

Tuesday

HE WAS LOST. HE WASN'T USED TO BEING LOST. HE WAS the kind of man who drew up plans and then executed them efficiently, but now everything was conspiring against him in ways he decided he couldn't have foreseen. He had been stuck in a jam on the A1 for two mind-numbing hours so that it was already past the middle of the morning when he arrived in Edinburgh. Then he'd gone adrift on a one-way system and been thwarted by a road closed because of a burst water main. It had been raining, steadily and unforgivingly, on the drive north and had only begun to ease off as he hit the outskirts of town. The rain had in no way deterred the crowds – it had never occurred to him that Edinburgh was in the middle of 'the Festival' and that there would be carnival hordes of people milling around as if the end of a war had just been declared. The closest he had previously got to the Edinburgh Festival was accidentally turning on Late Night Review and seeing a bunch of middle-class wankers discussing some pretentious piece of fringe theatre.

He ended up in the dirty heart of the city, in a street that somehow seemed to be on a lower level than the rest of the town, a blackened urban ravine. The rain had left the cobbles slick and greasy and he had to drive cautiously because the street was teeming with people, haphazardly crossing over or standing in little knots in the middle of the road, as if no one had told them that roads were for cars and pavements were for pedestrians. A queue snaked the length of the street – people waiting to get into what looked like a bomb hole in the wall but which announced itself, on a large placard outside the door, as 'Fringe Venue 164'.

The name on the driving licence in his wallet was Paul Bradley. 'Paul Bradley' was a nicely forgettable name. He was several degrees of separation away from his real name now, a name that no longer felt as if it had ever belonged to him. When he wasn't working he often (but not always) went by the name 'Ray'. Nice and simple. Ray of light, Ray of darkness. Ray of sunshine, Ray of night. He liked slipping between identities, sliding through the cracks. The rental Peugeot he was driving felt just right, not a flashy macho machine but the kind of car an ordinary guy would drive. An ordinary guy like Paul Bradley. If anyone asked him what he did, what Paul Bradley did, he would say, 'Boring stuff. I'm just a desk jockey, pushing papers around in an accounts department.'

He was trying to drive and at the same time decipher his A-Z of Edinburgh to work out how to escape from this hellish street when someone stepped in front of the car. It was a type he loathed – a young dark-haired guy with thick, black-framed spectacles, two days of stubble and a fag hanging out of his mouth, there were hundreds of them in London, all trying to look like French existentialists from the Sixties. He'd bet that not one of them had ever opened a book on philosophy. He'd read the lot, Plato, Kant, Hegel, even thought about one day doing a degree.

He braked hard and didn't hit the spectacles guy, just made him give a little jump, like a bullfighter avoiding the bull. The guy was furious, waving his fag around, shouting,

raising a finger to him. Charmless, devoid of manners – were his parents proud of the job they'd done? He hated smoking, it was a disgusting habit, hated guys who gave you the finger and screamed, 'Spin on it!', saliva flying out of their filthy, nicotine-stained mouths.

He felt the bump, about the same force as hitting a badger or a fox on a dark night, except it came from behind, pushing him forward. It was just as well the spectacles guy had performed his little *paso doble* and got out of the way or he would have been pancaked. He looked in the rear-view mirror. A blue Honda Civic, the driver climbing out – big guy, slabs of weightlifter muscle, gym-fit rather than survival-fit, he wouldn't have been able to last three months in the jungle or the desert the way that Ray could have done. He wouldn't have lasted a day. He was wearing driving gloves, ugly black leather ones with knuckle holes. He had a dog in the back of the car, a beefy Rottweiler, exactly the dog you would have guessed a guy like that would have. The guy was a walking cliché. The dog was having a seizure in the back, spraying saliva all over the window, its claws scrabbling on the glass. The dog didn't worry him too much. He knew how to kill dogs.

