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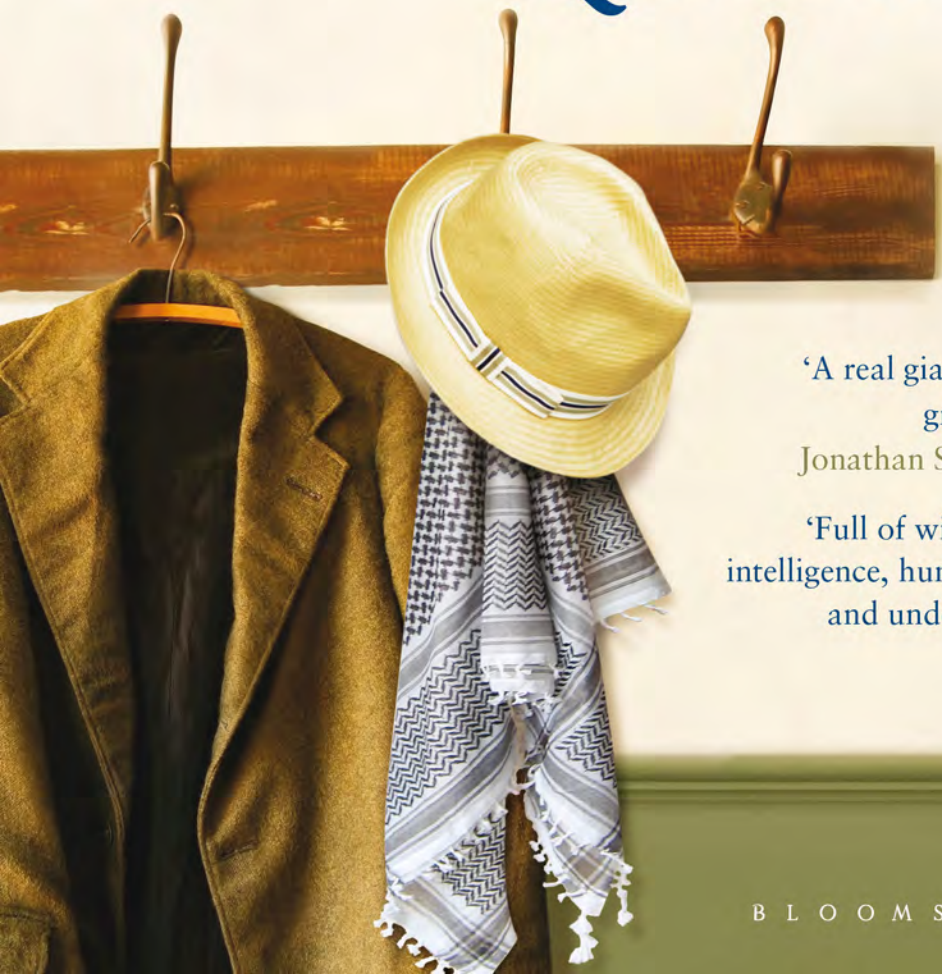
Howard Jacobson

The Finkler Question



'A real giant, a great, great writer'
Jonathan Safran Foer

'Full of wit, warmth, intelligence, human feeling and understanding'
Observer

BLOOMSBURY

THE FINKLER QUESTION

Howard Jacobson

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LONDON · BERLIN · NEW YORK

Praise for *The Finkler Question*

'Like all of [Jacobson's] work, *The Finkler Question* has a kind of energy that you have to look at through your fingers, like an eclipse. As the brightness of his brilliance is hard to look at, so is the darkness of his humor. I don't know a funnier writer alive' Jonathan Safran Foer, *Los Angeles Times*

'Every page is thick with [wit]: dark humour, bittersweet humour, black humour, irony, comic timing, comic subtlety, comic cynicism, knowing humour, unknowing humour . . . *The Finkler Question* is further proof, if any was needed, of Jacobson's mastery of humour' *The Times*

'Wonderful . . . Jacobson is seriously on form' *Evening Standard*

'Sentence by sentence, there are few writers who exhibit the same unawed respect for language or such a relentless commitment to re-examining even the most seemingly unobjectionable of received wisdoms' *Daily Telegraph*

'A richly satisfying read' *Sunday Times*

'Jacobson cunningly crafts sublime pathos from comedy and vice versa. As such, he is the literary equivalent of Tony Hancock, illuminating the conflict, anger, love and dependence created by friendship while wincing at the ignominy and absurdity of the characters' predicament. Jacobson's prose is a seamless roll of blissfully melancholic interludes. Almost every page has a quotable, memorable line' *Independent on Sunday*

'Wonderful. A blistering portrayal of a funny man who at last confronts the darkness of the world' Beryl Bainbridge

'A funny, furious and unflinching look at friendship, loss and growing older' *Guardian*

'Jacobson is brilliantly funny, but there is also an equally brilliant sadness and a sense of loss. Unmissable' *Saga*

'An entertaining novel and a humane one' *Financial Times*

'Fast-moving, wry and politely burlesque, *The Finkler Question* poses many questions' Eileen Battersby, *Irish Times*

'His is a recognition long overdue. Jacobson is a prodigious talent . . . [*The Finkler Question*] is mirthful and ironic but also a bracing inquiry into contemporary Jewishness, which is ever its author's great subject' *Independent*

'A wonderful, sad, funny novel about the desire for belonging, something every one of its readers will have felt' *The Times*

'[A] richly funny novel about grief and British Judaism and infidelity' *Sunday Times*

'Jacobson is at the height of his powers in *The Finkler Question* . . . Jacobson's wit launches a fusillade of hard-punching aperçus on human nature and its absurdities that only he could have written' *Metro*

'The writing is wonderfully mobile and inventive, and Jacobson's signature is to be found in every sentence' *Jewish Chronicle*

'The opening chapters of this novel boast some of the wittiest, most poignant and sharply intelligent comic prose in the English language, as though the writer, like his characters, is caught up in a whirlwind courtship (of each other, of the reader, of the idea of the preciousness of now in the teeth of time's passing)' *Scotsman*

'A striking novel and a subtle one . . . *The Finkler Question* has all the qualities we expect from Mr. Jacobson—especially a mordant wit, sometimes as acrid as it is exuberant' *Wall Street Journal*

'A riotous morass of jokes and worries about Jewish identity, though it is by no means too myopic to be enjoyed by the wider world. It helps that Mr. Jacobson's comic sensibility suggests Woody Allen's, that his powers of cultural observation are so keen, and that influences as surprising as Lewis Carroll shape this book. Mr. Jacobson stages a Mad Seder that brings Carroll's Mad Tea Party to mind' *New York Times*

'Brilliantly, painfully comic, *The Finkler Question* is a revelation even in the land that gave birth to Philip Roth' *Boston Globe*

'*The Finkler Question* tackles an uncomfortable issue [Jewish identity] with satire that is so biting, so pointed, that it pulls you along for 300 pages and leaves a battlefield of sacred cows in its wake . . . It's a must read, no matter what your background' National Public Radio

'A clever, canny, textured, subtle, and humane novel exploring the friendship of three ageing male friends . . . Although *The Finkler Question* is by no means a straightforward comic novel, it once again demonstrates Jacobson's mastery of the form' *Daily Beast*

'An enjoyable novel . . . as politically timely as it is comically well-timed' *Sydney Morning Herald*

'An incomparable marvel' *West Australian*

To the memory of three dear friends, great givers of laughter

Terry Collits (1940–2009)

Tony Errington (1944–2009)

Graham Rees (1944–2009)

Who now will set the table on a roar?

PART ONE

ONE

I

He should have seen it coming.

His life had been one mishap after another. So he should have been prepared for this one.

He was a man who saw things coming. Not shadowy premonitions before and after sleep, but real and present dangers in the daylit world. Lamp posts and trees reared up at him, splintering his shins. Speeding cars lost control and rode on to the footpath leaving him lying in a pile of torn tissue and mangled bones. Sharp objects dropped from scaffolding and pierced his skull.

