

Rosie, Bara, Gerry & Tom

Rosie, Bara, Gerry & Tom

A novel

by
Peter Wood Cotterill



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PART ONE

1995-1996

GERRY: out and about in northwest London ...

At the time it didn't seem much like a turning point; with hindsight, it most certainly was. My wife Barbara and I were headed for the brighter lights of Kilburn High Road, hurrying along a side street. Having just parked my new Lexus. One of the first to be imported: it's a special red bronze colour, with dark red leather upholstery. We're late as always. Well, last minute skin-o'the-teeth, as always. Barbs had booked seats for the Tricycle Theatre. She's been into fringe theatre for some time. Years in fact.

Can't for the life of me recall what it was, the play that is. Never been very good at remembering titles. People's names, yes, well 'so-so' recently; but titles are 'a no-no'. Not of plays. Nor films. Often books even. However much I've enjoyed them. Or felt influenced by them. It's a blockage. Like to think it's maybe because I'm more concerned with content. But it really gets my goat when Barbs starts her stone-faced, well, 'jeering' you have to call it, about my various shortcomings, including this one. I think it's only a minor, unimportant disability. A kind of selective Alzheimer's. Though I'd've hoped my 50s were just a bit early for that. Well, 58 next month.

Anyway. As I said: we're walking, hurrying, towards Kilburn High. I notice this tall gangling figure teeter across the junction ahead. It wasn't that I recognised him. Not then. But something rang bells for me; maybe just his way of walking: right forward

on the toes, steps unusually short for a six-footer. I mean, I'm six feet too, or maybe I should say six feet also, to avoid confusion! But by no means do I teeter. I take proper, longish, manly strides. But then, I'm a bit of a dancer; well used to be, when dancing was dancing and not hopping about like a dervish. Oh sorry, that's what they're calling 'non-PC' isn't it? Not 'politically correct'. Though I didn't mean it that way. I'm certainly not racist. More like racially unconscious. Even when I lived in Rhodesia. Perhaps even more so then.

I'm not saying I'm not socially aware, of 'difference' so to speak. Then or now. I mean you don't necessarily mix socially with aristos. Or with your dustbinman. Now do you? Though you're happy enough to give either of them the time of day. And most binmen don't number senior executives, or successful management consultants like me amongst their friends. Though there's no reason why they shouldn't. I've got nothing against binmen mind you. Or even binwomen for that matter, if there are any. Except when they leave the bins out in the road, or blocking the drive. Or forget to come.

As I was going to say: this guy's hands are tucked awkwardly in the pockets of what looks like someone else's black pinstripe waistcoat. Someone maybe three sizes smaller. It's far too short and very tight. What rang my bell I don't know. Maybe it was the way the crop-haired head, with its beak of a nose, sort of bobbed, bird-like, from focus point to focus point. As if the eyes were fixed in their sockets. Don't know what it was: something hooked my attention. I mean you don't normally get interested in some, well, let's say it: undistinguished, not to say 'disreputable looking' character, who you don't realise you once knew in better times, who just happens to cross the road ahead of you. Now do you?

Barbs was yattering on as she almost dragged me along the pavement: "You did lock the car, didn't you? You did leave it in

park, put the handbrake on, didn't you?" That sort of thing. Of course I had. Remember thinking the guy must be pretty hard up, or cold proof in thermal underwear, to be out in that weather in just that skimpy waistcoat. And only a short sleeved white tee, and jeans and tennis shoes. It was bitter January cold. That special north London, sleet-ridden wind hit us as we rounded the corner into the High Road. Immediately I look around for the guy.

"Gerald! What are you gawping around for?" snaps Barbs; it was all her fault we were running late. It always is. "You know where the theatre is. We've come up here often enough. Surely. Half-a-dozen times. Surely you remember. COME ON!" I didn't say anything. But I remember thinking: Oh! for someone who could accept me for how I am, but that was one of those what I call automatics. Floating thoughts. The kind that repeatedly, sometimes hourly, certainly daily, year in, year out, breeze in, and implant themselves on your consciousness, unbidden and often out of context. This one though seemed almost always to be in context. Unfortunately.

At first, I can't see the guy. Then I spot him, hands still in his waistcoat pockets, going up unnecessarily on tiptoe to peer into one of those rubbish bins fixed on a lamppost. He takes one hand from a pocket and fastidiously raises a newspaper from the bin. Just a couple of inches. As if to check its date. He drops it back. Maybe he's already seen it. Or he doesn't like the headline. Or perhaps it's the Daily Express. He turns and teeters towards the big, bright-lit window of a telly shop. That was when I recognised him.

