

## How Many Roads

It was an afternoon in February and the last of the daylight was filtering through the net curtain. Edwin awoke with an unfamiliar and slightly irritating scent in his nostrils. He moved his head a little and felt a coarse material, something like a brocade, against his cheek. These sensations were enough to remind him where he was and how he came to be there. He opened an eye and was not surprised to see the sleeping form of a young woman at the other side of the large bed on which he lay. She was fully clothed, as he was. The scent in the air was marijuana. He had experimentally inhaled a couple of snatches before dropping off to sleep. Now he felt at peace which, given his anxious disposition, was unusual.

He looked across at his companion. The dark brown of her skin blended well with the deep red and mustard colours of the bed cover. Her hair was drawn back in fine braids from a central parting. Her name was Claudette. There was something neat and contained about her form, as she lay with her hands clasped in front of her; he remembered how she had sprinted through the rain earlier that day. Edwin took a guilty pleasure in studying the symmetry of her features while she slept.

He felt a sneeze coming on and tried unsuccessfully to muffle it. Claudette awoke. She looked quickly about her and then rested back against the cushions. Edwin heard a female voice from behind him: 'You never know who you're going to wake up with, do you?'

'Shut up, Lizzie!' Claudette said.

In his profession as a psychotherapist Edwin met many people. They came to see him at his home and they told him their intimate secrets, encouraged by his quiet, receptive presence. These clients provided him with a window onto the world from which he kept himself apart. They learned nothing about him and were doubtless unaware of his dependence on them.

The other essential presence in Edwin's life was his wife Beth. She was a therapist too, working with couples and families. She had picked out this shy young man at the college where they trained and had supported him all the way through to his qualification. They married a week after he achieved it.

With a mortgage and help from both their families, they bought a rather dilapidated, double-fronted Victorian house in Streatham, near Tooting Bec Common. For the next four years Edwin worked to restore it, with meticulous care.

Then the supports that shored up his life fell away. Last February Beth was diagnosed with a terminal illness that rapidly ran its course. Edwin watched helplessly as her zest for life diminished. When she died at home in July he was bereft. Somehow he managed to bring the work with all his clients to an end. Without Beth he couldn't carry on his practice.

On the day in late September when he showed the last person to the door, he turned and walked slowly back to his study. He sat down and made some notes. Then he rose and moved to the chair that was always occupied by the client. There he allowed his habitual restraint to crumble away, just as so many unhappy people had done in his presence. He lifted his feet into the chair and rocked himself back and forth, sobbing like a child.

Over the following days he wandered through the rooms, his canvas shoes making no sound on the stripped wooden floors. He noted the confident touches by which Beth had created such a pleasing home. Only in his study was there something of his own

choice – a Chinese ceramic bowl from his childhood home and some stones he had lifted from the Welsh farm where his father was born.

He had always thought of his home as idyllic, with parents who loved him and kept him safe and untroubled. Their tiny rural community treated strangers with suspicion and Edwin emerged from it with a sense that the world was full of danger. He had allowed Beth to recreate a safe haven for him but now, at thirty-two years of age, he knew he must confront his fears. He must take the risks that he should have taken as a boy.

The house would have to go; it felt too much like a refuge now. He put it on the market, placed the contents in storage and carried his bowl and his stones to a furnished flat that he rented in Balham, on the other side of the Common.

The evenings were drawing in. For now he would yield to the urge to hibernate, but when spring came he would have to find a new relationship with the world outside. The proceeds of the sale of the house, after repaying the mortgage, would give him that time. It did not occur to him that the outside world might penetrate his fortress and take the future out of his hands. On 28<sup>th</sup> January he received a jury summons.

Five weeks later, on a dark Tuesday morning, he walked to the High Road and travelled three stops by bus to the court building. The selection process had been completed the day before and soon he was moving, with eleven other men and women, towards the jury benches of the main courtroom. He politely gave way to a young black woman, whose age he placed at about thirty. She was wearing a slim brown skirt and matching ribbed sweater under a black coat. She made her way to the far end of the front bench. Edwin followed and sat next to her. As he studied the layout of the court, he sensed some agitation in his neighbour. Had he inadvertently troubled her in some way? He had been careful not to make any accidental contact. When he turned towards her she said, ‘Don’t mind me, I’m just bloody fuming.’

