Ronald had threatened to move out before, but I always begged him not to. He knew he had power over me. He was one of those people who treats flattery as if it is mockery, and regards insult as a form of endearment. You couldn't talk to him. He refused to be praised, and if I called him 'Fanny' he only laughed. I suppose he knew that basically he was worthless, which led him to a kind of desperate boasting about his faults – he even boasted about his impotence. What Ronnie liked best was to get drunk on the cheap wine he called 'Parafino' and sprawl on the chaise and dig little hornets out of his nose and say what scum most people were. I knew he was bad for me and that I would have another breakdown if things went on like this much longer.

'God's been awful good to me,' he said once in the American accent he affected when he was drunk.

'That's blasphemy,' I said. 'You don't mean that. You'll go to Hell.'

'Wrong!' he shrieked. 'If you do mean it you'll go to Hell.'

When I met him he had just joined Howletts, the publisher. Quite early on, he began to sneer at the parties he sometimes took me to by boasting that he could go to one every day of the week. I thought he had a responsible position but afterwards, when I got to know the others, particularly Philippa and Roger, I came to realize that he was a rather insignificant person in the firm. I think this is why he seemed so embarrassed to have me along and took me so seldom. He implied that I wasn't attractive or intelligent enough for his publishing friends, and he would not let me near the real writers.

'This is Michael Insole, a friend,' he'd say, never letting on that we were living together in my flat. That sort of thing left me feeling incredibly depressed.

Then everything changed. I have not really analyzed it until now. It certainly wasn't an idea – nothing as solemn or calculated as that. It was more an impulse, a frenzy you might say, or a leap in the dark. At one of the parties I was talking to Sir Charles Moon-man, the novelist and critic. 'And what do you do?' he asked me. At another time I might have said, 'I live with Ronald Brill,' but I was feeling so fed up with Ronnie I said, 'Basically, I'm a writer.'

'Do I know your work?' asked Sir Charles.

'No,' I said. It was the truth. I worked then, as I do now, at the Arcade Off-License

near the Clapham South tube station, but living with Ronnie had made me want to go into writing.

Sir Charles found my prompt reply very funny, and then an odd thing happened. He relaxed and began to talk and talk. He was hugely old and had the downright manner and good health of a country doctor. He was reading Kingsley, he said, and squeezed air with his hands. He described the book, but it was nothing like any Kingsley I had ever read. He said, ‘It has, don’t you agree, just the right tone, an elasticity one associates with fiction –’ I nodded and tried to add something of my own, but could not get a word in.

At this point, Virginia Byward, the novelist and traveler, ambled over and said hello.

‘This is Mister Insole. He’s a writer,’ said Sir Charles. ‘We’ve just been talking about Kinglake.’

Kinglake, not Kingsley. I was glad I had not said anything.

‘Eothen? That Kinglake?’ said Miss Byward.

‘The Invasion of the Crimea. That Kinglake,’ said Sir Charles.

‘Well, I’ll let you two get on with it,’ said Miss Byward, laughing at her mistake. ‘Very nice to have met you, Mister Insole.’

‘She’s so sweet,’ said Sir Charles. ‘And her reportage is devastating.’ He clawed at his cuff. ‘Bother. It’s gone eight. I must rush – dinner engagement.’

‘I’ll be late for mine, as well,’ I said. ‘My hostess will tear a strip off me.’ But I was not going anywhere.

‘Such a bore, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘We are both being called away. So unfortunate. I would much rather stand and chat about the Crimean War.’

‘So would I!’ I said. Then, I could think of nothing else to say, so I said, ‘I am one of your most passionate fans.’

This was my leap in the dark. I had never read a word he had written. I suppose I looked terrified, but you would not have known it from the look on Sir Charles’s face – pure joy. He removed his pipe from his mouth and stuffed his finger in the bowl.

‘I’m so glad.’

‘I’m not joking,’ I said. ‘I find your work a real consolation. It genuinely engages me.’