Ray got out of the car and walked round to the back bumper to inspect the damage. The Honda driver started yelling at him, 'You stupid, fucking twat, what did you think you were doing?' English. Ray tried to think of something to say that would be non-confrontational, that would calm the guy down – you could see he was a pressure cooker waiting to blow, wanting to blow, bouncing on his feet like an out-of-condition heavyweight. Ray adopted a neutral stance, a neutral expression, but then he heard the crowd give a little collective 'Aah' of horror and he registered the baseball bat that had suddenly appeared in the guy's hand out of nowhere and thought, shit.

That was the last thought he had for several seconds. When he was able to think again he was sprawled on the street, holding the side of his head where the guy had cracked him. He heard the sound of broken glass – the bastard was putting in every window in his car now. He tried, unsuccessfully, to struggle to his feet but managed only to get to a kneeling position as if he was at prayer and now the guy was advancing with the bat lifted, feeling the heft of it in his hand, ready to swing for a home run on his skull. Ray put an arm up to defend himself, made himself even more dizzy by doing that and, sinking back on to the cobbles, thought, Jesus, is this it? He'd given up, he'd actually given up – something he'd never done before – when someone stepped out of the crowd, wielding something square and black that he threw at the Honda guy, clipping him on the shoulder and sending him reeling.

He blacked out again for a few seconds and when he came to there were a couple of policewomen hunkered down beside him, one of them saying, 'Just take it easy, sir,' the other one on her radio calling for an ambulance. It was the first time in his life that he'd been glad to see the police.

MARTIN HAD NEVER DONE ANYTHING LIKE THAT IN HIS life before. He didn't even kill flies in the house, instead he patiently stalked them, trapping them with a glass and a plate before letting them free. The meek shall inherit the earth. He was fifty and had never knowingly committed an act of violence against another living creature, although sometimes he thought that might be more to do with cowardice than pacifism.

He had stood in the queue, waiting for someone else to intervene in the scene unfolding before them, but the crowd were in audience mode, like promenaders at a particularly brutal piece of theatre, and they had no intention of spoiling the entertainment. Even Martin had wondered at first if it was another show – a faux-impromptu piece intended either to shock or to reveal our immunity to being shocked because we lived in a global media community where we had become passive voyeurs of violence (and so on). That was the line of thought running through the detached, intellectual part of his brain. His primitive brain, on the other hand, was thinking, Oh fuck, this is horrible, really horrible, please make the bad man go away. He wasn't surprised to hear his father's voice in his head (Pull yourself together, Martin). His father had been dead for many years but Martin often still heard the bellow and yell of his parade-ground tones. When the Honda driver finished breaking the windows of the silver Peugeot and walked towards the driver, brandishing his weapon and preparing himself for a final victory blow, Martin realized that the man on the ground was probably going to die, was probably going to be killed by the crazed man with the bat right there in front of them unless someone did something and, instinctively, without thinking about it at all – because if he'd thought about it he might not have done it – he slipped his bag off his shoulder and swung it, hammer-throw fashion, at the head of the insane Honda driver.

He missed the man's head, which didn't surprise him – he'd never been able to aim or catch, he was the kind of person who ducked when a ball was thrown in his direction – but his laptop was in the bag and the hard weighty edge of it caught the Honda driver on the shoulder and sent him spinning.

The nearest Martin had been to a real crime scene previously had been on a Society of Authors' trip around St Leonard's police station. Apart from Martin, the group consisted entirely of women. 'You're our token man,' one of them said to him and he sensed a certain disappointment in the polite laughter of the others, as if the least he could have done as their token man was to be a little less like a woman.

They had been offered coffee and biscuits – chocolate bourbons, pink wafer sandwiches, they had all been impressed by the assortment – and a 'senior policeman' had given a pleasant talk in a new conference room that felt as if it had been specially designed for groups like theirs. Then they were shown round various parts of the building, the call centre and the cavernous space of a room where people in plain-clothes ('NCIS') who were sitting at the computers glanced briefly at 'the authors', decided, correctly, they were irrelevant, and returned to their screens.

