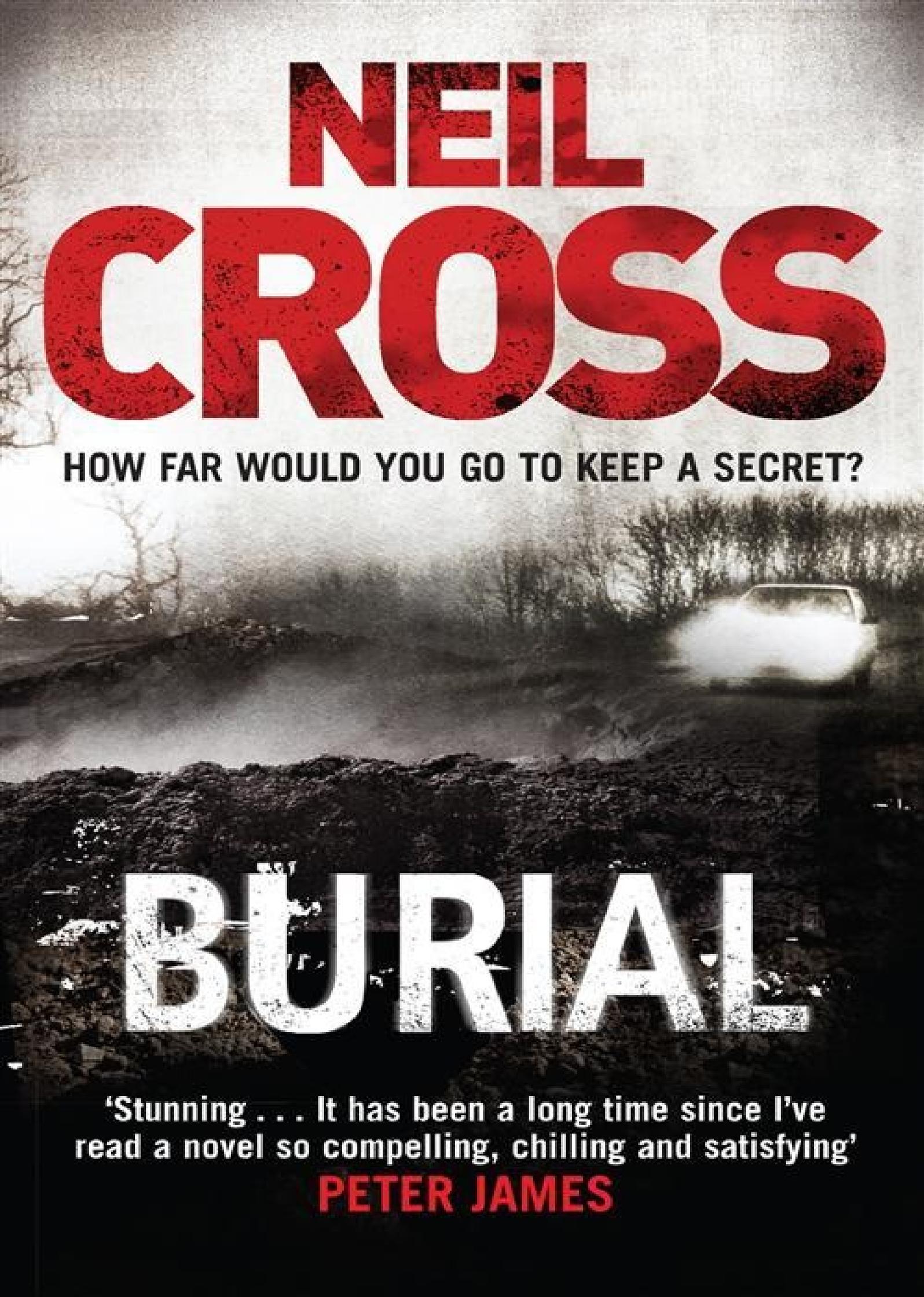


NEIL CROSS

HOW FAR WOULD YOU GO TO KEEP A SECRET?



