

Straight to You

by David Moody

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INFECTED BOOKS

Prologue

At a quarter past one on the morning of Tuesday, October the 2nd, our sun began to die. Like the inside of a body being slowly weakened and devoured by a cancer, and unseen by anyone and anything

watching, the star began to writhe and to react within itself producing lethal levels of energy and radiation which it spewed out into the space surrounding. All around the rest of the universe, nothing seemed to have changed - the brilliant yellow mass continued to burn brightly and to warm the planets in orbit around it where life continued unabated and oblivious to the star's inaudible dying screams.

Eventually, within fifty hours of the sun's first internal reaction, a change worked its way steadily through the vacuum which was noticed and which was, surprisingly, welcomed by the population of the earth - it began to get warmer. As the people on the planet's surface talked of mild winters and of Indian summers, the temperature of the air that they breathed rose steadily until, by Monday the 15th, most areas were a good five degrees warmer than their record books and experts said that they should be.

It was not the first time that such things had happened there and, for once, rather than complain, most people in England chose to relax and to make the most of their mini-heatwave. Steven Johnson, however, was far from impressed.

At only twenty-six years of age, he had done well to get to where he sat today. It had taken him eight years to work his way up through the ranks of the company which employed him from a mere clerk to the heady heights of an office manager. Now, as he sat alone and uncomfortable in the stilling heat of his oak-panelled office and rested in his expensive leather swivel chair, he wondered if it had been worth all the effort it had taken.

Steven looked out of the wide window next to his desk and down onto the busy high street below. With jealous eyes he watched people chatting, laughing, shopping and enjoying themselves and he cursed the concrete prison cell into which he locked himself for a minimum of seven hours every working day. Sometimes he wondered if he would have been better off without the burden of responsibility which had been hung on his shoulders at a relatively young age. Although not a lonely man by any stretch of the imagination, he would often listen to the laughter and jokes which drifted through the air from the main office and into his room, and curse the professional distance that his superiors insisted he maintain from the people who worked for him.

He also found it difficult to relax and to cast aside the stresses that his job involved, and the heat of the last two weeks had only made matters worse. As a single man, Steven went home each night to an empty house where the only listening ear belonged to the cat and, while the animal did its best and listened to his problems, it was useless when it came to offering support and encouragement. Although he never made any admissions to his friends or family, he was desperately in need of someone to share his time, his money, his problems and his life with.

Perhaps he was being naive, but he made no effort to go out and find such a person. He had been the victim of too many broken hearts and missed opportunities to spend his nights trudging around lonely bars and crowded clubs anymore. Brought up on a diet of other peoples sickly sweet love stories, Steven was sure that all he needed to do was wait patiently and then, one day, the girl of his dreams would come waltzing into his life.

Even with the large window open, the heat in the office was sticky and close. He loosened the tie around his neck and undid the top button on his formal, pressed white shirt. He glanced up at the clock on the wall in front of him and sighed heavily as its hands quickly worked their way around towards two o'clock. Two o'clock on the afternoon of Monday the 15th had been a time and a date that he had not been looking forward to. It had been decided by those in the higher echelons of power that one of the junior members of the office staff had not been performing to the fullest of his abilities and, unfortunately, this was the time and date when it had fallen to Steven to deliver the company's ultimatum to their struggling employee. As the second hand on the clock ticked mercilessly past the hour, he took a deep breath and picked up the phone.

With the receiver held tightly in his hand, Steven swallowed hard and dialled out to his secretary at her desk. If he was honest, he didn't believe that Ian Stanton (the member of staff that he was about to reprimand) had done anything to merit such action being taken but what troubled him more than being the hired mouthpiece of a man in a grey suit in an office on the other side of the country, was the fact that he was about to admonish one of the most popular members of staff. He felt sure that it would only serve to alienate him further from the rest of the people in the branch. Still, he thought, there was no avoiding it, it

was what he was being paid to do.

The thought of money depressed Steven and, as the phone rang in the outside office without answer, he could not help but think and be saddened by how much he had become a willing slave to cash. He was about to do something that he did not believe in and the only reason that he did it was to keep those few extra pounds flowing into his pockets at the end of each month. To stop them soiling their own hands, his superiors paid him a little more than the staff beneath him and expected that to be sufficient.

The company that Steven worked for was part of the financial industry and he could see better than most just how the possession of money seemed to command more respect than it ever deserved. He would often spend the best part of a day running around on behalf of those people who either had cash or connections while the people who really needed his help had to wait in a poverty-stricken line at the bottom of a stinking heap. Even when he was able to assist such people, it was never without heavy cost to those least able to pay while the rich were never asked to put their hands in their pockets. It was a difficult fact to accept but it was an unavoidable part of his working life. It was also a huge bone of contention which lodged itself painfully in Steven's neck. He knew that he had to find a new career before this one drove him to insanity.

Someone finally picked up the telephone.

'Hello,' a chirpy, high-pitched voice answered. It was Carol, the office secretary.

'Would you ask Ian to come inside please?' Steven said abruptly.

'Will do,' Carol replied before quickly replacing the receiver.

Steven put his phone down and took several deep, calming breaths. In the moments before Ian entered, he tried desperately to remember the standard lines from countless courses and numerous memos that his bosses had force-fed him with to deal with a situation such as this. He hoped that he would be able to keep up the act and deliver their ultimatum with the minimum of effort and resistance.

The silhouette of a man appeared in the frosted glass of the window in the door to Steven's office. The shadow paused for a moment (Ian was obviously as nervous and unsure about the interview as his manager was) before knocking on the door and coming inside.

There was a loud confident knock at the door and I stood up to let Ian into the office. He walked quietly past me, keeping his eyes directed firmly away from mine, and stood in front of my desk.

'Sit down, Ian,' I said and he pulled a chair across the room to sit opposite my chair.

I watched him as he sat down and noticed that he looked considerably calmer and more composed than I felt. He had already been told the purpose of my calling him into the office today and I expected him to have prepared his responses to the company's threats beforehand. A young man, only a couple of years my junior; he folded his arms, sat back on the hard, wooden chair and waited for me to sit down opposite him.

I cleared my throat. It was difficult for me to hide my dislike at the situation and, although I didn't look directly into his face, I could feel Ian staring across the table at me. I was sure that he saw me almost as the enemy and definitely as someone who could not be trusted. Although I knew that what I was about to say were the words of other people, I felt that he would hold every last syllable against me personally.

'How are things?' I asked, struggling to find a way of ending the stagnant silence and getting down to

the matter at hand.

'Fine,' Ian replied abruptly. It was obvious from the tone of his voice and from the brevity of his reply that he had no intention of making this an easy caution for me to administer.

'Look,' I began, 'I don't like having to do this, and I'm sure that you don't want to be sat here listening to me. . .'

I stopped mid-sentence. I remembered my teachers trying much the same line on me at school and I could not believe that I had just used it. I looked up to see Ian still staring at me. He turned away and began to fidget nervously and chew his fingers. I took another deep breath.

'I'll come straight to the point, Ian. Your work has failed to meet the standards that the company expects from someone of your grade and experience. Unless you buck up your ideas and start pulling your weight, you could well find yourself out of a job.'

I felt myself relax and was sure that my relief was obvious to Ian. I had delivered the required ultimatum and he appeared to have taken it reasonably well. I had been worried that he might not be so calm and was surprised when the expression on his face slowly changed to one of genuine concern.

'I understand what you're saying,' he said slowly, choosing his words carefully. 'I really don't want to lose my job.'

'I've got to be honest, Ian,' I said, quickly slipping back into company mode, 'you're not giving me that impression at the moment.'

He was quiet again for a second and I could see that there was something that he wanted to say. He shuffled in his seat and looked away from me and out through the window before beginning to speak slowly and with some trepidation.

'It's just that. . . ' he began before stopping mid-sentence with uncertainty.

'Just what?' I asked, keen to find out what was on his mind.

'It's just that I can't see any point in doing any more than I need to.' Ian struggled to find the right words to express how he felt without, I presumed, sounding anti-company (which most, if not all of the staff in the office were).

He fell silent again and I was about to speak when he interrupted.

'You've told me before now that if I apply myself and work hard, then I could be sitting where you are and. . .'

'...and?'

'...and I'm not sure if I want to be.'

Ian relaxed when he had finished speaking and looked anxiously towards me for a response. He had caught me off guard and I struggled to find anything to say in reply.

'As long as I get my money at the end of the month, I don't care what happens,' he added, emphasising his point.

It was my turn to fidget in my seat as I tried to force myself to act as a responsible company employee and to do the job that I had been paid to do. I could not help agreeing with and admiring Ian's views but I had to make the company's position known.

'I've been told to give you a month - after that we'll review the situation,' I said, hiding my doubts idly behind the threats of others.

'That's fair enough,' Ian replied, seemingly relieved that I had not taken his words badly. 'Believe me,' he continued, 'I really don't want to lose my job I just think that there's a lot more to life than slogging your guts out all day and getting home in such a state that you're too tired to do anything else.'

Once more he looked cautiously towards me for a reaction before adding,

'You can see what I mean, can't you?'

Unfortunately, I could see all too well what Ian meant. I nodded and stood to let him out of the room. It was difficult to stop myself from telling him just to what extent I had agreed with his comments and so, to prevent any embarrassment, I decided to finish the meeting and avoid any further conversation. I could not help feeling deflated and somewhat depressed - I had let down the company and, much more importantly, I had let my own morals and ideals slip.

'Please, Ian. Please just try and make a little more effort,' I said as I led him across the room. 'I'm not asking for one hundred percent dedication, just a little co-operation.'

Ian managed a relieved smile and left the office. I shut the door behind him and leant against the wall, glad that our meeting had passed without any real incident.

Although I made no conscious attempt to eavesdrop on the conversations out in the main office, I stood quietly next to the door for a short while and could not help but listen to what the staff were saying to their reprimanded friend. Through the frosted glass I could see them gathering around Ian for shreds of gossip and information like gannets after the tiniest scraps of food. I hated being cast as the enemy and strained to try and hear what was being said above the noise of the office. Although most of the words were nothing more than garbled mumbles, I distinctly heard Ian's voice telling the others that I had been a pushover.

I walked back from the door and sat down at my desk again. I swivelled the chair around so that I could look outside, leant back and stared lazily into the deep and clear blue sky. Ian had been right, of course, I had been a pushover. But how could I be possibly be expected to argue against something that I knew was right and to criticise others when I agreed with their morals and actions? I decided there and then (as I did nearly every day at the same time) that a change of career was the only sensible solution to my problems.

Five o'clock seemed to take an eternity to arrive. I spent three long hours alone in my office, ploughing through mundane paperwork and occasionally speaking to customers on the telephone. The heat made the time drag even more and I noticed from my records that it was on this date last year that we had fired up the boilers and switched on the office heating. Today I sat next to an open window with my tie hanging loosely around my neck and my shirtsleeves rolled up.

A knock at the door disturbed the quiet and Robert, my assistant manager, poked his bald, sweaty head into the room.

'All right if we all shoot off?' he asked. 'Everything's finished.'

I nodded.

'I'm just about to pack up myself,' I said and I was about to ask him a question when his head disappeared again. The heavy clunking of feet followed as the staff collected their bags, newspapers and redundant overcoats and climbed down the stairs to leave the building.

I gathered up my papers from the desk and shoved them into my briefcase, determined to catch up with more work at home later. As I leant across and closed the window, I looked down onto the busy street below and watched as people strolled through the early-evening gloom of October with their jackets hung casually over their shoulders and their shirt collars open.

I slammed the window down and locked it shut. Keen to leave the branch quickly and be on my way home, I picked up my jacket and case and went out into the main office. Robert had just let the last of the rest of the staff out of the building and I waited for him to return. It was company regulations that no-one was ever left on the premises on their own to lock up at night and a strict, almost regimental check of the building needed to be made before we could leave.

A discarded newspaper lay on a nearby desk and I picked it up. The paper was one of the national tabloids and, as I expected, carried little in the way of any real news. As is the norm for such papers, the first hint of unexpected sunshine meant full, front-page pictures of crowded beaches and of children in park paddling pools. The predictable headline yelled. 'What a Scorcher!' in inimitable Fleet Street style and another footnote at the bottom of the page continued the theme, saying, '...and there's more to come!' Try as I might, I could find nothing inside the paper to explain the heat or to even give the slightest idea of how long the conditions might last or how hot it could get.

Robert returned from the front door with his round face glowing red and covered with a layer of sticky sweat. 'This is too much for me,' he wheezed.

'I know what you mean,' I said. 'I don't know what we'll do if it gets any warmer.'

As I spoke and tried to make polite conversation, Robert walked past me and collected his briefcase. Although I was sure that he was not trying to be deliberately rude or obstinate, I could tell that he had no interest in anything I had to say and that he just wanted to get away as quickly as possible. I hoped that it was the branch he was so eager to escape from and not me - the constant whispers and glances from my staff were beginning to make me paranoid.

I followed Robert as he made the required checks around the building and switched off the computers. As we left the building I breathed a cool and relaxing sigh of relief and looked forward to a quiet evening at home. With a little luck, I thought, I would wake up in the morning and find that the office had burnt down and that it was a typically grey, cold and miserable October day outside.

Somehow, I didn't think that *would* be the case.

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With the arrival of night, the autumn light had faded away as normal but there had been no noticeable respite in the suffocating heat. Although past their bright best, I was determined to take advantage of what remained of the conditions and so settled down on the patio in a deckchair to relax and to listen to the radio for a while. I had brought home plenty of work from the office which needed to be done but, as the pressures of the day had now reduced to an almost bearable level, I decided to leave it all locked safely away in my briefcase until morning. The company got more than enough out of me between nine and five o'clock each day - this was my time and my time alone.

The patio was dark and quiet with the gloom only broken by the soft yellow electric light which spilled out of the house from the kitchen window. Although not brilliant by any means, the light provided just enough illumination to help me locate the cans of beer on the ground at the side of the chair.

The metal frame and thin cloth covering of the deckchair proved to be deceptively comfortable and it did not take long for me to begin to slide away into a light sleep. The heat and drink combined to deadly effect to help me lose consciousness with the minimum of fuss. Occasionally a soft breeze drifted across the garden, but it was never strong enough to wake me for more than a couple of seconds.

At around nine-thirty, an unexpected crackle of static from the radio woke me with a start. It had been playing quiet, tinny music all evening without interruption but had now begun to scream and hiss with distortion. Still half asleep, I struggled in the gloom to find the set with one outstretched arm. With fingers flailing, I grabbed the wire aerial and swung it around to try and relocate the station's elusive signal. When the music was replaced totally by static and white noise, I sat up and picked the radio angrily off the ground. As I toyed with the controls, a heavy and hot wind blew across my face. The wind was gentle and somehow directionless and it seemed to fall onto me rather than be blown. I looked up into the night sky to try and find the source of the breeze and was amazed when the whole panorama of darkness above me began to change colour.

At first deep black and punctuated only by the brilliance of individual, isolated stars, the sky changed initially to a ruddy brown before lightening and working its way from a deep red to a dull orange, almost as bright as the last glowing embers in a dying fire. I watched and rubbed my tired eyes, unsure if what I was seeing was really there or if it was just a trick of the night. Slowly, the colours reversed and the sky worked its way back to its original dull blackness. The radio in my hands crackled back into life and, as the warm wind subsided, the music began to blast out of the speakers once again.

I put the machine back on the ground and relaxed again in the deckchair. I looked up at the heavens

above and wondered about what I had just seen. Half of my mind seemed intent on finding a link between the hot conditions and the light and wind I had just experienced whilst the other half of me wanted nothing more than to ignore it and go back to sleep. The latter part of my brain was starting to win its battle with the other until, just as I was beginning to lose consciousness again, the telephone rang inside the house. Angry, tired and irritated. I jumped up out of my chair and knocked a half-finished can of beer over onto the patio. For a moment I watched as the liquid fizzed and frothed away in the pale light, before going into the house to answer the call.

Still not quite awake, I picked up the telephone receiver and held it to my ear.

'All right, Steve! Did you see that?' asked an annoyingly cheerful voice at the other end of the line. I recognised its owner immediately as Mark Evans, an old close friend.

'If you've just phoned me up to ask that, Mark, then our friendship could well be on its last legs,' I said as I tried to stifle a tired yawn. He ignored my idle threats.

'Did you see it?' he asked again. 'Wasn't it incredible?'

'Mark,' I said abruptly, becoming more and more irritated with each passing moment, 'yes, I did see the sky change and yes, to be honest, it was very unusual and very impressive. If you don't mind though, I was just about to go to sleep.'

'Boring bastard!' he snapped. 'Anyway, I didn't just call to ask about that, I wanted to know if you're still going out for a drink on Monday.'

At the mention of drinking and of going out, my tone changed and I actually managed to feign interest in the conversation.

'Fine, mate. Shall I pick you up about eight?'

'Okay,' Mark replied. 'But only if you're in a better mood. You've got to lighten up if you're going out with me.'

'I will,' I promised. 'I've just had a bad day, that's all.' I was keen not to talk about work and swiftly switched the conversation to another topic. 'Is Stuart still coming with us?' I asked.

Stuart was another close friend of Mark's and of mine. We had known each other since our school days together and our Monday-night outings to the pub had become something of a tradition.

'He can't come,' Mark said. 'Says he's too busy at work, but I doubt if that's the real reason.'

Stuart's attendance at our evenings out had become more erratic and irregular recently. Although we never dared say anything to him, we both presumed that it had more to do with his wife than with pressure of work.

'It's Susan,' I commented. 'Our Stuart's becoming a bit hen-pecked these days.'

Mark agreed. For a moment I pictured Stuart trapped at home and could not help but feel jealous of the fact that he at least had someone to be trapped at home with. All that I had was a fat old tabby cat who, almost on cue, bounded heavily down the stairs and ran past me.

'How are things at work?' Mark asked, disturbing my train of thought.

'Shit,' I replied, bluntly and honestly. I knew my friend well enough not to waste any time in beating around the bush with him.

'No change there then,' he offered. Mark had heard me complain about the office on many occasions in the past. In fact, he had probably listened to me moan about the place every time that we'd spoken since I had started there. 'You need to get yourself a real job!' he joked.

'What, like the one you've got?' I replied, sarcastically. Mark was a lecturer at the city's university and my sarcasm was really nothing more than thinly veiled jealousy. As well as earning a much better salary than me, he lectured in sports science and seemed to spend most of his time playing games and generally enjoying himself.

'I have to work for my money,' I added with a semi-intended bitterness in my voice.

'I know you do,' he replied. 'But who's having the best time?'

'All right, all right' I wailed, admitting defeat. 'How are things at your place, anyway?'

'Not too bad. There's quite a buzz around the campus about the weather at the moment. The meteorological department are having a field day.'

'I bet they are. Has anybody got any idea what's going on though?' I asked.

'Not really. They managed to predict that what happened tonight was going to happen. Some of them are saying that something similar will happen again before long.'

'All well and good but what exactly was it?'

'I don't know. All that I've heard is that it could have something to do with the sun.' He paused for a moment. 'And if you think about it that's bloody obvious.'

I laughed.

'It's typical though,' I said, 'the rest of us are slogging our guts out to earn a living and you lot are just sitting around and talking about how hot it is outside.'

'Steve, you really have got to lighten up a little. You're getting far too bitter in your old age.' Mark knew that I was joking and ignored my jealous jibes. 'Anyway,' he continued, 'I bet that everything will be back to normal in a couple of days. You wait, we'll go out next Monday and it'll be wet, miserable and...'

'...you'll be complaining about how cold it is, I know you. Anyway, I'll see you next week.'

'Yes, I've got to go. I've got a lot to get ready for tomorrow.'

'I'm sure you have, mate,' I said laughing. 'Got to blow up your balls and clean your boots. Christ, it must be tough.'

Mark sighed loudly.

'There's just no point talking to you when you're in this kind of mood. I'll see you on Monday.'

'Okay. Pick you up about eight. Have a good week.'

I listened as Mark put the phone down. I yawned, stretched and then replaced the receiver of my own set. The idea of heading back out onto the warm patio to the deckchair and to my remaining cans of beer was appealing and I walked towards the back door, tired and thirsty. No sooner than I had taken a couple of steps away from the phone, it began to ring again. Annoyed, I picked it up.

'Hello,' I snapped.

'Steven, it's your mother here.'

My heart sank as Mom began to speak. Although I enjoyed talking to her I knew that my beer would be flat by the time that she had finished gossiping.

'How are you, Mom?' I asked.

'Oh, not too bad, love. I can't get over this weather though.'

'I know what you mean, it's a bit much, isn't it?'

'Are you all right dear?' she enquired in her gentle, high-pitched tone. 'I tried calling a little earlier.'

'I was probably asleep. I had a bad day today.'

Although we had only been speaking for a matter of minutes and had done little but exchange pleasantries, I could already sense that all was not well with Mom. She habitually telephoned me with an irritating regularity to make sure that I was all right (she seemed to find it difficult to comprehend the fact that I was twenty-six and perfectly able to look after myself) and her calls usually took a familiar pattern. Mom would ask how I was, I would tell her and then ask the same question back. Nine times out of ten, she would reply by telling me exactly where she had been recently, who she had seen and what they'd been doing when she'd seen them. This vital information could take Mom anything up to half an hour to impart and, on the rare occasion when it was not forthcoming, I knew that something was wrong and that she had called me for another reason.

'Is everything all right, Mom?'

She paused for a moment before speaking again.

'It's your father, Steven. He's not too well.'

'What's wrong?' I asked, concerned. Dad was a strong old man and was rarely ill. If he complained you knew that there was something seriously wrong with him.

'I think it must be the heat,' Mom replied. 'He just can't seem to settle.'

Although he was in his early sixties, it was difficult to accept that Dad was growing old. In the same way that they both thought of me as their little boy, my parents still seemed the same to me today as they had done when I was younger. 'Is there anything I can do?'

'I don't know. Would you come over one night soon? We'd both love to see you.'

'Of course I will. Mom. It'll probably have to be next week, but I'll definitely come across.'

My parents lived on the other side of town and it took a while for me to get over to see them. I knew that I would be busy for the rest of the coming week and for the weekend after that. I hoped that Mom wouldn't mind if I left it that long to visit.

'That's fine, love. Your dad'll be pleased to see you.'

Unusually, she did not seem in the mood to chat and I felt sure that she would have been happier had I made arrangements to visit them a little sooner. I apologised for not being able to and then said goodbye. I wished with all my heart that I could just abandon the office and go and see them first thing in the morning, but I knew that was impossible. Disappointed with myself and worried about my father, I walked away from the phone in the hall and into the living-room.

I flicked on the television set just in time to catch the beginning of a news bulletin. There was nothing of any real interest in the main headlines, but it was becoming noticeable that the weather conditions had begun to work their way gradually up the programme's running order. A few days ago they had been little more than a tacked-on postscript but now that it looked as if the heat would last for a while longer yet, they were fast becoming headline news. I switched off the set again and walked out through the open French windows into the garden. The air had become perfectly still again and the heat was dry, close and heavy.

As the seconds ticked away towards ten-thirty, I drifted off and away into a sound, undisturbed sleep. Undisturbed, that was, until four o'clock the next morning when I woke in my deckchair and stumbled back into the house.

I was late getting into the office next morning. Once I had woken up on the patio and had gone back inside to bed I had found it difficult to get back to sleep. I had eventually managed to drift off again at around six and had then slept through my seven o'clock alarm. I could only have been ten or fifteen minutes later than usual but it did not matter - ten minutes or ten hours; once my daily routine had been disrupted it always seemed to take the best part of the whole working day to get it back into some semblance of order. Fortunately, the office was quiet all morning and it seemed that all of the people who were lucky enough to have the choice had stayed at home to make the most of the relatively tropical conditions outside.

There had been no overnight respite in the weather and by midday the brilliant sun stood high and proud in the deep blue sky, burning everything that it touched with its powerful and undiminished rays. I spent the morning trapped in my sweat-box of an office catching up with the paperwork which I had taken home last night with the intention of completing there. A telephone call from a friend was a welcome interruption from monotonous sheets covered in endless lists of repetitive figures.

'Sorry to bother you, Steve,' Carol said as she poked her head around the door and into my room. 'I've got a Rebecca Marsh on the phone for you, she says it's a personal call.'

'Thanks, Carol,' I said. 'That's fine. Could you shut the door on your way out please?'

My secretary obliged by slamming the door and almost pulling it from its hinges. I picked up the phone quickly to speak to Rebecca.

'Hi Becky How are you?'

I had known Rebecca for the last four or five years I couldn't remember how or where we had

originally met, I just knew that she was the best friend I had ever - or would ever - have. One of the biggest regrets of my life was the fact that I had met her shortly after she had married. I knew that if she had still been single I would have found the perfect partner to share the rest of my time with.

'I'm all right, Steve,' she replied 'How are things going with you today?'

I sighed.

'They're going, that's all I can say.'

Rebecca laughed and I relaxed. It was good to hear her voice again as she had been out of town for a couple of weeks. One of the few advantages of the location of the branch which I managed was that it was only a couple of minutes' walk from Rebecca's office a little way down the high street.

'Are you very busy?' she asked.

'Not particularly Do you fancy meeting for lunch?'

'I was just about to suggest that. Shall I meet you here at about one?'

'That's fine,' I replied, cheerfully. The thought of spending some time with Becky made the prospect of the rest of the day seem a little more palatable.