‘It is awfully good of you to say so.’

He sounded as if he meant it. More than that, he reacted as if no one had ever said these words to him before.

‘We must meet for lunch one day.’ He clenched the pipe stem in his teeth and beamed.

I said, ‘How about dinner at my place? When you’re free.’

And Sir Charles Moonman, the eminent novelist and critic, said to me, ‘I am free most evenings.’

‘Next week?’

‘I can do Monday, or Tuesday, or –’

‘Monday,’ I said. I gave him my address and that was that. He clapped me on the shoulder in his bluff country doctor way, and I was still somewhat dazed when Ronald came over.

‘What are you grinning about?’

‘I’ve just invited Sir Charles Moonman for dinner.’

Ronald was horrified. ‘You can’t,’ he said. ‘I’ll phone him in the morning and tell him it’s off.’

‘You’ll do no such thing,’ I said, raising my voice to a pitch that had Ronald shushing me and steering me to a corner.

‘What are you going to give him?’

He had me there. I do a nice shepherd’s pie, and Ronald had often praised my flan, but truly I had not given the menu much thought, and told him so.

‘Shepherd’s pie!’ Ronald was saying as Virginia Byward sidled up to me.

‘Hello, Mister Insole,’ she said. She had remembered my name! ‘Has Charles gone?’

Ronald was speechless.

‘Charles had to be off,’ I said. ‘A dinner party – he was rather dreading it.’

Miss Byward was staring at Ronald.

‘I know Mister Insole is a writer,’ she said. ‘But what do you do?’

Ronald turned purple. He said, ‘I sell worthless books,’ and marched away.

‘I hope I didn’t say anything to offend him,’ said Miss Byward. ‘Too bad about Charles. I was hoping he’d still be here. I meant to lock horns with him.’

‘If you’re free on Monday, come along for dinner. Charles will be there.’

‘I couldn’t crash your dinner party.’

‘Be my guest,’ I said. ‘It won’t be fancy, but I think of myself as a good plain cook.’

‘If you’re sure it’s no trouble –’

‘I’d be honored,’ I said, and then I could think of nothing to say except, ‘I am one of your most passionate fans,’ the statement that had gone down so well with Sir Charles. I was a bit embarrassed about saying it, because repeating it made it sound formulated and insincere. But it was my embarrassment that brought it off.

‘Are you?’ she said. She was clearly delighted.

‘Your reportage is devastating.’

It was as easy as twisting a tap. I said nothing more. I simply listened to her talk, and finally she said, ‘I’ve so enjoyed our little chat. See you Monday.’

Ronald was silent on the way home until we got to Kennington or The Oval. Then he said, ‘Are you a writer?’

At Stockwell, I said, ‘Are you a publisher?’

As the train drew into Clapham Common, he stood up and said, ‘You’re shameless.’ He pushed past me and ran up the escalator.

That night Ronald slept on the chaise and the next day he moved out of the flat and out of my life.

I had not known how easy it would be to make the acquaintance of Sir Charles Moonman and Miss Byward. It had only been necessary to learn a new language, and it was one that Ronald either despised or did not know. When I went broody about Ronald’s absence over the weekend I remembered the guests I’d invited for Monday

and I cheered up.

But on Sunday I began to worry about the numbers. Three people did not seem much of a dinner party and I kept hearing myself saying, ‘I like the intimate sort of party.’ So I invited Mr Momma, too. Mr Momma, a Cypriot, was a house painter who lived in the top-floor flat. He never washed his milk bottles, so Ronald had named him ‘Inky,’ which was short for ‘inconsiderate.’ Mr Momma said he would do a salad.

On Monday I went to the library and got copies of Sir Charles’s and Miss Byward’s books. I was setting them out, arranging them on tables, when the phone rang. I must have been feeling a bit insecure still because I thought at once that it was either Sir Charles or Miss Byward who had rung to say they couldn’t make it after all.

