

## Settling

In the city you could be free. This is what the man told himself, anyway, as he came down the steps of the bus. He thought that the best way to live life and to cure his problems was to move to another place. He had lived in different parts of his home town, had shared flats in the Uplands, lived in bedsits in Mount Pleasant, had tried lodging with families in Cockett and Killay. He'd then tried out places nearer the sea, in the Mumbles, then wilder places on the north of Gower; the grey marshlands of Penclawdd and Crofty where a man could walk out into the mist and take one last final moonlight swim.

Now he was trying London. He had the address of a friend of a friend who lived in a house in West London. The friend had asked if he could stay there until he got on his feet and they had said fine, so long as he paid something toward the rent and electricity and so on.

No one had given him directions on how to get to the house. Being a friend of a friend, no one really cared if he found the place or not. He would be tolerated rather than welcomed.

Around the corner from Victoria Coach Station he found a café, bought a coffee and sat at a narrow counter against the mirrored back wall. He thought they'd put the mirrors up to make the place seem bigger, but it was disconcerting to find yourself avoiding your own eyes while you ate or drank. He had no problem looking at his own face, but he didn't feel it was the kind of thing he ought to be doing, didn't like the idea of being caught staring at himself. So he fixed his gaze beyond himself at the life

## Settling

going on behind his back at the counter.

After his coffee, he decided to walk for a while, to get acclimatized to London. He was travelling light. He'd pared down his few possessions to almost nothing. He went into a newsagent's and bought an A to Z, but he stuck it in his rucksack and let it stay in there for the time being. He wandered around for a few hours like this. Enjoying the sense of being lost. Of having no past and no clear future. Right now he was just in a narrow slice of time, a bridge between here and there, then and now.

At three he came across a tube station and decided to descend the stairs that led to the ticket office. He spent some time staring at the tube maps and consulting his A to Z, working out his route to the house he'd be staying at. He felt good about the way he hadn't gone running straight there. He'd proved something.

He sat on the tube train ignoring everyone, in the same way that everyone else ignored him. But he glanced up each time the train came to a halt, craned his head to see what station they were at.

A lot of the people on the train were reading things: paperbacks, or the *Evening Standard*, or work papers. He decided he would get something to read next time. It would be part of his reinvention of himself.

He found the house easily, and stood in the porch for a few moments gathering himself for this first meeting before pressing the doorbell. The house was shabby and run down and stood on a busy arterial road. There was a paved drive, and a few dusty-looking shrubs that may have been ornamental at one time, but now they were out of shape and overgrown and invaded with brambles. It was turning dark and looked like rain. He heard the bell ring inside the house. It was a lonely sound.

No one came to the door. He pressed the bell three more times. Then sat down on the doorstep with his elbows resting on his knees and turned up the collar of his jacket. He rolled himself a cigarette and smoked it with bitter pleasure, a wry amusement at

this turn of events. Few people passed the house on foot, but there were plenty driving up and down the road, passing before him from left to right, or right to left.

The temperature dropped as the sun went down, and while the porch was sheltered, sitting there on the cold step was causing a chill to creep up on him. He shivered and drew his jacket tighter across his chest. He was young enough though, to still enjoy this. To feel that there was time for a more settled life; one where his ass wouldn't be turning to a numb block of flesh, while his fingers turned blue, while he waited for the arrival of strangers who didn't even know he was coming.

He smoked another cigarette. Checked the time. Stood and pressed a bloodless finger against the doorbell again.

He stared out at the road, noted the disinterested faces of the drivers, saw their mouths move in talk, the fingers drum in tune to unheard music on the steering wheel.

Snow began to fall, at first small meagre flakes, then bigger ones that came with more urgency. He watched it land on the paving slabs just beyond his feet, and saw how after a moment of inert sparkling whiteness, each flake gave up its ghostly presence and melted into nothing but a grey damp patch; a shadow of itself.

The snow wouldn't settle, then.

A man turned into the drive. Walking fast and reaching into his pocket as he neared the door. He didn't see Richard on the porch step until he was a few feet away. Richard stood quickly. Smiled.