They had all stood in a line-up, one of their members had her fingerprints taken and then they were locked – briefly – in a cell, where they had shuffled and giggled to take the edge off the claustrophobia. ‘Giggle’, it struck Martin, was an almost exclusively female word. Women giggle, men simply laugh. Martin worried that he was a bit of a giggler himself. At the end of the tour, as if it had been staged for their benefit, they witnessed, with a little frisson of fear, a team being hastily assembled in riot gear to remove a ‘difficult’ prisoner from a cell.

The tour hadn’t had much relevance to the kind of books that Martin wrote, in the person of his alter ego, ‘Alex Blake’. They were old-fashioned, soft-boiled crime novels featuring a heroine called ‘Nina Riley’, a gung-ho kind of girl who had inherited a detective agency from her uncle. The books were set in the Forties, just after the war. It was an era in history Martin felt particularly drawn to, the monochrome deprivation of it, the undertow of seedy disappointment in the wake of heroism. The Vienna of the *The Third Man*, the Home Counties of *Brief Encounter*. What must it have felt like to have pinned your colours to the standard of a just war, to have experienced so many noble feelings (yes, a lot of propaganda, but the kernel of it was true), to have been released from the burden of individualism? To have stood on the edge of destruction and defeat and come through? And thought, now what? Of course, Nina Riley didn’t feel any of those things, she was only twenty-two and had seen out the war in a Swiss finishing school. And she wasn’t real.

Nina Riley had always been a tomboy, though she had no apparent lesbian tendencies and was constantly courted by a great variety of men with whom she was remarkably chaste. (‘s as if’, an ‘appreciative reader’ wrote to him, ‘a Chalet School head girl grew up and became a detective.’) Nina lived in a geographically vague version of Scotland that contained sea and mountains and rolling moorland, all within a fast drive of every major town in Scotland (and, frequently, England, although never Wales, something Martin thought he should perhaps rectify) in her racy open-top Bristol. When he wrote the first Nina Riley book he had conceived it as an affectionate nod in the direction of an earlier time and an earlier form. ‘A pastiche, if you will,’ he said nervously, when he was introduced to his editor at the publishing house. ‘A kind of ironic homage.’ It had been a surprise to find that he was being published. He had written the book to entertain himself and suddenly he was sitting in a featureless London office feeling he had to justify the nonsense he had created to a young woman who seemed to find it difficult to keep her mind on him.

‘Be that as it may,’ she said, making a visible effort to look at him, ‘what I see is a book I can sell. A sort of jolly murder mystery. People crave nostalgia, the past is like a drug. How many books do you envisage in the series?’

‘Series?’

‘Hi.’

Martin turned round and saw a man leaning against the door jamb in an attitude of almost absurd casualness. He was older than Martin but dressed younger.

‘Hi,’ the young editor said in return, giving the man her rapt attention. Their minimal exchange seemed to carry almost more meaning than it could bear. ‘Neil Winters, our MD,’ she said, with a proud smile. ‘This is Martin Canning, Neil. He’s written a wonderful book.’

‘Fantastic,’ Neil Winters said, shaking Martin’s hand. His hand was damp and soft like something dead you might find on the beach. ‘The first of many, I hope.’

Within a couple of weeks Neil Winters was transported into more elevated echelons in the European mothership and Martin never met him again, but nevertheless he saw that

handshake as the identifiable moment when his life changed.

Martin had recently sold the television rights for the Nina Riley books. 'Like getting into a warm bath. Perfect fodder for the Sunday evening slot,' the BBC producer said, making it sound like an insult, which of course it was.