Women worst of all. When a woman of the sort Julian Treslove found beautiful crossed his path it wasn't his body that took the force but his mind. She shattered his calm.

True, he had no calm, but she shattered whatever calm there was to look forward to in the future. She *was* the future.

People who see what's coming have faulty chronology, that is all. Treslove's clocks were all wrong. He no sooner saw the woman than he saw the aftermath of her – his marriage proposal and her acceptance, the home they would set up together, the drawn rich silk curtains leaking purple light, the bed sheets billowing like clouds, the wisp of aromatic smoke winding from the chimney – only for every wrack of it – its lattice of crimson roof tiles, its gables and dormer windows, his happiness, his future – to come crashing down on him in the moment of her walking past.

She didn't leave him for another man, or tell him she was sick of him and of their life together, she passed away in a perfected dream of tragic love – consumptive, wet-eyelashed, and as often as not singing her goodbyes to him in phrases borrowed from popular Italian opera.

There was no child. Children spoilt the story.

Between the rearing lamp posts and the falling masonry he would sometimes catch himself rehearsing his last words to her – also as often as not borrowed from the popular Italian operas – as though time had concertinaed, his heart had smashed, and she was dying even before he had met her.

There was something exquisite to Treslove in the presentiment of a woman he loved expiring in his arms. On occasions he died in hers, but her dying in his was better. It was how he knew he was in love: no presentiment of her expiry, no proposal.

That was the poetry of his life. In reality it had all been women accusing him of stifling their creativity and walking out on him.

In reality there had even been children.

But beyond the reality something beckoned.

On a school holiday in Barcelona he paid a gypsy fortune-teller to read his hand.

'I see a woman,' she told him.

Treslove was excited. 'Is she beautiful?'

'To me, no,' the gypsy told him. 'But to you . . . maybe. I also see danger.'

Treslove was more excited still. 'How will I know when I have met her?'

'You will know.'

'Does she have a name?'

'As a rule, names are extra,' the gypsy said, bending back his thumb. 'But I will make an exception for you because you are young. I see a Juno – do you know a Juno?'

She pronounced it 'Huno'. But only when she remembered.

Treslove closed one eye. Juno? Did he know a Juno? Did *anyone* know a Juno? No, sorry, no, he didn't. But he knew a June.

'No, no, bigger than June.' She seemed annoyed with him for not being able to do bigger than June. 'Judy . . . Julie . . . Judith. Do you know a Judith?'

Hudith.

Treslove shook his head. But he liked the sound of it – Julian and Judith. Hulian and Hudith Treslove.

'Well, she's waiting for you, this Julie or Judith or Juno . . . I do still see a Juno.'

Treslove closed his other eye. Juno, Juno . . .

'How long will she wait?' he asked.

'As long as it takes you to find her.'

Treslove imagined himself looking, searching the seven seas. 'You said you see danger. How is she dangerous?'

He saw her rearing up at him, with a knife to his throat – *Addio, mio bello, addio.*

'I did not say it was she who was dangerous. Only that I saw danger. It might be you who is dangerous to her. Or some other person who is dangerous to both of you.'

'So should I avoid her?' Treslove asked.

She shuddered a fortune-teller's shudder. 'You cannot avoid her.'

She was beautiful herself. At least in Treslove's eyes. Emaciated and tragic with gold hooped earrings and a trace, he thought, of a West Midlands accent. But for the accent he would have been in love with her.

She didn't tell him anything he didn't already know. Someone, something, was in store for him.

Something of more moment than a mishap.

He was framed for calamity and sadness but was always somewhere else when either struck. Once, a tree fell and crushed a person walking just a half a yard behind him. Treslove heard the cry and wondered whether it was his own. He missed a berserk gunman on the London Underground by the length of a single carriage. He wasn't even interviewed by the police. And a girl he had loved with a schoolboy's hopeless longing – the daughter of one of his father's friends, an angel with skin as fine as late-summer rose petals and eyes that seemed forever wet – died of leukaemia in her fourteenth year while Treslove was in Barcelona having his fortune told. His family did not call him back for her final hours or even for the funeral. They did not want to spoil his holiday, they told him, but the truth was they did not trust his fortitude. People who knew Treslove thought twice about inviting him to a deathbed or a burial.

So life was still all his to lose. He was, at forty-nine, in good physical shape, had not suffered a bruise since falling against his mother's knee in infancy, and was yet to be made a widower. To his knowledge, not a woman he had loved or known sexually had died, few

having stayed long enough with him anyway for their dying to make a moving finale to anything that could be called a grand affair. It gave him a preternaturally youthful look – this unconsummated expectation of tragic event. The look which people born again into their faith sometimes acquire.

2

It was a warm late-summer's evening, the moon high and skittish. Treslove was returning from a melancholy dinner with a couple of old friends, one his own age, one much older, both recently made widowers. For all the hazards of the streets, he had decided to walk a little around a part of London he knew well, mulling over the sadness of the night in retrospect, before taking a cab home.

A cab, not a Tube, though he lived only a hundred yards from a Tube station. A man as fearful as Treslove of what might befall him above ground was hardly going to venture beneath it. Not after the close shave with the gunman.

'How unutterably sad,' he said, not quite aloud. He meant the death of his friends' wives and the death of women generally. But he was also thinking of the men who had been left alone, himself included. It is terrible to lose a woman you have loved, but it is no less a loss to have no woman to take into your arms and cradle before tragedy strikes . . .

'Without that, what am I for?' he asked himself, for he was a man who did not function well on his own.

He passed the BBC, an institution for which he had once worked and cherished idealistic hopes but which he now hated to an irrational degree. Had it been rational he would have taken steps not to pass the building as often as he did. Under his breath he cursed it feebly – 'Shitheap,' he said.

A nursery malediction.

That was exactly what he hated about the BBC: it had infantilised him. 'Auntie', the nation called the Corporation, fondly. But aunties are equivocal figures of affection, wicked and unreliable, pretending love only so long as they are short of love themselves, and then off. The BBC, Treslove believed, made addicts of those who listened to it, reducing them to a state of inane dependence. As it did those it

employed. Only worse in the case of those it employed – handcuffing them in promotions and conceit, disabling them from any other life. Treslove himself a case in point. Though not promoted, only disabled.

There were cranes up around the building, as high and unsteady as the moon. That would be a shapely fate, he thought: as in my beginning, so in my end – a BBC crane dashing my brains out. The *shitheap*. He could hear the tearing of his skull, like the earth's skin opening in a disaster movie. But then life was a disaster movie in which lovely women died, one after another. He quickened his pace. A tree reared up at him. Swerving, he almost walked into a fallen road mender's sign. DANGER. His shins ached with the imagined collision. Tonight even his soul shook with apprehension.

It's never where you look for it, he told himself. It always comes from somewhere else. Whereupon a dark shadow materialised from a doorway into an assailant, took him by the neck, pushed him face first against a shop window, told him not to shout or struggle, and relieved him of his watch, his wallet, his fountain pen and his mobile phone.

It was only when he had stopped shaking and was able to check his pockets and find them emptied that he could be certain that what had happened had happened in reality.

No wallet, no mobile phone.

In his jacket pocket no fountain pen.

On his wrist no watch.

And in himself no fight, no instinct for preservation, no *amour de soi*, no whatever the word is for the glue that holds a man together and teaches him to live in the present.

But then when had he ever had that?

He'd been a modular, bits-and-pieces man at university, not studying anything recognisable as a subject but fitting components of different arts-related disciplines, not to say indisciplines, together like Lego pieces. Archaeology, Concrete Poetry, Media and Communications, Festival and Theatre Administration, Comparative Religion, Stage Set and Design, the Russian Short Story, Politics and Gender. On finishing his studies – and it was never entirely clear when and whether he *had* finished his studies, on account of no one at the university being

certain how many modules made a totality – Treslove found himself with a degree so unspecific that all he could do with it was accept a graduate traineeship at the BBC. For its part – *her* part – all the BBC could do with Treslove when she got him was shunt him into producing late-night arts programmes for Radio 3.