'Great,' she said 'I've got to go now, I've got an appointment in a couple of minutes. I'll see you later.'

'Okay, I'll see you in a while.'

I put the phone down.

It was a source of continual amazement to me just how much better I always felt after speaking to Rebecca. I only needed to hear her voice for a moment and I was suddenly torn away from my depressing, humdrum career and thrust into a calmer, safer world.

I got up from my seat and walked across to the open window. Looking down, I saw that the street below was momentarily quiet and I watched as crowds of children suddenly spilled out of the gates of a nearby school, heading en masse towards the nearest shops. Dressed in shorts and T-shirts, the children ran out into the sunlight as they would on any other summer's day. I had to remind myself that it was the middle of October.

The hour between Rebecca's call and one o'clock dragged incredibly. A combination of the heat, the continual stream of work which arrived on my desk and the prospect of finally seeing my best friend again made the seconds feel like minutes and the minutes feel like hours. One o'clock eventually arrived and I quickly left the office.

I met Rebecca outside the building where she worked as we had planned, and we discussed where to go.

'It's too hot to go for a drink,' she said, 'and anyway, I can't really afford it.'

I knew exactly what she meant. It always seemed to be the same at the middle of the month - pay-day was still a couple of weeks away and my bank account was already beginning to slip heavily into the red.

'We could go to the park,' I suggested, searching for cheap alternatives for something to do. Rebecca nodded.

'Good idea. You can hear yourself talk there.'

'And it's free,' I added quickly.

We crossed the main road and followed the twisting path of a narrow side street which led to the park. As we walked, we caught up on the fortnight's worth of gossip and developments which we had missed while Becky had been away. I could not stop myself from staring at my beautiful best friend and thinking what an incredibly lucky man her husband was. Now that she was happily married, however, we had come to share a close, symbiotic relationship whereby we both relied on each other for help and support. Over the years we had grown to be as close as brother and sister and I valued her companionship more than she ever could have imagined. I always meant to tell her just how much she meant to me, but could never find the right moment.

When I had first suggested the park, visions of lush, cool grass and leafy trees had flooded into my mind. The reality, however came as something of a surprise to both of us. The park stood at the end of the little road which we followed and it usually offered an unexpected oasis of greenery contrasting sharply with the dense, cold grey of the city nearby. While it still provided a welcome escape from the plastic and concrete, we found it to be in a desperately sorry state. The grass was brittle and bleached of colour the soil hard cracked and dry. Although the temperature had only reached such extreme and unusual levels in the last few days, there had been little or no rain for the best part of a month and the lack of moisture was killing the park almost as we watched. Undeterred, we walked towards a huge, old oak tree to sit down in the little shade that it offered. It was only the layer of dead golden-brown leaves on the ground around the tree's base and its savage, bare branches twisting into the sky above us which gave any indication of it being autumn at all.

Rebecca brushed away handfuls of crisp crackling leaves before sitting down on the hard ground. I did the same and sat next to her.

'This weather's incredible,' I said, loosening my tie.

'Oh, don't, Steve,' she sighed. I looked at her, confused.

'Don't what?'

'Talk about the weather. Christ, it's all I've heard this morning.' She spread her legs out in front of her and leant back against the rough trunk of the tree. 'Every single person that I've spoken to has mentioned it. "What a lovely day", "Isn't it hot for the time of year?" Honestly, there's only so much that I can take.'

I could see how the continually inane conversations that Rebecca had been subjected to could soon wear a person down, but I could not help thinking that it would make a welcome change for me to actually become involved in a decent conversation at work rather than being ignored and locked away in my office in tiresome, continual isolation. It wouldn't matter what the subject was, just to have a member of staff be pleasant and approachable for a while would be enough.

'How's Richard?' I asked, changing the subject. Richard was Becky's husband.

'He's fine,' she replied as she began to search for something in her bag. We never talked much about him - if I was brutally honest, I didn't really want to know anything and Becky seemed not to want to tell me much. As long as he was treating her well and was looking after her, I was happy.

She emerged from her bag clutching a small, cellophane-wrapped packet of sandwiches and a can of lemonade. She opened the sandwiches and took a large bite out of one of them. After chewing for a moment she stopped and a look of utter disgust spread across her face. She forced herself to swallow.

'What's the matter?' I asked. Rebecca wiped her mouth and grimaced.

'That's disgusting,' she said as she looked down at the half-eaten food in her hand. She slowly peeled one slice of bread away from the other and I turned my nose up at the slimy concoction which had been spread between them.

'What the bloody hell is that?' I asked, pointing at the revolting food.

'Tuna fish and salad cream,' she replied. 'It doesn't look too good, does it?'

I shook my head.

'You've got strange tastes,' I joked.

'It'd be all right normally, it just got a little bit warm in my bag.'

'I couldn't even eat that cold,' I said, 'never mind toasted!'

Rebecca looked at me and wrinkled up her nose before gathering up what remained of the sandwiches, standing and throwing them into a nearby waste bin. She walked back towards me and wiped her greasy hands clean on her smart skirt.

We sat and talked for about half an hour. Thirty minutes of forgettable and yet enjoyable conversation which inevitably worked its way towards the subject of my marital status and what we were going to do about it. Rebecca seemed to enjoy making plans for me and usually took a while to be convinced that my attitude (all good things come to those who wait) would ever find me a partner. I said, jokingly at first but

then with some seriousness, that there was little point in trying to find the perfect woman when she was sat next to me and already married to someone else. Becky smiled but she did not reply and I wondered what she was thinking.

'I've got to get back,' she said at almost a quarter to two.

'It can't be that time already,' I whined, desperate not to have to go back inside.

'It is. Anyway, I've got to go to the supermarket before I go back so I'll have to go now. Are you coming or are you going to stop here for a while?'

The thought of fighting my way through a building packed with hot, sweaty and angry shoppers did not appeal to me.

'I'll stop here a little longer. I'll call you later.'

Becky smiled, collected up her things and walked away from me towards the park gates. When she was about a hundred yards away, she turned and waved and I wondered how my life might have changed if things between us had been different.

As I watched my friend leave, I heard the sound of approaching footsteps crunching towards me through the layer of dead leaves on the ground. I turned to see who was coming and was blinded for a moment by the brilliant sunlight. I shielded my eyes and saw that a shuffling figure neared. Uninvited, the figure stopped next to me and I looked up to see a gasping, wheezing old man stood at my side. Before I was able to protest or move away, he sat down.

'It's too bloody hot!' he coughed as he lowered himself to the ground.

I was about to get up when he grabbed my arm with one outstretched hand. Despite the heat, I saw that the man still wore full winter clothes - thick trousers, boots, a heavy overcoat and even a hat and scarf. I looked across into his aged face and watched as a heavy bead of sweat ran down the creased and wrinkled skin of his forehead before trickling down the bridge of his nose and hanging precariously between his nostrils. As I stared, unable to look at anything other than the overbalancing drop, he wiped it away with the dirty sleeve of his coat and sniffed.

'It is warm,' I said meekly, eventually remembering to reply to his comment.

'Do you know what I think?' he whispered as he took off his cloth cap and ran a trembling hand through the yellowing strands of silver hair which clung greasily to his sweaty scalp.

'What?' I asked politely, forcing myself to prolong a conversation with a character who I was becoming more and more wary about with each passing second. The man leant towards me.

'I think it's the end.'

'The end of what?'

The old man paused for a moment and looked around to make sure that no-one else was listening. I tried to pull away from him as a dry smell, which seemed to be made up of equal parts of stale sweat and urine, wafted towards me.

'The end of the world!' he said in a hushed, secretive tone.

I fought hard to control myself and not laugh out loud but could not prevent a broad smile from spreading across my face. While I hoped that the man would not take too much offence, I hoped that he would be able to understand and accept my disbelief and leave me alone.

'It's all right, son,' he continued, unabated, 'I can see you've got your doubts and I can't blame you for that.'

I sat in a stunned silence at the man's side, trying to work out how I could escape from him and becoming quickly convinced that the brilliant sun had tanned his brain as well as his weathered skin.

'What makes you so sure then?' I asked. I instantly regretted speaking and I knew full well that I tempted fate with every second that I stayed sat next to the old man.

'I've got a feeling in my gut,' he replied slowly. 'Call it intuition if you like, but when you get to my age you can tell when things are about to change.'

I too had a gut reaction about our conversation - I was sure that it was senility rather than intuition which was proving to be the deciding factor in the man's ideas and thoughts. I turned away from him and looked over towards the park gates, wishing that I could be walking through them and back to the office. I felt the man staring at the back of my head and, out of distrust, I turned back to face him.

'When you've seen as much as I have,' he continued with his throat hoarse and dry, 'you just get to know things.' He paused to wipe his sweaty brow with a weak, shaking hand. 'It's getting hotter by the day, son, and I don't think it's going to stop.'

'Don't be stupid, it's got to stop,' I protested. The man looked at me with an expression which seemed to be asking me for evidence to support my comment. Obviously, I was unable to find any.

I'm not sure whether it was my wariness of the old man or the things which he said to me that suddenly made me jump to my feet and start back to the office. There was no denying the fact that it was getting warmer with each passing day and although that in itself was not substantial evidence to suggest that the world was about to end, it was enough to start the first alarm bells ringing in my mind. The more that I thought about it, the more I began to read truth into the man's words. There was something about his voice which was honest and believable in a terrifying kind of way and, as I walked away, he shouted after me.

'Don't go, son. I haven't finished.'

I didn't want to hear any more.

'I've got to get back to work,' I yelled over my shoulder. 'It's been nice talking to you.'

'Don't waste your time there,' he shouted with his voice ragged and tired. 'There's not long left, you should be enjoying yourself.'

As I walked away, I could not help but think how right the man was in one way. Even if the world wasn't about to end and I was going to live for another seventy years, where was the logic in shutting myself away in the office each day and only managing to escape when I was too old to enjoy what was left? I thought back to yesterday and my conversation with Ian and realised how perceptive his comments had been.

I nervously looked over my shoulder to make sure that the man was not following me back to the office. The thought that I might one day become like him terrified me more than the prospect of the end of the world. Was that all I had to look forward to? Would I finally escape from my terminal career only to spend the rest of my days harassing people in the local park, or would I be destined to wait out my days in some damp, dingy flat?

I realised that the man was right. I should be out now, enjoying myself and living each day as it came along. And what about tomorrow? I'd only worry about that when it finally arrived.

When I returned to the office, the quiet of the morning had been replaced by frantic activity. The trays of work on my desk were full to overflowing with forms to complete and papers to sign and not one single member of staff seemed able to solve even the simplest of problems without first referring them to me.

I made a determined effort to clear my desk so that I could have an early night but throughout the afternoon I could not help dwelling on my lunchtime experience. The more I thought about the prison in which I worked, the more I came to realise that my cell was not the four walls within which I sat, but the whole system of civilisation which everyone was involuntarily and unavoidably trapped in. The more I thought about that, I became convinced that while the system could survive without me, I would find it difficult to survive without the system.

My efforts to leave early proved fruitless and, having worked myself into a deep, dark depression, I finally left the office at a little after eight o'clock that evening.

I arrived for work on Wednesday morning in no better mood than the one in which I had left the previous evening. A deadly combination of the heat and a distinct want not to go back to the office had led to me tossing and turning for hours in the stifling shadows of the night. As I lay awake, I noticed that once again the temperature had remained as high in the darkness as it had been in the daylight - the disappearance of the sun had again failed to have the cooling effect on the world that it normally would have done.

Once more the morning was strangely quiet. For a while I sat next to the open window and looked down onto the street below. As I rested on the windowsill and watched little figures meandering around below me, I wished that I was at home in my new-found favourite position - in my deckchair, on the patio with a cold can of beer in my hand. I thought that if I found myself with any spare cash to invest after pay-day then it would definitely be worth buying shares in one of the local breweries. They seemed to be doing double the business of anyone else in the heatwave.

There wasn't really that much that needed to be done at the office and I would have gone home had it not been for the fact that a customer had telephoned and had decided that they desperately needed to see me. I could not help but think that anyone who would rather come into my cramped office when they could stay outside on such a glorious day, needed treatment. Nevertheless, I knew that I could not avoid the meeting and hoped that the appointment would not last for long.

Carol brought the customer's file in to me at a little before eleven o'clock. The person who needed to see me so urgently was a Samantha Hill and, although I had met her once before, I could not remember very much about her. She was young, single and the niece of Mr Ronald Stanley, one of the wealthiest of the customers that I dealt with. Unlike most of the company's richer clientele, Mr Stanley managed to be pleasant and obliging despite his riches and I hoped that Miss Hill would follow in her uncle's footsteps. After the last couple of soul-destroying days, I wasn't sure if I could cope with any awkward customers.

On the stroke of the hour, with admirable punctuality, Carol entered the office and told me that Miss Hill had arrived, I stood up, moved my chair back behind the desk and made sure that I looked presentable. It was far too hot to wear my jacket, but at least I made an effort by rolling down the sleeves of my shirt and checking that my tie was straight. With the office and myself ready to receive company, I walked across to the door to let Miss Hill in.

She was nothing like I had imagined her to be. She nervously entered the room and, as we shook hands, I could not stop myself staring into the most beautiful pair of deep blue eyes that I had ever seen. For a moment I was unable to look anywhere else and I became increasingly self-conscious as I stared. My throat was dry and I had to clear it before I introduced myself.

'Good morning,' I said, feeling my face redden as I spoke. 'I'm Steven Johnson, office manager.'

Miss Hill smiled warmly and I gestured towards the desk for her to sit down. I took her jacket from her and once more could not help myself staring as she moved across the room. She wore a short, pastel green skirt which clung tightly to her figure and a white, sleeveless blouse. Her long, straight blond hair was pulled gently away from her face and fell in a loose plait down the centre of her back. As I sat down opposite her she crossed her legs under the desk and folded her hands into her lap.

'How are you?' I asked politely.

'I'm fine, thank you,' she replied in a light, breathless voice.

'And Mr Stanley?'

'He's fine too.'

'He's a good man. I get on well with him.'

Miss Hill nodded.

'He speaks well of you too. He told me that if I ever needed any financial advice then you were the man to see.'

'And do you?' I asked.

'Do I what?' she replied, puzzled.

'Need financial advice?'

'Oh, yes,' she said, laughing. She leant down and took a large folder from her bag at the side of her

chair. I'm going into business. It was going to be a partnership but I've fallen out with my partner. Unfortunately, things have gone too far for me to pull out now and I wondered if your company might be able to help.'

'Would Mr Stanley be willing to. . . ?'

She interrupted me.

'Uncle Ronald's already been far too kind to me. He helped me buy my property and has lent me some capital. I couldn't possibly ask him for anything more.' 'What would you need from us?' I asked. 'What kind of business are you going into?'

Miss Hill took various documents from her folder and spread them out on the desk in front of me. They were professionally produced and were of such detail that I could see the exact position of the business as at today's date. She intended to open a little shop in a quiet suburb of the city which would sell freshly made sandwiches and snacks. All that she needed from me was help so that she could finish equipping the shop and buy the first few weeks' stock.

The business plans and forecasts which Miss Hill showed me were impressive and showed that the venture had real promise. In addition, she held various relevant qualifications and I felt sure from talking to her that she would not enter into any commitment that she could not see her way to completely fulfilling. With the security of rich Uncle Ronald available to bail her out if it was ever required, it seemed that her proposition was a sound one.

After having examined all the details, I explained my position clearly to her.

'In principle,' I began, 'I can't see that the company would have any objection to us assisting you.'

Miss Hill flashed me a relieved smile and nodded.

'Of course, I'll need to complete the regulatory forms with you and we'll need to take up references.'

'That shouldn't be a problem,' she said as she sorted through the papers on the desk to find the names and addresses of her referees for me. She handed them over. 'Okay then, Miss Hill,' I said before being interrupted.

'Samantha, call me Samantha.'

'All right.' I said and smiled at her as I searched through the uncoordinated confusion of my untidy desk drawers for the required forms. I watched her as she collected up her papers and put them back into her folder. She was a good-looking and instantly likeable girl. Intelligent and easygoing, she would make the perfect wife for some incredibly lucky man somewhere, I thought. And those eyes...

I found the forms that I had been looking for.

'Right,' I said, 'this shouldn't take very long. We've just got these questions to complete.'

Samantha nodded and pulled her chair closer to the desk. As I opened up the form and took out my pen, she leant across and rested her elbows on the edge of the table. She sighed and looked up at me. Once more, I found myself unable to look away.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

'Nothing,' she replied. 'It just looks like there's a lot to get through.'

'Not really,' I said, shrugging my shoulders. 'It looks complicated but there's not that much to do. It'll only take us a few minutes.'

'You must be busy. Shall I take it away and do it at home?'

'There's no need,' I said quickly. I was suddenly aware that I did not want her to go. 'Honestly, it won't take that long.' I thought for a moment before asking, 'Why, do you need to go?'

Samantha shook her head. 'You must have much more important things to do than sit here and fill out forms with me.'

'Not really. Besides, doing it now will mean that everything can be agreed that little bit quicker.'

As she watched, I filled in her name at the top of the form and asked her address. I looked up from the paper to see that she watched me intently and I felt myself redden involuntarily. She chewed her bottom lip and looked thoughtful for a moment.

'This isn't fair, you know,' she said, smiling broadly.

I was puzzled.

'What isn't fair?' I asked.

'By the time we've finished this form, you're going to know a lot more about me than I'll know about you.'

'You don't want to know about me,' I said. 'There's nothing much to tell and it's not that interesting.'

'It still isn't fair,' she insisted as she took a pair of round-framed, wire-rimmed spectacles from her bag and put them on. She turned the form around on the desk to look at the questions.

'All right,' I said. 'Whatever you tell me about you, I'll tell you about me. Is that better?'

She laughed and turned the form back around so that it faced me again. The glasses which she wore complemented her already pretty face and she gently wiped her warm forehead. It was still hot in the office and, as I seemed to be getting even warmer with each passing minute, I checked the window to see if it was fully open. More relaxed, I loosened my tie and rolled up my sleeves again before sitting back in my chair and beginning our question and answer session.

'You know my address; where do you live?' Samantha asked and I told her. She seemed surprised. 'That's only a couple of minutes away from my house,' she said.

'I know. I drive past the end of your road on the way to work.' I cleared my throat before asking my next question. 'What about your marital status? Are you married?'

'I'm single,' she replied and I felt an unexpected wave of relief run through my body.

'And what about the partner you've fallen out with?' I asked. That was not a question on the form.

'Julie. Oh, she was just a friend, not a partner in that sense of the word.'

I felt foolish and as if I had been prying but Samantha seemed not to mind. I told her that I was single too.

We compared ages (she was three years younger than me), educational backgrounds and qualifications and I found myself becoming increasingly more and more relaxed in her company.

Although I could never profess to being a good judge of character, and reading a purpose into other people's signals and actions was something that I found annoyingly difficult, I felt sure that Samantha was as relaxed and as calm as I had become. I dared think for a moment that she could perhaps be the woman I had been dreaming about for all this time but I quickly tried to dispel such juvenile and unfounded ideas from my mind. I felt stupid and foolish at having entertained them for even a moment. Nevertheless, everything that I had told her had been the truth and I was sure that she had been just as honest with me.

We eventually reached the end of the form and I looked up at the clock on the wall. To my surprise, it showed the time to be gone midday. We had been sitting together in the office for over an hour but it seemed as if only a fraction of that time had passed. Samantha noticed the expression on my face and her eyes followed mine up towards the clock.

'Oh my god,' she exclaimed. 'I've taken up so much of your time. I'm so sorry'

Apologetically, she began to pack her documents and notes back into her bag.

'It's all right,' I said, 'there's nothing that can't wait here.'

'No,' she said. 'You've been absolutely great, but I really must go.'

My heart sank as she got to her feet and took her jacket down from the hook on the wall. I helped her put it on before opening the door to let her leave.

'I'll get the papers up to head office today. I can't see that they'll have any problems with anything and so long as your references check out we'll be in business.'

Samantha smiled broadly and held out her hand. I shook it gently. Her palm was warm and her fingers soft and gentle.

'Thanks again, you really have been brilliant,' she said and she stared at me, hypnotising me with her gaze.

'As soon as I hear anything, I'll be in touch.'

She left the room. Before I closed the door, she stopped and turned around to face me.

'If you're passing, why don't you call in on your way home one night?' she said.

I tried to maintain my professional integrity and politely decline but it was impossible.

'All right, I will,' I replied, unable to look anywhere but straight into her beautiful face.

'See you soon then,' she said and I watched as she left the building, taking my heart with her.

For the rest of the day, it was impossible for me to even try and concentrate on any of my work. All that I could think about was the young girl who had breezed into my office and blown me away.

On Friday night I finally managed to get out of the office at a reasonable hour. By four o'clock I was at home and, once there, I wasted no time in setting up the usual deckchair and refreshments outside. I had been booked to attend a dinner on behalf of the company but, thankfully, I had received a letter that morning telling me that the meal had been cancelled. I should have gone over to Mom and Dad's house but I didn't have either the energy or the inclination to move. It was my time now, and I was determined to relax.

Preparations for a lazy evening were going well until I discovered that there was hardly anything left in the fridge -no food and, much more importantly, no beer. Begrudgingly, I decided to go out straight away and get in enough provisions to see me through the rest of the weekend.

Fortunately, I lived close to a little street-corner supermarket which was hidden away in a quiet side-road from the rest of the sprawling city's hungry population. I found everything that I needed there and loaded it in carrier bags and boxes into the back of my car. I drove home quickly and it was only when I was half way down a certain road that I realised I was in the street in which Samantha Hill lived.

Since our meeting I had thought about her a lot. Had I been any younger, people might have thought that I had developed an adolescent crush on her but now, in my supposedly mature state, I managed to convince myself that I just admired Samantha for what she was doing and for the determined, persistent way in which she was going about it. In reality, however, I knew that I had found her incredibly attractive and I couldn't wait to get her financial arrangements completed and agreed so that I had an honest excuse to see her again.

As I drove along the street, I slowed the car down to a speed which allowed me to make out the numbers on the fronts of the dark buildings. I passed her home - number forty-seven - and carried on towards my house. As I turned into another street, I spotted an unmistakable figure walking along the pavement in the opposite direction to the way that I drove. Despite being piled high with bags of shopping, I could tell immediately that it was Samantha who struggled to reach her home. In the fading light, I stopped the car and hoped that she would recognise me.

'Hello,' I said chirpily as I wound down the window. 'Can I give you a lift?'

She looked puzzled and unsure for a moment. She walked a little closer to the car and then recognised me. Her expression changed and she smiled broadly.

'Hello again,' she said. She put down the heavy bags that she carried and I got out of the car to give her a hand. 'Would you mind dropping me back? I didn't intend to be carrying all of this, my dad was supposed to be picking me up an hour ago.'

'Have you had far to come?' I asked as I started to load the bags onto the back seat.

'Only as far as the bus stop,' she replied as I took the last bundle from her.

'You took all of this on the bus?' I said surprised.

'I didn't have much choice!' she laughed as I walked around and opened the passenger door for her. I

turned the car around in a nearby cul-de-sac and we drove back in the direction of her house. I asked how she'd been keeping and she told me that she was well.

'Would you like to come in for a drink?' she asked as we pulled up outside the house. I glanced at my watch.

'I'd love to,' I said and we got out of the car. Piled high with bags, we struggled towards the front door where Samantha's mother appeared and helped us inside.

'Mom, this is Steven Johnson,' Samantha said, introducing me.

'Nice to meet you,' I said as I struggled to find a spare hand to stretch out from among the carrier bags.

'Sam's told me all about you. Honestly, she's been working all the hours God sends on this shop.'

'I know. I'm really impressed.'

Samantha disappeared into the kitchen to put away the bags of shopping before quickly reappearing again.

'Mom where was Dad?' she asked. 'He was supposed to pick me up.'

'You know what your father's like. He tends to forget things now and then.'

'You mean he forgets things when he wants to. He's getting to be a real pain.'

Mrs Hill walked into the kitchen and left me alone with Samantha. Although I was glad to be with her, I felt slightly awkward with her mother in the house and I could think of little to say. There was a brief flash of headlights in the window and a car pulled onto the drive.

'Dad's home,' she shouted to her mother and, within a couple of minutes, he was inside the house. He walked straight past me and kissed his daughter on the cheek.

'Sorry I didn't get to you. Got stuck with something important,' he mumbled. He turned to face me 'Who's this?' he asked. 'New boyfriend? It's about time you got yourself sorted out with a bloke.'

Samantha blushed.

'This is Steven...' she began. Her mother reappeared in the kitchen doorway.

'You know, the one she was telling us about,' she interrupted.

'Taking a special interest in my Samantha's case are you son?' he asked and, before I could reply, Mrs Hill took his arm and dragged him into another room.

'I think I'd better go,' I said. 'I'll speak to you soon.'

Samantha seemed embarrassed by her parents.

'Don't worry about him,' she said nodding her head in the direction in which they had just disappeared. 'He's harmless.'

I smiled and made my way towards the front door. She walked out with me to the car.

'Thanks for the lift, anyway,' she said, smiling. 'Sorry about those two!'

'That's all right. I'll be in touch as soon as I hear anything.'

I climbed into the car and drove away. I watched Samantha's reflection in the rear view mirror until she disappeared out of sight and then I sped quickly home. I was disappointed that her parents had been allowed to spoil what could have been a very pleasant evening - I sensed that her father had taken an immediate dislike to me and hoped that it was nothing personal. I imagined that he would be the same with any man who showed an interest in his daughter and I could understand why entirely. Samantha was a very special girl - a fact that I was beginning to realise with every extra moment that I spent in her company.