In the two-dimensional fictional world that she inhabited, Nina Riley had so far solved three murders, a jewel theft, a bank robbery, retrieved a stolen racehorse, prevented the kidnapping of the infant Prince Charles from Balmoral and, on her sixth outing, almost single-handedly foiled a plot to steal the Scottish crown jewels. The seventh, *The Monkey-Puzzle Tree*, was newly in paperback on the 'Three for Two' tables in every bookshop. The seventh was 'darker', everyone seemed to agree (Blake is finally moving towards a more mature noir style, 'a reader' had written on Amazon. Everyone's a critic.), but despite this his sales remained 'buoyant', according to his agent, Melanie. 'No end in sight yet, Martin,' she said. Melanie was Irish and it made everything she said sound nice even when it wasn't.

If people asked him – as they frequently did – why he had become a writer, Martin usually answered that as he spent most of his time in his imagination it had seemed like a good idea to get paid for it. He said this jovially, no giggling, and people smiled as if he'd said something amusing. What they didn't understand was that it was the truth – he lived inside his head. Not in an intellectual or philosophical way, in fact his interior life was remarkably banal. He didn't know if it was the same for everyone. Did other people spend their time daydreaming about a better version of the everyday? No one ever talked about the life of the imagination, except in terms of some kind of Keatsian high art. No one mentioned the pleasure of picturing yourself sitting in a deckchair on a lawn, beneath a cloudless midsummer sky, contemplating the spread of a proper, old-fashioned afternoon tea, prepared by a cosy woman with a mature bosom and spotless apron who said things like 'Come on now, eat up, ducks,' because this was how cosy women with mature bosoms spoke in Martin's imagination, an odd kind of sub-Dickensian discourse.

The world inside his head was so much better than the world outside his head. Scones, home-made blackcurrant jam, clotted cream. Overhead, swallows sliced through the blue, blue sky, swooping and diving like Battle of Britain pilots. The distant thock of leather on willow. The scent of hot, strong tea and new-mown grass. Surely these things were infinitely preferable to a terrifyingly angry man with a baseball bat?

Martin had been hauling his laptop around with him because the lunchtime comedy showcase he had been queuing for was a detour on today's (very tardy) path to his 'office'. Martin had recently rented the 'office' in a refurbished block in Marchmont. It had once been a licensed grocer but now provided bland, featureless space – plasterboard walls and laminate floors, broadband connections and halogen lighting – to a firm of architects, an IT consultancy, and, now, Martin. He had rented the 'office' in the vain hope that if he left the house to go and write every day and kept normal working hours like other people it would somehow help him to overcome the lethargy that had descended on the book he was currently working on ('Death on the Black Isle'). He suspected it was a bad sign that he thought of the 'office' as a place that existed only in inverted commas, a fictional concept rather than a location where anything was actually achieved.

'Death on the Black Isle' was like a book under an enchantment, no matter how much he wrote, there never seemed to be any more of it. 'You should change the title, it sounds like a Tintin book,' Melanie said. Before being published eight years ago Martin had been a religious studies teacher and for some reason Melanie, at an early stage of

their relationship, had got it into her head (and never been able to get it out again) that Martin had once been in a monastery. How she had made this leap he had never understood. True, he had a premature tonsure of thinning hair, but apart from that he didn't think there was anything particularly monastic in his appearance. It didn't matter how much he had tried to disabuse Melanie of her fixation, it was still the thing about him that she found most interesting. It was Melanie who had disseminated this misinformation to his publicist, who had, in turn, broadcast it to the world at large. It was on public record, it was in the cuttings file and on the internet and no matter how many times Martin said to a journalist, 'No, actually I was never a monk, that's a mistake,' they still made it the fulcrum of the interview – Blake demurs when the priesthood is mentioned. Or Alex Blake dismisses his early religious calling but there is still something cloistered about his character. And so on.