He felt himself to be a stunted shrub in a rainforest of towering trees. All around him other trainees rose to startling eminence within weeks of their arriving. They shot up, because there was no other direction you could go but up, unless you were Treslove who stayed where he was because no one knew he was there. They became programme controllers, heads of stations, acquisitors, multi-platform executives, director generals even. No one ever left. No one was ever fired. The Corporation looked after its own with more fierce loyalty than a family of mafiosi. As a consequence everyone knew one another intimately – except Treslove who knew no one – and spoke the same language – except Treslove, who spoke a language of loss and sorrow nobody understood.

'Cheer up,' people would say to him in the canteen. But all that did was make him want to cry. Such a sad expression, 'Cheer up'. Not only did it concede the improbability that he ever would cheer up, it accepted that there could be nothing much to cheer up for if cheering up was all there was to look forward to.

He was reprimanded on an official letterhead by someone from the Creative Board – he didn't recognise the complainant's name – for addressing too many morbid issues and playing too much mournful music on his programme. 'That's the province of Radio 3,' the letter concluded. He wrote back saying his programme *was* on Radio 3. He received no reply.

After more than a dozen years roaming the ghostly corridors of Broadcasting House in the dead of night, knowing that no one was listening to anything he produced – for who, at three o'clock in the morning, wanted to hear live poets discussing dead poets, who might just as well have been dead poets discussing live poets? – he resigned. 'Would anyone notice if my programmes weren't aired?' he wrote in his letter of resignation. 'Would anyone be aware of my absence if I just stopped turning up?' Again he received no reply.

Auntie wasn't listening either.

He answered an advertisement in a newspaper for an assistant director of a newly launched arts festival on the south coast. 'Newly

launched' meant a school library which had no books in it, only computers, three visiting speakers and no audience. It reminded him of the BBC. The actual director rewrote all his letters in simpler English and did the same with his conversation. They fell out over the wording of a brochure.

'Why say exhilarating when you can say sexy?' she asked him.

'Because an arts festival isn't sexy.'

'And you want to know why that is? Because you insist on using words like exhilarating.'

'What's wrong with it?'

'It's indirect language.'

'There's nothing indirect about exhilaration.'

'There is the way you say it.'

'Could we try for a compromise with exuberance?' he asked, without any.

'Could we try for a compromise with you getting another job?'

They had been sleeping together. There was nothing else to do. They coupled on the gymnasium floor when no one turned up to their festival. She wore Birkenstocks even during lovemaking. He only realised he loved her when she sacked him.

Her name was Julie and he only noticed that when she sacked him, too.

Hulie.

Thereafter he gave up on a career in the arts and filled a succession of unsuitable vacancies and equally unsuitable women, falling in love whenever he took up a new job, and falling out of love – or more correctly being fallen out of love with – every time he moved on. He drove a removal van, falling in love with the first woman whose house he emptied, delivered milk in an electric float, falling in love with the cashier who paid him every Friday night, worked as an assistant to an Italian carpenter who replaced sash windows in Victorian houses and replaced Julian Treslove in the affections of the cashier, managed a shoe department in a famous London store, falling in love with the woman who managed soft furnishings on the floor above, finally finding semi-permanent and ill-paid occupation with a theatrical agency specialising in providing doubles of famous people for parties, conferences and corporate events. Treslove didn't look like anybody famous in particular, but looked like many famous

people in general, and so was in demand if not by virtue of verisimilitude, at least by virtue of versatility.

And the soft-furnishings woman? She left him when he became the double of no one in particular. 'I don't like not knowing who you're meant to be,' she told him. 'It reflects badly on us both.'

'You choose,' he said.

'I don't want to choose. I want to know. I crave certainty. I need to know you're going to be there through thick and thin. I work with fluff all day. When I come home I want something solid. It's a rock I need, not a chameleon.'

She had red hair and angry skin. She heated up so quickly Treslove had always been frightened to get too near to her.

'I am a rock,' he insisted, from a distance. 'I will be with you to the end.'

'Well, you're right about that at least,' she told him. 'This *is* the end. I'm leaving you.'

'Just because I'm in demand?'

'Because you're not in demand with me.'

'Please don't leave. If I wasn't a rock before, I'll be a rock from now on.'

'You won't. It isn't in your nature.'

'Don't I look after you when you're ill?'

'You do. You're marvellous to me when I'm ill. It's when I'm well that you're no use.'

He begged her not to go. Took his chance and threw his arms around her, weeping into her neck.

'Some rock,' she said.

Her name was June.

Demand is a relative concept. He wasn't so much in demand as a lookalike for everybody and nobody that there weren't many vacant hours in which to think about all that had befallen him, or rather all that hadn't, about women and the sadness he felt for them, about his loneliness, and about that absence in him for which he didn't have the word. His incompletion, his untogetherness, his beginning waiting for an end, or was it his end waiting for a beginning, his story waiting for a plot.

It was exactly 11.30 p.m. when the attack occurred. Treslove knew that because something had made him look at his watch the moment

before. Maybe the foreknowledge that he would never look at it again. But with the brightness of the street lamps and the number of commercial properties lit up – a hairdresser's was still open and a dim sum restaurant and a newsagent's having a refit – it could have been afternoon. The streets were not deserted. At least a dozen people might have come to Treslove's rescue, but none did. Perhaps the effrontery of the assault – just a hundred yards from Regent Street, almost within cursing distance of the BBC – perplexed whoever saw it. Perhaps they thought the participants were playing or had become embroiled in a domestic row on the way home from a restaurant or the theatre. They could – there was the strange part – have been taken for a couple.

That was what Treslove found most galling. Not the interruption to one of his luxuriating, vicariously widowed reveries. Not the shocking suddenness of the attack, a hand seizing him by the back of his neck and shoving him so hard into the window of Guivier's violin shop that the instruments twanged and vibrated behind the shattering pane, unless the music he heard was the sound of his nose breaking. And not even the theft of his watch, his wallet, his fountain pen and his mobile phone, sentimental as his attachment to the first of those was, and inconvenient as would be the loss of the second, third and fourth. No, what upset him beyond all these was the fact that the person who had robbed, assaulted and, yes, terrified him – a person against whom he put up not a whisper of a struggle – was . . . a woman.

3

Until the assault, Treslove's evening had been sweetly painful but not depressing. Though they complained of being without compass or purpose on their own, the three men – the two widowers and Treslove, who counted as an honorary third – enjoyed one another's company, argued about the economy and world affairs, remembered jokes and anecdotes from the past, and almost managed to convince themselves they'd gone back to a time before they had wives to lose. It was a dream, briefly, their falling in love, the children they'd fathered – Treslove had inadvertently fathered two that he knew of – and the separations that had devastated them. No one they loved

had left them because they had loved no one yet. Loss was a thing of the future.

Then again, who were they fooling?

After dinner, Libor Sevcik, at whose apartment between Broadcasting House and Regent's Park they dined, sat at the piano and played the Schubert Impromptus Opus 90 his wife Malkie had loved to play. Treslove thought he would die with grief for his friend. He didn't know how Libor had survived Malkie's death. They had been married for more than half a century. Libor was now approaching his ninetieth year. What could there be left for him to live for?

Malkie's music, maybe. Libor had never once sat at the piano while she was alive – the piano stool was sacred to her, he would as soon sit on it as burst in on her in the lavatory – but many a time he had stood behind her while she played, in the early days accompanying her on the fiddle, but later, at her quiet insistence ('Tempo, Libor, tempo!'), standing behind her without his fiddle, marvelling at her expertise, at the smell of aloes and frankincense (all the perfumes of Arabia) that rose from her hair, and at the beauty of her neck. A neck more graceful, he had told her the day they had met, than a swan's. Because of his accent, Malkie had thought he had said her neck was more graceful than a svontz, which had reminded her of a Yiddish word her father often used, meaning penis. Could Libor really have meant that her neck was more graceful than a penis?