From his therapist’s chair he would have encouraged her to tell him about it, but here he felt nervous and exposed. Then he thought – this could be a challenge. The judge had not yet appeared so, with a sense of testing himself, he said, ‘Would you think it rude if I asked you why you’re angry?’

‘No, I wouldn’t think it rude.’ She looked at him and then added, with a smile, ‘I doubt if you’re often rude. I’m Claudette, by the way.’

‘And I’m Edwin,’ he said. How easily she had read his character. Now he waited to hear more. The ability to sit out a silence had been one of his strengths as a therapist.

‘It’s that officious bastard in the uniform. If he tells me what to do one more time, I promise you I’ll sock him one.’

The clerk called the court to its feet and conversation was halted. The defendants were two young black men who were accused of breaking into the house of an elderly white woman and robbing her. She had been pushed about and terrified, but not seriously injured. Two weeks after the crime, on a Saturday morning, she had spotted these two men in the local street market and had alerted a policeman. They both denied the charge. The victim identified them again in court and the prosecution depended chiefly on her evidence. None of the stolen goods had been found in their homes, but one of the men possessed an African knife, in a leather sheath decorated with red and green jewels. When shown this in court, the old lady said it was the weapon that had been used to threaten her. The accused man explained that the knife was a souvenir from a journey to his roots in West Africa.

When they retired to the jury room at the end of the hearing it was evident that a few of the jurors were acquainted with each other. One of them, a burly middle-aged

white man called Bob, seemed to be a leader; the others deferred to him. His offer to take the job of foreman went unopposed.

‘I don’t think there’s much doubt about this case’ he began. ‘The police know who’s who round here.’

Edwin looked at Claudette. She lifted her eyes in a despairing expression. A reluctance to judge was another quality Edwin had brought to his profession. But now he feared the judgement he would have to make. Bob was becoming scornful of anyone who questioned his opinion.

Of the twelve jurors six were ready to return a guilty verdict without further discussion. Another, who had been undecided, made up his mind after Bob followed him into the Men’s Room. Two older black jurors, a man and a woman who had sat together during the trial, complained about the young generation – how they had grown up with a lack of discipline. They were open to persuasion as to the guilt of the two young men.

The judge’s advice about ‘reasonable doubt’ had resonated with Edwin and he didn’t feel that the case had been proved. Claudette was of the same view. Bob seemed to be hinting at inside knowledge.

‘Of course, they’ve smartened themselves up for our benefit, but you wait – when it comes to sentencing you’ll hear the record. This isn’t their first time; I’ll tell you that for nothing.’ Edwin had noticed Bob stopping to chat in the corridor with one of the police officers.

The two young men were convicted on the ten-to-two majority decision of the jury. It was revealed that neither had any record of previous offences. Edwin looked over at Bob, who shrugged his shoulders. The sentence was six months.

Edwin was left feeling uneasy. He had resisted the crude bullying of Bob and the others, but he knew that the evidence had not been properly weighed. He walked across the foyer with Claudette, intending to say goodbye before retreating to his lair.

Then she put a hand on his sleeve. ‘Wait a sec.’ She walked over to a group of relatives of the convicted men. ‘I presume you’ll be appealing,’ she said. ‘I don’t believe that was justice.’ One of the women was in tears and Claudette turned to her. ‘I’d like to try and help. I’m going to talk to that solicitor of yours anyway.’

At that moment Bob and some of the jurors approached noisily on their way to the door. Edwin stepped quickly towards Claudette and the black families to avoid being jostled. He heard Bob’s voice: ‘That’s right, mate - you join them.’

Claudette turned to Edwin, ‘D’you fancy a drink? I need to unwind.’

A steady drizzle had set in. They hurried along the High Road, trying to keep dry under Edwin’s small umbrella. They paused under the railway bridge, but the rain was getting heavier. Claudette said, ‘Let’s run for it.’ She set off with an athletic stride and Edwin hurried to catch up. She led him into the dim interior of a bar, the decor all black leather and polished chrome, lit by small spotlights. Edwin had never been in such a place. Claudette introduced him to the barman as her fellow juror and then asked, ‘Have you seen Lizzie at all?’

‘Not for a day or two. She did a fair at the weekend. Somewhere out in the country.’