BURIAL

'Stunning . . . It has been a long time since I've read a novel so compelling, chilling and satisfying'

PETER JAMES

Burial

by

Neil Cross

Can your guiltiest secret ever be buried? Nathan has never been able to forget the worst night of his life: the party that led to the sudden, shocking death of a young woman. Only he and Bob, an untrustworthy old acquaintance, know what really happened and they have resolved to keep it that way. But one rainy night, years later, Bob appears at Nathan's door with terrifying news, and old wounds are suddenly reopened, threatening to tear Nathan's whole world apart. Because Nathan has his own secrets now. Secrets that could destroy everything he has fought to build. And maybe Bob doesn't realise just how far Nathan will go to protect them...

SIMON SCHUSTER

London New York Sydney Toronto

A CBS COMPANY

Bertrams

10 pounds 00 pence

First published in Great Britain by Simon Schuster UK Ltd, 2009

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Simon Schuster UK Ltd

1st Floor

222 Gray's Inn Road

London WC1X 8HB

Simon Schuster Australia

Sydney

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library ISBN: 978-0-7432-3141-1

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Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Typeset in Granjon by M Rules

Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

This story is for Nadya, Ethan and Finn, for holding my hand and making me happy. It's for Jack the dog, too, if he promises to stop running away, and eating my macaroons.

1

The doorbell rang.

Nathan had a feeling - but he dismissed it, muted the TV and went to the door. There stood Bob; hunched over, grinning in the darkness and rain. Saying: 'Hello, mate.'

Nathan said, 'How did you find me?'

'I looked.'

Nathan tried to slam the door, but Bob put out a big hand, stopping it. Then he removed the hand and said, 'They're digging up the woods.'

'They're what?'

'Digging up the woods.'

'Why?'

'Does it matter? They're building a housing estate.'

'Of course it doesn't matter. What kind of housing estate?'

'The kind people live in. Are you actually listening?'

'Yes. Yeah, of course.'

Nathan glanced backwards, as if somebody was standing at his shoulder. But nobody was; it was Tuesday night. That meant Holly would be back late.

He said, 'Look. Give me a call. Phone me at work.'

'I'm here. Right now.'

'You can't come in. I'll meet you somewhere. Tomorrow.'

'I'll be gone in two minutes.'

'My wife will be home.'

But Bob just stood there, waiting in the rain. So Nathan gathered his breath and moved aside. Bob stepped over the threshold and stood dripping on the wooden floor.

He'd noticed the many framed photographs that hung in the hallway.

Nathan waited while Bob took a squinting step forward, examining the photographs

more closely. A baby girl, naked on a towel. A gap-toothed girl with a pageboy haircut. The fringe was blunt and a bit crooked - obviously trimmed by her mother. A holiday photograph in which the girl was a very young teenager, her hair short and bleached and spiky. She stood on the deck of a boat, wearing an orange life jacket. She was holding up a long, silver mackerel. In that photograph, she was laughing.

Bob looked at the photographs for a long time.

When he turned to Nathan, his voice had gone.

'What the fuck is this?'

'I told you not to come in.'

Using the wall for balance, Bob lowered himself. He sat on the stripped Victorian floorboards. He looked wrong, like an optical illusion, like a drawing where the perspective and the scale have been altered.

Fingertips brushed the hair on Nathan's nape.

In the living room, the TV flickered - and it seemed to Nathan that the lights dimmed, and flickered, then rose again.

Nathan and Bob had met fifteen years before, in the summer of 1993.

Nathan was renting a small room in a house on Maple Road. A year after leaving university, he was claiming benefit and waiting to be awarded a job on the city's biweekly listings magazine. The magazine had yet to bother rejecting his unsolicited job applications, or any of his unsolicited gig, film and record reviews. Nathan was encouraged by this lack of explicit rejection: his plan was to sit around and keep applying.

Because all the rooms in 30 Maple Road were rented out, there was no communal space in which to gather. So Nathan and his housemates spent the dole days drifting from bedroom to bedroom, drinking lots of Happy Shopper tea.

That afternoon, Pete's room was pretty quiet: from it there emerged only the earthquake throb of an Estring fed through a large amplifier and a digital delay pedal.

Nathan lay in bed, listening to it. Then he swung his legs over the edge of the bed, put on his trousers and a washed-out band T-shirt, and wandered across the mangy hallway.