"It's Tom," I say excitedly towards Barbs, "Tom Mundy!"

"Never heard of him. That down and out scruff? Come on. You can't stop. Or we'll be late." She tugs at my arm. Almost takes it. Though she wouldn't.

I pull away. "Tom Mundy. I knew him. He's a mate. When I was in Rhodesia? Hell's teeth, Barbs, you know, he did that small sculpture. Of Gem? My little daughter? On the davenport in my study. Isn't it?"

"No, it's not," says Barbs, "hasn't been for ages. I got Mrs Carter to put it on the monk's chest. At the back of the river room. Must've been last summer. Can't stand it." That's Barbs for you. Anyone else's conservatory is 'our river room'. Though you can just about see the river. The Thames. Posh area. The new council tax is extortionate. Thank god, I've paid off the mortgage. Snooty neighbours. Some of them.

I hurry over to Tom. Touch his elbow. He turns his head from the shop window, dead-eyed towards me. "Nothing much on telly these nights," he says, "all bloody repeats. And footer ..."

Just for a moment I wasn't so sure. "Tom?" I say, "You are Tom Mundy? Aren't you?"

He'd turned back to watching the dozen TV screens, many filled with a mouthing, mugging comedian. Or maybe it was a politician. Difficult to tell without the sound. P'r'aps even with it. I wait ... Tom's face is expressionless, still. He sniffs. Clears his throat.

Then speaks, without turning, still watching the bank of tellies: "Hiya Gerry. How ya keeping, man? Long time no see." I grab Tom's right hand in both mine. Pump it hard. Grinning all over my face. We'd been great mates. Close. You know? Real, real friends? For it must have been three years, if not more.

"Tom," I say, "Tomboy, hell's teeth man, it's good to see you. Jee-zus, Tom. What must it be? Ten? No, over fifteen years since we were both in Salisbury ... gott man, you've scarcely changed man. Hair's a bit thinner. Bit o' grey at the temples and in ya' beard. Few more wrinkles man. But you're still the

same old Tom. Hell's teeth, it's really really good to see you jong."

"You've gotten fat," says Tom.

"Yah, well," I say, "a bit. Just a bit. When d'you come back to Old Blighty, Tom?"

"Gerald!" Barbs interjects from across the pavement, "come on do! We're going to be late, I've got to pick up the tickets yet. GERALD!?"

"Tom," I say, "that's my wife, Barbara ..." He half turns and gives Barbs a quick once-over.

"Hiya there Barbara," he says to her. Then to me: "She looks nicer than the last one. Was Margie the last one?" Looks can lie as we all know. Always reckoned Tom fancied Margie, my first, and only previous wife. But then, you don't have to think someone looks, well, 'nice', to fancy them, now do you? Margie hitched up with some high-flying civil servant, six months or so after I knew I just had to leave her, and our two kids: Gem, short for Gemma, who was then coming up four and a bit; and Richard, Dicky, who then was just about three. That was six months after we all got back to England, pretty well flat broke. From Rhodesia. Or Zimbabwe as it's now called. Quite a relief, really; her remarrying the following year, I mean, not Rhodesia's change of name. The civil servant seems to have given the kids, and Margie, the security they needed. Which yours truly certainly couldn't back then. Anyway, I'd realised Margie and me were not going to gel within days of our getting married. In fact, probably sometime before! But Margie had been preppers.

"Look Tom," I put my hand on his upper arm. He almost flinches away. "Look. We've got tickets for the theatre. The Tricycle. Up the road here? We'll be out by about just after ten should think," I glance at Barbs for confirmation. Nothing; she

was well into her sphinx act. "Will you still be round this area Tom? Could we ... meet for a jar later? What about that pub over the road?" I point.

Tom stares across at the pub, both hands now back in their waistcoat pockets, giving his arms that sort of kangaroo stance again. "Yeah. Yeah. Why not?" he says.

"Great," I say, "look Tom. We must rush. Or we won't get in. See you later alligator. In the saloon bar then? Right?"

"Right," Tom echoes. Barbs and I start towards the theatre. We haven't gone three paces, when I suddenly think 'what if we miss each other later?' I stop and turn back. Tom is still staring across at the pub. Barbs is about to go ballistic. I pull one of my cards from my top pocket; I founded and own the management consultancy Seamer-Cowan Associates.