Had she not married Libor, or so the family mythology had it, Malkie Hofmannsthal would in all likelihood have gone on to be a successful concert pianist. Horowitz heard her play Schubert in a drawing room in Chelsea and commended her. She played the pieces as they should be played, he said, as though Schubert were inventing as he went along – emotional improvisations with a bracing undernote of intellectuality. Her family regretted her marriage for many reasons, not the least of them being Libor's lack of intellectuality and breeding, his low journalistic tone, and the company he kept, but mostly they regretted it on account of the musical future she threw away.

'Why can't you marry Horowitz if you have to marry someone?' they asked her.

'He is twice my age,' Malkie told them. 'You might as well ask why I don't marry Schubert.'

'So who said a husband can't be twice your age? Musicians live for ever. And if you do outlive him, well . . .'

'He doesn't make me laugh,' she said. 'Libor makes me laugh.'

She could have added that Horowitz was already married to Toscanini's daughter.

And that Schubert had died of syphilis.

She never once regretted her decision. Not when she heard Horowitz play at Carnegie Hall – her parents had paid for her to go to America to forget Libor and bought her front-row seats so that Horowitz shouldn't miss her – not when Libor won a measure of renown as a show-business journalist, travelling to Cannes and Monte Carlo and Hollywood without her, not when he fell into one of his Czech depressions, not even when Marlene Dietrich, unable to figure out the time anywhere in the world but where she was, would ring their London apartment from the Chateau Marmont at three thirty in the morning, call Libor 'my darling', and sob down the phone.

'I find my entire fulfilment in you,' Malkie told Libor. There was a rumour that Marlene Dietrich had told him the same, but he still chose Malkie whose neck was more graceful than a svontz.

'You must go on playing,' he insisted, buying her a Steinway upright with gilded candelabra at an auction in south London.

'I will,' she said. 'I will play every day. But only when you're here.'

When he could afford it he bought her a Bechstein concert grand in an ebonised case. She wanted a Blüthner but he wouldn't have anything in their apartment manufactured behind the Iron Curtain.

In their later years she had made him promise her he would not die before her, so incapable was she of surviving an hour without him – a promise he had solemnly kept.

'Laugh at me,' he told Treslove, 'but I got down on one knee to make her that promise, exactly as I did the day I proposed to her. That is the only reason I am staying alive now.'

Unable to find words, Treslove got down on one knee himself and kissed Libor's hand.

'We did discuss throwing ourselves off Bitchy 'Ead together if one of us got seriously sick,' Libor said, 'but Malkie thought I was too light to hit the sea at the same time she did and she didn't fancy the idea of hanging around in the water waiting.'

'Bitchy 'Ead?' Treslove wondered.

'Yes. We even drove there for a day out. Daring each other. Lovely spot. Great spiralling downs with seagulls circling and dead bunches of flowers tied to barbed-wire fences – one with its price ticket still on, I remember – and there was a plaque with a quotation from Psalms about God being mightier than the thunder of many waters and lots of little wooden crosses planted in the grass. It was probably the crosses that decided us against.'

Treslove didn't understand what Libor was talking about. Barbed-wire fences? Had he and Malkie driven on a suicide pact to Treblinka?

Seagulls, though . . . And crosses . . . Search him.

Malkie and Libor did nothing about it anyway. Malkie was the one who got seriously sick and they did not a damned thing about it.

Three months after her death, Libor ventured bravely into the eye of his despair and hired a tutor, who smelt of old letters, cigarettes and Guinness, to teach him to play the impromptus which Malkie had interpreted as though Schubert were in the room with them (inventing as he went), and these he played over and over again with four of his favourite photographs of Malkie on the piano in front of him. His inspiration, his instructress, his companion, his judge. In one of them she looked unbearably young, leaning laughing over the pier at Brighton, the sun in her face. In another she wore her wedding dress. In all of them she had eyes only for Libor.

Julian Treslove wept openly the moment the music began. Had he been married to Malkie he didn't doubt he would have wept over her beauty every morning he woke to find her in his bed. And then, when he woke to find her in his bed no more, he couldn't imagine what he'd have done . . . Thrown himself off Bitchy 'Ead – why not?

How do you go on living knowing that you will never again – not ever, ever – see the person you have loved? How do you survive a single hour, a single minute, a single second of that knowledge? How do you hold yourself together?

He wanted to ask Libor that. 'How did you get through the first night of being alone, Libor? Did you sleep? Have you slept since? Or is sleep all that's left to you?'

But he couldn't. Perhaps he didn't want to hear the answer.

Though once Libor did say, 'Just when you think you've overcome the grief, you realise you are left with the loneliness.'

Treslove tried to imagine a loneliness greater than his own. 'Just when you get over the loneliness,' he thought, 'you realise you are left with the grief.'

But then he and Libor were different men.

He was shocked when Libor let him into a secret. At the end they had used bad language to each other. Really bad language.

'You and Malkie?'

'Me and Malkie. We talked vulgar. It was our defence against pathos.'

Treslove couldn't bear the thought. Why did anyone want a defence against pathos?

Libor and Malkie were of the same generation as his parents, both long deceased. He had loved his parents without being close to them. They would have said the same about him. The watch of which he would be divested later that evening was a gift from his ever-anxious mother. 'Jewels for my Jules,' it was inscribed. But she never called him Jules in life. The sense of being properly put together which he had lost, likewise, was an inheritance from his father, a man who stood so straight he created a sort of architectural silence around himself. You could hang a plumb line from him, Treslove remembered. But he didn't believe his parents were the reason for the tears he shed in Libor's company. What moved him was this proof of the destructibility of things; everything exacted its price in the end, and perhaps happiness exacted it even more cruelly than its opposite.

Was it better then – measuring the loss – not to know happiness at all? Better to go through life waiting for what never came, because that way you had less to mourn?

Could that be why Treslove so often found himself alone? Was he protecting himself against the companioned happiness he longed for because he dreaded how he would feel when it was taken from him?

Or was the loss he dreaded precisely the happiness he craved?

Thinking about the causes of his tears only made him cry the more.

The third member of the group, Sam Finkler, did not, throughout Libor's playing, shed a single tear. The shockingly premature death of his own wife – by horrible coincidence in the very same month that Libor was made a widower – had left him almost more angry than sorrowful. Tyler had never told Sam he was her 'entire fulfilment'. He had loved her deeply all the same, with an expectant and even

watchful devotion – which did not preclude other devotions on the side – as though he hoped she would vouchsafe her true feelings for him one day. But she never did. Sam sat by her bedside throughout her last night. Once she beckoned to him to come closer. He did as she bade him, putting his ear to her poor dry mouth; but if she meant to say something tender to him she did not succeed. A gasp of pain was all he heard. A sound that could just as easily have come from his own throat.

Theirs, too, had been a loving if sometimes fractious marriage, and a more fruitful one, if you count children, than Libor and Malkie's, but Tyler had always struck Sam as withheld or secretive somehow. Perhaps faithless, he didn't know. He might not have minded had he known. He didn't know that either. He was never given the opportunity to find out. And now her secrets were, as they say, buried with her. There were tears in Sam Finkler, but he was as watchful of them as he had been of his wife. Were he to weep he wanted to be certain he wept out of love, not anger. So it was preferable – at least until he grew better acquainted with his grief – not to weep at all.

And anyway, Treslove had tears enough for all of them.

Julian Treslove and Sam Finkler had been at school together. More rivals than friends, but rivalry too can last a lifetime. Finkler was the cleverer. Samuel, he insisted on being called then. 'My name's Samuel, not Sam. Sam's a private investigator's name. Samuel was a prophet.'

Samuel Ezra Finkler – how could he be anything but cleverer with a name like that?

It was to Finkler that Treslove had gone running in high excitement after he'd had his future told on holiday in Barcelona. Treslove and Finkler were sharing a room. 'Do you know anyone called Juno?' Treslove asked.

'J'you know Juno?' Finkler replied, making inexplicable J noises between his teeth.

Treslove didn't get it.