The smile was unplanned, but he couldn't help himself. He was grateful to be found at last, to be amongst friends of friends of friends, even if this was in reality a stranger.

He introduced himself, explained the circumstances, mentioned Mike Jones, which was the name of the person on whose hospitality he would be dependent, and the man, shrugging with disinterest, let him into the house. He led him through to a big kitchen at the back. It was not much warmer in here than it had been outside. The man told Richard he could wait in here,

pointed out a cupboard that he said belonged to Mike and suggested there might be tea or coffee in there he could use. Then he left him to it, and disappeared to some other part of the house. After a few minutes, music could be faintly heard, drifting down from some warm room, a stranger's small piece of home.

He made himself some coffee, though as there had been none in the cupboard indicated he'd had to take it from someone else's more amply-stocked shelf. What would it matter? It was an accident, he told himself, he was mixed up. It was easily done. Though why he felt the need to lie, even to himself, was inexplicable.

He held the hot mug in both hands, hugged it against his chest as he stood by the window watching the snow fall. The light from the room illuminated the flakes nearest, and they seemed to fall faster than those further way. It was now fully dark out, though it was still early evening. He could just see enough to understand that this room overlooked a back garden. He wondered if it was snowing back in Swansea. It would be as dark. If he was still in Wales right now, he'd be on the bus home from work. He'd be aching from the long day, and aching with discontent. And if it did snow, it wouldn't stick around long. Wouldn't keep the buses from running. Wouldn't stop the world from turning. Not in Swansea, at least.

He heard the front door slam shut and voices; a man's and a woman's, then footsteps on the stairs. He wondered if that might be Mike coming in. Would anyone let him know that he had a visitor waiting for him down in the cold kitchen? A friend of a friend. A friend in need.

The doorbell rang, someone answered it. Laughter echoed through the house, then died away. The door slammed several more times, and while he was certain it was more of the household arriving, he also worried that maybe Mike would come and go again without even knowing he was there.

He felt more distant here in this cold kitchen, than he had on the streets earlier. He felt lost and invisible. More insubstantial

than a stranger even; his existence there as temporary as the snow flakes that had failed to settle.

It occurred to him that he could yet undo this process that he'd set in motion. He could put his jacket back on, wash the cup he'd used and put it back where he'd found it. He could lift his rucksack onto his back, go silently though the house, out the front door – closing it quietly behind him – find his way to the tube station again, sit on the train on the other side of the tracks, watch the stations he'd been through once already that day, let their names unfurl for him, one notch more familiar now, but still all a geography of unknowing – Acton Town, Turnham Green, Hammersmith, Gloucester Road, South Kensington. He saw himself almost doing it in reverse, like a videotape rewinding. Himself stepping confidently backwards up the steps of the bus, the door folding shut as he blindly found a seat. The vehicle rolling dangerously into a stream of traffic that was sucked irrevocably back west down the M4 to Wales.

The idea gripped him so strongly that he found himself acting on it; he threw his jacket on, hefted his bag on his shoulder and proceeded to the door. There were lights on in the hall and up the stairs, he passed a downstairs room and could hear a familiar television show theme-song playing. He smelled joss sticks burning somewhere, smoky and over-sweet.

None of it felt like home though.

He opened the front door and would have been gone, but what he saw there held him transfixed.

Snow had continued to fall, and still fell as he watched. It rushed to the earth, an army of fat flakes emboldened by the triumph of their conquest. The world was transformed. Blankets of glistening white lay everywhere and what traffic there was had slowed its pace. He lifted up his head and watched the multitude of flakes fly to him, marvelled at how this swarm of tiny white clouds seemed to emerge endlessly and soundlessly from nothing; poured from the blackness of the night into light, found its place in the bleached world below, and was a single entity once again.

He couldn't remember when he'd last seen snow like this. Had last seen it settle with such sureness. Without so much as a by your leave. As if the world was all for the taking. He wondered how it would look by morning, if it kept falling all night?

After some time he shut the front door and went and waited again in the kitchen. He'd stay. At least until morning.