They climbed onto high stools and Claudette ordered cocktails. She had just explained that Lizzie was her best friend, and that she was a dealer in second-hand Edwardian-style garments, when a voice hailed her from the door. Lizzie was there, shaking out her plastic raincoat on the mat. Her appearance was a contrast to that of Claudette. She was taller and heavier, her shape hidden under loose clothes. The deep violet of her sweater and her abundant copper-red hair contrasted dramatically with paper-

white skin. An ankle-length maroon woollen skirt completed a pre-Raphaelite effect. She looked from Claudette to Edwin and back and said, 'What's been going on while I've been away, then? No, let me guess – you've found this nice respectable man, with a regular job and a huge salary and you've gone all demure for his benefit.' She turned to Edwin, 'You might as well know, she'll lead you astray, this one.'

'Shut up, Lizzie. This is Edwin, and I don't even know if he has a job at all.'

Claudette ordered sandwiches and more cocktails and explained again about their day on the jury. Edwin was beginning to relax. He listened while the two friends chatted. Then Lizzie turned to him and asked; 'Did you think the two guys in the dock looked guilty?'

'No. I think those two are used to being believed; there was nothing of the practised liar about them.'

'I don't think they could believe what was happening to them,' Claudette said. 'Tell me, Edwin, *do* you have a job?'

'I'm a psychotherapist, or rather I was. My wife died six months ago. I've given up working for the moment.'

'That's tough. I'm sorry.'

'What about you two though? Tell me about you.'

Lizzie cut in and said, 'Tell you what - finish your sandwiches and we'll go back to my place. We can tell you our gruesome story there.' She looked at Edwin. 'A psychotherapist eh? Just what we've been looking for. You can keep your hand in with us – we've got every syndrome in the book.'

Claudette insisted on paying and then Lizzie hailed a cab which took them to a block of flats in Stockwell. The public areas were bare - walls and stairs in unfinished concrete. Her flat on the fifth floor was a contrast, rich colours everywhere, wall hangings and throw-over covers in exotic Moorish patterns. It was a studio flat with just the one room.

At Lizzie's prompting they took off their shoes and settled on the large bed. Soon they were in a row, propped against the padded headboard. A TV screen flickered soundlessly across the room. Lizzie, who was in the middle, reached across Edwin for a small tin that was on the bedside table. She took out some slim, hand-rolled smokes. Claudette took one, but Edwin declined and they made no effort to persuade him. 'Just say if you want a drag,' Lizzie said.

An idea occurred to Edwin. 'Tell you what – why don't you tell each other's stories?' Beth had used this technique in her work with couples.

'You crafty man,' said Lizzie. 'I can see we're not going to keep any secrets from you!'

'As long as you don't believe everything she says,' Claudette said. 'You go first, Liz. I'll put him straight when you've finished.'

'OK.' Lizzie drew her knees up under her chin, collected her thoughts and began: 'Well - this little girl was thrown into an orphanage in the wilds of Norfolk at a tender age. When I got there she was having a bad time. The usual story – she was different. The only black kid. But we hit it off - became a gang of two. I was wild in those days, and real angry; I wasn't going to take any shit from anybody. We got into some bother, I can tell you. But then things got better for Claudette. She got to be an ace with the hockey stick – quick as lightning she was. So then all the girls wanted to know her. And they'd reached an age when it was 'right on' to have a black friend.'

Claudette nodded agreement and Lizzie continued, 'We escaped to London as soon as we could. Been here ever since. All kinds of jobs. Now she's in care work – mostly

night shifts. Wants to be a Social Worker. She's just done the Access Course at the college in Brixton. That was a big thing – all black students. Woke her up to who she is. No more the wrong colour, trying to fit in. Discovered her history, and her anger – scary!' Lizzie held up her palms in a defensive gesture. She let her head fall back and inhaled deeply from her joint.

Claudette responded, 'OK, I suppose that's me, more or less. People often tell me how calm I am, and I think, "If you only knew!"' She looked across at her friend and then began: 'Well - you can see for yourself who Lizzie is - it's all there, in your face. What can I add? She saved my life. Before she came I only survived in that place because I was a good runner. But this crazy girl soon sussed that we had as much power as the people in charge. What could they do to us? We weren't afraid of punishment, and we didn't have any parents they could tell. We nearly started a rebellion. Anyway, in the end we took a train to London. They were glad to see the back of us. I was a right Bounty Bar, I can tell you - and I didn't know it. How could I? I didn't know anything. Makes me cringe to think about it.' She paused for a minute. 'Lizzie wasn't cut out for an employee; that was obvious. She had to finish up her own boss. I told you before, what she does – the period clothes. She's brilliant at it too - she can sell anything.'