'J'you know Juno? Is that what you're asking me?'

Treslove still didn't get it. So Finkler wrote it down. *D'Jew know Jewno?*

Treslove shrugged. 'Is that supposed to be funny?'

'It is to me,' Finkler said. 'But please yourself.'

'Is it funny for a Jew to write the word Jew? Is that what's funny?'

'Forget it,' Finkler said. 'You wouldn't understand.'

'Why wouldn't I understand? If I wrote *Non-Jew don't know what Jew know* I'd be able to tell you what's funny about it.'

'There's nothing funny about it.'

'Exactly. Non-Jews don't find it hilarious to see the word Non-Jew. We aren't amazed by the written fact of our identity.'

'And d'Jew know why that is?' Finkler asked.

'Go fuck yourself,' Treslove told him.

'And that's Non-Jew humour, is it?'

Before he met Finkler, Treslove had never met a Jew. Not knowingly at least. He supposed a Jew would be like the word Jew – small and dark and beetling. A secret person. But Finkler was almost orange in colour and spilled out of his clothes. He had extravagant features, a prominent jaw, long arms and big feet for which he had trouble finding wide enough shoes, even at fifteen. (Treslove noticed feet; his were dainty like a dancer's.) What is more – and everything was more on Finkler – he had a towering manner that made him look taller than he actually was, and delivered verdicts on people and events with such assurance that he almost spat them out of his mouth. 'Say it, don't spray it,' other boys sometimes said to him, though they took their lives in their hands when they did. If this was what all Jews looked like, Treslove thought, then Finkler, which sounded like Sprinkler, was a better name for them than Jew. So that was what he called them privately – *Finklers*.

He would have liked to tell his friend this. It took away the stigma, he thought. The minute you talked about the *Finkler Question*, say, or the *Finklerish Conspiracy*, you sucked out the toxins. But he was never quite able to get around to explaining this to Finkler himself.

They were both the sons of uppity shopkeepers. Treslove's father sold cigars and smoking accoutrements, Finkler's pharmaceuticals. Sam Finkler's father was famous for dispensing pills which reinvigorated people apparently at death's door. They took his pills and their hair grew back, their backs straightened, their biceps swelled. Finkler senior was himself a walking miracle, a one-time stomach cancer patient now become the living proof of what his pills were capable of achieving. He would invite customers to his pharmacy, no matter

what their ailments, to punch him in the stomach. Right where his cancer had once been. 'Harder,' he'd say. 'Punch me harder. No, no good, I still don't feel a thing.'

And then when they marvelled at his strength he would produce his box of pills. 'Three a day, with meals, and you too will never feel pain again.'

For all the circus hocus-pocus he was a religious man who wore a black fedora, was an active member of his synagogue, and prayed to God to keep him alive.

Julian Treslove knew he would never be clever in a Finklerish way. *D'Jew know Jewno* . . . He'd never be able to come up with anything like that. His brain worked at a different temperature. It took him longer to make his mind up and no sooner did he make his mind up than he wanted to change it again. But he was, he believed, and perhaps for that reason, the more boldly imaginative of the two. He would come to school balancing his night's dreams like an acrobat bearing a human pyramid on his shoulders. Most of them were about being left alone in vast echoing rooms, or standing over empty graves, or watching houses burn. 'What do you think that was about?' he'd ask his friend. 'Search me,' was Finkler's invariable reply. As though he had more important things to think about. Finkler never dreamed. On principle, it sometimes seemed to Treslove, Finkler never dreamed.

Unless he was just too tall to dream.

So Treslove had to figure out his own dreams for himself. They were about being in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were about being too late, unless they were about being too early. They were about waiting for an axe to fall, a bomb to drop, a dangerous woman to dabble her fingers in his heart. Julie, Judith, Juno . . .

Huno.

He also dreamed about misplacing things and never being able to find them despite the most desperate searches in unlikely places – behind skirting boards, inside his father's violin, between the pages of a book even when what he was looking for was bigger than the book. Sometimes the sensation of having misplaced something precious lasted throughout the day.

Libor, more than three times their age when they met him, had turned up out of the blue – he really did look, in his maroon velvet

suit and matching bow tie, as though he'd pushed open the wrong door, like Treslove in his dreams – to teach them European history, though mainly what he wanted to talk to them about was communist oppression (from which he'd had the foresight to flee in 1948,just before it sunk its claws into his country), Hussite Bohemia and the part played by windows in Czech history. Julian Treslove thought he had said 'widows' and became agitated.

'Widows in Czech history, sir?'

'Windows, chlapec, windows!'

He had been a journalist of sorts in his own country, a well-connected film critic and gossip columnist, and then again, as Egon Slick, a showbusiness commentator in Hollywood, squiring beautiful actresses around the bars of Sunset Boulevard, and writing about them for the glamour-starved English press, yet now here he was teaching the absurdities of Czech history to English schoolboys in a north London Grammar School. If anything could be more existentially absurd than Czech history, it was his own.

It was for Malkie that he'd relinquished Hollywood. She never accompanied him on his assignments, preferring to keep the home fires burning. 'I like waiting for you,' she told him. 'I love the anticipation of your return.' But he could tell the anticipation was wearing thin. And there were material cares he didn't feel he could leave her to go on handling on her own. He broke a contract and argued with his editor. He wanted time to write the stories of where he'd been and who he'd met. Teaching gave him that time.

Pacific Palisades to Highgate, Garbo to Finkler – the trajectory of his career made him laugh disrespectfully during his own classes, which endeared him to his pupils. Morning after morning he delivered the same lesson – a denunciation of Hitler and Stalin followed by the First and – 'if you're well behaved' – the Second Defenestration of Prague. Some days he'd ask one of the boys to give his lesson for him since they all knew it so well. When no questions about the First, the Second or indeed Any Subsequent Defenestrations of Prague appeared on their examination papers, the class complained to Libor. 'Don't look to me to prepare you for *examinations*,' he told them, curling his already curly lip. 'There are plenty of teachers who can help you get good marks. The point of me is to give you a taste of the wider world.'

Libor would have liked to tell them about Hollywood but Hollywood wasn't on the syllabus. Prague and its defenestrations he could slip in, the stars and their indiscretions he could not.

He didn't last long. Teachers who wear bow ties and talk about the wider world seldom do. Six months later he was working for the Czech Department at the World Service by day, and writing biographies of some of Hollywood's loveliest women by night.

Malkie didn't mind. Malkie adored him and found him funny. Funny was better than absurd. Her finding him funny kept him sane, 'And you can't say that about many Czechs,' he joked.

He continued to see the two boys when he had time. Their innocence diverted him; he had never known boyish innocence himself. He would take them out to bars they could not afford to go to on their own, mixing them drinks they had never before heard of let alone tasted, describing in considerable detail his erotic exploits – he actually used the word erotic, snagging his tongue on it as though the salaciousness of the syllables themselves was enough to arouse him – and telling them about the Bohemia from which he had luckily escaped and expected never to see again.

Of the nations of the free world, only England and America were worth living in, in Libor's view. He loved England and shopped as he imagined the English shopped, buying scented tea and Gentleman's Relish at Fortnum & Mason and his shirts and blazers in Jermyn Street, where he also indulged in a shave and hot towels soaked in limes as many mornings as he could manage. Israel, too, he spoke up for, as a Finkler himself, though that was more about needling people with the fact of its existence, Treslove thought, than wanting to live there. Whenever Libor said the word Israel he sounded the 'r' as though there were three of them and let the 'l' fall away to suggest that the place belonged to the Almighty and he couldn't bring himself fully to pronounce it. Finklers were like that with language, Treslove understood. When they weren't playing with it they were ascribing holy properties to it. Or the opposite. Sam Finkler would eventually spit out Israel-associated words like Zionist and Tel Aviv and Knesset as though they were curses.

One day Libor told them a secret. He was married. And had been for more than twenty years. To a woman who looked like Ava Gardner. A woman so beautiful that he did not dare bring home

his friends to meet her in case they were blinded by what they saw. Treslove wondered why, since he hadn't told them about her before, he was telling them about her now. 'Because I think you're ready,' was his answer.