I feel for a pen as I run back to him: "My card, Tom. In case we miss each other, later. Here, let me write my home address on the back," I do, "it's ex-directory of course." I tuck the card into a pocket of his waistcoat. "Now, see you later Tom" I say, "we've got a lot to catch up. Jeez, all these years man ..." Backing off, grinning and nodding, I go to rejoin Barbs, who is practically stamping her foot. I shout: "Where you living now Tom? Near here?"

Tom waves vaguely up the road. "Er. Yeah. Near here ..." Then I thought he said '14 Burrington Mansions', or something like that. Still backing, I barge into Barbs. She elbows me in the ribs. Then snaps, teeth clenched: "Gerald! I'll kill you if we don't get in before curtain up ..." I glance back again as we turn into the theatre. Tom's still stood there. Seemingly oblivious to the cold and the driving sleet. Bet like me he's missing being in god's own country. That's how Rhodies always referred to Rhodesia. And in many ways, it was. Super climate. Super people, black and white, and in between. Except for Mr

President Mugabe's gang of course. Super way of life, until everything fell apart.

Many folk are a bit surprised to hear I lived in Rhodesia for so long. Apparently I don't 'look the type', according to some, whatever that means. To which I usually reply: "You should see me when my knees are tanned ..."

When we'd moved out to Rhodesia, Margie and I'd been married almost five weeks. We'd sort of decided to get married just over a month before. I'd been offered a four-year contract to go back out to Rhodesia and run a department at an insurance company's Central Africa head office, in Salisbury, that's now called Harare. They'd offered by far the highest salary I'd then ever been paid.

I rented us a stylish, furnished, four-bed bungalow, in one of Salisbury's better suburbs. We moved in just three months before daughter Gem was born. At the Lady Chancellor Maternity Home. Well, that's what it was called then. Expect Mister President Mugabe's changed it, like the names of pretty well everything else. Lady Chancellor was the wife of the first governor of Southern Rhodesia, back when it became a self-governing colony, in 1923. Guess not everyone knows that! I wonder if Gem thinks of herself as a Rhodie? Or Dicky? Tell myself the kids, and Margie for that matter, have had the opportunity of a far better life away from me, than they would have had if I'd stayed around then. Both of us miserable; arguing most of the time. Gem would be, is just, what? 36 now. Last Saturday in fact. Probably doesn't even know I existed. Once upon a time.

Spend most of the night on three hours during the play, plus the interval, thinking back to old times. In Rhodesia: the Wankie Game Reserve, or 'Hwange' as it's called now; elephants and hippos at Mana Pools; Lake Mac. And those smooth round

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Matobo Hills beyond Bulawayo. Tom Mundy's exhibition at the National Gallery, the National Gallery of Rhodesia in Salisbury, that is. Tom and his then other half, Lynn, and our gang, out at Lake Mac. Some great guys. Real friends. Where're they all now? At least I now knew where Tom was. Hopefully over the road in the Black Lion. Couldn't wait for the play to end so I, so 'we' I suppose, can get over there.

TOM: over the road in the Black Lion ...

Soon as Gerry and his latest wife Barbara come into the Black Lion, I see them through the crowd. It was more like ten to eleven than 'just after ten'. Not that it matters. Gerry looks every which way, before going up to the bar to get their drinks. He did try, but didn't spot me at the table in the corner. Few would. 'Good ol' Tomboy' was pretty well hidden. There's a huge, rather dusty, umbrella plant, or perhaps it's an aspidistra. Behind a frosted glass partition. Together they half screen a dimly lit corner, off from the rest of the world. Apparently it's known as 'Lover's Nook' would you believe, according to a brassy plaque on the wall. At least it was out of sight of the landlord and the bar staff, who might've thrown me out for not buying anything.

During the evening maybe half a dozen couples had approached my table. Most had stopped in their tracks, disappointed; some wary, thinking better of it when they saw down and out me. One pair did share the table though, for an hour or more. Well, I say 'share'. They were oblivious. Of everything including me, which is not easy, as I guess my rags hum more than a bit. Pretty well oblivious of everything and everyone they were. Which was great. Because the girl had a pizza and scarce ate a quarter. Very good it was too. Quite like cold pizza, though I do prefer it hot. Quattro stagioni: though I guess she only left me three stagioni She left most of her drink too though, when they buggered off to bed. Tequila Sunrise I

think they call it. Or some such. Probably Tequila and orange juice, with a dash of Tabasco sauce I think. With a poncey little paper broly. Not really my style, but free booze is free booze. The guy unfortunately had finished his pint of Guinness and a whiskey chaser

While Gerry was up at the bar, I had a peek at Barbara. She really is quite nice-looking, though she looked really impatient. 'Pissed off' is probably the more accurate word for it. Sort of dark blonde, with highlights. Good bones. A womanly figure, as Gerry used to say. She reminded me of someone. Margie, Gerry's first wife, when he was Gerry Cohen. Not Gerald Seamer-Cowan, as he seems to be now. Mind you, he always was the type to sprout a hyphen, if he could.

