more likely to have rung me on my mobile. ‘Who from?’ I asked at once.

‘Your wife.’

‘My *wife*?’

The puzzle instantly became a mystery. Jenny and I *are* technically still married, but only because the decree nisi is a month or so short of becoming absolute. Given that her husband-to-be’s country estate (well, that’s what Wickhurst Manor sounds like to me) is only a few miles north of Brighton, I’d caught myself wondering on the train whether Jenny was thinking of coming along to one of the performances. I’d reckoned not. She’d keep her distance. She’d put my presence in the city out of her mind. But it seemed she hadn’t.

‘Jenny phoned here?’

‘Yes.’ Eunice nodded. ‘She wants to see you, Toby.’

It’s time to own up. It’s time to say what I’ve long since known. I love my wife. My soon-to-be-ex-wife, that is. I always have. I just haven’t always acknowledged the fact, or behaved accordingly. Actors’ marriages are notoriously unstable, like actors themselves, I suppose. We sometimes forget where the part ends and we begin. Sometimes, in the absence of a part, we invent one. Usually, because we perform rather than create, it’s a character from stock: the hard-drinking, fast-driving womanizer, forever on a spree of one kind or another. It’s easier to keep a mask in place for fear of what peeling it off would reveal.

That’s only one of the problems between Jenny and me. And, ironically, it’s a problem the last few years have abundantly solved. I know myself now, perhaps too well. But self-knowledge has come a little late. You’re not supposed to wait until the brink of your half-century to understand the workings of your own mind. Better than never at all, I suppose, although some might disagree.

We’d still have made it, I reckon, despite the infidelities and indiscretions, the lost weekends and broken promises, but for something else neither of us could have anticipated. To have a son. And then to lose him. There. I’ve said that too. His name was Peter. He was born. He lived for four and a half years. And then he died. Drowned in the oversized swimming pool that went with the oversized house that went with the lifestyle we thought we were supposed to enjoy.

We blamed each other. We were right to. But the blame should have been shared, not contested. You can’t alter the past. And maybe you can’t alter the future either. But you can wreck the present. Oh yes. You can lay that thoroughly to waste.

When Jenny left me, I told myself it was for the best. Platitudes like ‘Time for us both to move on’ fell regularly

from my lips. I think I may even have believed them. For a while.

Not any more, though. I should never have let her go. I should have done things differently. Very differently. Hindsight is the sharpest sight of all. It lays bare the truth.

And the bleak truth is that there's nothing I can do to repair the damage I've done. There's no way back. At least, that's what I would have said. Until tonight.

Jenny had left a mobile number with Eunice. When I rang it, she answered instantly. And all I could manage by way of greeting was, 'It's me.'

'I expect you were surprised to hear from me,' she said after a long pause.

'You could say that, yes.'

'Can we meet?'

'When have I ever objected to the idea?'

I heard her sigh before she answered. 'Can we?'

'Yes. Of course.'

'This evening?'

'All right.'

'You're not busy?'

'What do you think?'

Another sigh. 'There's no point to this if you're going to be—'

'I'll be whatever you need me to be, Jenny. OK?' I could, perhaps I should, have asked why she wanted to see me. But I didn't dare to. 'Where and when?'

The Palace Pier at six o'clock was about as quiet as it ever gets. Most of the bars and attractions were closed, although the Palace of Fun was open for the benefit of anyone determined to pump money into its fruit machines. The sea sucked sluggishly at the beach below, while a couple speaking what sounded like Hungarian huddled in one of the shelters, sharing a bag of chips. All in all, the

venue struck me as improbably distant from Jenny's natural habitat.

Then, as I reached the end of the pier, where the helter-skelter and merry-go-rounds were shrouded in wintry darkness, another thought struck me. Perhaps Jenny had chosen to meet me there just because of the shortage of witnesses, especially witnesses likely to know her. She didn't want to be seen with me. That was the point. The pier was somewhere she could be confident of a very private word.

She was leaning against the railings halfway back along the other side, dressed in a long dark coat and boots, gazing vacantly down at the beach, her face obscured by the brim of a fur-trimmed hat. If I hadn't been looking out for her, I might not even have noticed her. Though she, presumably, would have noticed me.