'Ready to go blind?'

'Ready to risk it.'

The real reason was that Malkie had nieces the same age as Treslove and Finkler, girls who had trouble finding boyfriends. Nothing came of the matchmaking – even Treslove couldn't fall in love with Malkie's nieces who bore not the slightest physical resemblance to her, though he did, of course, fall in love with Malkie, despite her being old enough to be his mother. Libor had not exaggerated. Malkie looked so like Ava Gardner that the boys canvassed the possibility between them that she *was* Ava Gardner.

The friendship faded a little after that. Having shown the boys his wife, Libor had little else to impress them with. And the boys for their part had Ava Gardners of their own to find.

Shortly afterwards the first of the biographies was published, quickly followed by another. Juicy and amusing and slightly fatalistic. Libor became famous all over again. Indeed more famous than he had been before, because a number of the women he was writing about were now dead and it was thought they had confided more of their secrets to Libor than to any other man.In several of the photographs, which showed Libor dancing with them cheek to cheek, you could almost see them spilling their souls to him. It was because he was funny that they could trust him.

For several years Sam and Julian kept in touch with Libor's progress only through these biographies. Julian envied him. Sam less so. Word of Hollywood rarely penetrated the deserted late-night corridors of Broadcasting House which were home – if a hell can be called a home – to Julian Treslove. And because he considered Libor's career to be the inverse of his own, he was continuously, if secretly, seduced by it.

Sam Finkler, or Samuel Finkler as he still was then, had not done a modular degree at a seaside university. He knew better, he said, which side his bread was buttered. Finklerish of him, Treslove thought admiringly, wishing he had the instincts for knowing on which side his own bread was buttered.

'So what's it going to be?' he asked. 'Medicine? Law? Accountancy?'

'Do you know what that's called?' Finkler asked him.

'What what's called?'

'The thing you're doing.'

'Taking an interest?'

'Stereotyping. You've just stereotyped me.'

'You said you knew which side your bread was buttered. Isn't that stereotyping yourself?'

'I am allowed to stereotype myself,' Finkler told him.

'Ah,' Treslove said. As always he wondered if he would ever get to the bottom of what Finklers were permitted to say about themselves that non-Finklers were not.

Unstereotypically – to think which was a further form of mental stereotyping, Treslove realised – Finkler studied moral philosophy at Oxford. Though this didn't appear an especially wise career move at the time, and his five further years at Oxford teaching rhetoric and logic to small classes seemed less wise still, Finkler justified his reputation for shrewdness in Treslove's eyes by publishing first one and then another, and then another and then another, of the self-help practical philosophy books that made his fortune. *The Existentialist in the Kitchen* was the first of them. *The Little Book of Household Stoicism* was the second. Thereafter Treslove stopped buying them.

It was at Oxford that Finkler dropped the name Samuel in favour of Sam. Was that because he now wanted people to think he was a private investigator? Treslove wondered. Sam the Man. It crossed his mind that what his friend didn't want to be thought was a Finkler, but then it would have made more sense to change the Finkler not the Samuel. Perhaps he just wanted to sound like a person who was easy to get on with. Which he wasn't.

In fact, Treslove's intuition that Finkler no longer wanted to be thought a Finkler was the right one. His father had died, in great pain at the last, miracle pills or no miracle pills. And it had been his father who had kept him to the Finkler mark. His mother had never quite understood any of it and understood less now she was on her own. So that was it for Finkler. Enough now with the irrational belief systems. What Treslove couldn't have understood was that the Finkler name still meant something even if the Finkler idea didn't.

By staying Finkler, Finkler kept alive the backward sentiment of his faith. By ditching Samuel he forswore the Finkler future.

On the back of the success of his series of practical wisdom guides he had gone on – his big feet and verbal sprinkling and, in Treslove's view, all-round unprepossessingness of person notwithstanding – to become a well-known television personality, making programmes showing how Schopenhauer could help people with their love lives, Hegel with their holiday arrangements, Wittgenstein with memorising pin numbers. (And Finklers with their physical disadvantages, Treslove thought, turning off the television in irritation.)

'I know what you all think of me,' Finkler pretended to apologise in company when his success became difficult for those who knew and loved him to accept, 'but I have to earn money fast in preparation for when Tyler leaves and takes me for all I've got.' Hoping she would say she loved him too much to dream of leaving him, but she never did. Which might have been because she did little else but dream of leaving him.

Whereas Finkler, if Treslove's supposition was correct, was too tall to dream of anything.

Though their lives had gone in different directions, they had never lost contact with each other or with each other's families – in so far as Treslove could be said to have a family – or with Libor who, first at the height of his fame, and then as it dimmed and his wife's illness became his preoccupation, would suddenly remember their existence and invite them to a party, a house-warming, or even the premiere of a film. The first time Julian Treslove went to Libor's grand apartment in Portland Place and heard Malkie play Schubert's Impromptu Opus 90 No. 3 he wept like a baby.

Since then, bereavement had ironed out the differences in their ages and careers and rekindled their affection. Bereavement – heartless bereavement – was the reason they were seeing more of one another than they had in thirty years.

With their women gone, they could become young men again.

For 'gone', in Treslove's sense, read gone as in packed their bags, or found someone less emotionally demanding, or just not yet crossed his path on the dangerous streets and destroyed his peace of mind.

4

After dinner, Julian had walked alone to the gates of Regent's Park and looked inside. Finkler had offered him a lift but he refused it. He didn't want to sink into the leather of Sam's big black Mercedes and feel envy heat up his rump. He hated cars but resented Sam his Mercedes and his driver for nights when he knew he would be drunk – where was the sense in that? Did he want a Mercedes? No. Did he want a driver for nights when he knew he would be drunk? No. What he wanted was a wife and Sam no longer had one of those. So what did Sam have that he hadn't? Nothing.

Except maybe self-respect.

And that also needed explaining. How could you make programmes associating Blaise Pascal and French kissing and still have self-respect? Answer – you couldn't.

And yet he did.

Maybe it wasn't self-respect at all. Maybe self didn't enter into it, maybe it was actually a freedom from self, or at least from self in the Treslove sense of self – a timid awareness of one's small place in a universe ringed by a barbed-wire fence of rights and limits. What Sam had, like his father the showman parmaceutical chemist before him, was a sort of obliviousness to failure, a grandstanding cheek, which Treslove could only presume was part and parcel of the Finkler heritage. If you were a Finkler you just found it in your genes, along with other Finkler attributes it was not polite to talk about.

They barged in, anyway, these Finklers – Libor, too – where non-Finklers were hesitant to tread. That evening, for example, when they weren't listening to music, they had discussed the Middle East, Treslove staying out of it because he believed he had no right to an opinion on a subject which wasn't, at least in the way it was to Sam and Libor, any business of his. But did they truly know more than he did – and if they did, how come they disagreed about every aspect of the subject – or were they simply unabashed by their own ignorance?

'Here we go,' Finkler would say whenever the question of Israel arose, 'Holocaust, Holocaust,' even though Treslove was certain that Libor had never mentioned the Holocaust.

It was always possible, Treslove conceded, that Jews didn't have to mention the Holocaust in order to have mentioned the Holocaust.

Perhaps they were able by a glance to thought-transfer the Holocaust to one another. But Libor didn't *look* as though he were thought-transferring Holocausts.

And Libor, in his turn, would say, 'Here we go, here we go, more of the self-hating Jew stuff,' even though Treslove had never met a Jew, in fact never met anybody, who hated himself less than Finkler did.

Thereafter they went at it as though examining and shredding each other's evidence for the first time, whereas Treslove, who knew nothing, knew they'd been saying the same things for decades. Or at least since Finkler had gone to Oxford. At school, Finkler had been so ardent a Zionist that when the Six Day War broke out he tried to enlist in the Israeli air force, though he was only seven at the time.