It was ethically incorrect, I knew, but I made up my mind on the way home to ask Sam out the next time we were together. If I was taking advantage of my position in the company to get to her then that was just too bad - I knew exactly what they could do with their job.

I felt so relaxed and calm when Samantha was around that I could not stop myself from thinking about her and I was quietly confident that she felt the same. At least her father had done me a favour and confirmed that his daughter was single and unattached at present.

I knew that I had nothing to lose (except my job - and that was becoming less important with each passing day) and I made a silent promise to myself to take her out. Could it be that my days as a single man were finally going to end?

The weekend flew by. Although I did little with my time - as usual - the two days that I had away from the office seemed to disappear within the blinking of an eye. It seemed that one minute it was Friday evening and the next it was Monday morning.

The temperature had risen continually over the two days I had spent at home. I looked back in the morning papers and noticed that it had been increasing almost uniformly at the rate of one degree centigrade each day and on Monday it had climbed to a staggering twenty-six degrees. The only thing that kept me going through the first long day back at the office was the thought of going out for a cool, relaxing drink that night with Mark. Typically, however, things did not go according to plan and at half-past seven I was still rushing to get ready so that I could pick him up at eight.

My lateness would have normally put me in a bad mood but today, unusually, it did not seem to matter - everything else was going well. Earlier in the day I had telephoned head office. The best part of a week had passed since I had interviewed Samantha and had sent her application up to be processed and I was growing tired of waiting for a decision. Once I had managed to locate the person who was dealing with Samantha's case (and after they had left me hanging on the telephone line for almost a quarter of an hour) they assured me that everything had been agreed and that the agreements which needed to be signed would be waiting on my desk first thing in the morning. I hoped that a couple of drinks tonight would give me enough confidence and the Dutch courage that I would need to be able to ask her out.

As I readied myself to leave, I could not help feeling like a lovesick adolescent about to ask his sweetheart to his first school dance. Since seeing Samantha the previous week, I had thought about her almost constantly and I was having difficulty in trying to keep my burgeoning feelings in perspective. Although I felt as if I knew her well, we had only spent a little time together and I knew that I had to try and stop my excited imagination from running away with itself.

I looked in the wardrobe for something decent to wear and eventually settled on a light T-shirt and a pair of old jeans. Although they were far from fashionable, they were the best clothes I could find which would be comfortable in the searing heat outside. Outside of working hours, I had spent the last week wearing little more than a pair of worn, threadbare shorts and the incredible conditions were starting to become a real worry. It was difficult to believe that it would be November in just over a week's time and I dared not imagine how hot it might be then.

When I arrived at Mark's house, he was sat in the shadows of a downstairs window, waiting impatiently for me. Although I was only fifteen minutes later than planned, he still took every available opportunity to criticise my lack of punctuality.

The drive to our usual pub took only a couple of minutes but, as we approached, we saw that there were many more people there than was normal for a Monday night. I pulled onto the carpark and the light from my headlamps illuminated crowds of drinkers slumped against the walls of the old building.

'Christ,' Mark said. 'We're never going to get served if we stop here.'

I looked around and could not see a single space in the crowded carpark.

'What do you want to do?' I asked.

'We could try somewhere else. I would say we could go back to my place but I really need a drink tonight.'

I reversed the car back onto the road and pointed it back in the direction from which we had just

come. I drove back towards my house.

'Want to try the Cheshire Cat?' I asked. It was not our favourite pub but it would do.

'All right,' Mark replied. 'It would have been quicker for you to have walked there!'

He was right - I could see the pub from the back of my house. We were there in a couple of minutes as there was little traffic of any note on the usually busy roads. Thankfully, as I was tired and suddenly very thirsty, there were spaces in the carpark.

The pub's beer garden (which was normally only used on the very hottest of summer days) was full of people. They sat huddled in groups on makeshift seats around improvised tables and basked in bright illumination from security lamps and from the dull electric light which spilled out through windows. I locked the car and we went inside. It was much quieter there and we were served quickly.

'A pint of bitter and a pint of mild,' I said to the barmaid as I dug deep into my pockets in search of money.

I watched as the large, elderly woman shuffled from one end of the bar to the other in a search for empty pint glasses. She put one glass under the bitter pump in front of me and pulled the heavy handle towards her. For a moment thick brown beer surged from the faucet and into the glass before being replaced with spitting, gassy foam. The barmaid looked to the heavens and rested the half-filled glass on the bar.

'Barrel's empty,' she said apologetically. 'I'm sorry, love. I'll have to get it changed.'

She grabbed a passing member of staff by the arm and asked him to take care of the problem. She then moved along to her left and poured Mark's mild from a second, working pump. As soon as his drink was ready and had settled, he took it from the bar and swallowed a large, thirsty gulp. He wiped his mouth dry and looked across at me.

'That's better,' he said. 'Christ, I really needed that.'

'Had a hard week?' I asked.

'No, not really,' Mark replied 'What about you? Anything interesting happened in the last few days?'

I shrugged my shoulders, racking my brain and trying desperately to think of anything that might be of even the slightest interest to my friend. It was an impossible task - the week had, on the whole, been an utter waste of time.

'Nothing really. Just your average week.'

I suddenly remembered the one part of the last seven days which had been worth going to work for and could not help letting a broad smile spread across my face.

'I met an incredible girl though.'

'Oh yes,' Mark said, his interest having quickly been aroused at the mention of the opposite sex.

'She's fantastic,' I continued. 'She's about to go into business, came into the office after some help with her finances. Honestly, she's amazing - young, single and really good looking.'

'And is financial assistance all she's going to get from you?' Mark asked, prompting me for a sexist answer. Before I could reply, there was a tap on my shoulder and I turned quickly around to see Samantha stood in front of me. I panicked and prayed that she had not heard me talking about her.

'Hi, Steve. How are you?' she asked.

I picked up Mark's pint and took a large gulp from it before I could answer. 'I'm fine. You?'

'Oh, I'm not too bad. Can I get you a drink?'

'Let me get you one,' I mumbled 'I was in the middle of a round anyway.'

Samantha nodded and smiled.

'Okay, I'll have half a lager and lime please.'

I asked the barmaid for the extra drink and, as she was pouring it, a voice floated up from the bowels of the pub cellar which was unintelligible but which was obviously conveying the message that the barrel of bitter had been changed. My pint was finally poured.

Samantha left us for a moment and I watched her as she walked across the room towards a quiet little table, around which sat two men and a woman, all of a similar age to her. My heart sank as I assumed the obvious (that she was with one of the men) and Mark looked at me with an expression on his face which seemed to be trying to say, 'better luck next time'.

Sam returned and took her drink from me.

'Do you want to come and join us?' she asked.

With the fear that my heart was about to be broken growing more and more intense with each passing moment, I tried to politely decline her invitation.

'We wouldn't want to intrude,' I said, meekly.

'Don't worry, you won't,' she replied. 'It's just my cousin and a couple of his university mates.'

I felt myself relax and I was sure that my sudden relief must have been clearly visible.

'To be honest,' Samantha continued, 'I'll be glad of a little company. All I've heard all night is what a great time they're having at college and how I've missed out by not going. It's starting to get tedious.'

'They're right, you know. It is good,' Mark said.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' I interrupted, remembering that I had not introduced him to Samantha. 'This is Mark, he lectures at the university so he would say that!'

'I'm pleased to meet you,' he said, smiling broadly.

'Mark, this is Samantha, the one I've...'

'...the one you've been telling me about,' he interrupted.

I took an embarrassed sip from my pint and we followed Sam as she walked over to the table where her friends waited. They looked up as we approached.

'This is Mark and Steve,' she said to her companions. She turned to me and introduced them. 'This is Claire, Daniel and Tom.'

We sat down. Mark sat in the place where Samantha had been sitting before we had arrived and that meant that I was left sitting opposite her at the far end of the table. Mark immediately struck up a conversation with his fellow academics and, to my delight, that left me free and alone to talk to Sam.

'Have you heard if everything's been agreed?' she asked. 'I don't want you to think that I'm being pushy or anything, it's just that I need to know so that I...'

'Don't worry,' I interrupted. 'Everything's fine I spoke to head office this afternoon and they've assured me that all the forms will be waiting on my desk in the morning. Can you come up and sign them?'

'I can't,' she replied with a look of real disappointment on her face. 'I've got workmen in the shop all day tomorrow and I'd rather not leave them there on their own.'

'That's all right,' I said, trying desperately to think of a solution to our problem. I had been counting on seeing Samantha again. I suddenly had an idea. 'I could bring them over to you in my lunch hour, if that's all right.'

'Could you?' she wondered excitedly. 'God, that would be brilliant.' She thought for a moment. 'Isn't it a bit out of your way though?'

It was, but I could not let her know that.

'Not really,' I lied.

'I'll make something to eat, shall I? We can celebrate.'

I smiled and nodded approval and, as I looked once more into Samantha's deep and mesmerising eyes, she reached out across the table and gently squeezed my hand.

The evening progressed enjoyably. Mark was content to sit and talk to Samantha's friends while I was more than happy to relax and talk to Sam herself. I was equally pleased that she seemed just as happy to spend her time with me.

The table which we were gathered around was next to a little window, the lead-lined panes of which were open wide but offered virtually no respite from the suffocating heat. Occasionally, a light breeze fluttered into the room but, other than that, the night was still and humid. From my position at the end of the table I could see little outside other than the tops of the roofs of the buildings across the street and the moon burning brightly in the cloudless evening sky.

We had talked for a good hour (which had seemed to have only taken a few minutes to pass) and both Samantha and I had learned a lot about each other. The questions had not needed to be asked directly, instead we had willingly volunteered information to each other. I felt as if I subconsciously

wanted her to know everything about me. Sam had been telling me about her plans to get a mortgage and to buy a home of her own when we were interrupted.

'...and then, once I've got the business really going,' she said, 'I'll be looking to try and find a little...' she stopped talking suddenly.

Through the open window, a hot and heavy wind started to blow indoors. The people gathered around tables and those sitting outside in the carpark quickly became quiet, and a deathly hush settled on the whole building as the jukebox stopped playing. The lights flickered and dimmed.

For a moment the air was choking and inescapably hot. I struggled to look through the tiny window and see what was happening outside but it was difficult from my awkward vantage point at the end of the table. I watched the sky above the pub and saw that it had slowly begun to change colour. As every pair of eyes in the crowded building strained to look skywards, we watched as the darkness of the sky melted away to become a muddy-red, an ember orange and then a yellow-white. Once the heavens had reached that colour, they worked their way back through the various shades until, moments later, they were back to their normal hue. The wind died, the lights brightened and then, after a second's silence, the jukebox began to play its thumping music again. Apart from the music, no-one else dared make a sound.

Mark was the first to speak

'Shit,' he said, simply.

'It was just like last week,' Sam's cousin Daniel said. 'Scary.'

The conversation ended as quickly as it had begun while we all paused to gather our thoughts and try and comprehend what we had just witnessed. Although I could not speak for any of the others, the heat and light had shaken me to the core and I was glad of the couple of drinks that I had had earlier to calm my nerves. It was not so much fright, it was more a sense of bewilderment and the lack of any warnings or explanations which had combined to unnerve me.

'Someone at work said that might happen,' Mark commented quietly. 'He said there could be more as well.'

'What was it though?' Daniel asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'I don't know. I don't think anybody knows.' He thought for a moment and ran his fingers nervously through his hair before speaking again. 'There are a few people at the university who are starting to get worried about what's been happening.'

I had been staring deep into the bottom of my glass and I looked up to see that all the faces around the table were fixed in Mark's direction. He seemed uncomfortable and looked at each of us in turn as he continued to speak.

'I've heard it said that things are going to get worse before they get any better.'

Mark swilled the dregs of his beer around in the bottom of his glass before drinking them down and wiping his mouth. I glanced anxiously across the table at Samantha and she returned my concerned expression. She shuffled to sit upright in her seat and, as she did, her foot rested against my leg. I was glad that she kept it there and did not move away - to feel her body next to mine was welcome and comforting.

A bell rang out and the landlord of the pub yelled for last orders in a deep, gruff voice. In an instant, the bemused quiet which had been so very evident in the building was replaced with sudden, frenzied activity as people rushed towards the bar to buy one final, nerve-settling drink. Mark nudged my arm.

'We'd better make a move, mate,' he whispered. 'I've got a busy day tomorrow.'

I nodded and stood to move away from the table. Samantha also got up and walked over to me.

'See you about half past one tomorrow?' she asked.

'Is that all right?' I replied rhetorically.

'It's fine,' she said. 'I'm looking forward to it.'

'I'll help take our minds off all of this,' I said, gesturing outside.

Sam smiled and I moved towards her and out of the way so that Mark could get past. Had we been alone, I would have kissed her goodnight but the presence of our friends managed to diminish the self-confidence that the little alcohol which I had consumed had built up within me.

'It was nice to have met you all,' Mark said to those who remained seated around the table. 'We'll have to do it again sometime, when it gets a little warmer perhaps!'

I shook my head in disbelief at my companion's bizarre sense of humour as he walked past Samantha and myself towards the exit. I said goodbye to Sam's friends before turning back to say goodnight to her.

'See you tomorrow then,' I said, not really wanting to leave. Mark and I walked out towards the carpark but, before we had even reached the door to leave the building, I could not stop myself from turning around and looking at Sam once more.

I felt as if I was floating on air as we staggered back to the car. Ignorant of the muggy heat and of Mark's tedious conversation, all that I could think of was the beautiful girl that I had just left.

7

As we had been forced to make an unexpected diversion earlier in the night, the drive back to Mark's house took longer than usual. He was tired and although he tried to deny it, slightly drunk. With no cassettes in the car to listen to, I switched on the radio in a vain attempt to drown out the constant and uninteresting noise that he made.

The radio crackled and spat static and the reception was so poor that it was difficult to find a signal of any strength. I eventually gave up trying to find something to listen to amongst the high-pitched hiss of the VHF and so switched to another waveband. The noise that the radio made was deeper and flatter but was still devoid of any human sounds until I finally managed to tune into the faint conversation of a late-night discussion programme. It sounded dull and boring but, as I moved my hand towards the set to switch it off. Mark stopped me.

'I want to hear this,' he said, slurring his words. He brushed my hand away and turned up the volume. 'This could be important — we should listen to it.'

I decided not to spoil my drunken friend's enjoyment of what sounded like a tedious debate. A panel of invited 'experts' was sat in a studio discussing the present conditions and hypotheating about what might one day happen if things did not change. As with all debates, there were two opposing sides. The difference here was that neither of them seemed to know anything about the subject which they argued over. They all knew what had already happened, but could only speculate and theorise as to what the future might hold in store.

'Professor Cunningham,' the host of the programme said from somewhere in the midst of the crackle and hiss of the radio waves, 'you've been quoted in the media recently as saying that the phenomena we are currently experiencing will inevitably prove to be temporary. Have you any solid proof to suggest that normality will soon be restored?'

The professor cleared his throat and started to answer.

'I believe that these effects that we are seeing will not last for much longer. There's no evidence to suggest . . .'

'Professor, you've got no idea of what's going to happen and neither have the rest of us,' a third voice interrupted angrily.

The venom, uncertainty and desperation in the third voice shocked and startled me for a moment. If this was the voice of someone who appeared to have some knowledge of what was happening and he sounded scared, perhaps there really was something to be worried about.

'Doctor Smith, if you would just let me finish . . .'

'Why, what's the point? All that you or anyone else can do is bullshit your way around the truth and that truth is that it's getting hotter by the hour. That's the one and only fact that we're all sure of.'

The flustered host's wavering tones echoed through the warm night air once more as he tried to keep control of proceedings.

'Doctor Smith, please allow Professor Cunningham to finish.'

'For Christ's sake,' Smith shouted. 'He knows about as much as you do about what's going on. You might as well go home and ask your mother about it rather than talk to him, me or anyone else. No-one knows what's happening and whatever it is, there's no way that any of us can stop it.'

Smith sounded hysterical and, although his was only a disjointed voice floating through interference-filled airwaves, I could tell that it was full of anger and intense frustration.

'Things are getting worse,' Smith continued, unabated, 'and after tonight's events I really can't see what we're going to achieve by sitting here and arguing about what might be about to happen. You must agree Cunningham.'

'Getting yourself and anyone else who's listening scared witless won't do any good either,' the professor replied. 'Stop dramatising things and get a grip for God's sake.'

'Dramatising things!' Smith yelled at the top of his hoarse and strained voice. 'For fucking hell's sake, we're seeing phenomena here which could easily signal the death of the planet and you tell me to stop dramatising things!'

I leant across and switched off the radio. Until we had listened to that programme. I had never even stopped to consider what might happen if the temperature did continue to steadily increase.

'What a load of crap,' I snapped, nervously and instinctively.

'Might not be,' Mark mumbled. 'Like the man said, no-one knows for sure.'

'Yes,' I protested, 'but there's no point in looking at the worst possible outcome. If it's going to happen, it's going to happen. I don't want to know anything about it when the end comes.'

I quickly stopped talking as the realisation dawned on me that we were discussing the end of the world. As I drove, I thought more about what I had heard and the fact that not a single person on the planet knew what was happening frightened me. In the past, there had always been someone available who could explain things which were out of the ordinary but today the only convincing arguments I had heard were from a paranoid man who seemed sure that our planet was dying. However, if the temperature did continue to increase at the same rate that it had been recently, in a few days' time it would be reaching upwards of thirty degrees - the 1st of November would be the hottest day of the decade (until the 2nd of November). I thought about the countries where that level of heat was normal and tried to imagine what kind of conditions they might be enduring there. It suddenly seemed very plausible that the increasing heat and the pulses of light that we had seen in the night sky could be the beginning of something much more terrible than any of us had dared to imagine I forced myself to try and think of something else and, at once, calming memories of Samantha drifted gently back into my mind.

The roads were quiet and we reached Mark's house in no time at all. The heat and the alcohol which he had consumed combined to great effect and, by the time we reached his home, he had drifted off to sleep I gently woke him and he stumbled out of the car and into the street.

I locked the car and watched as my friend staggered towards his front door and fought to get his key into the lock. The latch eventually clicked and he half walked, half fell into the house. I stood on the doorstep and waited for him to switch on the lights and to switch off the alarm.

All around the city surrounding the house, there seemed to be a strange atmosphere in the air which reeked of doubt and unease. While I was sure that very few people really had considered that the end of the world could be approaching, I was positive that I could not have been the only one who felt an uncomfortable sense of worry. No-one could be sure that they were safe and it was this uncertainty which had caused the friction and panic so evident in the amateurish radio broadcast that we had just listened to.

Mark yelled for me to come inside and shut the door and, as I waited on the doorstep, I listened to the muffled sounds of a fight taking place in the distance. As I waited I heard the far-off wail of a police-car siren and I could not help but wonder about what was going to happen.

Inside the house, Mark appeared to have sobered up somewhat and had managed to fill the kettle I shut the front door and went into the kitchen as he waited for the water to boil and spooned coffee granules into two empty mugs

'Not a bad night,' he said as he worked.

'It was all right, wasn't it?' I answered. I thought for a moment before speaking again. 'What did you think of Samantha?'

I waited nervously for Mark's answer. As a close friend, his opinion was of great value to me but, at the same time, I knew that if he didn't like her then I would discount his views immediately.

'She's great,' he said and a broad grin spread quickly across his face. 'She's got it bad for you, mate!'

'Do you really think so?' I asked, desperate for confirmation despite the fact that I was sure I already knew the answer. Mark nodded his head and poured boiling water into the two mugs.

'No question,' he said through clouds of quickly rising steam. 'I saw the way she was looking at you. Mind you,' he added as he stirred our drinks, 'I also saw the way that you were staring back.'

Embarrassed, I picked up one of the mugs, added a spoonful of sugar and took a large gulp from it. Although the drink was piping hot, it was still refreshing and it helped to quench a fierce thirst which had developed in my throat since we had left the pub.

'Want anything to eat?' Mark asked and I shook my head.

'No thanks, it's too hot.'

He went into the living-room and I followed. I sat down and Mark dug deep under a pile of discarded newspapers and magazines to find the remote control which operated the television set. He eventually found the little black box (under a cushion on the settee - nowhere near the pile of papers) and switched the set on.

It was almost midnight and the choice of viewing offered to us was far from appealing. One side showed a darts championship, the second horse jumping, the third a documentary and the fourth a dire, imported detective series which looked about twenty years old and which I had already seen countless times before. Before hurling the remote control onto a nearby seat. Mark flicked the set back to the third channel.

Once again, the theme of the programme was the extraordinary weather conditions and atmospheric effects which we had witnessed. The presenters, however, at least appeared to be a little calmer and more composed than their radio counterparts had been earlier. A doddering old gentleman, with a shock of brilliant-white hair, thick, horn rimmed glasses and an incredibly unfashionable suit, stood in front of a large diagram of the solar system. The sun was drawn at the far right of the picture and the nine planets which orbited around it were arranged in a line to its left. I settled down into my seat and listened as the presenter cleared his throat and began to talk.

'The events of this evening, and of last week, can be illustrated with the help of this diagram,' he began in a deep and gruff, well-educated voice. 'What appears to have happened, is that a huge wave of energy has been issued from the sun and it was this wave spreading out across the solar system which caused the unusual atmospheric conditions which were so very evident earlier.'

As the presenter spoke, he moved his hand across the diagram from the sun and out towards cold Pluto to illustrate the direction which the energy waves had taken.

'It is logical to assume, therefore,' he continued, 'that it is some undefined activity within the sun itself which has caused these events to happen. It would seem that this activity would also be the cause of the extraordinarily high temperatures which we have all endured over the last three weeks.'

I looked across at Mark who stared unblinkingly into the television screen. His drunkenness seemed to have worn completely away and he watched the old man with a genuine interest.

'While we have seen events similar to this in the past,' the presenter explained, 'they have never been encountered with such force and magnitude before.'

'It's frightening, isn't, it?' I said to Mark and he turned to look at me. He shrugged his shoulders.

'I don't know,' he replied. 'I mean, he's just said that this has happened before. All right, it was nowhere near as intense then, but it stopped, didn't it? The world hasn't ended yet, has it?'

'I can't argue with that,' I said before returning my attention to the television screen. The old man still

rambled on.

'Our understanding of the sun's internal mechanisms are still primitive and so we are unable to predict with any real accuracy what might happen in the immediate future. We hope, however, that as before, the activity will be short-lived and that normality will soon be restored.'

'I hope so too,' Mark said. 'I'll ask around at work tomorrow and see if anyone knows what's really going on. I get the feeling that this bloke's only being allowed to tell half the story.'

'Do you really think so?' I asked. He nodded.

'No question. He wouldn't be allowed to spread doom and gloom over the airwaves; he had to end on an optimistic note. You'd have everybody panicking, wouldn't you?'

I finished my coffee, stood up and stretched as the television programme ended.

'I'd better be off, I've got a lot to do tomorrow.'

A familiar, wicked smile spread quickly across Mark's face.

'I know you have!' he said, grinning. 'It's half past one you're meeting her, isn't it?'

'To tell you the truth, I can't bloody wait!' I nodded.

'I bet you can't, I hope everything goes all right. It's about time you got yourself sorted out.'

'Everything'll be fine,' I replied. 'Just as long as the world doesn't end before I get there.'

'That'd be just your luck,' Mark joked. 'You finally meet someone decent and you cop it before you can have any fun! Typical!'

We laughed together as we walked towards the front door. I did not dare say anything to my friend, but I had a nagging fear growing in the pit of my stomach which told me that all was not going to be well and it was becoming difficult to keep my feelings hidden. I was quietly sure, however, that I was not the only one who was worried.

'I expect a phone call tomorrow night,' Mark said. 'As soon as you get back, I want every single juicy detail of your lunch. Leave nothing to the imagination.'

'Mark,' I replied with a tone of false disapproval in my voice, 'you are a very sick young man.'

He pushed me out of the door.

'And you're a leech,' I added as I stumbled out into the street. 'I'll call you tomorrow!'

I unlocked the door and got inside the car. As I drove away, I waved to Mark, who stood in the light of his doorway, and I hoped that if I did call him he would be able to give me some reassuring news from his friends at work. It had to be good news, I thought, my life looked like it was finally about to sort itself out and I was determined not to let anything get in my way now.

I drove quickly home in silence and I was, all things considered, quite relaxed and happy. Although there had been nothing but gloom and bad news on the radio and television all night, I cared little. All I needed to do was picture Samantha's face in my mind and all of my fears and worries evaporated away into nothing. She filled me with a happiness that I had not felt for a very long time.

Once again the next morning at the office dragged unbearably. With still no respite from the incredible weather conditions, the city was again silent and stifling and the streets below were relatively empty. As I looked out of the office window, I wondered why I had bothered coming into work at all. Most people appeared to have simply chosen to stay at home and relax in the sunshine or, more probably, in the shade of their homes, watching the sun scorch and burn the world around them. Time seemed to run at a much

slower rate than usual and I was sure that it had something to do with the way that I stared at the clock every five minutes, willing its hands to work their way quickly around to one o'clock.