They lapsed into silence. On the TV screen a manic host was trying to inject some drama into a game show. Lizzie passed her cigarette to Edwin who took a couple of drags and then closed his eyes. Events had brought him an unlikely encounter: two women with more than a touch of wildness about them. He was usually so guarded, looking out for the consequences of any casual meeting. And yet he felt safe. Perhaps it was that they were two - somehow that contained their volatility. He dozed off.

Taking advantage of the tranquil feeling he had woken up with, Edwin announced: 'I'm thinking of acting out of character.' After a moment's reflection he added, 'or could it be for once I'm acting *in* character? I don't know. We therapists are always asking ourselves questions like that.'

'What are you trying to say, Edwin?' Lizzie was standing in the kitchen doorway with a mug of coffee in her hand.

'I thought I'd ask you both out.'

'What did you have in mind, then - a pint at the Prince Albert? Or was it a weekend in Paris?'

'Lizzie!' Claudette reproached her friend.

'Paris – why not?' Edwin said. 'I've always wanted to go. Make it a day trip. My treat. Don't be embarrassed to say no.'

Claudette made no reply. Edwin searched for a clue to her thoughts; at least there had been no quick excuse. She looked beyond him and Edwin turned.

'I think you can take that as a "yes",' Lizzie said.

When Edwin woke up at home the next morning he was amazed that he could have been so audacious. Claudette and Lizzie had woven some magic that still seemed to be with him. He walked to the shops and mingled with the crowds, conscious of a strange sense of connection. His usual wariness was absent.

He took a train to Victoria and from there he telephoned Lizzie. Her friendly response reinforced his mood. They confirmed the date for their proposed excursion and he booked three seats on the Eurostar to Paris for the following Tuesday.

Back at Balham station he walked almost jauntily along the platform towards the exit, following a couple with a baby in a pushchair. As he approached the underpass he

overtook a young man, who had stopped by the wall to talk on his phone. When the young family turned the corner ahead of him Edwin was alone in the passage. Just then another man entered from the far end and ran towards him. He turned back in panic, but his way was blocked by the one who had been on the phone. This man grabbed him by the coat with both hands and pushed him violently against the tiled wall. Edwin offered no resistance and was quickly relieved of his wallet. Both men ran from the passage, just as a group of passengers came round the corner. Edwin, winded by the impact against the wall, slid to the floor. The passengers skirted round him and walked on.

When he recovered his breath, Edwin slowly raised himself onto his knees and then to his feet. He made his way home on foot. There he wrapped himself in his duvet and lay face down on his bed, trembling. His spine hurt and he could feel a lump rising on the back of his head. He longed for Beth and her reassuring strength.

When the phone rang at four o'clock he jumped up in fright. It was Lizzie.

'Claudette wants to know if it's fixed – she's got to book her shifts.'

'I don't know. I think I've lost the tickets,' his voice came faintly.

'Are you OK?' There was silence. 'Edwin - has something happened?'

'I got attacked. Mugged.'

'Tell me where you are. I'll come over.'

When she saw his shaky condition Lizzie stepped forward and hugged him. Edwin held on to her and buried his face in her hair. Its musky scent reminded him of yesterday and seemed to steady him.

'You sit down,' she instructed. 'I'll make us a cup of tea and you can tell me about it.'

She took control, making him inform the bank of the loss of his cards and arranging for replacement tickets from Eurostar. She dialled the police and forced him to report the crime. 'You can't just let it go,' she said.

Edwin the therapist was recognising the signs of regression. The attack had proved that the world was dangerous, just when he was beginning to believe it was not. Once again he was finding someone to depend on.

'God, this place is depressing, if you don't mind me saying so,' Lizzie said. Edwin looked around him; her colourful presence pointed up the blandness of the furnishing.

'How's Claudette?' he asked.

'She's been working too hard, doing all the night shifts to pay off debts. Paris will do her good.'

Edwin looked uncertain.

'Don't worry,' she said, 'I'm not letting you out of it. You're coming.'