'Great night for a promenade,' I said stupidly as I approached. 'How about a barbecue later?'

'Hello, Toby.' She turned and looked at me, a tight half-smile flicking across her face. 'Thanks for coming.'

'You look well.' (This was something of an understatement. Separation from me had evidently agreed with her. Either that or she's found a good beautician in Brighton. I prefer to believe the latter.)

'Shall we sit down?' she asked.

'If we can find a seat.' This didn't raise even half a smile.

The bench in the nearest shelter was dappled with droplets of rainwater, shimmering in the lamplight. I thought I caught a few words of Hungarian drifting over from the other side of the structure as I brushed some of the water away. We sat down.

'The chippy's open,' I said, nodding over my shoulder towards the kiosk I'd passed earlier. 'Fancy sharing fifty penn'orth?'

'No, thank you.'

'When was the last time we shared a bag of chips on a draughty sea front, would you say?'

'Have we ever?'

This wasn't going well. Jenny didn't seem remotely pleased to see me. Which was odd, since we were meeting at her request.

'How's the play going?' she asked suddenly.

'Do you really want to know?'

'I read about Jimmy Maidment.'

Well, that was no surprise. The apparent suicide of a famous comic actor, albeit one not as famous as he once was, makes plenty of headlines. Throwing himself under a Tube train the day before he was due to open in *Lodger in the Throat* may have been Jimmy's characteristically pithy way of telling the rest of the cast that he doubted the play would resurrect his career, or anyone else's. Alternatively, maybe he was just drunk and missed his footing. The coroner will say his piece in due course. Either way, though, it wasn't a good omen. I miss him. And so does the play.

'It must have been a shock,' said Jenny. 'Was he depressed?'

'Perpetually, I expect.'

'The reviewers seem to think ...'

'That we're lost without him. I know. And it's true. Fred Durrance isn't in Jimmy's class. But that's not the only problem. And I'm sure you didn't suggest meeting so we could analyse where it's all gone wrong, so—'

'Sorry,' she interrupted, her voice softening.

A brief silence fell. The sea hissed soothingly beneath the pier. 'Me too,' I murmured.

'Will it go to London?' she asked.

'Not a chance.'

'So, this is the end.'

'Apparently.'

'I *am* sorry, you know.'

‘Sorry enough to have me back?’ I smiled thinly at her in the lamplight. ‘Just joking.’

‘I’m very happy with Roger,’ she said, apparently assuming I doubted it, which actually I didn’t. ‘We’ve set a date for the wedding.’

‘Pity I left my diary at the Sea Air.’

Jenny sighed. I was trying her patience, an art I unintentionally perfected a long time ago. ‘Let’s walk,’ she said, rising before the words were properly out, and striding off towards the shore, boot heels clacking on the planks of the pier.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked as I fell in beside her.

‘Nowhere,’ she replied. ‘We’re just walking.’

‘Look, Jenny, can I just say ... I’m glad you’re happy. Strange as it may seem, I’ve always hoped you would be. If there’s anything I can—’

‘There is.’ Her voice was firm but far from hostile. That’s when I guessed what was really making her so edgy. She had a favour to ask of me. Since the last favour she’d asked of me was to get out of her life and stay out, it was, however you cut it, a delicate situation. ‘Will you do something for me, Toby?’

‘Gladly.’

‘You haven’t heard what it is yet.’

‘You wouldn’t ask me to do it if it wasn’t the right thing to do.’

She might have smiled at that. I can’t be sure. ‘I have a problem.’

‘Go on.’

But she didn’t go on until we’d turned off the pier and started west along the promenade, the empty beach to our left, the thinly trafficked sea front to our right. A full minute of silence must in fact have passed before she started to explain, which she did with the bewildering question, ‘Have I told you about Brimmers?’

'No,' was the best answer I could give, sensing this wasn't the time to point out that she hadn't told me anything at all in a good long while.

'It's a hat shop I own in the Lanes. I've really enjoyed making a go of it. It's quite successful, actually.'

'You always wanted your own business.'

'Yes. And now I've got it.'

'That's great.'