Gerry gives Barbara little attention after he comes back from the bar with their drinks. Reckon she's probably telling him that he should have had a half not a pint. Remember thinking that it might be nice to have someone again to worry about you, fuss about you, care whether you risked your licence, put on weight. Margie used to do that. Gerry carried on looking around, ignoring Barbara. Looking for me presumably.

They're still there when the landlord shouts for the third or fourth time: "Your glasses ladies and gents per-lease!" I need urgently to go for a pee. I'm still thinking I might go over to them. When I get back, not surprisingly I suppose, they'd gone: their glasses cleared, the table wiped, their chairs upturned on the table. As if they'd never been there. Should've joined them. Perhaps it would have changed our lives. Daft really. What was it? Pride? Shame? Indifference? Not wanting to remember? Be reminded? Of good times. Of not so good times. I don't know. Wotchamacallit, inertia: probably. But then, I've always been sort of, well, shyish.

And they were mostly good times. Back then. In Rhodesia. More often than not. Six pretty good years. Best years of my life.

Probably. Way things've been going recently. Have been going ever since ... well, pretty well ever since I last saw Gerry. And Margie. They left some eight months or so before we did. Since Zimbabwe. Since Lynn. Since Manhattan. And Bar Harbor. And Key West.

Not that it ever went quite right in the States. Used to blame it, everything sort of steadily going downhill like, on Anna Fronstein, the great Manhattan art bluffer, critic and gallery franchiser. Anna 'discovered' me, unfortunately. Who knows? Might it have been better if I'd never met her? I'd have missed some fun certainly. And some grief. Would I still've ended up in my present north London squat and eating other people's leavings ...?

Back then, Fronstein had been 'doing' Southern Africa. A 'working vacation' she called it, no doubt to justify it as a tax deductible: "A Voyage of Discovery and New Horizons". She tended to speak with initial caps. And she had to go and find me. At first, she said it was destiny. But later once said it was more like bad luck.

She'd 'done' the Cape: couple of nights staying in the presidential suite at the Mount Nelson Hotel; with a brief excursion to a 'Cape Coloured Community Art and Craft Co-op', in Cape Town's District Six. She'd been up Table Mountain, presumably in the cable car. Then nine hundred odd miles or whatever on the 'Blue Train' up to Pretoria. Had 'done' the Kruger National Park in half a day, without getting out of her hired, chauffeured, airconditioned limo. She "Just So Loved Wild Animals In Their Natural Habitat". Took a few snaps of Ndebele painted huts in the Northern Transvaal, and bargained, impatiently I'd have guessed, for bits of beadwork. Just the right ethnic touch to replicate in some Harlem sweatshop. Sorry, some Harlem 'atelier'.

Then she'd headed up through Southern Rhodesia to the Victoria Falls. We, that is Father Fred O'Hanlon's African protégés and me, well, we had this small exhibition of our work. I think it must've been in the garden of the Vic Falls Hotel. Or somewhere pretty nearby. Can't recall exactly now. Anyway, fatefully, big bold Anna strolls through our show one late afternoon, just about sundowner time. If she were into football she'd have said she was gobsmacked. As she was Anna she said, "Gollygosh! Golly Gosh! It's So, So, *Prima Tivo*. So EXQUISITELY *Prima Tivo*." So, then we went and had a sundowner. Then we had dinner. Then we went to bed. Together. Anna was into fellas, so to speak, in those days.

She flew back to the Big Apple via London the next day. From Livingstone, over the Zambezi in what's now Zambia. Said, I just MUST come to Manhattan. Said, she'd "Launch Me On The Scene". That "Your Time, Chickadee", mugging Mae West, "Is About To Come". I think I only half believed her. But of course I wanted to. Even when I found out from Father Fred that she'd bought up all the Affs' exhibits as a job lot, at less than half list price, and shipped it all off to New York. Deducting the shipping cost from the payment. Which didn't leave a lot. Though to be fair, the Affs were mostly chuffed.