Edwin was early at the Eurostar terminal and was getting anxious by the time the other two arrived. They hurried to the platform and took their seats, the two women opposite each other at the window and Edwin next to Claudette. She had completed a series of shifts at midnight and was sleepy. As the train moved off she leaned towards the window and closed her eyes. Edwin turned to look at her. Her shirt bore an African design in dark brown and white and she wore her locks hanging loose. Lizzie smiled at him and said quietly, 'She looks nice doesn't she?'

Edwin blushed and nodded agreement. Claudette awoke. 'What's going on?' she asked.

'Edwin's been flirting with me.'

He began to protest and Lizzie burst into laughter.

Claudette said, 'She's terrible. Listen Edwin, I want to hear what happened to you. Just give me the gist and then we'll forget it for today.'

As the train entered the tunnel they bought coffees from the trolley and Edwin began his story. She prompted him about the detail, doing a deliberate debriefing job.

'The man who was phoning – did you hear what he was talking about?'

Edwin thought for a moment. 'He seemed to be ending a conversation. I can hear his voice now. He finished by saying: "d'accord." I reckon he was talking to his mate at the other end of the passage.'

'D'accord – that's French. They were both black men, Lizzie told me. What sort of build were they?'

'One was big – the one with the phone. The other was smaller, quite slim.'

Claudette turned towards him with a look of concentration. 'The two boys in the dock the other day, what build were they?'

'One was heavily-built; the other quite a bit smaller.'

'Remind me - did they talk while they were robbing the old lady?'

'She said they spoke very little, but she couldn't understand what they did say. Some kind of West Indian patois, she thought. She was a good witness – I think that's what helped to get the conviction. She wasn't a bit gaga.'

'You know what I'm thinking?' Claudette asked.

'I'm beginning to.'

'There in the court we had two black men, one big and one small. Descended from Jamaican immigrants, both of them - third generation. Then, when they're in jail you get mugged by two black men, one big and one small. Probably French speakers. From one of the old French colonies most likely.'

'They probably come and go on the Eurostar,' Lizzie put in.

Edwin looked about the carriage in alarm. Claudette put a reassuring hand on his arm.

'Sorry,' Lizzie said.

'The old lady wouldn't know the difference between West Indians and Africans,' Claudette said. 'She picked out two black guys who looked likely. Listen Edwin, I've made an appointment to see the defence solicitor. It's on Friday – can you come?'

'I'll be there.'

They sat for a minute or two, watching the lights of the tunnel flash by. Then Claudette said, 'So there you were, slumped on the floor, and the passengers all passed you by. No Good Samaritan came to your help?'

'They probably thought he was begging,' Lizzie said.

'Thanks very much.'

'Or maybe a busker,' she continued. 'Waiting for you to burst into a verse of "Blowing in the Wind".'

Edwin sang quietly:

*'How many roads must a man walk down  
Before they call him a man?'*

The two friends laughed and then Lizzie put her hands up to her mouth, imitating the whine of a mouth organ. 'You know your Dylan, then,' she said.

By the time the train emerged from the tunnel Lizzie had lightened the mood, teasing at every opportunity. Claudette rebuked her lightly, protective of Edwin.

'Shall we take a cab when we get there?' Edwin asked.

'You can't do Paris by cab,' Lizzie said.

'Don't be so bossy,' Claudette put in.

'No, she's right,' Edwin said, 'I want to feel part of the city, even for just a day.'

Lizzie had been to Paris before, buying stock for her business. She understood the Metro lines and she took them first to the market at Saint Ouen.

'She can't go anywhere without finding a bargain.' Claudette said.

Lizzie bought a 1920s cloche hat in dark green felt.

'Who's going to carry that all day?' asked Claudette.

'Edwin's going to wear it,' Lizzie said. She placed it on his head and he struck a haughty pose.

When they had seen enough of the market they walked to a pavement cafe, where they pored over their map of Paris. Each pointed to a different quarter and in the end Lizzie suggested an itinerary

'We'll take the Metro to Anvers and then climb the hill to Sacre Coeur. You can see the whole city from there. There are a lot of steps, I warn you, but you two are both lean and fit.' She pointed out to Edwin that Montmartre was nearby. He had voted to visit the artists' quarter.

The steps rose in several stages and half-way up they were ready to rest on a bench. A street musician came over, playing a classical piece on the oboe.

'They have a better class of busker here,' Lizzie said.

'Saint-Saens,' Edwin suggested. The man nodded.

They rewarded the musician and tackled the next flight of steps. At the church they tagged on to a group following an English guide, but after listening to her explanation of the mosaics on the high altar they exchanged looks and headed for the door.