'Death on the Black Isle' felt even more trite and formulaic to Martin than his previous books, something to be read and immediately forgotten in beds and hospitals, on trains, planes, beaches. He had been writing a book a year since he began with Nina Riley and he thought that he had simply run out of steam. They plodded along together, he and his flimsy creation, stuck on the same tracks. He worried that they would never escape each other, that he would be writing about her inane escapades for ever. He would be an old man and she would still be twenty-two and he would have wrung all the life out of both of them. 'No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no,' Melanie said, 'it's called mining a rich seam, Martin.' Milking a cash cow for all it was worth was how someone else, someone not on 15 per cent, might have put it. He wondered if he could change his name – or, even better, use his real name – and write something different, something with real meaning and value.

Martin's father had been a career soldier, a company sergeant-major, but Martin himself had chosen a decidedly non-combatant path in life. He and his brother Christopher had attended a small Church of England boarding school that provided the sons of the armed forces with a spartan environment that was one step up from the workhouse. When he left this atmosphere of cold showers and cross-country running (We make men out of boys), Martin had gone to a mediocre university where he had taken an equally mediocre degree in religious studies because it was the only subject he had good exam grades in – thanks to the relentless, compulsory promotion of Bible studies as a way of filling up the dangerous, empty hours available to adolescent boys at boarding school.

University was followed by a postgraduate diploma in teaching to give himself time to think about what he 'really' wanted to do. He had certainly never intended actually to become a teacher, certainly not a religious studies teacher, but somehow or other he found that at the age of twenty-two he had already gone full circle in his life and was teaching in a small fee-paying boarding school in the Lake District, full of boys who had failed the entrance exams of the better public schools and whose sole interests in life seemed to be rugby and masturbation.

Although he thought of himself as someone who had been born middle-aged, he was only four years older than the oldest boys and it seemed ridiculous that he should be educating them in anything, but particularly religion. Of course, the boys he taught didn't regard him as a young man, he was an 'old fart' for whom they had no care at all. They were cruel, callous boys who were, likely as not, going to grow up into cruel, callous men. As far as Martin could see, they were being trained up to fill the Tory back benches in the House of Commons and he saw it as his duty to try to introduce them to the concept of morality before it was too late, although unfortunately for most of them it

already was. Martin himself was an atheist but he hadn't completely ruled out the possibility that one day he might experience a conversion – a sudden lifting of the veil, an opening of his heart – although he thought it more likely that he was damned to be for ever on the road to Damascus, the road most travelled.

Except for where the syllabus dictated, Martin had tended to ignore Christianity as much as possible and concentrate instead on ethics, comparative religion, philosophy, social studies (anything except Christianity, in fact). It was his remit to 'promote understanding and spirituality', he claimed, if challenged by a rugby-playing, Anglican, fascist parent. He spent a lot of time teaching the boys the tenets of Buddhism because he had discovered, through trial and error, that it was the most effective way of messing with their minds.

He thought, I'll just do this for a bit, and then perhaps go travelling or take another qualification or get a more interesting job and a new life will start, but instead the old life had carried on and he had felt it spinning out into nothing, the threads wearing thin, and sensed if he didn't do something he would stay there for ever, growing older than the boys all the time until he retired and died, having spent most of his life in a boarding school. He knew he would have to do something proactive, he was not a person to whom things simply happened. His life had been lived in some kind of neutral gear: he had never broken a limb, never been stung by a bee, never been close to love or death. He had never strived for greatness and his reward had been a small life.

Forty approached. He was on an express train hurtling towards death – he had always found refuge in rather febrile metaphor – when he joined a creative writing class, being run as some kind of rural outreach educational programme. The class met in a village hall and was run by a woman called Dorothy who drove from Kendal and whose qualifications to teach the class were unclear. She'd had a couple of stories published in a northern arts magazine, readings and workshops (work in progress) and an unsuccessful play performed at the Edinburgh Fringe about the women in Milton's life (Milton's Women). The very mention of 'Edinburgh' in the class made Martin feel sick with nostalgia for a place he hardly knew. His mother was a native of the city and Martin had spent the first three years of his life there when his father had been stationed at the Castle. One day, he thought, as Dorothy rattled on about form and content and the necessity of 'finding your own voice', one day he would go back to Edinburgh and live there. 'And read!' she exclaimed, opening her arms wide so that her voluminous velvet cloak spread out like bat wings, 'Read everything that has ever been written.' There were some mutinous murmurs from the class – they had come to learn how to write (or at least some of them had), not to read.