In the previous year or so I'd been doing pretty well in Salisbury, at least for me. Despite the rapidly floundering economy. A few, well, two or three of the remaining better-heeled expats and Rhodies, were starting to buy some of my stuff. It was cheaper than most of the imports, which were becoming rarer as the country's economy began to flounder more and more. Then I got a contract for a couple of murals down south. In Jo'burg. I guess I'd gotten some nice publicity through association with Father Fred's collective. He's a missionary who'd have been an artist, even a Bohemian as he put it, if he hadn't gotten god when he

was young and impressionable. He'd started his sculpture studio-workshop for local Mashona carvers a few years before, down at his mission station. Some ninety miles or so from Salisbury, the capital, what's now called Harare. He wasn't the first, or the last, or the only one. But at least he seemed to be genuine. He did it for them, not for his ego: "To help protect them from the confines of airport art," as he used to say.

I'd met Father Fred about a year earlier. Gerry and Margie had this weekend rondavel out near Lake MacElwaine, as it used to be called. Perhaps it still is. Lake Mac's a pretty huge dam, about twenty or so miles from Salisbury. Great for sailing and waterskiing then if you could afford it, or knew someone with a speedboat. Maybe still is. It supplies most of Harare's water. Or did.

When I say rondavel, that's what everyone called them, though they weren't all actually round. Perhaps a third were rectangular or even square. Whitewashed breezeblock walls, under a reed-thatch roof. Very basic furniture. Concrete floor. No ceiling. Unglazed, mosquito gauzed window openings, and ditto doorway. A board stoep or veranda out front, facing the water. A single room, and an outside 'PK': the piccanin' kiya, the 'small house': where you kept the Elsan.

Gerry and Margie had let me have their rondavel for a couple of months that rainy season. That's roughly from October through to February, if you're lucky. This was just when the consequences of Rhodesia's Bush War made such 'bushwhacking' more than a little bit risky. It was great for working. Though the mozzies and tsetse fly were hell. I did a lot of quite good work, even if I say so myself. Lynn used to come out from Salisbury and stay at weekends. Often with Gerry and Margie and some of the gang, if rain wasn't too likely. They brought out fresh beef and stuff. A few crates of Castle lager and Lion ale. Camped

out under the stars. We'd have a braaivleis each night, round an open fire. Steaks and sausages and chops. Spuds in the hot ashes. Boerewors and melktart. Just like Surbiton someone, some idiot, said. We had great times. Simple.

So, early one afternoon, out at the rondavel, by the lake, I was working on a big lump of baobab wood, out front under the shade tree. Watched by a yellow-fanged, old dog baboon, standing sentinel while his troop drank fifty feet away down at the water's edge. The old dog screamed a warning and the troop scattered, clamouring. Father Fred, in baggy khaki shorts and a faded rugby shirt, flipfopped into view along the shore. I'd sort of heard of him I think, but I'd not met him before. He liked what I was doing. Invited me to come down to his mission station to meet his Mashona carvers and see their work. After that I started to work with them, when I could, though I tried not to influence their style.

I'd had some traditional art training back in England. WEA, that's the Workers Education Association, evening classes for a couple of years in my late 'teens and very early twenties. While scraping a sort of living as a brickie. Then almost a year part time at the old Hornsey College of Art, 'til I ran out of cash.

It would have been too easy to imprint a Western gloss on what the 'Shona carvers were doing. Anna Fronstein called it primitive but it was really sophisticated simplicity. Building intellectually on traditional styles and images. What would you expect a Manhattan polymath to know, anyhow? Ten months after Anna had gone back to New York, Lynn and I held our 'garage' sale. Sold up everything: the few sticks of furniture that were ours, old clothes, kitchen stuff. Our 1930s, corrugated-iron-roofed, partly-furnished bungalow was rented. I sold our old jalopy to one of the better-off African carvers for close to peanuts, on condition he drove us, and our bags, to the rail station.

Made sure he could drive OK, and had at least a provisional licence, before doing the deal.

Leaving Rhodesia was a wrench. We left about eight months or so after Gerry and Margie and their kids had ‘abandoned ship’. The writing was on the wall. Had been for some years, I guess. The country seemed about to fall apart. Thousands of whites had left or were leaving: for the UK, Oz, the US, New Zealand, South Africa. Though a surprising number seemed to be sticking it out. At least for the time being. Leaving was an even bigger wrench for Lynn I guess. She was a third generation Rhodie: her grandad had come North in an ox wagon as a baby, from the Orange Free State, around the end of the nineteenth century.