With sunrise that morning, the heat had increased further still until it was now like a heavy, suffocating blanket which lay all around, smothering everything and everybody with its exhausting, relentless and inescapable power. Every newspaper and magazine carried concocted, charlatan explanations of events and mixed them with a generous and unhealthy number of stories about old-aged pensioners dying of dehydration in their homes and of the water in lakes and reservoirs falling to new record-low levels.

When one o'clock finally arrived, I gathered up the papers and forms that I needed Samantha to sign and, before leaving, called Robert into my room. He staggered in through the office door, looking flustered and exhausted. As he stood still and tried to compose himself, he wiped his fat, round and red face with an already damp handkerchief and leant against my desk. For a moment I stared at the picture of ill health that stood in front of me and I felt genuinely sorry for the man.

'I'm going out to see Miss Hill now,' I said. 'I'm not sure when I'll be back so could you look after things here for a while?'

Robert stood up straight and nodded. I noticed that his cotton shirt was drenched with sweat and that it clung tightly to his skin.

'Will you be all right?' I asked, worried about the exhausted condition that he was in.

'I'll be fine,' he wheezed. 'I'm just having a bit of trouble with this heat. It doesn't agree with me.'

'Are you going to be okay to look after the office?'

'I said I'll be all right!' he snapped and he looked up at me with an angry expression on his flustered face.

'I shouldn't be too long,' I said, attempting to reassure him and to disguise the fact that I intended to stay with Samantha for as long as I possibly could. 'I'm not expecting any calls and I don't think that there will anything that you can't deal with. If you do need to contact me. Miss Hill's number is in her file and that's somewhere in my filing cabinet.'

Robert nodded and turned to walk out of the room. I felt sorry for him in some respects - he was much older than me and I was sure that he resented my seniority in the office. He was normally able to rise above such feelings but the extreme heat and its effects on his desperately unfit body did nothing to help ease the situation.

I shoved the paperwork into my briefcase and grabbed my jacket before following Robert out of the office. I draped the jacket over my shoulder as it was far too hot to even think about wearing it. It was, in fact, far too hot to be wearing anything.

I left the office as quickly as I could and with it I left a grumbling assistant manager complaining to the rest of the staff. Although I feigned deafness, I could hear him telling them all how he was the one that really ran the branch - I just picked up the manager's salary at the end of every month. Regardless of his comments, I was in a good mood and was determined not to rise to the childish baiting of my staff. I walked ignorantly past them all and out of the building.

Before getting into my car, I stopped to pick up a bottle of wine. I walked past a little florist's shop and thought for a moment about getting some flowers for Samantha. Next to the florist's was a sweet shop and I wondered if chocolates might be better. An irrational paranoid fear grew in my mind as I imagined foolishly that such presents might give Samantha the wrong impression of me. Although I wanted to get much closer to her, I thought that our relationship was far too fresh and new for me to start buying sentimental gifts. Instead, I settled on the bottle of wine - a neutral gift which I could palm off as just an accompaniment to our lunch rather than a romantic gesture. The wine was chilled and the bottle cold in my hands. I wondered how cold it would be by the time I reached Samantha's.

The drive to the shop took only a little while. As I stopped the car and got out, I admired what I saw. Although it was only half-finished, the building's frontage already looked professional and very inviting with an ornate sign being painted above the whitewashed windows. I could see movement through the

partially obscured glass and I could not help but feel somewhat disappointed that I would not be on my own with Sam. Perhaps that was a good thing, I thought. I didn't know if I would be able to control myself if we were left alone - she was so beautiful.

I took the wine and my briefcase out of the back of the car and, as I locked and closed the boot, the front door of the shop burst open and Samantha came running out to meet me. She looked wonderful in a long summer dress which clung lovingly to every curve of her perfect figure and the sunlight made her free, flowing hair glow with life and colour. As she approached, I felt an unexpected nervousness in my stomach, and my legs weakened. I prayed that I would be able to keep myself and my emotions in order despite the fact that I wanted desperately to pick her up in my arms, to take her somewhere quiet and romantic and make slow, passionate love to her. I tried to cool myself down by remembering that I was there on official company business.

'Hi, Steve! How are you?' Sam asked as she approached.

'I'm fine,' I replied. 'You look fantastic.'

She took my arm and led me towards the shop.

'This is for you,' I said, holding out the bottle of wine. 'I thought we could celebrate.'

Sam stopped. For one terrible and irrational moment I thought that my worst fears had been realised and that she had taken offence at my gift. I knew that it was a foolish and unfounded thing to imagine but, in the heat of the moment, I was fighting to keep control of a brain, a heart and a body that did not want to be restrained. My fears were washed away in a second as Sam stood up on tiptoes and kissed me lightly on the cheek.

'You shouldn't have,' she said, looking straight at me with her gorgeous, almost hypnotic eyes. 'You're so sweet.'

I followed Samantha into the shop where, away from the relentless sunlight, it was slightly cooler and where I was able to think and to act sensibly once more. The main area of the shop was a hive of activity with workmen toiling in the heat to fix counters and shelves while others followed behind, decorating in their work mates' footsteps.

'You've done really well in here,' I commented, looking around. 'How long do you think it'll be before you can open?'

'Just a few weeks,' she replied. 'Now that you've come through with my finance I'll be able to sort out the stock and the rest of the fittings that I need.' She paused to think for a moment and looked around at her shop 'The only trouble is,' she continued, 'I don't know whether to buy more microwave ovens for the hot, winter food or extra fridges for the ice cream!'

Samantha took my hand and pulled me through a door behind the main serving area. The door opened out onto a little corridor and, from there, various storerooms and kitchens could be accessed. To our left was an empty, spare room and she reached inside to switch on the light. The dull yellow glow of one, unprotected sixty-watt bulb illuminated a little table in the middle of the room which was covered with an appetising spread of sandwiches, salads and cakes. I felt guilty of the fact that I had little appetite but I resolved to try and eat something. Two seats were sat close to each other next to the table and Sam gestured for me to go inside and to sit down.

'I hope you don't mind eating in here,' she said. 'It's far too hot to go outside.'

She disappeared for a moment to fetch two wine glasses from the kitchen

'You really shouldn't have gone to all this trouble just for me,' I said, shouting after her.

'It's no trouble,' she replied as she came back into the room. 'Besides, it gives me a chance to show you some of the types of things that I'll be doing here.'

She sat down in the chair next to me which she had angled so that whilst we were not far apart, we were able to look straight into each other's faces. My next words were spoken involuntarily - before I had even stopped to think, they were already floating through the air in Sam's direction and I was unable to stop them.

'The food's a bonus,' I said. 'It's enough for me just to see you.'

I was immediately embarrassed and looked away from Samantha and down to the floor. I slowly turned my head back to look in her direction to gauge her reaction and I felt incredible relief when I saw

that she was smiling broadly. She reached out her hand, grabbed mine and squeezed it softly. I chanced upon the unopened bottle of wine sitting on the table and picked it up quickly - I needed a drink.

'Have you got a corkscrew?' I asked. Sam shook her head.

'No,' she laughed, 'that's one of the fittings that I still need to get.'

'Never mind,' I said and I jumped up from my seat. I went out into the main area of the shop and, seeing that all of the workmen were busy at the far end of the room, I took the liberty of borrowing a screwdriver which had been left lying on a nearby stool. Returning to Samantha, I forced the cork down the neck of the bottle with the tool and poured the wine out into our glasses.

'I hope you don't mind the taste of a little cork in your wine,' I joked. 'I find that it often adds to the flavour and brings out the body of a good white!'

'Now you're just talking crap!' Sam said and she laughed as she took a sip from the glass that I passed to her.

'I am,' I replied. 'You seem to have that effect on me.'

'You have quite an effect on me,' she whispered quietly and I almost choked on the sandwich that I had just bitten into. I had dared to think that Samantha found me attractive and that she enjoyed my company, but to have it confirmed in such a blunt, definite and undeniable manner was beyond my wildest dreams.

We ate for a few quiet minutes. Neither of us seemed to have very much of an appetite for our food but I made a concerted effort to avoid hurting Sam's feelings. I cleared my plate and put it down on the table.

'That was really good,' I said, wiping my mouth with a serviette. 'If that's the kind of thing that you're going to be selling here then I don't think you're going to have any problems.'

'Thanks, Steve. I'm glad you liked it.'

'What have you got left to do in here then?' I asked, gesticulating at the rest of the building around us. She shrugged her shoulders.

'Not that much,' she said, quietly and simply.

'Are you looking forward to opening up?'

'I suppose,'

'Do you want to talk about something else?' I asked. Sam nodded and smiled. I had guessed from the brevity of her answers to my questions that she was not interested in talking business and I changed the subject. 'What did you think of Mark?' I asked, reminding her of our time together the previous evening.

'He's great,' she said, suddenly springing back into life. 'He's got a brilliant sense of humour.'

'It's not that good,' I replied defensively.

Before speaking again, I remembered the energy pulse that we had experienced last night. It had been the only negative aspect of an otherwise totally enjoyable evening and so I made a deliberate attempt to steer away from the topic of the weather and the relentless heat.

'Why didn't you go to university?' I enquired, remembering our friends' constant conversations last night. 'You had the qualifications, you could have done anything.'

She thought for a moment before replying.

'I know. I suppose I'd just had enough of learning by the time that it came to make the decision. I needed to start earning some money.'

Sam's reasoning sounded vaguely familiar as it had been for much the same reason that I had gone straight into working for the company rather than continuing my education. It had been a move that my parents had not entirely approved of and it was good to have found someone else who agreed with my opinions and who thought along the same lines as I did.

'Do you regret it?' I asked.

Samantha shook her head.

'I'm happy with the way things have turned out,' she said, draining the last drops of wine from the glass which she had emptied in record time. 'And things are getting better every day.'

As she spoke, Sam looked up into my face and I felt my heart melt. I knew then that the girl who sat next to me could really prove to be as special and important as I had dared think she might be at the time

of our first meeting. Although I had then dismissed my initial feelings as juvenile and trite, they seemed to have more and more truth and substance with each extra moment that I spent in her company.

When I next looked at my watch, it was almost three o'clock I panicked and at once my mind was filled with thoughts of disaster and catastrophe at the office which I had left under the control of a deputy manager who seemed to be permanently on the point of collapse I knew full well that if anything happened in my absence, the blame would rest squarely at my feet

'I'm sorry, I've got to go,' I said as I stood up to leave. 'I didn't see the time.'

Sam looked at her own watch and seemed as surprised as me to find that we had been talking for almost an hour and a half.

'Do you really have to?' she asked and I nodded sadly.

'I'm afraid so I wish I could stop.'

I tucked my shirt into my trousers and rolled down my sleeves. I moved towards the door of the little room but stopped when I was close to Sam. I turned to look into her face and then, with equal amounts of inevitability and spontaneity, I leant down and kissed her lightly on the lips. She put her arms around me and I held her tightly before we kissed again. Long and passionate, our second kiss seemed to last for a blissful eternity and I found it difficult to tear myself away.

'I wish I could stay here with you,' I whispered into her ear. 'I don't want to let you go.'

'I never want you to let me go,' she said quietly 'Can you come back tonight?'

My heart sank as I remembered that tonight was the night that I had arranged to go across town and visit my parents. I would normally have telephoned them and cancelled using some weak and concocted excuse but today, as my father was ill, I felt duty-bound to go. I silently cursed myself for not having visited last Friday when my business dinner date had been cancelled.

'I can't. I wish I could but my dad's ill and I've promised that I'll go over and see him.' I said. Samantha seemed to understand. 'Can we go out tomorrow?'

It was Sam's turn to bring bad news and she shook her head dejectedly.

'I've got an appointment with my insurers tomorrow night. It's too late to cancel now.'

'The day after then?' I asked, hopefully. Samantha nodded and smiled.

I painfully tore myself away from her. Despite the incredible heat all around and inside the building, my body felt cold where I had just held her and I longed to pull her close to me again. I walked towards the door of the shop, holding her hand tightly. She suddenly stopped walking and I turned back to see what was wrong.

'I haven't signed anything!' she shouted, laughing. 'You've forgotten what you came for!'

'Can you see what you're doing to me?' I asked jokingly as I took the forms and papers from out of my case. Sam signed where I indicated and I threw the documents back into the bag. 'I'm losing all control. You're turning me into a nervous wreck!'

'I'm sorry,' she laughed with mock apology in her voice.

'Don't be,' I whispered 'I'm loving every second of it!'

Before leaving I held her tightly once more and we kissed again in full view of the assembled workmen. We received a sarcastic round of applause from the labourers and I left the shop feeling embarrassed but caring little. I promised that I would call Sam the next day and then climbed into the car. I drove back towards the office and watched her in the rear view mirror until I turned a corner and she disappeared from view.

I had not needed to panic - Robert had survived the afternoon without incident and, more importantly, so had the office. I apologised to him for being away for so long and made up some lame, implausible excuse about being detained and having to explain the forms to Miss Hill. I could tell that he didn't believe

me but I didn't care.

Although less than two official working hours remained in the day, time still managed to run at a snail's pace. I had often joked with friends about how time managed to slow down in the week and then double its speed at weekends or when I was enjoying myself. I decided that must have been the reason why the hour and a half I had spent with Samantha had felt like less than ten minutes.

Once again, with a complete disregard for company regulations, I was deserted and left alone in the office at five o'clock sharp and I felt (out of guilt rather than company loyalty) that I should stop for a while and try to catch up on some of the paperwork that I had avoided doing that afternoon. By the time I was reasonably up to date, it was close to half past six. I decided to leave, to go home and change and then make my way to my parents' house as arranged.

Throughout the whole of the rest of the afternoon, I was unable to get Samantha out of my mind for even the briefest of moments

9

As I had planned earlier, I arrived at my parents' house washed, refreshed and feeling a little more relaxed than I had done earlier in the day. I parked the car and walked towards the little house which had been my home for many years. There were thousands of memories locked up in the tiny building and, as I approached, I prayed that the people close to me who still lived within its walls were safe and well. All the talk of energy waves and all of the confusion that I had witnessed over the last couple of days made me long to return to the security of the past and of my childhood. As I stood on the doorstep and opened the front door, a wave of tender sentimentality washed over me.

One of the most unusual and unexpected aspects of the heat and of the recent bizarre conditions was the distorting effect that they had on my body clock. Although it felt like summer, it was dark by five o'clock and it stayed that way until late in the morning. It was difficult sometimes to convince myself that it really was late October and, although the darkness made it feel as if it should be much later, by the time I went into the house it had only just turned seven-thirty.

Inside the building was dark and the living-room was illuminated only by the flickering blue light of the television set in the corner of the room and by a dull, yellow glow from the open kitchen doorway. When she heard the front door open. Mom came into the living-room and she smiled when she saw me.

'Hello, love. How are you?' she asked in her soothing, peaceful voice.

'I'm fine, Mom,' I replied as I walked across the room and followed her into the kitchen. 'Tired, but fine.'

Finally hearing Mom speak again helped me to calm down and to forget the troubles of the day. She had a relaxing, gentle quality to her voice which immediately took me back to my childhood days. When we were younger, Mom's incredible ability to remain restrained and rational had usually resulted in both my sister and myself ignoring her when she had needed to reprimand us (authority was always maintained by my father who, in such instances, always told us off with a well-aimed slap with the back of his hand). Today, however, Mom's tone lifted me and managed to restore a little piece of normality to the increasingly crazy and hectic world that I found myself living in.

'Where's Dad?' I asked as Mom filled the kettle from the tap.

'He's outside,' she replied, nodding her head through the window and towards a barely discernible shape sitting out on the back lawn. 'Poor thing,' she continued. 'This heat's really knocked him for six.'

I walked quietly towards the back door and peered through the glass to look at my dad who sat bathed in the low yellow light which spilled out across the lawn from the kitchen window. When I had been living at home, my parents had never seemed to age. In my mind, they had looked the same on the day I left home as they had done in my earliest memories. It was only now that I was not seeing them on a daily basis that they seemed to be getting any older and today, sadly, Dad looked desperately frail, tired and ancient.

As I watched my father sleeping in an old deckchair, a light wind blew across the garden and he shuffled uncomfortably. The breeze ruffled the delicate strands of white hair which lay across his head and the light from the house combined with the sparse silver rays of the moon to cast ghastly haggard shadows across his face. Dad's glasses were perched precariously on the end of his wrinkled nose and the only movement he made was as his chin slowly shifted up and down as it rested on his heaving chest.

'He doesn't look too bad,' I said to Mom. I was quite worried by Dad's appearance but I did my best to try and allay any of the fears that my mother might have had.

'He might look all right,' she said, 'but he's not himself. You know your father, he's not one to make a fuss when he's under the weather but I can tell. I've been with him for long enough.'

I looked into Mom's face as she toiled over the hot pots and pans on top of the kitchen stove. She looked tired and worn out and I could see the strain and worry that Dad's condition was obviously causing her to feel. Although there was the best part of a ten-year age gap between my parents and she didn't look anywhere near as aged as Dad did, Mom still seemed to be growing old at an alarming rate.

'Steven,' Mom said (she was the only person who called me that and not Steve). 'We're going to go up and visit your Uncle George for a little while.'

I was relieved to hear that. Uncle George lived on the Scottish coast and, when I was younger, whenever we had visited there as a family, Dad had spent most of our time there complaining that the North was far too cold for him.

'That's good news,' I told Mom. 'That should really do Dad a lot of good. It's about time you had a rest as well.'

Mom nodded and smiled. She seemed pleased that I approved of their plans.

'What about Michelle?' I asked, wondering what my younger sister was going to do.

'She's coming with us. The poor love's been having a rough time at college recently. I think it'll do her as much good to get away for a while as it will your father.' 'When are you thinking of going?'

'Tomorrow. We're going up by train. We leave at half past nine.'

The immediacy of their leaving shocked me. Dad was notoriously slow at making plans and decisions and Mom could see that I was genuinely surprised.

'It'll be for the best,' she said, reassuringly. 'We'll stay up there for a while and come home when things get back to normal.'

Michelle came bounding down the stairs and burst energetically into the kitchen.

'I thought I could smell something!' she joked, cheekily. 'Stevie's here!'

I laughed sarcastically and walked over to greet her. We hugged for a moment and, once more, I realised just how much my conceptions of my family had changed since I had moved out. Before I had left, there had been days when Michelle and I could hardly bear to be in the same room as each other and yet we now hugged one another as if we had been apart for years.

'How's things?' she asked.

'Not too bad,' I replied, giving little away. 'What about you? Are you all right?'

Strangely subdued, she nodded her head slowly and sat down at the table.

'Can you go and get your father for me?' Mom asked, looking in my direction. 'I'm about to serve up dinner.'

I went outside to fetch Dad and was surprised by the brittle crunching of the moisture-starved grass beneath my feet. I stood at Dad's side and gently shook his shoulder. He began to come around.

'Hello, son,' he said in a voice that sounded tired, feeble and weak. 'How are you?'

'I'm all right. Dad,' I replied. 'I've had enough of this heat though. It's a bit hot, isn't it?'

'Too bloody hot,' he snapped bluntly as he pushed his aching frame up and out of the chair. I held his

arm to help him but he brushed my hand away. 'I'm all right,' he grumbled. 'Just a bit stiff, that's all.'

Dad moved away from the support of the deckchair, turned and shuffled towards the open back door. I watched him sadly as he moved. Dad had always been such a fit and active man that to see him like this was heartbreaking. I knew that Mom was right and, although she hadn't said as much, I could see that the incredible conditions were killing him.

We sat around the kitchen table to eat our meal and, for a while, things were just like they had been before I had left home. Mom sat opposite Dad and I had the pleasure of sitting directly across the table from my little sister. Although Mom had struggled in the kitchen for a long time to prepare our meal, none of us seemed able to eat much. I toyed with the food on my plate while I thought of Samantha and I chewed a couple of hot, filling mouthfuls. I looked up to see that Michelle was staring at me and I was sure that she wanted to ask something. Her intuition seemed to have told her that I had begun seeing someone and then, with her usual disregard for tact and decorum, she began to pursue the issue with unavoidable and embarrassing questions.

'So, Steve,' she began, 'am I imagining things or are you happier than usual tonight? Have you finally managed to find yourself a decent girlfriend?'

I almost choked on the mouthful of food that I was eating.

'What makes you think that?' I asked, keen not to give anything away without a struggle.

'I know you too well,' she replied. 'You're being nice to me and that's a sure sign that something's up.' Michelle smiled sweetly, desperate for information and gossip.

'That doesn't mean that I'm going out with anyone, does it?' I said with deliberate ambiguity. 'Does anybody want another drink?' I asked, trying unsuccessfully to change the subject. My love life was not something that I wanted to discuss in front of Mom and Dad.

'I bet you are,' she said, putting down her knife and fork.

'Well, as a matter of fact, I am,' I said, shoving more food into my mouth. That was all that I wanted to say but Michelle, typically, had other ideas.

'I knew, I could tell!' she shouted. 'What's her name? Where did you meet her? Come on, I want to know everything.'

'Her name's Samantha, and that's all you're going to get,' I said with my mouth still half full of food.

'Leave your brother alone,' Mom interrupted. 'He's come over here for his tea, not to be questioned by you.' She turned to face me. 'I'm sure she's a lovely girl and you'll tell us all about her when you're ready to.'

'It's too bloody hot in here,' Dad suddenly shouted angrily.

The rest of the family around the table became silent as he threw down his knife and fork and stood up. After waiting for a couple of seconds to get his balance, Dad shuffled away from the table and disappeared into the dark living-room. Mom watched him go and I saw that her eyes had filled with tears.

Michelle became quiet, fearing guiltily that she had angered our father with her excited behavior. I pushed my plate away from me, unable to eat any more and watched as Mom stood silently and went into another room.

Later that night, I sat in the living-room with Dad. The windows were all fully open and a gentle breeze fluttered into the room which gently lifted the lace nets and light curtains which hung around them. The only light came from a dull table lamp at Dad's side and the only sound from Mom and Michelle talking in the kitchen.

'How are you feeling now, Dad?' I asked.

'Oh, not too bad, son,' he replied, calmly. 'I'll be glad when this heat finally eases off though.'

'Mom was telling me that you don't like it. It'll be better when you get up to Uncle George's though, won't it?'

'It won't be the heat getting to me then, it'll be that bloody wife of his,' he snapped. 'Still, your mother seems to think that it'll do us all good to get away for a while.'

'She's right you know They say it's going to get worse before it gets any better.'

'And you'd know, would you?' Dad snapped, uncharacteristically. He grumbled and took a large swig from a tumbler of whisky which he held in his tired hand. 'It'd all be a lot simpler if they hadn't been bugging around with the planet in the first place.'

'But, Dad,' I protested foolishly, trying to explain what was actually happening, 'it's the sun that's causing all of this. It's got nothing to do with pollution, the ozone layer or anything else.'

Dad hauled himself upright in his seat and leant towards me until his face was only inches from mine.

'Son, you can tell me that it's the sun doing this. You can even tell me that it's men from Mars. The truth is that none of it would be happening if it wasn't for those bloody idiots who are supposed to be in charge of this planet.'

There was no point in arguing with Dad. I was sure that it was the heat and stress which were causing him to become irrational and I couldn't see that there was anything to be gained from prolonging the conversation any further. As I watched him, he picked up the remote control unit that operated the television, switched on the set and flicked through the channels. When he could find nothing that interested him (I didn't even get asked if I wanted to watch anything) he pushed down the red button in the corner of the controller which made the set die again, plunging the room back into a gloomy semi-darkness. I got up and went to talk to Mom and Michelle in the kitchen.

'It's getting late,' I said, looking up at the clock on the wall. 'I'll have to be going soon.'

Mom sat at the table and looked up at me sadly.

'Can't you stay for a little longer?' she asked hopefully. 'We might not see you again for a while.'

'Of course you will.' I said without thinking. 'I'll see if I can't get a couple of days off work and I'll come up to Uncle George's and see you all.' I held out little hope of managing to get time off, but the idea did at least seem to cheer Mom up for a moment.

'I hope you can, love. That'd be wonderful,' she said with a sad, distant look in her eyes. I put my hand on top of hers and smiled.

'Everything's going to be all right. Mom,' I said. 'You just take Dad up to the seaside and he'll be fine. I promise you, in a week we'll all be back to normal and you'll be wishing that the sun had never gone in.'

Mom nodded her head, got up and went into the living-room to check on Dad. I was left alone with Michelle.

'Look after them both, won't you?' I said. I expected my sister to retort with some half-baked and ill-considered witticism but she surprised me with her seriousness.

'I will,' she said quietly. 'And you make sure that you're all right.'

'You know I will. Always looking after number one, that's me.'

'Good, keep it that way.'

I looked into Michelle's eyes and saw the same doubt and fear which had been so painfully evident in Mom's expression. Although I tried to disguise my own fears and worries, I could not help but wonder when I would see my family again. I didn't want Michelle to see just how worried I was. but I told her that I wished that I could go with them to Scotland in the morning. All the talk of the possibility of impending doom and destruction had affected me more than I had originally thought and it was with a great reluctance that I accepted the fact it was time to go home.

'I've got to go, Michelle,' I said quietly. She got up from her seat and hugged me tightly. Inexplicably, tears began to well up in my eyes and I tried to brush them away as discreetly and nonchalantly as was possible.

'I'll call you when we get to Uncle George's,' she said. 'And don't worry about those two, they'll be all right.'

I nodded and kissed my sister lightly on the forehead. We hugged again as Mom returned from the living-room.

'Have you really got to go now, love?' she asked.