'Roger's fine about it.'

'Good. And what line of business is Roger in?'

'Corporate investment.' I was still puzzling over what precisely that meant when she briskly continued: 'Look, this has nothing to do with Roger. The thing is, some weird bloke's been hanging around the shop. There's a café opposite where he sits in the window, sipping endless cups of tea and staring across at Brimmers. I find him standing around outside when I open or close up. I've seen him out at Wickhurst too. There's a footpath that runs close to the house. I can't walk along it without bumping into him.'

'Who is he?'

'I don't know.'

'Haven't you asked him?'

'I've spoken to him a couple of times, but he doesn't respond. He answers "Can I help you?" with "No", then stares some more and wanders off. He's beginning to prey on my nerves. I think he's harmless, but he just won't go away.'

'Have you spoken to the police?'

'To complain of what? A man patronizing a café and walking along a public footpath? They'd think *I* was persecuting *him*.'

'Is he persecuting you?'

'It feels like it.'

'Sure you don't know him?'

'Positive.'

'What's he like?'

‘Creepy.’

‘You can do better than that.’

‘All right. He’s ... middle-aged, I suppose, but a bit childlike at the same time. There’s something of the overgrown schoolboy about him. The nerdy, socially dysfunctional kind of schoolboy. Wears a duffel-coat, with all sorts of ... badges on it.’

‘Obviously dangerous, then.’

‘If you’re not going to take this seriously ...’ She tossed her head in a well-remembered gesture.

‘What does Roger say?’

‘I haven’t told him.’ It was an admission she seemed reluctant to make, even though she must have known she’d have to.

‘Really?’

‘Yes. Really.’

I can confess now to deriving some small but twisted pleasure from the discovery that Jenny had a secret from her affluent and no doubt handsome fiancé – and was sharing it with me. The pleasure distracted me to some degree from the mystery. Why hadn’t she told Roger? She supplied an answer swiftly enough.

‘Roger travels a lot on business. I don’t want him worrying about me or staying home on my account.’

But it didn’t ring true. Jenny should have known better than to feed me such a line. I know her too well. Whatever she said, I had Roger down as the protective, not to say possessive, type. Her real concern is that her independence is at stake if she asks the new man in her life to save her from the stalking nerd of the Lanes. And Jenny values her independence. Very highly.

‘Besides,’ she added, ‘what could he do?’

Several possibilities sprang to mind, but I didn’t put the more extreme of them into words. After all, by the same token, what could *I* do? ‘He might recognize the bloke.’

‘He doesn’t.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘We were together when chummy walked past us recently. On the footpath I mentioned. I asked Roger if he knew him. He said no. Definitely not.’

‘But you didn’t explain the significance of the question.’

‘Obviously I didn’t. Besides ...’

‘What?’

‘I think I might know what chummy’s connection with me is. And it isn’t Roger.’

‘What, then?’

‘You mean *who*.’

‘OK, who?’

‘You, Toby.’

‘What?’

We both stopped and turned to look at each other. I couldn’t make out Jenny’s expression clearly in the shadow of her hat. But I dare say she could read me like a book. She’s always been able to. And what she must have read was disbelief.

‘Me?’

‘That’s right.’

‘But it can’t be. I mean ... that doesn’t make sense.’

‘Nevertheless ...’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘I just am.’

‘OK.’ I relented. ‘What made you think it?’

Jenny glanced over her shoulder. She’d noticed before I had that a group of youngsters was approaching. With a touch on my arm, she steered me to the side of the promenade. The precaution turned out to be unnecessary, because the youngsters promptly dashed across the road towards the Odeon Cinema. But still she lowered her voice as she spoke. ‘Sophie, my assistant at Brimmers, often goes to the café where chummy hangs about. She’s noticed him too. Well, last week, she spotted a video he’d bought lying

by his elbow. He'd taken it out of the bag to look at. Guess what it was.'

I turned the puzzle over in my mind for a moment, my gaze drifting towards the carcass of the West Pier, a hump of black against the blue-black sky. '*Dead Against*,' I murmured.