Dorothy seemed dynamic. She wore red lipstick, long skirts and flamboyant scarves and wraps that she pinned with big pewter or silver brooches. She wore ankle boots with heels, black diamond-print stockings, funny crushed-velvet hats. That was at the beginning of the autumn session when the Lake District was decked in its gaudy finery, but by the time it had descended into the drab damp of winter Dorothy herself was wearing less theatrical wellingtons and fleeces. She also had grown less theatrical. She had begun the session with frequent references to her 'partner' who was a writer-in-residence somewhere, but by the time Christmas loomed she wasn't mentioning the partner at all and her red lipstick had been replaced with an unhappy beige that matched her skin.

They had disappointed her too, her motley collection of retirees and farming wives and people wanting to change their lives before it was too late. 'It's never too late!' she declared with the enthusiasm of an evangelist, but most of them understood that

sometimes it was. There was a gruff man who seemed to despise them all and who wrote in a Hughesian way about birds of prey and dead sheep on hillsides. Martin had presumed he was something to do with the country – a farmer or a gamekeeper – but it turned out he was a redundant oil geologist who had moved to the Lakes and gone native. There was a girl, a studenty type, who really did despise them all. She wore black lipstick (disturbing in contrast to Dorothy's beige) and wrote about her own death and the effect it would have on the people around her. And there were a couple of nice ladies from the WI who didn't seem to want to write at all.

Dorothy urged them to produce little pieces of auto biographical angst, secrets of the confessional, therapeutic texts about their childhood, their dreams, their depressions. Instead they wrote about the weather, holidays, animals. The gruff man wrote about sex and everyone stared at the floor while he read out loud, only Dorothy listened with bland interest, her head cocked on one side, her lips stretched in encouragement.

'All right then,' she said, sounding defeated, 'write about a visit or a stay in hospital, for your "homework".' Martin wondered when they were going to start writing fiction but the pedagogue in him responded to the word homework and he set about the task conscientiously.

The WI women wrote sentimental pieces about visiting old people and children in hospital. 'Charming,' Dorothy said. The gruff man described in gory detail an operation to remove his appendix. 'Vibrant,' Dorothy said. The miserable girl wrote about being in hospital in Barrow-in-Furness after trying to cut her wrists. 'Shame she didn't manage it,' muttered one of the farmers' wives sitting next to Martin.

Martin himself had been in hospital only once in his life, when he was fourteen – Martin had found that each year of his teens brought some fresh hell. He had passed a funfair on his way back from town. His father was stationed in Germany at the time, and Martin and his brother, Christopher, were spending the summer holidays there on leave from the rigours of their boarding school. The fact that it was a German funfair made it an even more terrifying place for Martin. He didn't know where Christopher was that afternoon, probably playing cricket with other boys from the base. Martin had seen the funfair at night when the lights and smells and shouting were a dystopian vision that Bosch would have enjoyed painting. In the daylight it seemed less threatening and his father's voice appeared in his head, as it was wont to do (unfortunately), shouting, 'Face the thing you're afraid of, boy!' So he paid the entrance fee and proceeded to skirt gingerly around the various attractions because it wasn't really the atmosphere of a funfair that scared him, it was the rides. Even playground swings used to make him sick when he was younger.

He searched in his pocket for change and bought a Kartoffelpuffer from a food stall. His grasp on the language was slippery but he felt pretty safe with Kartoffel. The fritter was greasy and tasted oddly sugary and sat in his stomach like lead so it really was a bad time for his father's voice to make a reappearance in his head, just at the moment when Martin wandered past a huge swing, like a ship. He didn't know the name for it in German, but in English he knew it was a Pirate Boat.