We took the train ‘down south’ to Durban. Sailed two days later up Africa’s east coast on a Lloyd-Triestino liner, calling at Lourenço Marques and then Beira in Mozambique; Tanzania’s former capital and largest city by far, Dar es Salaam; Mombasa in Kenya; Mogadishu in Somalia; on round the Horn of Africa to Djibouti; then across the Red Sea, to Aden in Yemen; before going up to Port Sudan, from where we took a side-trip to see something of Cairo, and the pyramids at Gizeh, before rejoining the ship at the north-end of the Suez Canal. We then sailed across the Med, and up the Adriatic, to Venice. From that wondrous city, I’d have loved to have spent much more time there, as well as in Cairo, we took a train across to Paris, where we stopped for a couple of days, then on to London. The first time in my home town for nearly six years. I looked up a few old friends and fewer selected relatives; they were mostly welcoming, for a while, but their lives had moved on too. What we’d had in common, if anything, was now too far in the past to be meaningful, except for a very few hours. After three weeks, we splurged half our remaining cash on one-way tickets to the States, on the QE2 from Southampton.

The day after we arrived in New York we presented ourselves at Anna Fronstein's Manhattan gallery. She'd no doubt deny it, but I'm sure at first, she didn't really remember me, or my work. To be fair, though I had to wonder later at her motivation, she offered Lynn a part-time job, as a relief receptionist in her gallery. That kept us afloat for a while, just about.

When I went to Bar Harbor, Maine in the summer, to help out in a bricabrac store, owned by some guy I met, Lynn wouldn't come. She moved into Anna's apartment. By the time I got back a mezzanine office had been installed overhanging and overseeing the gallery with 'Lynn Bezuidenhout, Gallery Director' stencilled in gold on the armourplate door. Bezuidenhout was Lynn's maiden name, so to speak. She was now very comfortably 'at home' in Anna's duplex.

I had about eighteen hundred bucks to show for my summer, and decided to go south, to my hero Ernest Hemingway's Key West for the winter. That was party time. An English accent, even an East London one varnished with Rhodie at the edges, was still quite a good meal ticket in those days. Bundle that with being a 'professional' sculptor, and my alleged charm and beautiful body, I had it made. Everyone had room then for an 'interesting' house guest. The trick was to move on before the interest waned. That way your present hosts not wanting you to go, yet, made your prospective hosts all the keener to welcome you. My 'winter' in the Keys lasted until mid-July. Florida in August is too hot and humid for my liking.

I've always believed I was fingered by my last host's exhusband. Whatever, the heavies from the US Immigration Service came round. Seems I'd overstayed my six months visitor's permit. By about a year. 'Bye bye Gloria, hello London' again. Gloria, that's Gloria Muller, my last host in Florida, kindly bought me a two-way open flight ticket to London, or perhaps one of her sugar

daddies did, to get rid of me. But, by the time I got back to Marco Island in the late fall she'd found herself a new houseguest.

Everything gradually fell apart for me over the next few months. The following Spring I moved back up north, to Massachusetts. Worked for a bit making plaster mini-statues for an interior designer in Provincetown. But I had to move on when he wanted me to move into his home, as his 'houseguest'. He definitely shopped me with the immigration service. This time it was a one way economy class ticket forcibly bought with the last of my money. I'd had enough of my life in the States anyway.

So, there I am, back in what is 'Maggie Thatcher's Britain', at the end of September '85, right on time for that year's Brixton Riots. That was ten years ago. There weren't any jobs for unsuccessful, unknown sculptors. I hated the thought of going back to bricklaying. I had to go to the welfare to survive. To get benefit they liked you to have an address, so I moved from my pad 'underneath the arches' into my first squat. After a succession of stultifying part-time jobs, and half-a-dozen squats across northwest London, and two or three brief 'relationships', about six months ago I met a girl called Rosie, and we found 'our place', up the road from Kilburn High.

To help pass the time, I had started this mammoth earthmother-cum-Europa figure. I did a bit of work on it most days, when my fingers weren't too frozen and there was no other excuse. After some three months, it was really starting to take shape. I hadn't worked on it in the week before Gerry tapped me on the shoulder, outside Curry's in Kilburn High Road. I'd been thinking more often than usual of ending it all; not really seriously, it was enough to just think about it: the kid at the benefit office was getting to be more and more difficult. She didn't seem to understand that there aren't a lot of jobs around for middle-aged and failing sculptors.