When they reached Montmartre Edwin was determined to see the Bateau Lavoir, where so many famous artists had their studios. It proved difficult to find and they couldn't see inside when they got there, but for Edwin it was exciting just to feel the presence of Modigliani, Braque and Picasso.

They sat in a little square nearby, resting their feet. Lizzie kicked off her shoes.

'What's next?' Claudette asked her.

'Next is your choice – the Latin Quarter. Metro to St-Michel. We could have lunch there.'

There were many bistros to choose from, most of them with a waiter posted outside to lure the visitors. They resisted these entreaties until one young man addressed Claudette: 'Beautiful lady – please come and dine here.' Lizzie ushered them in, ignoring her friend's protests.

The restaurant proved a sound choice and they had a bottle of red wine with their meal. The other two laughed as the waiter gave special attention to Claudette.

Edwin made a tentative suggestion to visit the Musee d'Orsay, naming some of the famous paintings there. This was firmly vetoed by the two women.

'My feet couldn't take an art gallery,' Lizzie said. 'But I'll show you pictures just as good. We'll go along by the river.'

They strolled past the paintings exhibited along the Seine and Lizzie put an arm round each of her companions. She embarrassed Claudette by pausing to comment on the nudes, knowing that her friend preferred to hurry past them. Adopting the pompous tone of the art critic, she said, 'Notice how the hands are cleverly concealed. Bottoms are so much easier to paint.'

On their return they travelled together to Balham. Near the exit to the station Edwin had difficulty catching his breath. He began to tremble. Lizzie held onto him and

said, 'I'm going to see you home. You go on, Claudette, you've got to work in the morning.'

Lizzie gripped his arm and they walked to the flat. Edwin tried to insert his key in the lock, with a shaky hand.

'Here, let me.' Once inside she said, 'I'm staying, whether you like it or not.'

He gave her a weak smile. 'Thanks. God, I feel pathetic.'

'You get yourself to bed. It's been a long day. I'll be here.' She pointed to the settee. 'It's warmer than my place anyway.'

Edwin did as he was told. He got ready and then slid under the duvet. He lay still, trying to keep his mind on the day in Paris, on the pure joy the two women had summoned from his sober character. But the image of the underpass at Balham kept intruding. He gave an involuntary cry and Lizzie put her head round the door. She crawled onto the bed and put an arm across his chest. 'There, you're OK now.' She moved closer and put her head against his shoulder. 'Trendy pyjamas.' He looked down at the old-fashioned blue and white stripes. 'I've always worn these.'

Lizzie slid out of her skirt, pulled the duvet over herself and hugged him close.

'You're safe now.'

'You're a wonder, Lizzie.'

'I'll let that pass.'

Her presence, so soft and warm, began to calm him. He put an arm round her middle. After a while he began to caress her.

'If it's a waist you're looking for, you're out of luck, mate,' she said. He pulled her closer and she said, 'I'm getting a strong feeling, Edwin, that you're quite restored to form.' Then she grasped his wrist and spoke quietly: 'Edwin. This was all about comforting. And not just for you, I'll confess. I wanted a man's arms round me, and not the kind of man I usually attract. But listen - that's as far as it's going, OK? And I'll tell you why. I think you're smitten with Claudette, am I right? And she likes you too, in case you hadn't noticed. Also she's very special to me. I couldn't keep a secret from her, not a guilty one like that, anyway.'

Edwin pressed his cheek against her soft upper arm.

Lizzie said, 'I want to tell you about her, about how she runs away from every relationship - with men, I mean.'

'She's scared of being abandoned?'

'Correct, Mr Therapist. But that's not all. There's another fear. When she got to that bloody orphanage she was desperate for a parent figure - someone she could trust. She made the wrong choice, twice. Two men abused her.' After a moment she continued, 'Now, I'm taking a chance on you. Sounds like I'm her protector, and I suppose I am, but I think I've seen enough. I reckon you're patient, and you understand.'

Edwin lay silent. She hadn't moved; he could still feel her warmth, breathe in the scent of her. There came to his mind a picture - two girls, orphans, clutching each other for safety in an unfriendly place.

'So, on Friday you meet her at the solicitor's. She'll make mincemeat out of that man, you'll see. But underneath she's vulnerable as hell. Just be yourself and don't be put off. Once she finds you're there for her, no matter what, she'll start to trust.'