'I'm afraid so,' I replied and I moved across the room to hold Mom tightly. 'Don't worry,' I whispered, 'everything's going to be all right.'

Although I had no way of knowing if what I said was true, settling my family's nerves seemed to compensate to an extent the guilt I felt from not traveling with them to Scotland.

I said goodbye to my father and, as usual, his reply took the form of a couple of grunts aimed in my direction from the armchair in which he remained firmly seated.

10

I awoke next morning to find that the heat seemed to have increased yet again through the dark hours of the night. Although I had neither the time or the inclination to try and prove such a theory, I felt sure that if I'd cracked an egg on the pavement it would have fried within moments. I was sorely tempted to stop at home but I knew that, as office manager, I should make the effort to go into work. If it got any warmer though, I thought, there would be no way that I'd even think about going into the office and shutting myself away indoors.

When I arrived at the building only Robert and Carol were there. Robert held a door key and Carol lived only five minutes' walk away from the office so I had expected to see them both there. Three of the remaining staff, however, had already called in sick and two more were much later arriving than usual. Thankfully, the office was quiet again and I had an empty diary. Outside the streets were a little busier than they had been as people were forced to come out of the shade to take care of the jobs which they had put off over the last few days.

I sat alone in my room and listened to the muffled sounds of the office. The mechanical whirring of an electric fan was the only constant noise and the relative quiet was a marked contrast to the usual deafening melee which I normally had to endure. I opened the window as wide as possible and dragged the swivel chair over towards it. I rested my feet on the windowsill and, once settled, angled the fan so that it pointed my way and I could relax in the cool breeze.

For once, for the first time in months, my desk really was clear of work and I had no qualms about taking things easy. All that I could think about, however, was Mom, Dad and Michelle and I wondered if they had made it safely to Uncle George's. I hoped that it would be a little cooler up there. Dad could be grumpy at the best of times but I had never seen him in quite the state which he had worked himself into last night. I tried not to think about what might happen to him if he was unable to find relief from the relentless conditions outside.

With my feet up on the window ledge and the cooling wind from the noisy fan blowing into my face, I began to drift off to sleep. Suddenly the phone rang and its unexpected clattering shattered the peaceful quiet. Fortunately it was not a customer calling, it was Rebecca.

'Hi, Steve. How are you?' she asked, sounding annoyingly vibrant and cheerful. 'Hot!' I replied. 'What about you?'

'Just the same. It couldn't get any warmer if it tried, I'm sure of it.'

Rebecca sounded relaxed and well. I asked her where she was calling from.

'I'm at home.' she said. 'I just couldn't face the thought of going into work this morning.'

'I know what you mean. I thought about stopping at home too but as I'm supposed to be in charge here . . .'

'The responsibilities of office, eh?' Becky joked. She was quiet for a moment before speaking again. 'I saw Mark yesterday.'

'I saw him on Monday,' I said. 'We went out for a drink.'

'Yes I know, he told me all about it.'

A short, knowing silence followed and the purpose of Rebecca's call revealed itself - she was sniffing out gossip.

'Who's this girl then?' she asked.

I felt strangely awkward telling Rebecca about Sam. As a rule, we usually shared all our secrets, keeping nothing back from each other, and we had discussed my lack of romance on more than one occasion. Now that I had found someone though, things felt different. I hoped that it would not change our relationship and could see no reason why it should. Ruthlessly and relentlessly, Rebecca pushed me for more information.

'She's called Samantha,' I began, 'and she's...' I paused as I struggled to find the words that would effectively describe what she was beginning to mean to me. 'Well, she's just about the best thing that's happened to me in a long time.'

Thankfully, Becky seemed pleased for me and was keen to meet Sam. Within a few minutes she was making plans for Samantha and me to visit her or to go out for a meal with her and Richard I skirted around the invitation with a subtle decorum - although it sounded like a good idea, I had not yet been out on my own with Sam and that was something that needed to be corrected before I started making plans for us to socialise with other people.

Rebecca stayed on the line for the best part of half an hour. I was glad of the interruption and I got the impression that she was pleased to be able to speak to someone else for a while. Richard only meant well for her, but it sounded as if he had almost confined her to their house until the conditions outside eased. I accepted that it was probably for the best, but could easily understand her frustration at having to constantly stare at the same four walls. She was going stir crazy.

There was a knock at the door and Carol's face appeared, I cupped my hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone and looked up.

'Sorry to interrupt you, Steve,' she squeaked in her timid, mousy voice. 'There's a Miss Clewes here to see you.'

The name failed to ring any bells.

'Miss who?' I asked and Carol stepped into the room so that she could not be heard in the office outside.

'Head Office,' she whispered and my heart sank.

'I'm sorry Becky,' I said, taking my hand away from the phone. 'I've got to go, something's come up.'

'All right,' she said. 'I'll speak to you soon.'

'I'll call you later,' I said and I hung up. I quickly stood and tidied the office as best I could. I moved the chair back under the desk, hid the electric fan and straightened my tie. Miss Clewes suddenly appeared in the doorway.

'Mr Johnson,' she said, walking quickly towards me.

'Good morning,' I replied 'This is an unexpected pleasure.' I shook her outstretched hand and she almost crushed mine with a grip of immense vicelike force. Surprised, I offered her a seat and she sat down.

'My visit is unexpected, Mr Johnson,' she began in an official and oppressive tone, 'but I do not expect that it will be a pleasure. I'm from the company audit department.'

My legs weakened and I fell heavily into my seat Miss Clewes stared directly at me with an unflinching expression fixed on her face.

'As you know, the company employs my colleagues and me to make these random spot checks on our branches and to ensure that everything is in order. You will be required to offer me every assistance and to comply with my every request. The audit will take between three and four days to complete and my findings will remain confidential to myself and my superiors until I am sure that all of my investigations have been completed.'

It took a couple of seconds for me to fully comprehend and digest all that she had said (although it was, in all probability, a standard and well-prepared speech) and then I was only able to acknowledge her with a dumb nod.

Miss Clewes was a formidable character. Well-built and white-haired, she looked to be in her mid to late fifties. She was dressed in a smart business suit and her wispy hair was pulled strictly and severely away from her face into a tight bun. With no jewellery, perfume or make-up, she was an imposing sight and, in the sweltering heat gave off an imposing smell as she refused to take off her jacket. She brought the air of a harsh, old-fashioned school headmistress with her into my unprepared office.

'Are you able to answer any questions?' I asked. 'Can I ask you anything about the audit?'

She thought for a moment, obviously searching through the standard replies to questions that the company had forced her to memorise during training.

'As I said, Mr Johnson, I will be unable to discuss my findings until all my work here is finished. If you have any other questions, I will listen and will answer them if they merit my response.'

Throughout her reply and through all that she had already said to me, the tone of her voice did not alter in the slightest. Her words sounded false, rehearsed and lacking in spontaneity - she was the archetypal company employee. I decided to risk her wrath and ask another question.

'Is my branch being inspected for any particular reason, or is this just a routine visit?'

It was a question that needed to be addressed. In the short time that Miss Clewes had been in my office, worries and doubts about my recent performance had flooded my mind and I needed to know whether it was me or the branch that was being scrutinised. Once again, she paused to find the correct answer before replying.

'There are several branches being audited in this region. This is not the only one.'

Although her answer was, I presumed, deliberately ambiguous, it eased my mind a little. I had thought for one terrified moment that rumours had spread around the area that I was seeing one of my customers and that those same rumours had managed to find their way into the ever-listening ears of my superiors at head office.

'As I've said,' Miss Clewes continued, 'the audit should last for only a few days. You will be involved little but I will need the full co-operation of both you and your staff to obtain for me all the documentation and data that I might require.'

She began to explain the actual areas of the office's work which were to be examined but I was not really listening. My mind had begun to wander and I found myself staring out of the open window into the deep, clear blue sky and towards the huge, incandescent sun which continued to burn down relentlessly. As she rambled on, uninterrupted, I thought of my friend Mark outside playing games with his students and of Rebecca sitting at home in comfort. I thought of my family, miles away by the sea and then, finally, I thought of Samantha. I knew that I had to get myself out of this job. It was killing me.

Miss Clewes finished her briefing by explaining that she would need privacy to do her work and, as my room was the quietest part of the office, that she would be commandeering it for the duration of her visit. Depressed, annoyed and incredibly hot, I collected my belongings and took them out to a spare desk in the general office. I dumped them angrily down and, ignoring the stares which came from what remained of my staff, tried to find something to do. I knew that the next few days would be far from easy.

The rest of the day was agonisingly long and drawn out. In an unpredictable contrast with the rest of the week, the office suddenly became very busy. It had nothing to do with the customers (none of whom seemed to want anything to do with us at the moment) but had everything to do with the extremely demanding inspector who had graced us with her presence. Her constant requests for information and explanations took every spare second of mine, and of everybody else's time.

The five members of staff who had eventually arrived for work. Miss Clewes and I finally left the office at just before five-thirty.

I arrived home in the rapidly fading light to find my two elderly next-door neighbours, Mr and Mrs Coombes, relaxing on their dry, parched front lawn in a pair of equally elderly deckchairs. I pulled slowly onto the drive, keen not to accelerate the car's engine more than was necessary for fear of waking Mr Coombes from his slumber. I stopped the car, got out and closed the door with the minimum of force. I thought that I had succeeded in not disturbing Mr Coombes and tiptoed towards the house. Despite my considerable and determined efforts, I looked back over my shoulder to see his round, grinning face peering at me from over the hedge which ran between our properties.

'Evening, Mr Coombes,' I said, forcing myself to be polite and to sound cheerful and pleased to see the irritating little man. 'Are you both well?'

As I spoke I slowly walked towards my front door, trying desperately not to get drawn and trapped in an inane conversation with my neighbour. He nodded and disappeared. For a moment I thought that I had escaped but my heart sank as he appeared at the end of the hedge and started to walk down the driveway towards me.

'What about this weather then?' he shouted in his annoyingly high-pitched voice. Although he always denied it, Mr Coombes was becoming slightly deaf and seemed to prefer yelling to talking these days.

'I know. It's incredible, isn't it?' I replied, cheerfully.

Mr Coombes cupped his hand to his ear and I repeated my words until he managed to decipher them. I supposed that, as he spent nearly all of his time at home with his wife, he hadn't had much chance to discuss the weather with anyone else. The subject had by now long ceased to be an interesting topic of conversation with the people I was forced to mix with each day but, for his sake, I bravely pursued the theme to save hurting the old boy's feelings.

'It's absolutely unbelievable, isn't it?' I shouted. 'I mean, it'll be November in a few days time!'

Mr Coombes nodded and then signalled that he hadn't quite made out what I had said. Rather than repeat myself again, I asked a completely different question.

'How are you two coping with the heat?'

'I'm all right,' he said, wiping away a bead of sweat which suddenly dribbled and trickled down his wrinkled forehead. 'Mrs Coombes doesn't like it though. It's only now that the sun's gone in that we've been able to come outside. We spend most of the days indoors - it's a lot cooler in the house.'

I could not help feeling a little jealous of them having the option of being inside or out each day - my choice was made for me. Mr Coombes' attitude was in stark contrast to the other old man that I had met in the park a little over a week ago. While he had decided to come out and pester innocent people with his dark tales and prophecies of gloom and destruction, my neighbour seemed content to do the decent thing and stay in his home, out of sight and out of mind. The man in the park had seemed convinced that the heat was the beginning of something serious and sinister while Mr Coombes and his wife were happy just to sit back and make the most of the scorching temperatures while they could. It was depressing to think that I might one day be like these people - I did not know which one I would least prefer to be.

Mr Coombes wiped his dry mouth with his hand and took a step towards the hedge to check on his sleeping wife. As he watched, she shuffled uncomfortably in her chair, opened her mouth wide, yawned and began to snore loudly. He laughed.

'That's my girl,' he said, chuckling heartily to himself. 'She could sleep through anything that one.'

As we appeared to have reached a lull in the stilted, staccato conversation, I made another vain and desperate attempt to get away. Mr Coombes was one step ahead of me and he seemed determined to prolong my agony.

'Playing havoc with the garden, this weather,' he shouted.

'I can imagine,' I said and I noticed the old man looking less than favourably at my little plot of land. 'I don't have much time to get out into the garden these days,' I continued.

If the truth be known, I had no intention of working outside. The sum total of my outdoor activities last year had been mowing the lawn three times and sunbathing four and the reason that Mr Coombes looked at my garden so disapprovingly was that, in the last few weeks of the summer which had just passed, I had removed the turf and had the whole of my front lawn covered with a thick layer of tarmac. It had been a move that had not been welcomed next door.

He put his hands on his hips and stretched his back.

'These are strange days,' he said, unexpectedly and I, thinking that he was about to broach the increasingly popular topic of the end of the world, interrupted.

'Do you think there's long left?' I asked simply.

'Long left for what?' Mr Coombes said and he looked at me with a bewildered expression plastered across his wrinkled face.

'You know,' I continued, wishing that I hadn't said anything, 'long left for the world.'

There was a dreadful moment's silence before the old man's face cracked into a long, wide grin and a loud, embarrassing laugh (which I felt sure could be heard from both ends of the street) floated out from his dark, toothless mouth. With tears rolling down his face, he staggered backwards, wheezing and pointing in my direction. To my great relief, the phone began to ring inside the house.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I've got to go.' I rushed towards the front door, feeling my face quickly reddening.

I fumbled with the key in the lock as I hurried to get inside and answer the call. I burst into the house, tripped over a recently delivered newspaper which lay just in front of the door and dived across the hallway to pick up the phone.

'Hello,' I said, breathlessly.

'You took your time!' replied a sarcastic and unmistakable voice. I kicked the door closed with an outstretched foot and sat down on the carpet to speak to Samantha. 'Are you all right?' she asked.

It was good to hear her voice again. Despite the effects of the horrendous day which I had just endured and my public humiliation outside the house seconds earlier, everything suddenly seemed all right.

'I'm better now I've spoken to you,' I replied. 'How's your day been?'

'Not too bad.' Sam sighed. 'Not as good as yesterday though. I could really have done with having you around.'

'I wish I could have been around,' I replied. 'Mind you, it was a good job that we had lunch yesterday. We were invaded by bloody company inspectors this afternoon.'

'Shit, really?' she said, sounding surprised. 'Why? What's brought that on?'

'I've been told that it's just a random visit, but I'm not really convinced that's true.'

'Have you done anything wrong?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Well then,' she laughed, 'there's no need to worry, is there?'

'I suppose not,' I mumbled, far from sure. Sam was quiet for a moment.

'What if they find out about us?' she asked. 'It won't look too good if your bosses find out that you're seeing a customer, will it?'

'I don't really care,' I replied without really stopping to consider my answer. 'I must confess though, I had started to think along those lines when she first arrived but...'

'...but what?' she interrupted as I paused for thought.

'...but I don't care. There are things in life which are a lot more important than any stupid job.'

'Like me?' Sam asked.

'Like you,' I replied truthfully. 'Are you still all right to go out tomorrow night?'

'Of course I am,' she said. 'Christ, you don't think I'd miss out on that, do you?'

'Well no, I suppose not. Besides, it wouldn't be anywhere near as good if you weren't there.'

'You'd just have to find someone else to take out, wouldn't you?' she joked.

'I could look around for years, Sam, and I still wouldn't find anyone I'd rather go out with.'

She was quiet for a moment and I had to check that she was still on the other end of the line.

'Are you all right?' I asked.

'I'm okay,' she replied quietly, her tone suddenly more serious and subdued. 'It's just that I've had some bad news today.'

My heart stopped beating for a moment and my legs weakened as I braced myself for Sam's news. I had been beginning to think that things had been going rather too well for me recently and I had been waiting for something to go wrong. Perhaps this was it, I thought, perhaps she was about to unleash a horde of skeletons from inside a previously unmentioned closet.

'My grandmother's ill,' she said, simply.

Although I tried not to appear callous or uncaring, I could not help but breathe a loud sigh of relief that the news had not been worse. I hoped that Sam hadn't heard me.

'Mom and Dad have asked me to go with them and look after her for a while. We're going up in the next couple of days.'

I had to summon the courage to ask my next questions.

'Where does she live? Is it far from here?'

'Miles away,' she said, sadly. 'She's up on the north-west coast. It's a little village called Colliwell. I don't know if you've heard of it.'

I hadn't and it might as well have been on another planet. All that I could think was that Sam was going to be taken away from me and my bad feelings were compounded by the guilt that I felt from caring more about our blossoming relationship than for her grandmother's health.

'Have you really got to go?' I asked, trying hard not to sound as if I was pleading with her to stay.

'I have. I don't want to but I've got no choice. I owe it to Mom and Dad.'

'I know,' I said, accepting the inevitable. 'I know what you mean. My folks have gone up to visit relatives in Scotland today.'

'And are you going to go up to them?'

'I said I might but it's a hell of a distance.' Sam was quiet for a moment. 'Come up with us,' she said.

My immediate instinct was to accept her invitation without question. I knew, however, that the decision was not as clear-cut as it first appeared to be.

'Would your parents really want me hanging around?' I asked.

'That's up to them,' she replied with a tone of quiet defiance creeping into her voice. 'I want you with me.'

I knew at that moment that I would have done anything to have been with Samantha. My head was filled with stupid romantic images and ideas of fighting my way through unknown, crowded streets and towns to be with the woman that I was rapidly falling in love with. I also knew at that same moment that I had responsibilities to my family and employers that I wanted to ignore but could not.

'When are you going?' I asked, praying that it would not be for a while yet.

'I think Dad wants us to go up the day after tomorrow.'

'That soon?' I said. My heart sank heavily.

'Gran's pretty ill. She needs us there.'

'Will you still be all right to go out tomorrow night?' I asked and I regretted the words as soon as I had spoken them. I felt incredibly guilty at placing so much importance on a night out with Sam when her family needed her much more than I did. 'Will you be all right to travel after a night out?' I added quickly as an afterthought.

'Of course I will,' she said softly. 'It's only the thought of seeing you that's keeping me going. Nothing's going to stop us from having a good time tomorrow.'

'All right,' I said, feeling slightly happier. 'I'll pick you up at about seven and we'll go and have the best night ever. It might be too hot, and it might not last for as long as we'd like, but I'm going to make sure

that it's fantastic.' I paused for a moment. 'Well, if you're there it'll be fantastic anyway.'

I could not help telling Samantha exactly how I felt and, to my delight, she seemed to feel the same way about me. I remembered that we had only been together for a short time but it seemed to make no difference. She meant so much to me. I could not believe that such a perfect, beautiful girl could fall for a man like me and I prayed that our time together would never end.

'I've got to go,' Sam said. 'I'll speak to you before tomorrow night, all right?'

'Okay,' I said. 'I'm counting the hours. See you.'

I put down the phone and, for a while, did nothing but sit still on the floor, slumped against the wall. All that I needed to do was picture Sam's face in my mind for all the problems of work and the torments of the searing conditions outside to pale into insignificance. I felt sure that, if Sam was by my side, I could get through anything that the vicious world could throw at me.

I eventually finished dreaming by the phone, got up and went into the kitchen. Although I wasn't really hungry, as it was getting late I instinctively made myself something to eat. I piled a plate high with sandwiches made from cool meat and salad, fresh from the fridge, but I wasn't able to take even one bite from the mountain of food. Guiltily, I threw the meal away and skulked into the living-room with only a crumpled newspaper and a cold can of beer for company.

I could not decide how I felt - half of me was still on a high after speaking to Samantha while the other half was filling rapidly with doubts and fears. Was I about to lose Sam as quickly as I had found her? Had my family arrived safely in Scotland yet? What was the real reason for the arrival of the inspector at the office today? When I opened the newspaper, the darker, depressive side of me began to take a firm hold.

My daily paper was a local rag whose reporting style seemed to fall uncomfortably between the trashy tabloids and the wordy broadsheets. Tonight it was full of reports which, despite the heat outside, made my blood freeze. The front page of the paper was usually plastered with attention-grabbing, sensationalist headlines and only occasionally would these make way for serious, factual information. Tonight's edition was one of those rare occasions. For once, however, there were no reports of wars, of deaths or of disasters in the normal sense of the word. Instead, the lead story told a much grimmer tale. Scientists appeared to have confirmed that the planet's situation had begun to deteriorate drastically and that it still showed no immediate signs of easing or improving. They claimed that if the temperature continued to increase at the same rate as it had done over the last few days and weeks, dangerous and then deadly levels of heat would be reached in the very near future. Already people had begun to die in the hotter climates of the world and all the evidence available appeared to suggest that this devastation would quickly spread around the rest of the globe.

With a strange mixture of terror and morbid fascination, I read and reread every word of the article many times and, even then, it was hard to believe and absorb all that it said. My immediate fears gradually subsided, however, only to be quickly overtaken by an uneasy sense of helplessness. I felt angry and frustrated about the fact that, if the temperature really was going to reach life-threatening levels soon, there was nothing I, or anyone else, could do to stop it from happening. Having what little control which remained over my own destiny ripped from my hands without the slightest warning was a sickening and gut-wrenching feeling.

Later on the television, a news reporter did her best to calm a nation that sat on the edge of their collective seats, hanging on her every last word. Although she was as powerless as the rest of us to do anything, she seemed determined to try and convince her viewers that the conditions could just as easily improve as they could worsen. I thanked her mentally on behalf of the rest of the population for her assurances, but her hollow words held little comfort for me or, I presumed, for anyone else. She warned that further energy pulses were expected soon and that we should go indoors or get under cover when they struck. Her tone of factual concern was reminiscent of 1950s cold war propaganda films and, as in those same films, she gave advice on how to survive. Her words fell on deaf ears as I knew that, if things

finally did reach such a desperate stage, no-one could have any idea of what we might find when we finally crawled out of our protective shelters.

Looking around my little home, I felt low and alone. I wished with all my heart that I could be with my family and I dreamed of seeing their faces again. I knew, however, that they were hundreds of miles away and the geographical gulf which lay between us compounded my pain. Although I wanted desperately to be with them, I also soon realised that I didn't want to be anywhere without Samantha at my side.

In a surprisingly short length of time, I had managed to begin to accept the fact that the planet could be entering its final days and that there was nothing I could do to stop the destruction - it was inevitable. I knew that the pain I would feel at the end would be halved if Sam was with me. The thought of her made the fear seep away.

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As I had expected, the next morning at the office was deathly quiet and seemed to take an eternity to pass. Despite the fact that only one customer walked through the office doors before midday, every moment of mine and my staff's time was taken up with running around to satisfy the relentless requests and orders of Miss Clewes, the inspector. With a complete and utter disregard for our own important daily duties and routines, she constantly demanded that we take paperwork, files, computer disks and anything else she required into the office which had once been mine but which she had quickly made her own. Our troubles were compounded by the fact that less than half of my staff had bothered to turn up for work. As well as making more work for the rest of us, their absence said little for my management of the office.

When Robert and I had arrived to open up the building at half past eight. Miss Clewes had been waiting on the doorstep and, from the moment she had stepped into the building, she had worked constantly and without pausing for a moment until one o'clock when she stopped regimentally for a precise hour's lunch. As soon as she left the office, the heavy, suffocating and authoritarian atmosphere which she carried with her followed and, as the staff relaxed, I crept back into my room to call Samantha.

I stood at the open window and looked down onto a much busier street scene than I had seen over the last few days. Snaking queues sneaked out from the covered doorways of supermarkets and grocers' shops while other stores lay vacant and empty. Yesterday's news appeared to have shocked a population who seemed now to be stocking up their larders and cupboards ready to stay in the shade and protection of their homes until things either improved or ended.

I hoped that my family were secure in the company of Uncle George and his wife. Mom had telephoned late the previous evening to let me know that they had arrived there safely and that they hoped I would soon be able to join them. As I looked out at the increasing confusion below I saw that hot, frightened and frustrated shoppers had begun to shuffle and scuffle in a supermarket queue. I knew that if things continued to develop as I feared that they might, then I would be making plans to leave the stifling city at the earliest opportunity.

I searched for the number of Samantha's shop in my records and dialled. The phone rang constantly for about half a minute but there was no answer. I hung up and tried again but still could get no reply. The line connected and the phone rang out but there was no-one there to pick it up. I tried her home number

and hoped that someone there would answer. I sat on the edge of my desk and nervously waited. A dark fear grew with each passing ring that Samantha might already have left for her grandmother's house. I was relieved when the phone was finally picked up.

'Hello,' a quiet voice said.

'Can I speak to Samantha please?' I asked and I then heard the thump of the phone being put down while Sam's mother (I presumed that was who had answered) went to find her daughter. In the background I heard a muffled conversation taking place before footsteps approached the phone and the receiver was picked up again. 'Hello,' Sam said.

'Hi, it's me. How are you doing?'

'I'm okay,' she said, relaxing. 'What about you?'

'I'm all right. It's taken me ages to get through to you. I was starting to think that you might have gone to your gran's early.'

'There's no way that I'd leave without letting you know first. I don't want to go as it is.' Sam's voice trailed away into silence and I could tell that the thought of leaving was troubling her.

'I tried the shop first,' I said. 'Should've realised that you'd stop at home today.'

'It's too hot to go out. Besides, I've got a lot to get ready here. Where are you calling from?'

'I've had to go into work. With the inspector here I didn't have a lot of choice but if things get any worse then I won't be coming in tomorrow - it's like an oven in here.'

'Can we still go out tonight?' she asked. I was surprised by her question but was pleased that she still wanted to see me.