'How did you know?' Jenny sounded genuinely surprised. *Dead Against* was the last of my all too few Hollywood engagements, released to vinegary reviews and absentee audiences all of eleven years ago. A sub-Hitchcockian thriller in which I play an English private detective pursuing a glamorous hit-woman in Los Angeles, *Dead Against* turned out aptly to have nothing going for it. My co-star, however, Nina Bronsky, has gone on to better things, which is why, according to Moira, some of her earlier films are suddenly making it to the video-store shelves. Perhaps a royalties cheque eighteen months from now will quell my resentment. Then again, perhaps not.

'There aren't that many videos out there in any way connected with me, Jenny. *Dead Against* it had to be. But it could mean nothing. Maybe chummy's a Nina Bronsky fan. He sounds her type.'

'Be serious, Toby. Please. I'm worried about this man.'

'Well, if he's a fan of mine ...' I shrugged. 'I guess that makes me in some way responsible for him.'

'I'm not blaming you, for God's sake. I just want this weirdo off my back.'

'How can I accomplish that for you?'

'Go to the café tomorrow morning. See if you recognize him. Or if *he* recognizes *you*.'

'I haven't changed that much in eleven years. He *should* recognize me.'

'Then speak to him. Find out who he is; what he wants. See if you can't ...'

'Get rid of him?'

'All I want him to do is lay off, Toby.'

'Plus tell me why he's on your case. *If* he's on your case.'

'It's something to do with you. It must be. The video proves that. He's found out we used to be married and—'

'We still are, actually. Married, I mean.'

Jenny addressed the quibble with a seaward glance and a brief silence. Then she said, 'Will you do it?'

'Of course.' I smiled. 'Anything for you, Jenny.'

I meant it. I still do. But there's more to it than that, as I suspect Jenny's well aware. The video alone proves nothing. If our duffel-coated friend is interested in me, he could also be interested in Roger. Jenny says she doesn't want to worry Roger. But maybe she doesn't quite *trust* Roger. Maybe she wants to find out on her own terms what this is really all about – if it's about anything beyond the daily habits of a millinery fetishist. And maybe she knows she can rely on me to dig out the truth, because I still love her and haven't given up hope of making *her* love *me* all over again. She's playing a dangerous game, my once and future Jenny.

'What time should I show up?' I asked.

'He'll be there by ten. Without fail.'

'I'd better get an early night.'

'Don't come to the shop. Don't let him think I've sent you.'

'I'll do my best. Ad libbing's always been my forte.'

'Thanks, Toby.' There was genuine relief in her voice and maybe fondness too, although there I admit I could be kidding myself. 'I'm more grateful than I can say.'

'Shall I phone you ... afterwards?'

'Yes, please.'

'But you'd rather I didn't pop round to report?'

'It's not that. I ...'

'Perhaps Roger wouldn't be pleased. If he got to hear about it.'

'This has nothing to do with Roger.'

Jenny brushed a strand of hair back beneath the brim of her hat, exploiting the action to avoid my gaze. 'As it happens,' she said, 'Roger's away on business at the moment.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes,' she replied coolly.

'So, this is just between us.'

'I'd like to keep it that way.'

'I understand.' So I did. And so I do. We have an understanding all right. But it depends on not being made explicit. Neither of us is being entirely honest.

'I'd better be going,' said Jenny, with a sudden conclusive motion of the head. 'I'm meeting friends for dinner.'

Jenny's always been good at making friends. I didn't realize how good until she left me, taking most of them with her.

'Goodnight, Toby.'

I watched her cross the road and head up West Street past the cinema. Then I started back along the promenade, towards the Palace Pier and the Sea Air beyond.

Eunice said I was looking cheerier when I got back than I had been earlier. She'd probably have said that whether it was true or not, harbouring as she does a romantic Burton and Taylor vision of me and Jenny. But a glance in the hall mirror told me she was right. I saw reflected there what I haven't glimpsed so much as once during our long weeks on the road: a faintly optimistic sparkle in the eye.

After tackling Eunice's steak-and-kidney pud, I needed a walk. Time spent in reconnaissance being seldom wasted, as my old dad used to say, I made my way to the Lanes and prowled around, until, after several double-backs, I found Brimmers.