'You've misremembered what I told you,' Finkler corrected Treslove when he reminded him of that. 'It was the Palestinian air force I tried to enlist for.'

'The Palestinians don't have an air force,' Treslove replied.

'Precisely,' Finkler said.

Libor's position with regard to Israel with three 'r's and no 'l' – Isrrrae – was what Treslove had heard described as the lifeboat position. 'No, I've never been there and don't ever want to go there,' he said, 'but even at my age the time might not be far away when I have nowhere else *to* go. That is history's lesson.'

Finkler did not allow himself to use the word Israel at all. There was no Israel, there was only Palestine. Treslove had even heard him, on occasions, refer to it as Canaan. Israelis, however, there had to be, to distinguish the doers from the done-to. But whereas Libor pronounced Israel as a holy utterance, like the cough of God, Finkler put a seasick 'y' between the 'a' and the 'e' – Isra*y*elis – as though the word denoted one of the illnesses for which his father had prescribed his famous pill.

'History's lesson!' he snorted. 'History's lesson is that the Israyelis have never fought an enemy yet that wasn't made stronger by the fight. History's lesson is that bullies ultimately defeat themselves.'

'Then why not just wait for that to happen?' Treslove tentatively put in. He could never quite get whether Finkler resented Israel for winning or for being about to lose.

Though he detested his fellow Jews for their clannishness about Israel, Finkler couldn't hide his disdain for Treslove for so much as daring, as an outsider, to have a view. 'Because of the blood that will be spilled while we sit and do nothing,' he said, spraying Treslove with his contempt. And then, to Libor, 'And because as a Jew I am ashamed.'

'Look at him,' Libor said, 'parading his shame to a Gentile world that has far better things to think about, does it not, Julian?'

'Well,' Treslove began, but that was as much of what the Gentile world thought as either of them cared to hear.

'By what right do you describe me as "parading" anything?' Finkler wanted to know.

But Libor persisted blindly. 'Don't they love you enough for the books you write them? Must they love you for your conscience as well?'

'I am not seeking anyone's love. I am seeking justice.'

'Justice? And you call yourself a philosopher! What you are seeking is the warm glow of self-righteousness that comes with saying the word. Listen to me – I used to be your teacher and I'm old enough to be your father – shame is a private matter. One keeps it to oneself.'

'Ah, yes, the family argument.'

'And what's wrong with the family argument?'

'When a member of your family acts erroneously, Libor, is it not your duty to tell him?'

'Tell him, yes. Boycott him, no. What man would boycott his own family?'

And so on until the needs of men who lacked the consolations of female company – another glass of port, another unnecessary visit to the lavatory, an after dinner snooze – reclaimed them.

Watching from the sidelines, Treslove was enviously baffled by their Finklerishness. Such confidence, such certainty of right, whether or not Libor was correct in thinking that all Finkler wanted was for non-Finklers to approve of him.

Whatever Sam Finkler wanted, his effect on Julian Treslove was always to put him out of sorts and make him feel excluded from something. And false to a self he wasn't sure he had. It had been the same at school. Finkler made him feel like someone he wasn't. Clownish, somehow. Explain that.

Treslove was considered good-looking in a way that was hard to describe; he resembled good-looking people. Symmetry was part of it. He had a symmetrical face. And neatness. He had neat features. And he dressed well, in the manner of who was it again? Whereas Finkler – whose father had invited customers to punch him in the belly – had allowed himself to put on weight, often let his own belly hang out of his shirt, spat at the camera, waddled slightly on his big feet when he went on one of those pointless television walks down the street where the laundry van knocked down Roland Barthes or through the field where Hobbes had an allotment, and when he sat down seemed to collapse into his own bulk like a merchant in a spice souk. And yet he, Treslove, felt the clown!

Did philosophy have something to do with it? Every few years Treslove decided it was time he tried philosophy again. Rather than start at the beginning with Socrates or jump straight into epistemology, he would go out and buy what promised to be a clear introduction to the subject – by someone like Roger Scruton or Bryan Magee, though not, for obvious reasons, by Sam Finkler. These attempts at self-education always worked well at first. The subject wasn't after all difficult. He could follow it easily. But then, at more or less the same moment, he would encounter a concept or a line of reasoning he couldn't follow no matter how many hours he spent trying to decipher it. A phrase such as 'the idea derived from evolution that ontogenesis recapitulates phylogenesis' for example, not impossibly intricate in itself but somehow resistant to effort, as though it triggered something obdurate and even delinquent in his mind. Or the promise to look at an argument from three points of view, each of which had five salient features, the first of which had four distinguishable aspects. It was like discovering that a supposedly sane person with whom one had been enjoying a perfect normal conversation was in fact quite mad. Or, if not mad, sadistic.

Did Finkler ever encounter the same resistance? Treslove asked him once. No, was the answer. To Finkler it all made perfect sense. And the people who read him found that he too made perfect sense. How else was one to account for there being so many of them?

It was only when he waved goodbye that it occurred to Treslove that his old friend wanted company. Libor was right – Finkler *was*

seeking love. A man without a wife can be lonely in a big black Mercedes, no matter how many readers he has.

Treslove looked up at the moon and let his head spin. He loved these warm high evenings, solitary and excluded. He took hold of the bars as though he meant to tear the gates down, but he did nothing violent, just listened to the park breathe. Anyone watching might have taken him for an inmate of an institution, a prisoner or a madman, desperate to get out. But there was another interpretation of his demeanour: he could have been desperate to get in.

In the end he needed the gate to keep him upright, so intoxicated was he, not by Libor's wine, though it had been plentiful enough for three grieving men, but by the sensuousness of the park's deep exhalations. He opened his mouth as a lover might, and let the soft foliaged air penetrate his throat.

How long since he had opened his mouth for a lover proper? Really opened it, he meant, opened it to gasp for air, to yell out in gratitude, to howl in joy and dread. Had he run out of women? He was a lover not a womaniser, so it wasn't as though he had exhausted every suitable candidate for his affection. But they seemed not to be there any more, or had suddenly become pity-proof, the sort of women who in the past had touched his heart. He saw the beauty of the girls who tripped past him on the street, admired the strength in their limbs, understood the appeal, to other men, of their reckless impressionability, but they no longer had the lamp-post effect on him. He couldn't picture them dying in his arms. Couldn't weep for them. And where he couldn't weep, he couldn't love.

Couldn't even desire.

For Treslove, melancholy was intrinsic to longing. Was that so unusual? he wondered. Was he the only man who held tightly to a woman so he wouldn't lose her? He didn't mean to other men. In the main he didn't worry much about other men. That is not to say he had always seen them off – he was still scarred by the indolent manner in which the Italian who repaired sash windows had stolen from him – but he wasn't jealous. Envy he was capable of, yes – he'd been envious and was envious still of Libor's life lived mono-erotically (*eloticshrly* was how Libor said it, knitting its syllables with his twisted Czech teeth) – but jealousy no. Death was his only serious rival.

'I have a Mimi Complex,' he told his friends at university. They thought he was joking or being cute about himself, but he wasn't. He wrote a paper on the subject for the World Literature in Translation module he'd taken after fluffing Environmental Decision Making – the pretext being the Henri Murger novel from which the opera *La Bohème* was adapted. His tutor gave him A for interpretation and D- for immaturity.

'You'll grow out of it,' he said when Treslove questioned the mark.

Treslove's mark was upgraded to A++. All marks were upgraded if students questioned them. And since every student did question them, Treslove wondered why tutors didn't just dish out regulation A++s and save time. But he never did grow out of his Mimi Complex. At forty-nine he still had it bad. Didn't all opera lovers?

And perhaps – like all lovers of Pre-Raphaelite painting, and all readers of Edgar Allan Poe – an Ophelia Complex too. The death betimes of a beautiful woman – what more poetic subject is there?

Whenever Julian passed a willow or a brook, or best of all a willow growing aslant a brook – which wasn't all that often in London – he saw Ophelia in the water, her clothes spread wide and mermaidlike, singing her melodious lay. Too much of water had she right enough – has any woman ever been more drowned in art? – but he was quick to add his tears to her inundation.