Because Pete had lived in the house the longest, he'd graduated to the biggest room. In it, an old mattress doubled as a sofa. The sofa had been rescued from a skip outside next-door's house. Propped against the wall was a monumental, patched-together stereo -- assembled from gaffer-taped components joined by coloured leads and soldered interconnects.

Pete always had people in his room. Often, they were members of what was still called the convoy -- patchouli-ripe crusties who told endless dull tales of the Battle of the Beanfield. There were Goths, too, and sometimes ravers, a youth culture for which Nathan didn't much care.

There were oblique Rastafarians, a benevolent hippie called Fuzzy Rob, a speed-dealing biker called Carnie Frank, a morbidly obese West Indian truck driver called Reds. There were dangerous-looking, sarcastic men in baggy old jeans and prison tattoos.

But this afternoon, there was just a big, scruffy, feline man lolling on one of the old sofas. He wore an ivory shirt, a navy-blue suit threadbare at the cuffs and long, knotty hair that might have been backcombed since last being washed.

Nathan nodded hello and sat on the floor, hugging his bony knees.

The stranger put a Bic flame to the end of a John Player Special.

When it was lit, he leaned forward to offer Nathan his hand.

'Bob.'

Nathan shook the hand. It was very big. Shaking hands made Nathan self-conscious, like a kid playing grown-ups.

Pete sat cross-legged beneath the monstrous, teetering stereo. He wore a matted red dressing gown and dirty white socks.

Bob had a leather briefcase with him; scuffed at the seams, perhaps a lucky find in a charity shop. From it, he withdrew a Dictaphone, which he put on the floor in front of Pete, saying: 'Shall we get on?'

Nathan said, 'So, what's this all about?'

Bob was producing a spiral-bound reporter's notebook and a chewed-up Bic. 'A friend of a friend put me in contact with Pete.

He's agreed to be interviewed.'

'For what?'

'My research.'

'Cool. Are you a journalist?'

'No. It's just research.'

'For . . .?'

'My PhD.'

Nathan looked from one to the other and back again; at big handed, cumbersome Bob - and Pete in his tatty scarlet dressing gown.

He said, 'Really?'

'Really.'

'What are you researching? Music?'

Music was Pete's only interest - music and a girl called Emma, who'd dumped him eighteen months ago.

Bob gave Nathan an imperious look, and Pete stepped in: 'He wants to know about my brother.'

'Mate, I didn't even know you had a brother.'

'That's the point.'

'So, what? Is he inside or something? Like, all black sheep and shit.'

Bob said, 'If you would,' meaning Shut the fuc up, please. He turned to Pete. 'Would you prefer to be alone for this?'

'Nah. Nathan can sit in. If he's into it.'

Nathan was into it.

Bob told him, 'If you stay, please don't interrupt. Please don't ask any questions.'

'All right. Whatever. Jesus.'

Bob leaned a little towards the Dictaphone and said, 'July 4th, 1993. 1.30 p.m. The subject is Pete King, aged . . .'

'Twenty-four.'

'Pete King. Aged twenty-four.'

For a moment, Nathan thought Pete was about to start giggling.

But instead he sat up - cross-legged and straight-backed - and began to talk.

Bob: So, when are we talking about?

Pete: Summer, 1981. June or July or something. I think it was June.

And your older brother?

David, his name was. We lived out in the country - our dad had a farm. When I was little, I used to follow our David round. He showed me all these secret places. He called me a limpet; but he didn't mind, not really - not even when I went off alone to have a gander at his jazz mags.

[Laughter]

There was all these knackered old Men Onlys and Razzles and Clubs. He had them stashed in an old box between the roots of this massive old yew tree, right on the edge of our dad's land, down by the river. It must've been five hundred years old, that tree, and our David used it to stash dirty magazines.

And how old were you -- when David died?

Twelve, I suppose. Twelve, going on thirteen.

What happened?

It was stupid, really. He was helping our dad fix the bailer. It was Friday afternoon and he was in too much of a hurry. He got his arm caught, then it was ripped out of the socket. Our dad was with him. He ran off to call the ambulance, but by the time it gets there, our David's dead. And how did you feel about that?

I don't know how I felt about it, really. It was all a bit weird.