'Of course we can. Christ, it's going to take a lot more than any heatwave to stop me having a good time. I don't know what we're going to do, but I'm really looking forward to it.'

'We could go back to your house and sit around the fridge!' Sam joked. I laughed and was pleased that she had still managed to keep her sense of humour despite the conditions outside.

'Have you heard from your grandmother?' I asked. I was almost too scared to ask but was desperate for information. 'Are you still going up there?'

'I'm afraid so. Dad's dead set on going tomorrow.'

My heart sank.

'We'd better make sure that we have a good time tonight then, hadn't we?' I asked cheerfully, trying hard to mask the bitter disappointment that I felt at having Sam taken away from me so soon. I had expected it to happen, but the confirmation of my fears made me feel ten times worse.

'Come around at about seven,' she said. 'I really can't wait to see you again.'

I knew just how she felt. Although it had been less than two days since we had last seen each other, and only a matter of hours since we had spoken, I was desperate to be by her side once more. As we chatted, I could not help but think about the relationship which I had become suddenly and hopelessly embroiled in. Weeks ago, I would have scoffed at the idea of falling in love with someone so quickly and so deeply but, today, I was forced to accept the fact that it had happened. Weeks ago, however, I would also have dismissed the possibility of the planet that I lived on burning up around me as well.

Miss Clewes surprised me at half-past three.

I knocked on the door of my office and went inside to find her packing her papers and folders away into her smart and practical leather briefcase. As I approached she snap-locked the case shut and laid it flat on the desk in front of her. Her face appeared tired and she looked ill.

'Mr. Johnson,' she said wearily. 'I'm not well. I'm going to go home.'

For a moment I could think of nothing to say. From the second she had first appeared in my office, she had appeared to be almost inhuman and completely invulnerable to such trivial inconveniences as the stifling heat and illness. The Miss Clewes who stood in front of me now was different. She was a tired and worried woman.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I eventually said, remembering to reply to the best news that I had heard all day. 'I hope it's nothing serious.'

She shook her head slowly and gently touched her forehead with a trembling hand.

'I'm sure it isn't,' she croaked before clearing her dry throat and speaking again. 'I don't think that I will be in tomorrow. In fact, I've spoken to my superiors and we have agreed that the rest of the audit will be postponed until the conditions improve. I'll be in touch with you when I am ready to return.'

With that, Miss Clewes stood upright (she had been leaning uncharacteristically against the desk for support) and pulled her heavy, formal skirt straight. She picked up her case, draped her jacket over her arm and breezed past me out of the room and then out of the office altogether. Once I was sure that I had heard the sound of the front door being closed, I allowed myself to relax.

The phone on the desk began to ring and I picked it up quickly.

'Steven Johnson,' I said, automatically and officially.

'Hello, Steven, it's Keith Etheridge here.' Keith was the manager of a nearby branch of the company and had been a colleague of mine for a number of years. 'I've got some good news for you mate!'

I couldn't cope with two lots of unexpected good news in an many minutes standing up and sat quickly down in my chair in my newly reclaimed office.

'I've just had a communication from head office to be circulated around the branches. We're shutting shop for the next few days until things improve.'

'It's about time,' I said, relieved.

'That's what I thought. There's no point in staying open. I mean, we've only had three members of staff come in today and that's still two too many to serve the number of customers that have been in. This heat's not doing anybody any good.'

I thanked Keith for delivering the company's message and then spent at least ten minutes trying to get him off the telephone. Although he was a pleasant and amiable man, he liked to talk and all that I wanted to do was get out and go home. I eventually managed to get rid of him, claiming that I had to take another call. (Keith was, in fact, the only person to have telephoned the office all day.)

I walked out into the main office relaxed and, more importantly, glad to finally have some good news for the staff. Despite the fact that the situation must have been really grave for the company to have taken the drastic step of closing all of its branches, I was pleased that it had been left to me to tell the employees in my charge. I normally only seemed to talk to them to tell them off when something had gone wrong or to ask them to do a job for me and I was glad that, for once, I was to be the bearer of glad tidings.

My news was met with a typically disappointing and apathetic reaction from the four staff that were still in the building and, without stopping to even ask me any questions or query the company's decision in the slightest, they trooped past me, out of the door and were quickly on their way home.

Once again, I was left to lock up the building with my ever-present and ever-complaining assistant Robert who stumbled around the office looking more and more exhausted with each minute that passed.

'It's about bloody time the company saw sense,' he grumbled. Instead of pursuing the conversation, this time it was my turn to act dumb in an attempt to get out as quickly as possible.

We stepped out into the fading evening light and found that the streets were silent. The frenzied activity of earlier in the day had disappeared and nearly all of the shops were locked, bolted and had their metal shutters drawn for the night.

Seven o'clock soon arrived and I found myself pulling up in the car outside Sam's house feeling unusually apprehensive and nervous. I walked up to the front door, took a deep breath and then rang the bell. Mrs Hill answered and invited me inside.

'It's Steven isn't it?' she asked as I wiped my feet on the mat and went indoors.

'That's right,' I replied. 'It's nice to see you again. How are you?'

'Oh, I'm very well thank you. I'll be glad when this weather eases though.'

I tried hard to feign my interest in yet another conversation about the weather. Even when it behaved and acted according to tradition and record, the weather seemed to be the mainstay of any conversation between strangers and, now that it was doing something which actually merited the interest in it, the topic seemed to have worked its way into every conversation that I recently heard or had been a part of.

'How's Samantha's grandmother?' I asked. I was deliberately vague as I was not sure which one of her parent's mothers was ill.

'Mom's not too bad. She'll be better when we get up there to her. Sam tells me that your parents have gone away.'

'Yes, they've gone up to Scotland. They're staying with relatives of ours up there.'

'I always think a family should stick together,' Samantha's mother said and her words struck a guilty chord within me. I knew that, as I would not be going into the office for a couple of days, I should really have made the effort to go straight up to my uncle's house.

Through a doorway I spotted Samantha's father sitting next to an open patio window and reading a newspaper which was being fluttered and blown by a gentle breeze which gusted into the house. My arrival had obviously not interested him and I thought it best that I did not disturb him. Mrs Hill continued to extol the virtues of family life and I was glad when I heard the sound of a door shutting upstairs and Samantha came bounding down the stairs towards me.

'Hi, Steve,' she said, cheerfully and I watched her as she approached. She wore a light cotton dress which swirled invitingly around her and her long blond hair cascaded down around her delicate, pretty face. She smiled as I looked at her and I felt myself melt in front of her. She breezed past me, pausing only to kiss her mother on the cheek, and went into the living-room towards where her father sat. I watched as she picked up her handbag from a table next to him and kissed him.

'Night, Dad,' she said. 'I'll see you later.'

'Don't be out late,' he snapped gruffly, without lifting his head from the paper. 'We've got a busy day tomorrow and you've got a lot of travelling ahead of you.'

Sam walked out of the room and looked first at her mother and then at me. She seemed slightly embarrassed by her ignorant father and I took his lack of communication with me as a sign that I was not welcome.

'Are you ready?' I asked, suddenly keen to leave. Sam nodded and we made our way to the car.

'See you later, Mom,' she said as her mother waited in the light of the doorway and watched us drive away.

'Is your dad always like that?' I asked, trying carefully not to offend her.

'Yes!' she replied, laughing. 'I think he's a bit like your old man - the heat's getting to him but he's too proud to say anything.'

I drove the car down the hot and quiet road and switched on the radio. Before I could hear what station was on, Sam slammed a cassette into the front of the machine. 'I was about to do that,' I said.

'Sorry. I just couldn't stand listening to the radio. All that I've heard recently is how bad things are getting. I want to try and forget all of that for a while tonight.'

'I know. Where do you want to go?' I asked, suddenly realising that I hadn't a clue where we were heading.

'I don't know,' Sam replied, shrugging her shoulders. 'We could head into town for a little while, have a couple of drinks and then see what we feel like doing afterwards.'

'Okay,' I said and I took a turning which aimed the car towards the city centre.

For various reasons, I had hardly been out over the last few nights and the quiet of the suburbs came as something of a surprise. It was only when we drove deeper into town that we saw many other people at all. I cruised the back streets searching for somewhere to stop, but could find nowhere and so headed for the main shopping area.

As we drove down a dark, dimly lit road, the cassette finished playing in the stereo and Sam switched it off.

'This feels strange,' she said, suddenly. Although her comment had been unexpected, I knew exactly what she meant. There was an unusual, almost oppressive atmosphere in the town.

'I know. I'm not sure what it is, it's just that...'

My words were interrupted by the crashing noise which accompanied a huge road bollard being thrown with force through a shop window. I looked across the street to see the various members of a large gang scrambling through shards of broken, shattered glass and through the remains of a virtually demolished shop display. They ran back into the open and were distracted momentarily by the light and noise from my car. They turned and stared for a second before running away into the shadows of the night.

I looked across at Samantha and she returned my expression of surprise and disbelief.

'What's going on?' she asked.

I could not tell her.

'I don't know,' I replied, staring at the wreckage of the shop that the looters had left. 'There'll be police around here soon. We'd better go.'

I turned the car around in the middle of the road and drove back in the direction from which we had just come. I took another junction which led onto the main high street but stopped when I saw other cars being driven along at incredible speeds, trying to avoid missiles which were being hurled from gangs gathered on either side of the street. Although we saw only a small area of the city, and we were there for only a short time, I needed no other encouragement to drive quickly away and back towards the suburbs. I glanced over at Samantha and saw that her face was pressed hard against the window. She seemed to be having as much difficulty as I was in comprehending the sudden senseless and unexpected violence that we were seeing.

At the outskirts of the town we found relative peace again and I tried to make some sense of the anger that I had just witnessed. The news that we had heard last night had obviously frightened everyone and although most people were able to control their worries and fears, there remained some who could not. It appeared that all their frustrations had been too much to keep bottled up inside. I had expected people to react badly to the terrible news, but never to the extent that we had just seen.

For a while we sat silent in the car, both unable to think of anything to say to the other.

'Just keep driving,' Sam said eventually as we approached the area near to where she lived. 'Just keep driving until you find somewhere where we can stop and talk.'

Fifteen minutes quickly passed and the plastic and concrete of the city soon gave way to the brittle, scorched greenery of the moisture-starved countryside. We drove down a narrow, rough country lane and, as we approached a lay-by, I pulled in and stopped the car. For a moment we sat quietly together, subdued by what we had seen and had left behind in the city.

'What's going on?' Samantha asked. I felt sure that she knew I could not answer her. 'I mean,' she continued, 'we only drove into a part of the city, imagine what it's like...'

'It's not worth thinking about,' I interrupted. 'It's just what we're all feeling. We're both worried but we're able to control ourselves and not do anything...'

I shut up quickly as I realised that my meaningless words were helping no-one. Sam opened the car door and turned around on the seat so that her feet dangled outside. She breathed the warm night air in deeply and I watched her as she stood up and walked away. It was obvious that she was frightened and that she was trying to hide her fear from me. In reality I was equally scared and could offer frustratingly little comfort.

I climbed out of the car and followed Samantha as she walked towards the brittle, dying hedgerow which separated the road from the fields beyond. I put my arm gently around her and held her close to me. Despite the raging heat that suffocated everything around us, the warmth of her body next to mine was soothing and almost cooling. I turned her around so that she was looking towards me and looked deep into her troubled face. A single tear fell from her eye and trickled slowly down her perfect skin before she lifted her hand and wiped it away, ashamed at herself for having let her emotions show so readily.

'Come on,' I said. 'Don't cry. We're going to be all right.'

My words sounded hollow and they echoed through the strange stillness of the silent countryside. Samantha forced herself to smile.

'I'm okay,' she said, sniffing back more tears. 'It's just that I know things are going to get worse before they get any better, and I don't think I'll be able to get through them without you.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' I said, foolishly.

'No, but I am. Christ, Steve, I'm scared to death.'

'If it hadn't been for you, I'd have lost control a long time ago,' I whispered. 'You're the reason that I've managed to get through the last few days and if you think I'm ever going to let you go then you've got another think coming.'

'Will you come with us tomorrow?' she asked, hopefully. I knew that there was no way I could travel up to the coast with Sam and her family and, besides, there were things that I would need to sort out at home before I could leave.

'I can't,' I said, sadly. 'I won't be able to leave in time in the morning.'

Perhaps I was just fooling myself. If I was brutally honest, there was nothing I needed to do at home or at the office which couldn't wait. I desperately wanted to travel with Samantha, but I could not face the prospect of intruding on the privacy of her family at such an uncertain time. I knew that it was weak of me, and it was shallow, but there was nothing I could do that would change the way I felt.

'As soon as you can then?' she said and I nodded.

'First chance I get and I'll be coming straight to you.'

She smiled again, and I felt a little better.

'Anyway,' I continued, 'let's forget about tomorrow until it arrives. Let's make the most of what we've got left tonight now that it's here.'

I held Sam a little way away from me and looked deep into her mesmerising eyes, glinting with moisture in the low light of evening. Slowly, and with a strange trepidation, I moved my head towards hers and lightly kissed her soft lips.

Samantha took my hand and led me towards the hedge in front of us. We walked along the harsh and spiky border until we found a place where it thinned enough to allow us to clamber through into the field beyond. The parched grass was so dry that it crunched under my feet and the noise of our footsteps was the only sound that could be heard.

We walked a few yards into the field before Samantha stopped and turned around to face me once more. With a trembling hand she undid the top button of her dress before reaching out for me again. Again we kissed, more passionately than before and then, with excitement mounting, I began to undo the rest of her dress. Slowly at first, and then with desire accelerating us, we tore the clothes from each other's bodies until we stood naked in the evening silence. I took her shoulders in my hands and pulled

her gently to the ground. Samantha writhed with pleasure as I entered her and as the brittle, coarse grass tickled and played on her naked, exposed skin. Slowly, and with a passion the like of which neither of us had dared imagine before, we made love for what felt like hours. The world was silent save for our whispers and moans of pleasure which shattered the fragile peace. I could not begin to describe the pleasure that Samantha's body brought to me in those moments.

After what had felt like a blissful eternity, I climbed from her and lay exhausted at her side. Holding each other tightly, we both floated away into a light, untroubled sleep.

I was woken with a sharp jolt to find Samantha frantically shaking my shoulder. She was fully dressed and, as I pulled myself up onto my elbows, I felt a familiar and immediately disturbing hot wind blowing into my face. I struggled to keep open my sleep-filled, tired eyes and squinted through the darkness to stare at a horizon which had begun to glow and, incredibly, to change colour.

Samantha knelt at my side and shook me continually until I was wide awake and sitting up. I fumbled on the ground beside me to find my trousers and shirt and pulled them on quickly. I held Sam close to me as we watched the entire sky change colour from dark purple to a bright orange which then melted into almost a brilliant vibrant yellow. The warm wind continued to blow and it made it difficult for me to watch with dry, stinging eyes. As the sky lightened further still, my skin began to prickle and it felt as if brilliant sunlight was scorching my face.

As it had done before, once the light had reached a brilliant crescendo of bright colour, it quickly began to mutate and dissolve back through the various shades and hues until its original tone was restored. The wind died down and I held Samantha tightly as we sat motionless, transfixed and confused. Although the last vestiges of sleep still slowed and dulled my tired brain, I knew at once that what we had just experienced was another energy pulse. I did not need to wait for scientific proof or official confirmation to tell me that this new wave had been stronger and had lasted far longer than any other that we had felt before.

My first and most immediate reaction was to try and find something strong and supportive to say to Samantha but, despite trying desperately to search for the words I needed in my head, nothing could overcome the feelings and fears which the energy pulse had given rise to. Instead we sat shaking in silence in the incredible heat.

'Are you all right?' I finally managed to ask, pulling Sam away so that I could get a clear look at her tear-streaked face. She nodded and I watched as more tears began to roll down from her stinging eyes. I began to cry too and held her tightly once more.

'Come on,' I whispered, my voice far from steady. 'Let's go home.'

'I don't want to go home,' she sobbed. 'If I go home then I'll have to go away and I don't want to go...'

'I don't want you to go,' I said. I took a deep breath and, against my better judgement, told her that she had to go, that her family needed her to be with them. I stopped for a moment and, as I held Samantha's shaking body close to mine, I could not help but think how hypocritical I sounded. My family needed me too, but I had stayed in the city rather than travel with them to Scotland. I wished that I could have gone with Sam in the morning and, if the truth be known, I probably could have. I felt awkward and uncomfortable attaching myself to her family when I had so selfishly abandoned my own and I was sure that her father would have had something to say about me hitching a ride with them all. To satisfy my feelings of guilt, I managed to convince myself that I needed to call into the office in the morning to check that everything was all right and I made a silent promise to travel up after Samantha later in the day before continuing north to be with my family again.

Sam pulled away from me, dried her eyes and stood up to leave the field. I pulled on my shoes and socks, finished dressing and watched her as she walked towards the gap in the fence to get back to the road. To see her in such a state was tearing me apart inside, but I did not know what I could do to ease her pain.

I walked back to the car, got inside and turned it around to drive her home. While it had not been quite the evening that either of us had expected or imagined, neither of us really minded. As we travelled along the dusty road in silence, my busy, racing brain helped me to come to two important realisations. Firstly, I admitted that I was in love with Samantha and that she meant more to me than any girl ever had before and, secondly, I realised with bitter sadness that the old man in the park last week had been right - the heat and the light really were the beginnings of something terrifying and unstoppable. The confusion seemed much clearer and easier to comprehend with Sam at my side and my heart sank at the thought of her leaving town.

I looked across at the beautiful girl next to me and wished that we could have met under different circumstances. Until she had walked into my office, I had scoffed at the idea of love at first sight but now, now that it had actually happened to me, I had been changed forever. I thought angrily about the time I had wasted alone when Sam had always been there and within easy reach and I knew at that moment that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her, however long that proved to be. Inside I tried to laugh at the savage irony that my life had been subjected to but I could not - the pain I felt at the prospect of losing Samantha was tearing me apart.

As we neared her home Sam, who had been quiet and subdued for the whole of the journey, finally spoke.

'Steve, are you sure that you can't come with us tomorrow?'

I knew that I could but I felt sure that it would only cause unnecessary and unwanted trouble and friction. I also knew that I should be able to rise above such trivial things but, in the heat and confusion, I wasn't so sure that they could easily be overcome.

'Honestly, I can't. Give me the morning to sort myself out and I'll start out then. With a little luck I might be with you this time tomorrow.'

I wasn't sure if that was true, but I knew that I would certainly do my best to try and reach her.

'Have you got any paper?' she asked and I leant across the car to search in the glove box for a scrap that she could use. I found an old pad and, taking the paper from me, Sam scribbled down her grandmother's address and brief directions to find her house once I had managed to reach the village.

'There you go,' she said, beginning to smile again. 'Now you've got no excuse!'

I was glad that she seemed a little happier.

'I will come you know,' I said, truthfully. I knew that there would be no way that I could sit alone in the city without knowing how Sam was.

'Do you promise?' she asked.

'Cross my heart.'

I had made thousands of promises before but there had seldom been one that I intended to keep more than that. As I looked across at the girl sitting next to me and she smiled back, I vowed to do everything within my power to make sure that I was away from her for as short a time as possible.

'You try and keep me away,' I whispered.

I turned the car left off the main road and round onto the street where Samantha lived. Although neither of us said anything, I knew that we both wanted to keep driving and not to stop. Against my better judgement, however, I pulled the car up outside her house. It was a little after midnight and, in one of the windows on the top floor of the building, I could just make out the shadowy figure of Sam's father waiting anxiously for his daughter's return. Sam looked up and noticed him momentarily before turning back to face me and putting a reassuring hand on my arm.

'He means well,' she said, softly. 'He's just worried about me.'

'I'm worried about you,' I said, instinctively and honestly as my feelings rushed out like a dam that had suddenly burst its banks. 'You're on my mind all the time. Christ, whenever I'm away from you I can't think about anything else.'

Sam shuffled towards me in her seat and held my arm tightly. She rested her head on my shoulder and, although I tried hard not to, for the second time that night I began to cry.

'Shit,' I said, trying desperately to hold back the tears and not upset Sam. 'Our first real time together and I feel like I've spent most of the night grizzling.'

'It shows you care,' she whispered quietly.

'I do. More than you could ever imagine.'

She kissed me softly and we held each other tightly. I knew, sadly, that it was time for us to part. Sam climbed out of the car and walked around to stand next to my open window.

'I'll call you as soon as we get to Gran's,' she said, sniffing back more tears. 'It'll be the first thing I do.'

'It had better be,' I said as I reached out and held her hand. 'I'll come up just as soon as I can.'

The front door of the house slowly opened and the pyjama-clad figure of Samantha's father appeared on the driveway.

'I've got to go,' she said quietly and despondently. She leant into the car and we kissed again until her father suddenly appeared at her side to lead her indoors.

I sat in the car and watched as Sam walked towards the house and as she was quickly engulfed in the shadows and darkness of the building. Slowly and tearfully, I left her road and drove back towards my house.

I cared little about the collapsing city around me - all that I cared about at that moment was Samantha and until I was with her again I knew I would not rest.

Over the last few weeks I had been finding it difficult to get to sleep in the heat but that night, with the temperature having increased further still and the thought of losing Samantha in my mind almost constantly, it was proving impossible. I lay naked on my bed in the half-light, tossing and turning restlessly for what felt like hours. As the time approached three o'clock, I switched on the television set in the vain hope that the flickering light and noise from some inane late-night programme would help me to lose consciousness.

Of the four channels that I had access to on my set, three had closed down for the night. The one remaining station had nothing better to offer than a cheap, shabbily made discussion programme. Although the subject had originally been something else entirely, the members of the audience could not help themselves from continually referring to the incredible atmospheric conditions which I was trying unsuccessfully to forget. There seemed little point in watching the programme at first but I was steadily drawn in as I watched the audience fighting and squabbling amongst themselves. The host of the debate seemed intent on whipping the studio into an uncontrollable frenzy and he soon succeeded.

The theme of the programme seemed to have originally centred around changes to licensing hours and laws but, in the confusion, that had been quickly forgotten. Now two men stood face to face in the centre of a garish studio set, pointing accusing fingers and shouting incomprehensibly at each other. One of the men made a casual comment aimed at the other and his adversary quickly replied with a well-aimed right hook to the jaw. The first man lay stunned on the ground in front of a shocked audience for a moment before quickly jumping up and leaping onto his attacker. Within seconds, the easily provoked fighting had spread like an angry bushfire through a parched forest as grown men and women hurled flailing fists and spiteful words at each other. The terrified and the pacifists in the crowd followed the example of the show's host as he dived off the set and ran for cover in the hidden depths of the television studio. Amazed, I watched for a few more seconds before reaching out and fumbling for the control to switch off the set.

I sat in the suddenly silent darkness and tried to comprehend what I had just seen. As the heat had dried out the unsuspecting world, so it also seemed to have drained all patience and understanding from a high percentage of the planet's population. All it had taken was a single spark to set light to the whole of the television studio and I realised that it must have been similar emotions which had caused the violence we had seen in the city earlier.

The pointlessness of the violence made it a hundred times more frustrating - where was the sense in punching the man next to you when he had as little control over events as you yourself did? There was nothing that anybody could do and I saw little point in arguing over something which could not be proved or disproved until it was too late.

I lay back down on my warm and wet, sweat-soaked bed and pulled a single light sheet up over my body. My eyes slowly began to become accustomed to the low gloom again and I looked around my bedroom. Outside there was an almost constant soundtrack of muffled bangs, crashes and screams and, as I screwed my eyes tightly shut, I wondered if it would be worth waking up again in the morning.

I eventually managed to fall asleep for a while but even that brief respite was interrupted by a dream:

I was sitting at my kitchen table. It took a while for it to register that it was my kitchen as the room appeared to have changed so much. The walls were dirty, dusty and brown and empty cupboards and shelves hung wearily from the walls.

Dressed only in filthy cotton trousers and a pair of battered running shoes, I stood up and walked towards the sink. My throat was dry and I had an incredible thirst which I needed desperately to quench. The draining board was stacked high with soiled crockery and cutlery and was illuminated by a brilliant, almost incandescent light which flooded through the broken glass of the kitchen window.

I pushed a pile of plates to one side and managed to find a relatively clean glass. I held it up to the tap and turned the handle slowly. Stiff and resistant at first, the tap gradually began to turn and a hesitant trickle of brown water spilled out of the faucet. As quickly as it had begun, the water stopped flowing again and the plumbing of the house groaned loudly to let me know that it was as dry as the world outside.

Desperate to find something to drink, I walked towards the back door which creaked open as I approached, letting more brilliant light pour inside. I stepped outside and immediately had to shield my unprotected eyes from the blazing heat and light which flooded my senses. My exposed skin prickled and I could feel it quickly burn under the vicious rays of the raging sun.

The garden was as dead and dirty as the house from which I had just emerged and all that remained of my fish pond was a dry pit in the middle of the starved lawn. At the bottom of the pit, the rotting carcasses of my pet fish baked on the dried, cracked mud surface. The world was silent at first, but I slowly became aware of sounds of movement from the front of the building. I crept closer to the shadows of my home and stalked along its side to investigate the commotion.

The road in front of my house had become a single, uninterrupted queue of people. Shabbily dressed and slow moving, they stumbled in exhaustion together along the street like drops of water trickling down a drying stream. Occasionally, someone would fall to the ground but their plight would be ignored. The people behind them would step over their inconvenient bodies or, if they had enough energy, kick them to the side of the street like a piece of discarded rubbish. Save for the shuffling of hundreds of pairs of feet on the rough ground, the people were silent, suffering quietly as the sun's evil rays burnt and charred their tender, exposed flesh.