Jenny's good taste is pretty obvious just from the stylish window display and candy-stripe colour scheme. I couldn't see much of the interior and, if I'm to obey Jenny's orders, I'm not about to. But who knows? Not me. I'm just hoping.

The Rendezvous café was also closed, as you'd expect. The sign promises morning coffee, light lunches and afternoon teas. There's a counter at the rear, tables and chairs in the centre and a broad ledge along the glazed frontage, with stools, where customers can perch and watch the world of the Lanes go by as they sip their beverage of choice. You can easily keep Brimmers under observation from there, of course, though not without being observed yourself, which may or may not be the object of the exercise for my alleged fan. We'll see about that. Tomorrow, as promised.

Reconnaissance done, I ambled off to a pub I generally end up in at some point during Brighton runs – the Cricketers in Black Lion Street, allegedly Graham Greene's favourite – and downed a reflective pint. Sunday in Brighton had already exceeded my expectations, which admittedly wasn't difficult, but little did I realize that it still had a surprise in store for me.

I was at a table in the corner of the bar not visible from the door, idly watching a middle-aged married man and a woman who clearly wasn't his wife getting slowly sloshed. Sunday night can induce more than its fair share of morbidity. It's my only free night of the week at present, so I should know. Tonight, however, I was feeling just fine.

That's probably why my heart didn't sink when a bloke sidled over from the bar, said, 'Mind if I join you?' and plonked himself down next to me.

He struck me at first sight as your typical garrulous pub bore. Short and stout, with moist blue eyes, veinous nose and cheeks, thin sandy-grey hair and a tongue that seemed too large for his mouth, he was dressed in a crested blazer that could surely never fasten round his paunch, off-white

shirt and stained cavalry twills. In one hand he held a glass of red wine, in the other a flier advertising *Lodger in the Throat*.

'You're Toby Flood or I'm a Dutchman,' he announced.

'And you're not a Dutchman,' I replied.

'Can I buy you a drink?'

'I'm fine for the moment, thanks.'

'It's a relief to see you, to be honest.'

'A relief?'

'I've got a ticket for Tuesday night.' He held up the flier. 'So, it's good to know you've made it down. Syd Porteous. Pleased to meet you.' He extended a large, saveloy-fingered hand, which I had little choice but to shake.

'You a regular theatregoer, Syd?' I ventured.

'No, no. Leastways, I didn't used to be. But I've been trying to ... broaden my horizons ... since I've had more time on my hands.'

'Just retired, have you?'

'Not exactly. More ... downsized. You've got to duck and dive in this town. Well, *city* they call it now. Nice for the councillors, that, but bugger all use to those of us who keep them in expenses. Anyway, I can't claim to have been to the theatre' (or thee-eight-er, as he pronounced it) 'more than the gee-gees this year, but maybe next, hey? It'll soon be New Year resolution time and I've turned over more new leaves than the average rabbit's eaten, so ...'

The way he'd started gave me the impression I could be on the receiving end of a stream-of-consciousness monologue till last orders. I was just beginning, in fact, to devise an excuse to leave him to it when I became aware that there was a small, still point to the turning world of his rambling thoughts. And I was it.

'Any chance of a new series of *Long Odds*, Toby?' Syd suddenly asked. 'I used to be glued to that.'

Sad to say, Syd was in a small minority there. My 1987 TV series about a compulsive gambler who dabbles in

private investigations on the side (or was it the other way round?) is about as likely to be revived as Empire Day. 'No chance, I'm afraid.'

'Don't seem to have seen you much on the box lately.'

'I'm concentrating on the theatre. Live performance is more challenging.'

'Yeah, well, there's that to it, I suppose. Your fans get to see you in the flesh.'

'Exactly.'

'This play must be getting you a lot of attention. I'm looking forward to it.'

'Good.'

'I met him, you know.'

'Who?'

'Orton.'

Against my better instincts, my curiosity was aroused. 'Really?'

'Oh yes.' Syd lowered his voice melodramatically. 'Here. In Brighton. Just a couple of weeks before he died. Summer of 'sixty-seven.'