Shock, or whatever. Our mum was crying and our dad was drinking, and all these aunties and uncles and neighbours and Granddad and Grandma were round. It was sort of like I wasn't there. What happened next? Well, they buried him. Did you attend the funeral?

Yeah. But I didn't think that much of it. I'm sitting on this bloody pew in a suit, all tight round the collar. And nobody's said two proper words to me about him. It's a really hot day. You remember that summer -- they had all the riots, St Paul's, Toxteth, Brixton and wherever.

So anyway. On the way home in the car, I'm not speaking. I don't cry or nothing; I just don't speak. And as soon as the car pulls up outside the farm, I run inside. Our mum's got this big spread laid out. Sandwiches and that -- pork pies, this massive ham.

Our dad comes up to me and says, Don't do this to your mother, not today of all days.

So I start crying and run upstairs. I'm so pissed off, I don't know what to do. So I start looking round for something to smash. I want to break something -- something I really care about. Does that make sense? It's very common.

Anyway. I'm standing in the middle of my bedroom, fists all clenched, and I think: the

Specials.

Our David had been to see them -- in Bristol, at the Locarno, in 1980. He'd hung round outside and got the album signed. Not Terry Hall - but Neville had his name on there, and Roddy Radiation. It was David's most treasured thing, and I'd always wanted it. I used to nick it, hide it among my records. I only had about five - Top of the Pops and Disney songs and that - so he always found it, easy. So anyway. I go to David's bedroom and I kneel down, and there it is - the most precious thing in his world, the first Specials album, signed by Neville Staple and Roddy Radiation.

I had it in my hands, I was going to snap it - when I see something in the wardrobe mirror. I look up, thinking it must be our dad and I'm in deep shit. But it's not our dad. It's our David. Your brother David? My dead brother David, yeah. What was he doing?

Just sort of sitting there. Smiling at me. Did he speak?

He didn't need to. It was the kindest smile I ever saw. Like he knew exactly what I was doing, and why I was doing it. The funny thing is, the first thing I thought to do was to put the record back where it belongs. So I do that, and when I look up, our David's gone.

What happened next?

I sit there on the edge of the bed, next to where David had been.

Then go down to the wake and say sorry to our mum and dad. They were all right about it. Did you mention seeing David? No need. Had anything like this happened to you before?

No.

And since?

No.

One last question. What was David wearing?

[Pause]

I don't know. I can't even remember. How weird is that?

Bob sat back on the sofa, pocketing the Dictaphone.

Pete relit the skinny joint he'd allowed to go out.

Nathan said, 'Blimey.'

Pete puffed and exhaled, saying, 'Freaky or what?'

The door creaked loudly and Nathan's heart exploded in his chest.

He looked over his shoulder, at the door, saying, 'Christ. I'm getting the fear.'

Bob told him, 'Sometimes, telling these stories acts as a kind of evocation.'

'Evocation

of what?'

'I don't know. Whatever.'

Nathan's feet were cold. The worn carpet was bitty on his soles. He said, 'What are you talking about?'

'I'm doing ghosts.'

'Doing ghosts.'

'Studying them.'

'Yeah, right.'

'Absolutely. I'm two years into a PhD. Psychology.'

'But there's no such thing as ghosts.' He cast a quick, guilty glance at Pete. 'Sorry, mate.'

Pete shrugged, unbothered.

Bob began to pack up his briefcase, saying: 'So, is Pete lying?'

'Of course he's not.'

'Is he mad?'

'No.'

'Was he seeing things?'

'No.'

'Then what happened?'

'I don't know.'

'Nor do I. That's why I'm studying it.'

Bob stayed a little while longer. They drank a cup of tea and Pete played his band's

demo. Bob nodded along and seemed to approve; he promised to come to Pete's next gig. They all knew he wouldn't. Then he thanked Pete and told Nathan it had been good to meet him.

Bob said, 'See you later, then.'

Nathan thought: Not if I see you first. But he said: 'You must have an idea -- you must have an opinion.'

'On what?'

'On what they are. Ghosts.'

'They're any number of things. Illusion, delusion, hallucination.

Electromagnetic phenomena dicking around with the temporal lobe.