Instinctively, and without realising what I was doing, I joined the queue. My arrival was unnoticed and unacknowledged and the pace of the walk was uncomfortable. The movements of the masses were slow and forced but no-one had the energy to move any faster. All around me, the people were as dishevelled, ragged and parched as me. They seemed to drag themselves along, shuffling their feet step by painful step, and most were unable even to lift their heads.

The line of people (which was between ten and fifteen bodies deep in places and which seemed neither to have a beginning or an end) stumbled towards the end of the road in which I lived. There, the queue joined a street which was unfamiliar and which I was sure I had never seen before. Relentlessly, I was swept onto the new road which seemed to be fed from all angles by queues similar to the one which

I had become a part of. From every side poured thousands upon thousands of weary, slothful walkers who all headed in one mysterious direction. Despite the effort of the walk, I managed to lift my head for a moment and saw that the route I followed led directly into the dilapidated, burnt-out shell of a dead city.

About a mile ahead of me, huge, grey concrete towers stabbed the brilliant blue sky and I turned my head away once more as the radiant sun rose high above the tallest and most central of the skyscrapers. The sound of footsteps increased as hundreds of thousands of tired walkers converged on the ruined city. The noise reached a rumbling crescendo before being suddenly replaced by an empty silence.

The queue stopped moving. I did not notice the sudden change of pace until I had walked into the person in front of me and the person behind had collided with my back, but the lack of movement was definite and inexplicable. Slowly, and with a considerable amount of effort, I and millions of other people lifted our exhausted heads up to look towards the dusty, dead remains of the city.

My eyes burned with pain but it proved impossible to tear my attention away from the town and the sky above it. The buildings rose from the ground like the meat-stripped ribs of a rotting animal carcass. The crowd stood in stunned silence as, from its high commanding position, the sun began to burn brighter still, to glow with an unimaginable luminosity and then, finally, to light the whole sky with an agonising brilliance. A terrifying wind settled suddenly on the millions of people, blowing many off their feet and down onto the dry ground. Unmoved, I lifted my hand to shield my eyes from the brightness and screamed in agony as the world became white and the flesh was burnt away from my body.

It was five o'clock when I woke. The single sheet which I had pulled over my body in the night was soaked with sweat and the air in my poorly ventilated bedroom was close, warm and choking. Slowly in the darkness, I sat up and tried to settle myself after the shock of the nightmare dream which still burned clearly in my mind. After a few quiet, calming minutes had passed, I stood up and felt my way through the gloom to the bathroom. Once there I filled the sink with cool, clear water and held my face under the surface until I emerged free of sleep and having escaped completely from the confusion of the dream.

I dried my face with a soft towel and looked at myself in the mirror. In the harsh electric light I appeared almost unrecognisable and I had to rest against the bath for support. For the best part of an hour I stopped there, silent and shaking.

I eventually stumbled back to bed but there was little to be gained from staying there - the bed was wet and uncomfortable and I had virtually no chance of getting back to sleep again. Instead, I went downstairs and made a drink to ease the burning dryness of my throat. For a while I did little but wait for the morning sun to rise and watch it from the comfort of my armchair. I thought about switching on the television or the radio but I decided against it - I felt sure that I would only be subjected to more of the chaos I had already seen and heard or that I would be reminded of a normal world which was long gone but which I prayed would soon return.

At seven o'clock, I went back upstairs to wash and dress myself. I stood in front of the wardrobe and automatically reached for one of my work suits. I quickly replaced it and chose instead to put on a light pair of jeans and a T-shirt. I was tempted to collect a few things and head for Samantha's house but I resisted the idea. Although I had used it as little more than a convenient excuse yesterday, there really were things at the office which I did need to collect. I decided to drive there quickly before getting ready to follow Sam later in the day.

Throughout the long, early hours of the morning, I was constantly haunted by the images from my dream. The most frightening aspect of the nightmare vision was the fact that, if the heat and energy pulses continued to increase as they had been doing, such a terrible fate might really await the world.

I set off for the city at around half past eight. Apart from the heat and the brilliant sunlight, everything seemed relatively normal as I got into the car and started the engine. The madness of last night seemed to have been confined to the city centre and the suburb in which I lived was peaceful and still. The first roads I travelled along were busy for the time of morning but not overly crowded. As I approached the nucleus of the town, however, the situation suddenly changed.

My normal route to the office was as quick and direct as I could possibly make it and it involved following quiet side streets until I reached a dual carriageway which led deep into the heart of the city. I had expected to find more vehicles on this main road but, when I finally reached it, the volume of traffic far exceeded even my wildest expectations. All four lanes (two running in either direction) were solid, unmoving lines of cars, vans and lorries. Horns blared and tempers frayed as the snaking queue of traffic baked in the unbearable early-morning heat.

By the time the full extent of the traffic jam had revealed itself to me, it was too late to avoid joining the back end of the queue. Reluctantly, I slowed down the car and pulled up a little way behind another. As the traffic appeared to have reached a complete standstill, I followed the example of other drivers around me and switched off my engine. There was little to do but sit and wait.

I looked across the road at the car parked next to me and its front seat passenger acknowledged me with a smile. After what I had seen last night in the city and on the television, I was suddenly wary of everyone else but the man seemed harmless enough. He looked over at me with a resigned expression on his face and shrugged his shoulders to show his frustration at the volume of traffic.

'Don't know what the world's coming to, mate,' he shouted across the gap between our cars. 'Where are you heading?'

'I've just got to collect some things from my office,' I replied. I was not really in the right mood to make conversation but there was little that I could do to avoid speaking to the man. 'I'm only going to be in there for a couple of minutes. If I'd known it was going to be this bad then I wouldn't have bothered.'

'Ain't you listened to the news at all today?' the man asked. I shook my head and looked puzzled. The man looked amazed. 'Bloody hell, mate,' he said, 'you're taking a hell of a chance.'

I looked back at him with a confused expression on my face. I had honestly expected the troubles we had seen last night to have faded away with the darkness. With hindsight, I knew that had been an incredibly naive view to have taken.

'Put it this way, pal,' the man continued, 'you ain't got no chance of getting to where you want to go unless you can swap your car.'

'Swap it for what?' I asked innocently. He looked across at his driver companion and they both laughed before he turned back around and faced me.

'For a bloody tank I should think!'

'Has there been more trouble then?' I asked. The man laughed again.

'Christ, just a bit! Jesus, didn't you hear it all?'

I shook my head. Although my house was not located that far away from the centre of town, it was situated in an area which afforded it a considerable degree of protection from the inner city problems which had, apparently, been so rife. I had heard a lot of noise last night but with Samantha and my family on my mind constantly, I had paid them little attention. I certainly hadn't heard anything to suggest the kind of trouble that the man's tone implied had taken place.

'Where are you heading for then?' I asked, keen to find out where the immense queue of traffic was destined if it was not for the city itself.

'We're cutting through, trying to get to the country and then on north,' the man replied.

One of the problems that I had found of living close to the city centre was that the quickest way to get

past it was usually to drive straight through the middle of it. There were various ring roads and alternative routes but from my position they offered little relief and often meant driving an extra distance. Judging from the amount of traffic on the road ahead of me, it looked as if most of the population was taking my short cut to escape from the violent and claustrophobic metropolis. Of the people that I was closest to, most of them had decided to leave town and it was not completely implausible to presume that many other people had settled upon the same option. I could see little that the countryside might offer by way of escape from the overpowering weather conditions, but I supposed that the less populated areas of the country could be free of the violence and troubles which had been so very evident in the city the previous night.

'There's supposed to be army people about in there,' the man at my side shouted as he pointed along the road in the direction of the city centre. 'They should get things moving and keep the traffic going.'

By happy coincidence, as the man said the word moving, the queue of traffic suddenly sprung into life. From all around, the sound of engines starting and being revved into life, and the smell of carbon monoxide and other gases escaping from cold exhausts filled the hot air. I had not realised just how quiet it had become until the rumbling noise from hundreds of individual cars combined and filled the world with their deafening and raucous chorus. Movement was slow at first but progress was definitely being made. Within moments I had lost my companion in the next lane as he moved away.

The traffic chugged along at between five and ten miles per hour, stopping and starting, and I quickly began to accept that trying to get to the office had been a stupid and pointless idea. I realised that I was doing it out of a peculiar misguided loyalty to the company and to ease my guilt further at not having made the effort to overcome my doubts and travel north with Samantha and her family. I cursed myself as I imagined being at her side instead of sitting alone in the stifling traffic queue. I would have been there if I had only had the courage to swallow my foolish pride. When the first suitable opportunity arose, I turned off the main road and down a quieter side street which led back in the direction of home.

It had quickly become quiet again as I had lost the noise of the mass of other cars and I switched on the radio, suddenly keen to find out what had been happening around the rest of the country. Since the previous evening I had been preoccupied with thoughts of Samantha and of my family and I hoped that they were all right. I felt sure that Sam would be well on her way to her grandmother's by now but, to be certain, I decided to drive past her house.

It was half past nine and I was surprised at how late it was already. Time had dragged while I had been waiting in the traffic queue and I guessed that I must have been sat there for a good half hour. As the quiet, tinny music faded away from the local radio station, it was replaced by the voice of a young announcer. He sounded nervous and unsure and I supposed that he might have been the only person available to make the broadcast. Most of the population seemed not to have gone into work that morning and it was not too far fetched to presume that those people working in the media had done the same.

'These are the headlines at nine-thirty on Friday the 26th of October,' the announcer began. 'I'm Clive Esham.'

The broadcaster cleared his throat (most unprofessionally) and started to read out the news.

'Outbreaks of violence and looting have been widespread throughout the country. All major cities have reported such incidents and the police have requested that the population remain calm and co-operative. People have been advised to stay in their homes and only to travel if absolutely necessary. Most main roads and motorways are extremely congested with little relief expected in the foreseeable future.'

I almost laughed out loud at the ridiculous pleas for assistance from the authorities. People were rarely calm and co-operative at the best of times and I could see little chance of them remaining responsible and collected while the very ground that they stood on began to burn under their feet. The bulletin continued.

'The weather department has, in association with various other government institutions, recorded record temperatures in England for the tenth day running. A high of thirty-one degrees Celsius was recorded in mainland Britain yesterday, eclipsing the previous record set in 1865 by some seven degrees. Experts have predicted that the conditions look set to continue at least until the weekend.'

Once again, the authorities appeared to have little idea of what was going on or what was about to

happen. As I had already seen over the past few days, all that could be confirmed were the facts that were already known and there was little point in that. It didn't matter to me or to anyone else if it was twenty-eight or thirty-five degrees outside, every single person on the face of the planet knew that it was inexplicably wrong.

'As yet,' the announcer continued, unaffected by my silent criticisms, 'government sources have still been unable to identify the cause of the heatwave but the minister for the environment today issued a statement advising that...'

I switched off the set. I had no intention of listening to the pointless pontification of some sad old man who, in all probability, had no more idea of what was going wrong with the world than the goldfish in the drying pond in my back garden. At least the fish seemed to be enjoying a relatively normal life and appeared to be content to bathe in the warm pond while the world baked around them.

All that I could do was go with the general flow - there was nothing that I could do to alter the course of almost certain destruction which the unprepared planet seemed doomed to follow. I had to admit, though, the temptation to visit the city centre and do a little looting and wanton vandalism myself was strong. I could easily have desecrated the walls of my office without even giving it a second thought.

As I drove away from the main road and the city centre, the roads again became quieter and there was considerably less traffic about. The talk of heat on the radio had reminded me of the energy pulse that we had experienced last night (its memory had, so far, been buried under the weight of my concerns for Samantha) and, as I thought about it further, it suddenly occurred to me just how much brighter and stronger it had been than the last one. Terrifyingly, I also noticed that as the intensity of the heat and light seemed to have quickly increased, so the gap between the waves seemed to have reduced.

Samantha's house was empty. I stopped the car outside and walked despondently towards the front door. It came as no great surprise that there was no answer when I knocked and I peered through the frosted glass windows in the garage door to see that the family car had gone.

I walked back to the front of the house and peered through the net curtains to see inside. The living-room was bare, stripped of all personal possessions and the furniture sat under heavy, white dust sheets. The house had an overpowering atmosphere of lifelessness and it was difficult to believe that it was the same place from which I had picked up Samantha just over twelve hours ago.

The house felt dead and devoid of all personality and it was then that I realised just to what extent I was missing Samantha already. I knew that I had to get to her quickly and my final, nagging doubts were quickly blown away by the emptiness which I felt. I hoped that by the time I was ready to make my way north to reach her, most other people would have reached or would be nearing their journey's end.

I knew that there was nothing to be gained from waiting by the empty house any longer. I quickly drove home (it only took a few minutes to reach my house) and I soon managed to formulate a rough plan of campaign for the next few days in my troubled mind. I would pack a few things and then set out, with my first priority being to get to Samantha. Once I had found her, I decided, I would continue the journey north to where my family waited in Scotland. I prayed that Sam would want to come with me - if she wanted to stay with her family then I knew that I would have an unbearable decision to have to make.

I parked the car and went indoors. In the short time that I had been out of the house I had developed a raging thirst and I headed straight to the kitchen to quench it with cool, clear water from the tap. As I drank, the phone began to ring and I rushed across the house to answer it, hoping that it would be Samantha calling to let me know that she had arrived safely at her destination. It wasn't - it was Rebecca.

'It's only me,' she said, chirpily. 'I just phoned to make sure that you hadn't gone into the office.'

'I did try to,' I admitted as I tried not to offend my best friend and hide my disappointment at not speaking to Sam. 'I got halfway and then turned back,' I explained. 'It's crazy out there.'

'I know. I think it's the same everywhere.'

'How are you doing?' I asked.

Becky sighed. 'Oh, I'm all right. I'll be glad when things finally get back to normal though.'

'If they ever do,' I said, unable to offer a more positive response to Becky's comment.

'They will, Steve, I'm sure they will.'

Rebecca was always an optimist and she usually managed to convince me to think along the same lines as she did. Today, however, I could not be swayed.

'What are you going to do with yourself then?' she asked.

'I'm going to try and head out of the city later. Samantha's gone north and the rest of my family have gone up to visit relatives in Scotland.'

'They've all gone and left you,' Rebecca said with a tone of real sympathy in her voice. I was glad that she cared - it helped me to combat the feelings of unbearable and absolute loneliness which had been quickly growing throughout the difficult morning.

'I know,' I said, half-jokingly, trying to hide my despondency. 'It's tragic really.'

The tone in Rebecca's voice changed and became gentle and more serious.

'You could always come and stop here with us if you wanted to.'

'Thanks, Becky. I really appreciate the offer but I need to try and get to my family. I mean, none of us know what's going to happen from one day to the next and I really should try and get to them in case...'

I let my words trail away, not wanting to end my sentence on such a desperate note.

I felt once more like a complete and utter hypocrite. I had not even got the courage to tell Rebecca that I was going to try and reach Samantha instead of making the journey to my family. I did not know how she would react to the idea of me running around the country to be with a girl I had only known for a couple of weeks while the people who really needed me waited hundreds of miles away.

'If you change your mind,' she said, 'you know where we are.'

'Thanks, Becky. I'm going to miss you.'

As I said goodbye and hung up the telephone, the last words that I had spoken to her rang around inside my head. I had not meant them to sound so final, but the longer I dwelt on them, the more realistic the possibility that I might never see Rebecca again seemed. At difficult times it made all the difference knowing that I had real friends like Becky behind me and I wished that before I had hung up the phone I had been able to tell her just how much her friendship was worth to me.

The prospect of a long, slow journey in the heat was not something that I relished but I knew that it was what I had to do. To keep me sane and on the right track, I had only to picture the face of the girl who would be waiting for me at my journey's end.

The remainder of a lonely, worrying Friday was spent making hurried preparations to leave home and attempt the difficult journey to Samantha and then, ultimately, to my family. I had thought that there would not be much I would need to take with me but, as is usually the way, once I had collected together all that I might possibly have needed, a huge pile of possessions lay waiting on the living-room floor to be packed tightly into my unsuspecting car.

The kitchen cupboards were empty and, as midday approached, I resigned myself to the fact that I would have to leave the house to make an inconvenient trip to the local general store. I had been loath to leave home until Samantha had called to let me know she was safe but this was an emergency. With the prospect of many scorching and dehydrating hours at the wheel of my car ahead of me, I knew that I

needed to make sure that I had enough provisions to see me through. I ran to the little shop (it was only a few hundred yards down the road) and returned quickly without having bought anything. The shelves of the shop had already been stripped bare and the little food that remained on sale was so highly priced that I decided to wait and make do with what little provisions I could gather together for the journey.

In the unbearable heat, and with the safety of the ones I loved at the front of my mind, the day passed slowly and it was not until four o'clock, when the scorching sunlight had finally started to steadily fade away to darkness, that the telephone finally rang. I was loading my bags and belongings into the car when the shrill ring of the phone pierced the evening air and sent me scurrying into the house to answer it.

'Steve?' Sam's unmistakable voice asked, 'Steve, it's me, Sam. Are you all right?'

'I am now,' I replied as calmly as I could although I was breathing deeply and my heart was racing at an incredible rate. 'I'm fine now that I've heard from you.'

The relief I felt at having heard her voice was almost impossible to disguise and, for a brief moment, I was lost for words. In my mind I had rehearsed and prepared for the phone call throughout the day but, now that I was finally speaking to the girl I cared for so much, all of the questions I had prepared disappeared from my mind. After a lengthy, awkward silence, I was able to speak again.

'How are you?' I asked. 'Did you manage to get to your gran's place okay?'

'Eventually,' Sam replied. 'The traffic has been horrendous today, I've never known anything like it. Everyone who owns a car must have been out on the roads.'

'Everybody except me.'

'Haven't you been to work?'

'I did try to get there but it was a waste of time. I turned back before I got to the city and went over to your house but you'd already left. There was a lot more trouble in town after what we saw last night.'

'Tell me about it,' she said, her voice sounding strained and tired. 'We had to drive straight through. Christ, the Army's working flat out in there just trying to stop people from killing each other. It's been crazy in every city that we've been close to, and you make sure that you take care when you go through.' She laughed quietly. 'I want you to be in one piece when you get yourself up here.'

It was amazing just how much more relaxed I suddenly felt now that I had heard Samantha's voice. Now that I was sure she was safe and that she and her family had reached their destination, the journey ahead did not seem like such an impossible undertaking and the violence around me seemed trivial and inconsequential.

'I'm just packing the car now,' I told her. 'I'm going to set out in a couple of hours. If I leave it until dark then the bulk of the traffic will hopefully have got through and I should have an easy trip up.'

'Like I said, take care,' Sam said thoughtfully.

'It's going to take a lot more than anything the city can throw at me to stop me from getting to you,' I said with truthful, if exaggerated, honesty and confidence. I thought for a moment before speaking again. 'If that's what you want,' I added.

She replied without hesitation.

'Of course it is. Christ, I can't wait to have you here. I'm missing you more than I ever imagined I would.'

'I know what you mean. We've only really known each other for a couple of weeks, Sam, but I can't even begin to tell you how much you've come to mean to me already.'

Had I not been speaking on the telephone to Samantha, had we been talking face to face, then I might not have had the courage to be so forward and honest about my emotions and feelings towards her. Regardless, the things I told her were the truth and, in the short time we had known each other, I had come to love her. While we talked on the telephone, hundreds of miles apart, I felt as if a huge part of me was already up there with her.

Sam was quiet for a few seconds and, as I listened closely, I heard her crying.

'Hey, come on,' I said quietly. 'I'm trying to cheer you up, not upset you.'

'I'm sorry,' she sobbed. 'It's just that I want you here so much that it hurts.'

'And I want to be with you more than anything else. Give me a couple of hours and I'll be on my way.'

'Promise?' she said as she sniffed back her tears.

'I swear. I've got a few more things to get together and then I'm coming to get you. I'll be as quick as I can.'

'You'd better be,' she joked as her voice became calmer and slightly more composed.

'I love you,' I said simply and honestly and, before I had managed to say goodbye and hang up the receiver, I too was sobbing uncontrollably. As Sam said goodbye and put down her telephone, the metallic, impersonal click of disconnection and the steady drone of an unconnected line echoed around the emptiness of my home. Hearing those sounds served to emphasise the distance between us and I wished with all my heart that I could have been next to Samantha at that moment instead of hundreds of miles away and alone.

The feelings I felt inside were confusing. At the same time I felt both incredible, undeniable joy and heart-breaking, almost nauseating desperation. I knew that I had a difficult journey ahead of me - a huge undertaking in itself - but what was even more worrying was the ominous cloud of confusion which hung heavily over the heads of everyone. I had just about managed to come to terms with the fact that there was a chance the world would soon end but what I could not accept was the possibility that I might not be with Samantha when it happened. As I stood alone and sniffed away bitter tears of frustration in the quiet of my empty home, I felt like the loneliest person on the red-hot face of the planet.

By seven o'clock I was finally ready to leave. It was dark outside and I was surprised that it had taken me so long to prepare for the journey ahead. As I walked out to the car and locked the door of the house behind me, I felt as if I was leaving for good, that I would never return home again. At that moment, with the prospect of driving hundreds of miles along hot, dangerous roads ahead of me, I considered unloading the car and staying where I was safe (or safe as could be expected). I quickly cast such thoughts from my mind when I pictured Samantha's face once more. I knew that I had no choice but to leave.

Unlike my aborted trip to the office earlier in the day, I did not hit heavy traffic that night until I had virtually reached the city centre. Just when I had started to think that the madness and confusion of the daylight hours had finally ended and that some sanity had been restored, I pulled onto a motorway access road and was greeted by the sight of the lights of a line of thousands upon thousands of cars, bikes and vans stretching out along the curve of the road for as far as I could see into the distance. I knew that the road ahead was the most direct and reliable route to the part of the country where Samantha was waiting and I reluctantly joined the end of the apparently endless queue. Resigned to sitting and waiting in the traffic, I slowed the car down to begin the tedious crawl through the cluttered city centre.

In the time that I had spent preparing for the arduous journey ahead, I had tried to strengthen myself mentally for what I might see in the city. The reality, however, far surpassed anything that I had dared to imagine. Throughout its entire length as it stretched and snaked through the metropolis, the steady stream of vehicles was marshalled by a ragged and very much depleted armed forces guard. The soldiers that I passed looked tired, agitated and exhausted and their numbers were decreasing by the minute. At one point, when the traffic had stopped moving momentarily and I waited anxiously next to a makeshift

roadblock, I watched four of the seven guards on duty there simply walk away and desert their colleagues and officers. It seemed that even the most dedicated and reliable members of society were becoming increasingly resigned to the apparent hopelessness of the world's desperate situation.

Thankfully, the traffic weaved a relatively safe path through the town, although some degree of trouble and friction seemed to be in view virtually all of the time. At the sides of the roads, in dark sidestreets and floodlit shopping precincts, rampaging gangs fought with each other and with what remained of the emergency services. Their conflicts were pointless - there was nothing to fight for and neither side could possibly be victorious - but they battled on regardless. The violence seemed to be almost therapeutic and appeared to be helping those who were unable to accept the inexplicable cloud of doubt and destruction which hung heavily over the heads of every individual. Almost every shop window was shattered and the contents of their displays and storerooms lay strewn haphazardly across the cluttered streets.

As the traffic wound its weary path along the main road and towards the far side of town, the violence (which bordered on hysteria) was relentless. In the gloom and the shadows, it was difficult to make out details, to see exactly what was going on, but when I saw the first body lying in a crumpled heap in the gutter, I knew instantly what it was. About my age, the corpse belonged to a police officer and he lay stripped half-naked on the hard ground. His neck was twisted painfully around and his face pointed in my direction. He stared with cold, moistureless and unblinking eyes and I found it difficult to look away from a face which was full of so much pain and surprise. He looked so startled and astonished that I was sure his death must have come as the result of some unexpected, unprovoked attack.

More disturbing than the crumpled body itself was the way in which the people around failed to react to it. The battered and bloodied corpse was ignored and kicked to one side as if it was nothing more than a piece of discarded litter. No respect or consideration came from the hordes of looters, rioters and thieves who trooped past the scene, their arms well-loaded and piled high with stolen goods. I could not help but notice how the conditions had seemed somehow to change and warp the priorities of even the most hardened criminals. As I drove slowly past one row of desecrated shops, it seemed as though some had been looted and ransacked more than others. A store selling expensive designer clothes and another with windows full of top-of-the-range stereos, televisions and videos had both hardly been touched. A neighbouring off-licence and tobacconists had, however, been stripped bare and virtually razed to the ground.

Before all of this had happened, when my days had some kind of order and sense to them, my friends and I had often discussed time and the way in which it seemed to be stacked against us. No matter how hard we tried, we found it impossible to reason how the five working days in a week managed to drag on so painfully slowly while the two days of the weekend seemed to disappear in the blinking of an eye. Alone in my car, with nothing to do but sit and wait nervously as the traffic crawled along painfully at a snail's pace, time managed to play another of its twisted games with me. The three hours before I finally reached the outskirts of the city (a journey of less than five miles which usually took no more than twenty minutes to complete) seemed to last for more than ten. Eventually, the harsh office blocks, towering buildings and box-like houses disappeared and were replaced by dry, starving trees and fields. The road ahead stretched far into the distance and its twisting, winding route through the parched countryside was marked out by the brilliant electric lights of tens of thousands of crawling cars.