I'm familiar enough with the diaries Orton kept from December 1966 until his death in August 1967 for Syd's reference to have struck me as at least superficially authentic. Orton and Halliwell came to Brighton in late July, 1967, to spend a long weekend with Oscar Lewenstein, co-producer of *Loot*. Orton was bored out of his brain by the visit. I didn't recall a younger version of Sydney Porteous lurching onto the scene, however.

'How did you come to meet him?' I casually enquired. A public lavatory sprang to mind as the venue, given Orton's sexual habits, but Syd's answer was rather more disconcerting.

'Bumped into him in this very pub. A Sunday night, it was - like now. We chatted about nothing much. He didn't say who he was, though the name wouldn't have meant a thing to me if he had. I was an ignorant young shaver.'

Clocked his face in the papers a fortnight or so later, though. A bit of a shaker, that was. Looking back, I think he was trying to pick me up. Weird, isn't it?

'What is, in particular?'

'Well, him and now you, in the Cricketers on a Sunday night. What would you call that if it isn't weird?'

'I'd call it coincidental.' (If it was true, which I rather doubted.) 'Faintly coincidental.'

'Even so, you want to be careful. I'm not the superstitious type myself, but you actors are supposed to be. The Scottish play. The Superman curse. All that sort of malarkey.'

'I'll try not to let it worry me.'

'Look, I'm an old Brighton hand. My ma had a bit part in *Brighton Rock*. And I'm in a crowd scene in *Oh What a Lovely War!* So, I almost feel like an honorary member of the acting profession. Anything I can do for you while you're here - anything at all - just say the word. I'll give you my mobile number.' He scrawled the number on a beer mat and thrust it into my palm. 'Not much I can't lay hands on or find out in this town. Know what I mean?' He winked.

Unsure whether I really wanted to know what he meant, I smiled weakly and pocketed the beer mat. 'I'll bear the offer in mind.'

'You do that, Toby.' He gave me a second, more exaggerated wink. 'I wouldn't like to think of you getting into trouble for the lack of a word to the wise.'

Shaking Syd off wasn't easy. He was all for 'going on somewhere'. I had to dredge up considerable reserves of charm to avoid offending him. Somehow, though, I doubt he takes offence easily. He can't afford to with his personality.

Back here at the Sea Air I've had the opportunity to check Orton's diaries for late July, 1967, which have raised more questions than they've answered. He and Halliwell arrived in Brighton on Thursday 27th and spent three days

cooped up discontentedly at the Lewenstein house in Shoreham, leaving on Monday 31st. Just about the only time Orton was alone, oddly enough, was Sunday evening. He had gone with Halliwell and the Lewenstein family to see the new Bond film, *You Only Live Twice*, at the Odeon Cinema, but it was sold out. The others opted to see *In Like Flint* instead, but Orton preferred to cruise off in search of casual sex. He succeeded in getting himself sucked off by a dwarf in a public convenience. (Orton seems to have given the word 'convenience' a very liberal interpretation.) Then he had a cup of tea at the railway station and walked back to Shoreham.

No mention of the Cricketers, then, nor of anyone who could be Sydney Porteous as an ignorant young shaver. Orton wasn't much of a pub-goer by his own and others' accounts. The incident doesn't ring true. Syd, I conclude, was spinning a yarn.

Or was he? No Orton scholar for sure and certain, how did he manage to get as many facts right as he did? As it happens, Sunday, 30 July 1967 was the only evening when he *could* have met the great and soon to be late Joe Orton in a Brighton boozer.

Besides, I can't deny that there's something slightly disturbing about Porteous's story. Orton's weekend by the sea wasn't wholly lacking in superstitious significance. His agent, the legendary Peggy Ramsay, had a house in Brighton. She met up with the party on Saturday night and they dropped by her place on the way out to dinner. There Orton made some characteristically scornful remarks about a horus she showed him – an Egyptian wood carving in the likeness of a bird, traditionally placed on graves to escort the souls of the departed to heaven. Peggy thought such disrespect was tempting fate. Sure enough – if you're that way inclined – Orton was dead within a couple of weeks.

I'm not, of course, that way inclined. At least, I try not to be. But Eunice brought yesterday's *Argus* up to me earlier,