Infra-sound. All of the above, and more. Not many people know this, but most ghosts are spectres of the living. The ghost of a living person is called a fetch.'

'A fetch.'

'A fetch.'

'Yeah, right.'

'It's true,' said Bob, with the briefcase in his hand.

He said goodbye, and they heard him stomp down the stairs - then the creak and slam of the front door.

'Fuck me,' said Nathan. 'Where did you find him?'

They laughed.

On the bass, Pete banged out the riff from Ghostbusters. Nathan said, 'Is it true? What you told him?'

He didn't see Bob again for four and a half years.

That September, Maple Road's tolerant old landlord died, leaving the house to his daughter, who put it straight on the market. Unprotected by tenancy agreements, the housemates drifted off and away.

After Pete's band, Odorono, split up, he moved to a squat in London. A couple of years later, Nathan saw a small picture of him in Melody Maker. Odorono had become the Odorons. They released one independent album before succumbing to musical differences.

Nathan was one of the few who bought the CD; it was called The Malibu Stacey Sessions. Nathan played it three times, and tried each time to like it but never could. He filed The Malibu Stacey Sessions at the back of his collection, where it couldn't shame him with his indifference.

Now

it was Christmas, 1997.

For three years, Nathan had been employed as a researcher on a late-night local talk-back programme called The Mar Derbyshire Solution. The presenter, Mark Derbyshire, was paunchy and balding - with a neatly shaped beard which failed to obscure his close physical resemblance to a beaver. He wore satin shirts in primary colours, open to the third button.

Usually, The Mark Derbyshire Solutions lonesome audience could be relied upon to trumpet their opinion on the day's news stories.

When those stories weren't conducive to late-night chat, Nathan had to dig up some current issue that involved paedophilia, satanism, immigration, child murder, miracle cancer cures, political correctness gone mad, or European integration. This was called research. Mostly, it consisted of reading the Daily Mail.

When this think-tank of the lonely was in proper, eye-rolling form, Mark Derbyshire and the show's producer (a louche and florid ex-Fleet Street hack called Howard) kept Nathan around simply to have someone to humiliate.

A great deal of Nathan's job, therefore, involved popping out to the local twenty-four-hour garage or supermarket to buy tampons, extra-strength condoms, laxatives, or K-Y Jelly. Sometimes all four.

Sometimes, if Mark was feeling especially beneficent, Nathan might be sent to get the Jag washed instead. Sometimes, he was sent out with a pocket stuffed full of five-pound notes; in the early hours of the morning, he was required to approach strangers - in the street, on late-night garage forecourts and in taxi queues whereupon he would ask them for that evening's code word, which had been decided by Mark: it might be simply big brassieres, or it might be Nule Saddam, or it might be Mark Derbyshire is a Sex Donkey!

Slowly, this occasional item became a semi-regular feature.

Eventually it was given a name: A Fistful of Fivers, in Association with Infinity Motors, Ltd. Mark would send Nathan on to the street at 2

a.m. with 2,000 pounds in his pocket, cash. Nathan would hang around waiting to encounter some lucky member of Derby's Crew, which is what Mark called his listeners.

It didn't take Nathan very long to learn how to distribute the cash safely and quickly. Mostly, he handed wads of it to minicab drivers filling up at the twenty-four-hour garage round the corner - it was not terribly far from the police station.

Many of the cab drivers were regular listeners to The Mark Derbyshire Solution - although many of them, being immigrants, were also part of The Mark Derbyshire Problem.

Nathan was twenty-seven and at the fag end of a relationship with a girl called Sara, with whom he had once, not very long ago, believed himself to be in love. Now the sight of her nettled and demoralized him.

Sara didn't much like Nathan, either - so probably it was fortunate they barely saw one another. The Mark Derbyshire Solution was broadcast from midnight, which meant Nathan left for work shortly after 9 p.m. Sara worked in an office and didn't get home until 7.30. This left about ninety minutes for them to get through.

Nathan was pretty sure that Sara was sleeping with her boss, who was called Alex and looked like that kind of man.

There were hints. She'd taken to showering when she got home, as well as when she got up. She no longer wore her slightly tattier, more practical underwear to the office and her lingerie at the weekends; that behaviour pattern had suddenly (and neatly) reversed itself.