The Pirate Boat was rising and falling in a huge, impossible parabola in the sky, the cries of the occupants following the trajectory in a swoop of terror. The very idea of it, let alone the palpable reality in front of him, struck an absolute kind of horror in Martin's breast and, on that principle, he tossed the remains of his Kartoffelpuffer into a waste bin, paid the fare and climbed aboard.

It was his father who came to the civilian Krankenhaus to take him home. He had been taken to the hospital after he was found on the floor of the Pirate Boat, limp and semi-

conscious. It wasn't a mental thing, it was nothing to do with courage, it turned out that he was particularly sensitive to g-forces. The doctor who discharged him laughed and said, in perfect English, 'If you want my advice, you'll not apply to be a fighter pilot.'

His father had walked right past his hospital bed without recognizing him. Martin tried to wave but he failed to see his son's hand flapping weakly on the covers. Eventually someone at the nurses' station directed him to his son's bed. His father was in uniform and looked out of place in the hospital ward. He loomed over Martin and said, 'You're a fucking fairy. Pull yourself together.'

'There are some things that are nothing to do with character weakness. There are some things that a person is constitutionally incapable of dealing with,' Martin concluded. 'And, of course, that was another country, another life.'

'Very good,' Dorothy said.

'It was a bit thin,' the gruff man said.

'My life has been a bit thin so far,' Martin said.

For the last class of the session Dorothy brought in bottles of wine, packets of Ritz crackers and a block of red cheddar. They appropriated paper cups and plates from the kitchen of the village hall. Dorothy raised her cup and said, 'Well, we survived,' which seemed an odd kind of toast to Martin. 'Let's hope,' she continued, 'that we all meet again for the spring session.' Whether it was the imminence of Christmas or the balloons and shiny foil decorations hanging in the village hall, or indeed simply the novel notion of survival, Martin didn't know, but a certain celebratory air washed over them. Even the gruff man and the suicidal girl entered into the jubilee spirit. More bottles of wine emerged from people's backpacks and A4-sized bags, they had been unsure if there was going to be an end-of-term 'do' but had come prepared.

Martin supposed that all of these elements, but particularly the wine, contributed to the surprising fact of his waking up next morning in Dorothy's bed in Kendal.

Her pale face was pouchy and she pulled the covers over her and said, 'Don't look at me, I'm a fright first thing.' It was true she did look a bit of a fright but, of course, Martin would never have said so. He wanted to ask her how old she was but he supposed that would be even worse.

Later, over an expensive dinner in a hotel overlooking Lake Windermere, which Martin reckoned they both deserved for having survived more than just the course, she toasted him in a nice steely Chablis and said, 'You know, Martin, you're the only one in the class who can put one word in front of another and not make me want to fucking puke, excuse my split infinitive. You should be a writer.'

Martin expected the Honda driver to pick himself up off the ground and search the crowd to find the culprit who had thrown a missile at him. Martin tried to make himself an anonymous figure in the queue, tried to pretend he didn't exist. He closed his eyes. He had done that at school when he was bullied, clinging to an ancient, desperate magic – they wouldn't hit him if he couldn't see them. He imagined the Honda driver walking towards him, the baseball bat raised high, the arc of annihilation waiting to happen.

To his amazement, when he opened his eyes, the Honda driver was climbing back into his car. As he drove away a few people in the crowd gave him a slow hand-clap. Martin wasn't sure if they were expressing disapproval of the Honda driver's behaviour or disappointment at his failure to follow through. Whichever, they were a hard crowd to please.

Martin knelt on the ground and said, 'Are you OK?' to the Peugeot driver, but then he

was politely but firmly set aside by the two policewomen who arrived and took control of everything.