It was as though a compact had been enjoined upon him by the gods (he couldn't say God, he didn't believe in God), to possess a woman so wholly and exclusively, to encircle her in his arms so completely, that death could find no way in to seize her. He made love in that spirit, in the days when he made love at all. Desperately, ceaselessly, as though to wear down and drive away whichever spirits of malevolence had designs upon the woman in his arms. Embraced by Treslove, a woman could consider herself for ever immune from harm. Dog-tired, but safe.

How they slept when he had done with them, the women Treslove had adored. Sometimes, as he kept vigil over them, he thought they would never wake.

It was a mystery to him, therefore, why they always left him or made it impossible for him not to leave them. It was the disappointment of his life. Framed to be another Orpheus who would retrieve his loved one from Hades, who would, at the last, look back over

a lifetime of devotion to her, shedding tears of unbearable sorrow when she faded for the final time in his arms – 'My love, my only love!' – here he was instead, passing himself off as someone he wasn't, a universal lookalike who didn't feel as others felt, reduced to swallowing the fragrances of parks and weeping for losses which, in all decency, were not his to suffer.

So that was something else he might have envied Libor – his bereavement.

5

He stayed at the park gates maybe half an hour, then strode back with measured steps towards the West End, passing the BBC – his old dead beat – and Nash's church where he had once fallen in love with a woman he had watched lighting a candle and crossing herself. In grief, he'd presumed. In chiaroscuro. Crepuscular, like the light. Or like himself. Inconsolable. So he'd consoled her.

'It'll be all right,' he told her. 'I'll protect you.'

She had fine cheekbones and almost transparent skin. You could see the light through her.

After a fortnight of intense consolation, she asked him, 'Why do you keep telling me it'll be all right? There isn't anything wrong.'

He shook his head. 'I saw you lighting a candle. Come here.'

'I like candles. They're pretty.'

He ran his hands through her hair. 'You like their flicker. You like their transience. I understand.'

'There's something you should know about me,' she said. 'I'm a bit of an arsonist. Not serious. I wasn't going to burn down the church. But I am turned on by flame.'

He laughed and kissed her face. 'Hush,' he said. 'Hush, my love.'

In the morning he woke to twin realisations. The first was that she had left him. The second was that his sheets were on fire.

Rather than walk along Regent Street he turned left at the church, stepping inside the columns, brushing its smooth animal roundness with his shoulder, and found himself among the small wholesale fashion shops of Riding House and Little Titchfield Streets, surprised as always at the speed with which, in London, one cultural or commercial activity gave way to another. His father had owned a cigarette and

cigar shop here – *Bernard Treslove: Smokes* – so he knew the area and felt fondly towards it. For him it would always smell of cigars, as his father did. The windows of cheap jewellery and gaudy handbags and pashminas made him think of romance. He doubled back on himself, in no hurry to get home, then paused, as he always paused when he was here, outside J. P. Guivier & Co. – the oldest violin dealer and restorer in the country. Though his father played the violin, Treslove did not. His father had dissuaded him. 'It will only make you upset,' he said. 'Forget all that.'

'Forget all what?'

Bernard Treslove, bald, browned, straight as a plumb line, blew cigar smoke in his son's face and patted his head affectionately. 'Music.'

'So I can't have a cello, either?' J. P. Guivier sold beautiful cellos.

'The cello will make you even sadder. Go and play football.'

What Julian did was go and read romantic novels and listen to nineteenth-century operas instead. Which also didn't please his father, for all that the books which Treslove read, like the operas he listened to, were on his father's shelves.

After this exchange, Bernard Treslove went into his own room to play the violin. As though he didn't want to set a bad example to his family. Was it only Treslove's fancy that his father wept into his violin as he played?

So Julian Treslove played no instrument, though every time he passed J. P. Guivier's window he wished he did. He could, of course, have taken up music any time he wanted to after his father died. Look at Libor who had learnt to play the piano in his eighties.

But then Libor had someone to play it for, no matter that she was no longer with him. Whereas he . . .

It was as he was looking at the violins, lost in these tristful reflections, that he was attacked, a hand seizing him by his neck without warning, as a valuable cat out on the tiles might be grabbed by a cat snatcher. Treslove flinched and dropped his head into his shoulders, exactly as a cat might. Only he didn't claw or screech or otherwise put up a fight. He knew the people of the street – the beggars, the homeless, the dispossessed. Imaginatively, he was one of them. To him, too, the roads and pavements of the city were things of menace.

Years before, between jobs, and in pursuit of a beautiful unshaven nose-ringed charity worker with whom he believed he was destined to be happy – or unhappy: it didn't matter which, so long as it was destined – he had donated his services to the homeless and made representations on their behalf. He could hardly argue when they made representations for themselves. So he fell limp and allowed himself to be flung into the window and emptied.

Allowed?

The word dignified his own role in this. It was all over too quickly for him to have a say in the matter. He was grabbed, thrown, eviscerated.

By a woman.

But that wasn't the half of it.

It was what – reliving the event in the moments afterwards – he believed she had said to him. He could easily have been wrong. The attack had been too sudden and too brief for him to know what words had been exchanged, if any. He couldn't be sure whether or not he had uttered a syllable himself. Had he really accepted it all in silence, without even a 'Get off me!' or a 'How dare you?' or even a 'Help'? And the words he thought she had spoken to him might have been no more than the noise of his nose breaking on the pane or his cartilages exploding or his heart leaping from his chest. Nonetheless, a collection of jumbled sounds persisted and began to form and re-form themselves in his head . . .

'Your jewels,' he fancied he'd heard her say.

A strange request, from a woman to a man, unless it had once been made of her and she was now revisiting it upon him in a spirit of bitter, vengeful irony. 'Your jewels – now you know how it feels to be a woman!'

Treslove had taken a module entitled Patriarchy and Politics at university. In the course of that he often heard the sentence, 'Now you know how it feels to be a woman.'

But what if he'd manufactured this out of some obscure masculinist guilt and what she had actually said was 'You're Jules' – employing his mother's fond nickname for him?

This, too, took some explaining since he hardly needed telling who he was.

It could have been her way of marking him, letting him know that she knew his identity – 'You're Jules and don't suppose that I will ever forget it.'

But something else would surely have followed from that. Something else of course did, or had, in that she comprehensively relieved him of his valuables. Wouldn't she, though, for her satisfaction to be complete, have wanted him to know who she was in return? 'You're Jules, I'm Juliette – remember me now, you little prick!'

The more he thought about it, the less sure he was that 'Your' or 'You're' was quite the sound she'd made. It was more truncated. More a 'You' than a 'Your'. And more accusatory in tone. More 'You Jules' than 'You're Jules'.

'You Jules', as in 'You Jules, you!'

But what did that mean?

He had the feeling, further, that she hadn't pronounced any 's'. He strained his restrospective hearing to catch an 's' but it eluded him. 'You Jule' was more what she had said. Or 'You jewel'.

But is it consonant with calling someone a jewel that you smash his face in and rob him blind?

Treslove thought not.

Which returned him to 'You Jule!'

Also inexplicable.

Unless what she had said as she was emptying his pockets was, 'You Ju!'

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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Peeping Tom
Redback
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The Mighty Walzer
Who's Sorry Now?
The Making of Henry
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Non-fiction

Shakespeare's Magnanimity (with Wilbur Sanders)
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A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

An award-winning novelist and critic, Howard Jacobson was born in Manchester and read English at Cambridge under F. R. Leavis. He taught at the University of Sydney, Selwyn College, Cambridge, and finally Wolverhampton Polytechnic – the inspiration for his first novel, *Coming From Behind*. Other novels include *The Mighty Walzer* (winner of the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize), *Kalooki Nights* (longlisted for the Man Booker Prize) and, most recently, the highly acclaimed *The Act of Love*. Howard Jacobson writes a weekly column for the *Independent* and has written and presented several documentaries for television. He lives in London.

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