Lizzie paused before concluding, 'Now, lover boy, I'm going to turn into your fairy godmother and fly away. But first I want a great big hug to remember. Grab me anywhere you want. It's been a long time.'

The secretary announced their arrival over the intercom and directed them up a narrow staircase to a cramped office, every surface piled high with papers and files. The solicitor had the air of one used to dispensing wisdom to the less informed. He looked to Edwin to explain their mission. Edwin turned to Claudette, suggesting that she begin. They had met outside the office in Acre Lane and hadn't had time to discuss tactics.

'We were on the jury last Tuesday in Balham,' she began, 'the two black lads accused of robbing the old lady. You were there.' She was becoming breathless, but managed to continue, 'You instructed an incompetent barrister, who let his clients down.' She had opened in an aggressive manner. Edwin guessed that the man had infuriated her by turning automatically to him, the white male, and ignoring her.

The solicitor raised his eyebrows and replied calmly, 'I'm not sure we should be having this conversation. Jury discussion is confidential and there are proper channels for complaints.'

'OK then, we won't talk about what went on in the jury room, which was a disgrace, by the way. I believe your barrister presumed they were guilty and didn't think it was worth bothering.' Claudette's voice was becoming strident.

'That is a grave accusation.' The solicitor examined his well-manicured fingers.

Edwin intervened to allow Claudette to take a deep breath. 'The barrister didn't seem prepared. The evidence against the two boys was pretty thin.'

Then Claudette surprised Edwin with knowledge of one of the accused. It seemed that after the trial she had read an article about the family in "The Voice" and had decided to visit the parents of the larger boy. 'Much more character evidence could have been given. This boy was on a work experience scheme. His ambition is to have his own catering business. His family are very well-respected people. You could have collected evidence of that kind.' The solicitor didn't reply and she continued, 'Tell him what happened to you, Edwin.'

Edwin told the story of his mugging, ending: 'We suspect that the two who attacked me were the ones who robbed the old lady.'

Claudette rose and looked down on the solicitor. 'The police are looking into that now. What you've got to do is make sure the two boys get justice on appeal. And I warn you, the Press Box won't be empty next time, I'll see to that. Miscarriage of justice makes a good headline.'

She walked to the door without another word. Edwin nodded to the solicitor and followed her down the stairs.

They stood on the pavement in Acre Lane, facing each other.

'Well done, Edwin. If you hadn't been there I'd have clocked him one.'

'You managed to ruffle his feathers a bit, I'd say.'

'Unwinding time again,' she said. 'Cocktails.'

They walked towards the Town Hall in Brixton, and then crossed into Coldharbour Lane. She caught Edwin's sleeve and said, 'Look.'

Bob, the jury foreman, was approaching with another man. The pavement wasn't wide enough to allow them to pass four abreast. Edwin would have stepped aside, but Claudette was in no mood to give way. They came face to face. Bob spoke first.

'Well I never. It's the friends of the young villains.' He turned to Edwin. 'Leading you into criminal ways, is she?' Then he looked her up and down and said, 'I'll grant you though - she's a pretty little thing.' He winked to his friend and added, 'if that's your taste.' He reached out a hand towards Claudette's chin.

A tide of feeling swelled within Edwin. The timidity of his youth, the cruel loss of Beth, his mugging at Balham Station, all fused together with protectiveness towards Claudette. He took a swing at Bob's belly. Bob slipped the blow without difficulty, half turning and bringing the edge of his hand down on Edwin's arm.

'Come on,' Claudette said, pushing past. 'They're scum.'

They turned the corner into Atlantic Road and stopped to catch their breath. Claudette began to laugh. She raised her hands like a boxer and aimed a playful punch at Edwin. Then she took his arm and said, 'My hero.'

They sat in the Jacaranda Garden, with drinks in front of them. Claudette said, 'You know, Edwin, you're a danger to yourself, if not to others. If you'd caught him with that punch you'd have been in real trouble. We're going to get those two guys out of jail and Bob's going to know all about it. That's the way to deal with him.'

Edwin, buoyed up by his recent upsurge of rage, sat tall in his chair. The words of the Dylan song came into his head: '*How many roads must a man walk down, before they call him a man?*' He looked at his companion and said, 'Claudette, I think you're great.'

She laughed. 'A pretty little thing, would you say?'