Nathan sometimes saw the flickerings of deceit in her face: the sidelong glance, the secret smile for a private allusion.

'Are you okay?' he would say.

'Fine,' she'd say - and smile that dreamy, knowing smile.

Nathan felt bad for her.

Now he'd decided the time had come to finish it with Sara; one of them had to do it. This is why he'd accepted that year's invitation to Mark Derbyshire's Christmas party. It was to be a kind of parting gift, and a kind of unspoken apology.

Sara didn't listen to The Mark Derbyshire Solution - it was on too late - but she'd always been impressed that Nathan worked for Mark Derbyshire, who had once been famous. And she'd always wanted to go to his party. But every year Nathan found an excuse not to.

The Christmas party had been written into Mark's contract when he still meant something, which was a very long time ago indeed.

But the radio station still paid for the drinks, the canapes and a miserable local wedding DJ to play some Boney M. records. Most of the senior management and a

number of the station DJs and newsreaders felt compelled to attend. Many of the junior staff actively looked forward to it and so, apparently, did the communities local to Mark's house.

Before leaving for work on Wednesday evening, Nathan told Sara, 'So. We've been invited again.'

'To Mark's party?'

'To Mark's party.'

She froze, like a fawn in woodland.

Nathan was putting on his plaid jacket, the one he wore to work during the winter. He said, 'It's probably best if we don't go. There'll be a lot of drugs around, I expect.'

Ordinarily, Sara disapproved of drugs. But now exasperation flickered round the edges of her face. This was Mark Derbyshire's Christmas party, and the presence or absence of drugs was of no interest to her.

She grew demure. 'But I'd really like to.'

She said this every Christmas. And every Christmas, Nathan said, 'Maybe next year.'

Now she simpered a little, half playing, half meaning it, stroking his upper arm with the back of her fingernails, saying, 'Pretty please?'

And Nathan said, 'Okay, then. Why not?'

She screamed and kissed him - smacking him on the cheek and on the forehead.

Even as recently as a few months ago, they'd probably have had quick, celebratory sex. But Nathan and Sara no longer had sex.

Neither of them had mentioned it; it made them too sad, too awkward and too embarrassed.

Now, Sara got so childishly excited - running and whooping -- that she had to run to the bathroom.

At first, this pleased him; it had been a while since she was so happy in his company. Then he began to wonder when, exactly, she'd begun closing the bathroom door when she needed to pee.

It seemed to him that he really should know something like that if only so he could identify it as the moment he knew for sure that it was really over.

But he hadn't noticed, and the moment he knew for sure it was really over was right

now, right this second.

After the moment had passed, he called out, 'I'm late, I have to run!' and opened the door.

From the bathroom, she yelled, 'See you, babes!' and he smiled.

He caught the bus to work.

Saturday was the night of the party. Nathan slept late and woke, unusually, to the sound of Sara going about the house, singing. It was a sunny, late-winter afternoon, and from the flat the traffic noise was reduced to a monotonous hiss.

He got up and pulled on an old and faded band T-shirt. Utterly Bastard Groovy, it read, green on black. Utterly bastard groovy was exactly what Nathan never felt, not any more.) In this and a pair of Calvins, he slapped barefoot to the compact living room.

Sara was sitting at the table, one hand round a mug of coffee, reading the Guardian Review. Nathan was struck by the reality of her. He saw how pretty she was, and how young; with her face cleansed and scrubbed of make-up, he could see the tiny imperfections and freckles on her nose and cheeks, and her eyes looked naked and vulnerable. She was bare-legged, wearing only one of his T-shirts. It fitted her like a minidress. This is how she'd dressed on those far-off Saturday mornings when he first knew her; those days when it would have seemed impossible that he could ever grow to dislike her, or she him. Or that they could ever stop having sex.

In the afternoon they snuggled chastely on the sofa, watching a black and white film as the winter sun dipped in the west.

At 5.30, they began to get ready. Nathan took a shower and shaved. He had a couple of good suits hanging in the wardrobe -- he'd bought them with his first credit card when he and Sara were first together and he was light-headed with the idea of being in love, and being loved by this lovely girl. There were some good shirts, too (also yet to be paid for), and several good ties. Nathan never wore ties; he had the wrong kind of job. But Sara kept buying them, and with each tie he unwrapped from tissue paper, he sensed her disdain for his lack of ambition ratchet up another notch. The ties hung on a rack in his wardrobe, a Technicolor indictment.