Although it was not much later than ten o'clock, the effects of the relentless heat had combined with the concentrated effort of driving those few miles through the city to leave me, and countless other drivers, drained and exhausted. While I knew that I had to reach Samantha and that I wanted to get there as quickly as possible, I also knew that I needed to rest for a while. To continue along the road in such a condition would have been dangerous and rash. Despite the fact that we were now free from the troubles of the city, the traffic appeared to have slowed again and the volume of vehicles surrounding me seemed not to have reduced in the slightest. Ahead of my car, I could see that a number of drivers had begun to pull their cars off the road and onto the dusty grass verge at its side to rest. A quick look at my dashboard showed that the engine's temperature was rapidly rising and I guessed that a break would do the car as much good as it would me. I realised that it would keep me from Samantha and my family for a little longer but I knew that seeing them for a while was infinitely preferable to not seeing them at all. I

decided to stop.

Once the car in front had chugged forward a couple of yards away from the bonnet of mine, I revved the engine hard and forced my hot and tired vehicle up over the high kerb and onto the side reservation. The ground was as rough and uneven as solid rock and the car bumped along until I found a suitable place to stop and rest. I switched off the engine and, although the volume of noise was lessened for a moment, the deafening roar from the running motors of hundreds of other cars still filled the hot, dry air. The heat had not been reduced by even the slightest fraction of a degree since sunset and I was forced to open the windows for ventilation. In doing so, I let in the foul-smelling, dirty air from outside which was charged with the rancid, belching fumes from passing transport but there was little that I could do about it. The choice was a bleak one - I could leave the windows closed and asphyxiate, or open them and allow the heavy clouds of carbon monoxide gas to creep inside. I hoped that what little wind there was would be enough to disturb and diffuse the deadly gases and I felt sure that the number of cars passing would gradually reduce throughout the night.

The noise outside was enough to keep me from falling asleep on its own but it combined with my feelings of unease at what I had seen in the city to keep me wide awake and alert. I felt slightly safer out of the town, however, and I hoped that the people who had made an effort to escape with me would have better, more important things on their minds than looting and stealing from the cars of those who rested at the side of the road. There would be plenty of rich pickings for such thieves, I thought, as my car was piled high inside with virtually all that I had of any value and I was sure that the boots of most other cars would be filled with similar cargo. After dwelling on the idea for a ridiculous length of time, I decided that no-one with any intelligence would risk a robbery, after all, there would be no way that they could escape from the scene of the crime in a getaway car. In the heavy traffic I had joined, my car's speed had seldom risen to a level that could not be matched by a person walking.

I wondered if I should lie on the floor in the back of the car. I had scrambled over the front seats to stretch out in the back and I wondered if I should climb down onto the ground to escape the heat and light should we be subjected to another energy wave in the night. I thought back to the field where I had sat with Samantha when the last pulse had struck and I remembered how the heat and light had made my skin itch and prickle. If the power of the pulses was increasing, the next one could do real damage to any exposed flesh. To be safe, I slowly eased myself into the narrow, awkward recess between the two sets of seats and there I drifted into a painful and uneasy sleep.

When I first woke, I struggled in the darkness with blurred eyes to make out the figures on the digital dashboard clock. I rubbed my tired eyes and was eventually able to see that the time was just coming up to three o'clock. With difficulty, I pulled myself up out of my little hole and sat upright on the back seat. I looked outside and saw that, although the cars were travelling a little more quickly than they had been, there was still a solid, unending line of traffic on the road which stretched out into the far distance. My example had been followed by a number of other drivers and I saw that a line of parked cars was spread out in front of mine on the grass verge, parallel to the moving traffic at their side. In the back of the car I carried the little stereo which had kept me company on those long, hot nights outside resting on the patio at home. Although it felt as if they had happened years ago, they were, in reality, only a few days past. As I toyed with the set and tried to find a strong enough signal to listen to, I could not help but wish that I was back at home and asleep in my own comfortable bed.

I was only able to find one radio station which was still broadcasting and, when I found it, it was hardly worth listening to. Programmed music played almost continually which was only occasionally interrupted by a young and inexperienced announcer. As he stuttered and stumbled through introductions and announcements that I paid little attention to, I could not help but think that anyone who had reported to work on a day like today was either extremely dedicated or incredibly stupid. The mumbling, unsure broadcaster seemed to fit into the latter category. In the last few hours, I had seen soldiers deserting the army while I had watched them and policemen showing as little regard for the laws of the land as the

criminals that they had once chased - why this person felt compelled to continue to fill the airwaves with his amateurish ramblings was beyond me. People had to face facts, I thought, until some semblance of normality was restored to the planet then society, civilisation and order would continue to be abandoned and ignored. Whether they would ever return was a question which no-one seemed able to answer or could not even be bothered to consider. As a piece of nondescript music faded away into an awkward silence, the young man's nervous voice returned with something that resembled a hastily cobbled-together news bulletin.

The headlines were unsurprising - there had been more trouble and violence in all cities again and most of the major roads which led from them were still blocked and clogged solid with traffic. I began to drift back to sleep as the man droned on and on but, when his voice was replaced with a recorded announcement from the minister of the environment, my attention, and the attention of every other person on or around the crowded road, became focused on the broadcast.

Slowly, and in sombre, resigned tones, the politician confirmed the worst fears of everyone. He stated that the heat was still increasing and that it seemed certain to continue climbing at its alarming level. At its present rate, it would only be a matter of days before even the coldest parts of the planet would become inhospitable. There was no escaping the fact that the world was dying.

For a single, peculiar moment, there was silence. Outside, the cars sat still in their queue as their passengers tried to accept and believe what they had just heard. Then one car moved, then another and another until the red-hot air was again filled with the confused sounds of horns blaring, engines roaring and tempers fraying. All around me there was sudden panic-induced motion and mayhem as every car on the road tried desperately to force its way ahead of the others - their terrified, obstinate drivers ignoring everybody else to make sure that they were safe and on their way towards their destinations. I knew that it would be foolish to try and make a move in the midst of such madness.

It was with an incredible and inexplicable calmness that I slowly slipped back down between the seats of my car with the minimum of fuss. I covered my ears and, somehow, managed to fall asleep once more.

When I next woke up it was, incredibly, almost seven o'clock. I struggled to climb up out of the little gap in which I had slept and was surprised and alarmed to find how long I had eventually managed to sleep for. To my considerable relief, the volume of traffic outside had finally been reduced to little more than a steady trickle and the majority of the tens of thousands of angry cars that I had shared the crowded road with last night were nowhere to be seen.

In the bright, deep-blue sky, the sun had begun its unstoppable ascent to the position where it would hang for most of the day and from where it would scorch and burn the helpless world below. Even in the shade of the back of the car, the heat was relentless and overpowering and I struggled to let myself out. I fumbled with the hot door latch and stumbled out onto the road to stretch my stiff, aching body.

I half tripped and half fell out of the car and onto a carriageway strewn with the discarded junk and refuse from the hundreds of cars which had relentlessly pounded along it in the dark hours of last night and the early hours of this morning. As I stood and yawned by the side of my car, a white saloon appeared from nowhere and roared along the road next to me. I watched it as it sped away into the distance, climbing and twisting its way along the hot, dusty road. I turned around to fetch a drink from the back of my vehicle and was stunned by the appearance of the devastated city behind me.

Like a brittle, skeletal shadow of its former self, the dry, dirty towers and buildings of the city stood high and harsh against the brilliant morning sky. Palls of thick, opaque black smoke twisted up from the ground and, even from a considerable distance away, the sounds of confused fighting could still clearly be heard.

I took a warm can of drink from the back of the car and drained it dry in a couple of quick, thirsty gulps. Despite the amount of rubbish strewn on the ground around me, I still carefully packed my litter away before closing the boot of the car and making my way back around to the front. A book of maps lay on the passenger seat and I opened it to confirm my route for the morning's drive.

The dry road stretched out ahead of me for a depressingly long and uninviting distance and I knew that the journey I was about to undertake would be exhausting. I only needed to turn around and look over my shoulder at the ruined city to know that it was a trip that I was now committed to try and make. The crash barrier on the central reservation of the wide, four-lane road had been torn away in places so that cars could travel freely in either direction along either side of the road and it seemed that everyone had reached the same difficult decision to go on as I had.

I got back into the car and, although I deliberately tried not to think about it, I could not help but wonder if the politicians and scientists were right and, if they were, just how long did the planet have left to live? The more I did consider it, however, the more I realised that it mattered little to me how long was left, provided I managed to reach Samantha before the end. My heart was heavy though, and I felt suddenly guilty of the fact that every passing moment I spent sitting and waiting reduced the already slender chance I had of progressing on to reach my family.

I took a deep breath and turned the ignition key. For one, heart-stopping moment, the car's engine failed to start and I worried that I might not even reach Samantha, let alone Mom, Dad and Michelle. I turned the key again and, to my immense relief, the car spluttered and sprung into life. It bumped and groaned as I drove along the rough, hard ground and over the high kerb down onto the sticky tarmac. Once there, it began to move smoothly along.

The traffic around me seemed to have reduced further still in the short time since I had woken. I was now virtually alone on the road and I pushed the accelerator pedal down until the car was moving at a steady ninety miles an hour. As the ruined city gradually disappeared from sight in the rear view mirror, my heart was lifted and my subconscious fooled me into thinking that I was making good, steady progress. In reality, the miles that I covered in those first few minutes were only a fraction of the distance I had to travel but the fact that I was making progress at all was enough to keep me in relatively high spirits.

Once again, while I knew that the enormous journey ahead would be tough and demanding, I only needed to picture Samantha's face in my mind to know that it would all be worthwhile. I remembered our times together and the night in the field and, as I recalled the gentle touch and the delicate scent of her perfect body, I pushed down harder on the accelerator, willing the car to move faster and faster towards my destination. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, another car appeared and quickly overtook me and disappeared in a cloud of dry dust. Following the example of the car's driver, I forced the accelerator pedal down hard to the floor, determined to squeeze every last available ounce of performance from my tired vehicle.

The road was straight and uninteresting and my determination soon gave way to boredom, frustration and impatience.

After almost five hours of steady driving, I had managed to make a sizable inroad into the distance between Samantha and myself. The journey was hot and hard, but the thought of reaching the girl I loved made me sure that I could get there. With Sam waiting at the end of the trip, I felt as though I could travel ten times the distance to be with her. Unfortunately, my car did not share my optimism. The conditions were increasingly tough and the stress and heat quickly began to take their toll on the exhausted vehicle.

I had nothing to do but sit and drive, and nothing to think about but the huge distance ahead of me. Unsurprisingly, it was not long before I too began to tire and I knew that I would have to stop soon.

The traffic around was fairly quiet. I had been caught in an unavoidable bottleneck near to the city but now, as the roads had become more accessible and people's courses had altered, the volume of cars had become much more diffuse. I estimated that if I could maintain the speed that I had been travelling at, it would take me only another two or three hours to reach my destination and I hoped that I would arrive at the village where Samantha's grandmother lived sometime in the early evening. My estimations and calculations were based on little more than basic guesswork and rough reckoning, but it helped a lot just to have a target to aim for.

For the majority of the miles that I had already covered that day, I had been able to drive along quiet, minor roads which were relatively free of rubbish and cumbersome blockages. I took care, however, to follow a carefully planned and considered route which would be almost the most direct and yet which would, hopefully, avoid all major centres of population. The odds against me reaching Samantha were stacked high enough as it was, and I could see no point in taking any further, unnecessary chances. The quickest routes to travel along were often main roads and I took care to balance the extra distance I needed to drive with the safety that each road might offer.

Although I tried to keep the car travelling at a constant and sensible speed, I could not help accelerating occasionally and, in the heat, the extra speed affected the performance of the car's engine dramatically. As a result, when the time had just ticked past twelve midday, the indicator on the fuel gauge on the dashboard began to drop perilously close to the red end of the dial. To my considerable relief, a dusty blue hoarding at the side of the motorway informed me that there would be services and a petrol station within the next five miles and I hoped that the fumes in the near-empty fuel tank would be enough to get me there.

I sped nervously along the quiet carriageway and breathed a heavy sigh of relief when the red-brick buildings of the service station loomed into view on the horizon. With the needle on the display showing there to be literally just drops of fuel left in the tank, I limped onto the deserted forecourt and stopped the engine.

As I stepped out into the raging heat of noon, I noticed with some disappointment (although it had been what I had expected to find) that there was no-one else around. The sales booth and surrounding area were deserted and I decided that, as there was no-one there to accept my money, I would not bother to pay for the fuel. I opened the petrol tank and took the pump out from its greasy metal holster. Eager to get back onto the road and complete my journey, I depressed the handle. The display on the pump went blank for a moment and the machinery whirred loudly before it quickly became silent again. I took the head of the pump out of my tank and looked carefully down its neck, searching for any obvious blockages. I soon realised that the machine was empty and hung the pump up again.

I felt like a complete and utter idiot and my only saving grace was the fact that no-one else was around to share in my embarrassment. Hundreds of thousands of cars must have passed along the busy route in the last day and it seemed obvious (with hindsight) that the limited coffers of the service station had long since been drained of their very last drops of precious fuel. Dejectedly, I walked across the forecourt to try another pump but again it was useless - not a single millilitre of fuel remained there.

As I stood and leant against the warm metal bonnet of my car, another depressing and ominous thought wormed its way into my already tired and confused mind. If I couldn't fill the car's tank with petrol, how could I get to Samantha? If I was unable to find an alternative method of transport (and that seemed like an impossible task in itself) then I would have to finish the journey on foot. I knew that if that

was the case, the time it would take me to reach her would double at the very least and, in all probability, it would treble.

I tried desperately to convince myself that it was worth going on and that I could still make it to Samantha as I walked across the dusty, windswept forecourt and over towards the little red-brick building which housed the sales area, the car wash and the toilets. Despite the fact that I had had little to drink over the last few hours, I desperately needed to stop there.

The door to the toilet creaked open noisily and, as I stepped inside, my footsteps echoed on the terracotta floor tiles. I stood at the urinal and, as I undid my trousers, I looked down into a dry, yellow-stained gutter at my feet. The smell which came up from the dirty trough was obnoxious and I tried to breathe it in as little as possible. I made a decided effort to think of other things and to dream of pleasant, distant places but, when I was half way through using the toilet and at my most exposed and vulnerable, an unexpected noise rang out from behind me. Still trying hard to keep my aim and my calm intact, I struggled to turn slowly around and look into the darkness to find the source of the sound. In the half-light and shadows of one of the cubicles, I made out the shifting shape of a tired figure trying to climb up from the dirty floor.

'All right, mate?' the figure asked in a tired, hoarse voice.

I shook myself dry and did up my trousers. Turning around fully, I walked cautiously towards the cubicle and gingerly pushed the wooden door open fully. As bright light flooded into the shadowy space, a rough and bedraggled character hauled himself upright using the lavatory pan for support. The man looked ancient and worn at first sight but I supposed that it could have been the intense conditions outside which had contributed to his aged appearance. With considerable effort, he lifted his aching frame up for a moment before dropping back down to sit on top of the closed lid of the toilet bowl. Out of politeness, I acknowledged him.

'Are you all right?' I asked. The man coughed and spat against the dirty wall opposite to the one that he leant against.

'Nasty business, all this,' he said as he slumped forwards on his throne to get a better look at me. He lifted a shaking hand to his eyes to shield them from the bright light outside.

'It doesn't look too good, does it?' I commented, struggling to find anything else constructive to say. I felt uncomfortable - not only was I talking to a man who appeared to live in a toilet, but in my confusion and haste I had also managed to piss down my leg. Discreetly, I shuffled back towards a little sink next to the exit. I was keen to find a way to escape as my distrust of the toilet dweller was growing with each second that I spent in his odorous company. I put my hands into the sink and turned the tap but nothing came out.

'Waste of time, that,' the man croaked. 'They've been dry for the best part of a day.' I walked back towards the man even though all my instincts told me to keep moving in the other direction. 'The only place to get a drink around here,' he continued, 'is from one of these.'

The man tapped the sides of the toilet bowl upon which he sat and I grimaced. He immediately sensed my disgust and offered an explanation of sorts.

'It's all right, mate, don't worry,' he croaked. 'This water's clean - they put bleach in it!'

At that moment my worst fears were confirmed - as well as tanning his skin, the fierce sunlight had scrambled the man's brain. Not one hundred yards from where he sat was a shop and I was sure that there must have been something better and more healthy for him to drink there rather than water soiled with various chemicals and people's sewage. Taking care not to upset the ragged man, I made my excuses and tried to leave.

'It's been good talking to you,' I said, taking care not to show my true feelings. 'I've got to get going though, I've got a long way to go.'

'Stay here,' the man protested. 'We'll get on all right, you an' me.'

'You look after yourself,' I said, determined to leave the toilet as quickly as I possibly could. 'I'll come back and see you one day.'

'You do that,' he coughed, 'you're a good bloke.'

The man's crazy, deep-set eyes stared unblinking in my direction and I turned and walked quickly out

of the building, hoping that he would not follow. As I walked into the light outside, I heard him shout after me.

'Take care, mate. If you need anything, you know where I am.'

The incredible heat and brilliance outside made me wonder if, perhaps, the tramp was better off in some ways than I was. He was obviously long past the stage of being able to make rational decisions and to think logically and I tried to imagine how good it would feel to be free of the cares and worries which weighed me down so heavily. Being insane could only be an advantage in helping anyone get through the time that remained.

I walked back onto the deserted, dusty forecourt and tried another couple of useless petrol pumps. Once more, there was no fuel left in either of them and I resigned myself to the fact that I was going to have to finish my journey on foot. I would use the minute amount of petrol left in my car to get as far as possible but after that I would have no alternative but to walk the distance that remained.

Before returning to the car and moving on, I went into the little sales booth at the side of the concrete area which housed the petrol pumps. The metal door was locked and chained closed but that had not deterred the people who had visited there before me from getting inside. The large glass windows had all been shattered and I climbed through an empty pane with my feet crunching and grinding tiny diamonds of glass into the hard, marbled floor.

The shelves and displays of the shop had already been ransacked by countless visitors earlier in the day. The floor was littered with paper, wrappings, empty cardboard boxes and broken glass and I tiptoed my way carefully towards the till and counter area. The drawer of the electronic till had been forced open but, surprisingly, much of the cash that had been stored there remained untouched.

Behind the counter, a little door led to a storeroom which was in as much of a mess as the rest of the shop. It was dark and gloomy in the room and I switched on the light but it had no effect - either the power was off or the bulb had blown. In the darkness I stumbled around, feeling the warm air in front of me with outstretched hands, hoping to find something solid to hold onto. As I felt my way along a storage rack, I could find little other than more rubbish and there was nothing worth taking with me. I stuffed a couple of quickly melting chocolate bars into my pockets and turned around to stumble out of the little room.

I walked back towards the light and stubbed my foot on a heavy cardboard box which was hidden on the ground in the shadows. I bit my lip, trying hard not to scream out for fear of attracting the unwanted attentions of my friend in the toilets. Instead I leant against a nearby display stand until the throbbing pain had faded away. I knelt down to see what was in the box and, to my surprise and delight, found it to be full of bottled water. It was overpriced, sparkling and vitamin rich mineral water but it was water nonetheless. I struggled to pick up the box (which held a dozen plastic bottles) and carried it outside.

Before doing anything else, I took the top off one of the containers and drank from it thirstily. The water was fizzy and it made me belch loudly but it was still refreshing and revitalising. I managed to locate some scraps of food and a detailed map of the local area before stepping back out into the heat and loading up the car.

As I threw the things that I had collected into the back of the tired car, I cursed my own shortsightedness. I had envisaged being at Samantha's grandmother's house by now and had made little provision for any unexpected delays. It was a stupid, rash and foolish way to go about things and I could not believe that I had overlooked the possibility of trouble when it had been so obvious that this was the perfect climate in which things could go wrong.

Putting the food away, I realised, to my surprise, that I had not eaten for the best part of a day. As I climbed back into the car, I reached into the back and grabbed a melted chocolate bar which I virtually drank from its wrapper. The heat inside the car was unbearable and I waited for a moment before shutting the door. Despite the fact that the vehicle had been mostly hidden in the shade of the service station, the dashboard had remained unprotected from the brilliant light. The plastic covering of the steering wheel was soft and pliable and I had to drape a spare T-shirt over it before being able to hold it tightly enough to drive. For a moment I thought about smashing the windscreen as it seemed to be having the effect of a giant magnifying glass, increasing the heat inside the car ten-fold. As I only had a little

distance to travel in the car, I decided to leave it.

I fumbled at the side of the steering column to put the keys into the ignition and turn them. Before I was able to start the car, a strong, unexpected wind began to blow. For a moment I could only hear the sound of the wind blowing through the brittle trees at the side of the road but then it suddenly increased in strength dramatically, blowing dust and rubbish up into the air and buffeting the sides of the car so violently that I thought for a second it might turn over. I anticipated what was about to happen and, as I screwed my eyes tightly closed and ducked my head down towards the handbrake and gearstick for shelter, a light of unbelievable strength filled the sky, turning everything a brilliant white. It was inescapable and made my skin itch and burn, leaving me feeling as if my face was being pressed close to a raging fire. It seemed to last for minute after painful minute but then, after only twenty seconds had passed, the light faded and the wind died back to its normal level.

Slowly, feeling the strong heat on the back of my neck lessening, I lifted my head and looked outside. For one terrifying moment I thought that despite having had them tightly shut, the light had damaged my eyes but they gradually became accustomed to the conditions once more and I was able to make out fuzzy, blurred shapes. Trying hard to keep calm and to control the rising fear that I felt, I reached down to the ignition key and tried to start the engine. There was nothing - not even the slightest hint of movement or spark of power came from the car.

I fumbled with the doorlatch and stumbled out onto the concrete forecourt. Even through the strong soles of my shoes I could feel the heat of the exposed ground and I quickly made my way towards the grass verge which ran along the side of the once busy road. The verge was yellow and lifeless and it was difficult to find the point where the dying grass ended and the cracked, dry ground began. I stood still for a moment and tried to compose myself. Looking around, however, I was staggered to see just how much the scorched landscape had changed. In all the time that I had been driving, I had seen little other than the tarmac of the road ahead and there had been nothing to see in the darkness of last night except for the headlights of thousands of other cars. Now that I had a good chance to look around, I saw that the world around me had come to resemble the surface of some starved and parched alien planet.

On the other side of the road to the service station, huge hills rose up from the ground and into the bright sky. The sides of the massive mounds were covered in brittle, blanched trees whose roots lay buried in the sick, dry soil. From a distance, the hills looked more like sand-dunes than anything else. The energy wave which had just washed over the country seemed to have drained the last drops of colour and life from the ground and it seemed that the whole place was in danger of becoming one huge, lifeless dust-bowl. My skin was sore and pink where the light from the pulse had burned my exposed body and I took off my worn T-shirt as I walked slowly back towards the car.

I tried to start my car again but there was no life in the dead engine. Fortunately, running out of petrol had prepared me for the loss of transportation and I had already decided on the action which I would need to take. From the back of the car I took a little rucksack which I had brought from home and I filled it with all the food and drink that I had just stolen from the ransacked shop. In the little space that remained in the bag, I crammed in clothes and other essentials and, before moving off, I paused to change out of the dirty clothes that I had been wearing for the last few hours. Despite the fact that I had seen no-one except the man in the toilet for the best part of two hours, I still hid myself away self-consciously in the stifling heat of the car as I undressed.

I eventually stood next to my useless vehicle, ready to leave. Still keen not to take any unnecessary chances and, bearing in mind the fact that just about everything I owned was stashed in the back of the car, I locked it and shoved the keys into a pocket in my rucksack. Although I had everything that I needed with me, I paused before moving. The distance that I still had to cover to reach Samantha was immense and daunting and I wondered if I would be able to get to her in time. I knew that I had to try and reach her but the temptation to stop in the service station toilets with my crazy friend grew with each moment that I nervously stalled. Determined, I took a deep, dry breath and started out along the road.

After studying it for a moment, I folded up the map that I had taken from the shop and shoved it into the back pocket of my trousers. I had found the village of Colliwell marked on the page and it was of some comfort to me that my position and my eventual destination were on the same sheet. Although the

scale of the map was somewhat misleading, I was glad that only eight inches separated me from my love. I walked past the front of the decimated shop and, as I did, I took a large umbrella out from what remained of a garden-furniture display. A cross between a gaudy golf umbrella and a garden parasol, the wide circle of cloth at least offered me some shelter and respite from the relentless light. My ridiculous appearance was completed with the addition of a wide-brimmed, floppy felt hat which had been an unwanted birthday gift from a friend three years ago. Today it was far from useless and I was glad of the extra protection that it offered me.

With the straps of the well-stuffed rucksack digging into the tender skin of my shoulders, I finally left the shade and relative comfort of the covered service station and walked out onto the open road. I fumbled in my shirt pocket and pulled out a pair of sunglasses which did not completely subdue the brilliance of the sun-scorched world, but which did at least dull the light so that I was able to look around without too much discomfort.

The hot and dusty track stretched out ahead of me and I walked on with the scuffing of my shoes on the dry ground the only noise that disturbed an otherwise eerie and overpowering silence.

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