When, in a rolling cloud of scented steam, Sara finally emerged from the bathroom, wrapped in a white towel, Nathan was dressed and ready, laying out his wallet and keys on the kitchen table. He wore a charcoal-grey suit over a black T-shirt.

He sat on the bed and watched her. There was no prevarication; she'd been planning her outfit for days now. She blow-dried her short hair with brisk, staggering efficiency, so the asymmetrical fringe fell over one eye. She applied her make-up with a few, quick, practised strokes (but in a manner he knew required years of diligent practice, like elite sportsmanship). Towel off: knickers on. Bra. Pull-up stockings.

Spritz of perfume. Dress. Slip on heels. Suddenly remember to apply roll-on deodorant. Examine self in mirror from several difficult angles, smoothing down creases with an alluring little shimmy. Open handbag. Double-check keys, address book, mobile phone, whatever other mysteries the bag contained. Lean in to mirror. Fiddle with fringe, minutely calibrating it. Add mascara.

She ordered a taxi and mixed them a gin and tonic. The plan was to sit listening to music - Sara's choice - until the taxi arrived. Nathan hated the Cranberries.

He walked to the bathroom, locking the door behind him.

Faintly embarrassed by his own nervousness, he ran the taps just to make a noise. Then he removed from his pocket a little Ziploc bag containing four grammes of cocaine in four paper wraps. He'd cleaned out his savings account to buy it. The supplier was Howard, the grey-haired ex-hack who produced The Mark Derbyshire Solution.

Nathan racked up two fat lines on the cistern, then took the little pewter snorting spoon he'd bought from a now-closed head shop in Cornwall one good summer that seemed a million years ago, and he snorted back, crisply and efficiently. Then he stood straight, looking at the ceiling, sniffing. His snot tasted chemical.

He smiled with joy at the memory of it and knew it was working already.

He tucked the spoon into one pocket and the wraps into another, opened the bathroom door and walked out, sniffing.

In her party dress, Sara stood alone in the centre of the room, one hand cupping an elbow, the other holding a long glass of gin and tonic. As if she were the host and waiting for the party to begin.

At the railway station, they queued for tickets. There were twenty minutes to kill. They stopped for a drink at the generic railway bar.

Nathan visited the lavatory. Then they hurried to catch the train. It sat on a wintry platform. They boarded and sat without speaking, Sara staring - apparently sombre - at her blank-eyed reflection in the train window, and through it to the passengers on the platform who passed spectrally by.

Nathan said, 'Christ. I'd kill for a cigarette.'

She gave him the look.

'Come on,' he said. 'Just one night. It's party nerves.'

She allowed herself an expression of benevolent radiance. 'Go on.'

It's only one night.'

It's only cancer, he thought, producing a packet of Marlboro Lights from his coat pocket; one of four he'd bought to last him a long evening.

He stood between the carriages of the juddering train, blowing smoke out the window.

Half an hour later, they pulled up to Sutton Parkway. It was little more than a dark, astringently cold concrete platform.

Nathan gathered himself, saddened a little to know the best part of Sara's evening, the anticipation, was nearly over. Almost certainly, from now on, the evening would only get worse.

Outside the station, they caught a minicab.

Nathan paid the driver and the minicab pulled away, its tail lights smudged and indistinct in the billowing white exhaust.

Their party shoes scratched on the cold gravel of the long driveway.

From inside the big house came a faint, muffled, repetitive boom; the windows vibrated with it.

Mark Derbyshire had built this mansion in the late seventies, when he could still afford it. At the rear was a helicopter landing pad, long since overgrown.

Nathan offered Sara his elbow and together they approached the door. It was answered by a balding man dressed as a butler; Nathan hoped he'd been hired for the evening.

Sara removed her coat, shrugging it from her narrow white shoulders in a way that made him remember, for a moment, why he'd once believed himself to be in love with her.

The magnolia hall was hung with gold and silver discs from forgotten bands and singers whose records Mark Derbyshire had once helped to climb the charts. And there were many framed eight by tens. In them a younger and thinner Mark Derbyshire - but with the same neatly trimmed beard, the same look of jovial malice - placed his arm round the shoulder of one squirming celebrity or other: a young Madonna was there, and David Bowie showed his David Bowie teeth. Elton John looked frumpy and unhappy in a straw boater and comedy spectacles. The photographs made Nathan melancholy.

Sara said, 'Shall we?' and - feeling for a moment like Cary Grant -- he led her inside the double door into the ballroom.

At the far end, the wedding DJ stood at his mixing desk. A few guests, mostly young local girls, were dancing.

Sara tugged his elbow.

'What?'

'Celebrity count?'

'It's early days. It's not even nine.'

She looked at him, trustingly. They pushed and 'excuse-me'd and danced round the loose crowd to get to the drinks table. It was a long trestle, behind which stood six young men in burgundy shirts, pouring drinks.

Nathan surveyed the party, holding a gin and tonic. He barely knew anyone - certainly nobody to whom he felt inclined to introduce Sara. He wondered what on earth they could find to talk about until it was time for her to go home disappointed.

They stared at the party and into their drinks. Nathan tried not to look at the senior managers -- whom he regarded with contempt for their black suits and their big, old-man ears and their stupid fucking cigars.

He made an effort to point out colleagues whose names he might have mentioned in passing, but Sara wasn't really interested; she wanted to see, and be introduced to, celebrities. But no real celebrity had stepped over Mark Derbyshire's threshold since Margaret Thatcher was in power.

Eventually, Howard strolled past. Although to Nathan he was obviously fucked out of his mind, he carried a certain louche charm, with his curly grey-white hair, his unlatched bow-tie. Nathan grabbed his elbow.

'Howard! Mate! Have you met Sara?'

Howard had not met Sara.

Shaking her hand, he glanced at her creamy décolletage with an expression that resembled sorrow. Then he locked eyes with her.

Howard had pale Icelandic eyes and they shone like a missile guidance system.

Nathan said, 'Tell her about some of the people you've worked with.'

'I'm sure she's got better things to do than listen to my war stories.'

'The Rolling Stones,' said Nathan, not without desperation. 'The Beatles. Spandau Ballet.'

'Spandau Ballet!' said Sara.

And that was it. She was happy.

Nathan hung around for a while, but soon it became clear he was no longer required.

He wandered off to get another drink, then followed the chlorine tang towards the indoor swimming pool.

The atmosphere round the pool was excitingly muted and full of potential. Nathan leaned against the damp wall and stared through the steamy glass ceiling at the pin-sharp December sky. He recognized none of the constellations and for a moment fantasized that he'd entered a deeply foreign country. He felt good.

In the corner was Mark Derbyshire. He was engaged in restrained conversation with a big, shambling, shaggy-haired man in crumpled dinner jacket and an Hawaiian shirt. The shambling man seemed to be controlling the conversation: Mark Derbyshire looked diminished, clutching his glass of wine in one hairy-backed hand, nodding along, glancing left and right.

Mark spotted Nathan and rolled his eyes with relief, beckoning Nathan over.

'Nathan. You have to meet this guy.'

The shambling man turned. And for the second time in his life, Nathan reached out to shake Bob's hand.

'Mate,' he said, recognizing Nathan. 'Good to see you.'

Mark said, 'You know this guy?'

Nathan said, 'Kind of.'

Bob said, 'From way back. How are you? You're looking a bit more prosperous.'

Nathan looked down at his suit, still unpaid for. 'Well. Y'know.'

He caught Mark Derbyshire's confused, malevolent little eyes.

Bob explained to Mark, 'He was a bit of a hippie when I knew him.'

And Nathan protested: 'I don't know about that'

'Bit of a new age traveller,' said Bob. 'All patchouli and ganja.'

'That's great,' said Mark, who at least knew what ganja was; he'd heard it mentioned in a comedy reggae song. 'It's great that you two know each other. I can make you Bob's liaison, Nathan.'

'Great,' said Nathan, not knowing what Mark was talking about.

'We're going to have Bob on the show,' said Mark.

'As an experiment,' said Bob.