‘Michael?’

It was Tanya Moult, one of Ronald’s authors. I should say one of Ronald’s victims, because he had strung her along for years. She was working on a book about pirates, women pirates, and Ronald had said it was just the ticket, a kind of robust woman’s thing. That was very Ronald. He had other people doing books on cowboys – black cowboys; hair-dressers and cooks – all men; gay heroes, and cats in history. Tanya sent him chapters and at the same time she scraped a living writing stories for women’s magazines under a pseudonym. Ronald was very possessive about Tanya, but perversely so: he kept me away from her while at the same time being nasty to her.

I told her that Ronald had moved out. It was the first she had heard of it and I could tell that she was really down. Ronald had not been in touch with her about her newest chapter.

‘Look, Tanya,’ I said – it was the first time I had used her Christian name. ‘Why don’t you come round tonight? I’m having a few friends over for dinner.’

She hesitated. I knew what she was thinking – I couldn’t blame her.

‘Sir Charles Moonman,’ I said. ‘And Virginia Byward.’

‘Gosh, Michael, really?’

‘And Mister Momma from upstairs.’

‘I’ve met him,’ she said. ‘I don’t know whether I have anything to wear.’

‘Strictly informal. If I know Sir Charles he’ll be wearing an old cardigan, and Virginia will be in a rather shapeless tunic.’

She said she would be there. At seven, Mr Momma appeared in a bulging blue jumpsuit, carrying plastic bags of lettuce and onions and some tubs of dressing. He said, ‘How do you know I like parties?’ and pulled one bulge out of his pocket – an avocado. His teeth were big, one was cracked, he wore a gold crucifix on a chain around his neck, and he smelled of sweat and soap. He sniffed. ‘Cooking food!’ He swung his bags onto the table. ‘Salad,’ he said. ‘I make fresh. Like my madder.’

I had never seen Mr Momma happier. He shooed me out of the kitchen and then busied himself chopping and grating, and whistling through the crack in his tooth.

Tanya arrived on the dot of eight with a bottle of Hungarian Riesling. ‘I’m so excited,’ she said, and I realized just how calm I was. The bell rang again.

‘Oh, my God,’ cried Mr Momma.

Tanya went to the kitchen door and smiled.

‘Like my madder,’ Mr Momma said.

Sir Charles was breathless when I met him on the landing.

‘I should have warned you about those stairs,’ I said.

But his breathlessness helped. He was panting, as if he had been cornered after a long chase and he could do nothing but smile and gasp his thanks as he was introduced to Tanya. He found a chair and propelled himself backward into it and sighed.

‘Wine?’ I said.

‘That would be lovely.’

I poured him a glass of Montrachet, gave him its pedigree (but omitted the fact that I had got it at a staff discount from Arcade Off-License) and left him to Tanya.

‘– it’s not generally known, but there were a fantastic number,’ Tanya was saying, and she was off: women pirates. Sir Charles was captivated.

‘Do you know,’ said Virginia Byward when she arrived, glancing around the flat and relaxing at the sight of two copies of her books, ‘this is only the second time in my life I’ve been to Clapham? I’d rather not talk about the first time. I came a cropper that night!’ She spoke to Sir Charles: ‘It was during the war.’

‘Something for your biographer,’ said Sir Charles.

We all laughed at this. But I thought then, and I continued to think throughout the evening, that I was now a part of their lives and that the time they were spending with me mattered. Each great writer seems to me to contain a posthumous book, the necessary and certain biography. Writers carry this assurance of posterity around with them. This was a page of that book.

This: my chaise, on which Miss Byward was sitting; my brass Benares ashtray with a smoldering thimble shape of Sir Charles's pipe tobacco in it; my tumbling tradescancia; my gate-legged dining table on which one of Ronald's dents was still visible; my footstool with its brocade cushion; my crystal sugar bowl; the wine glass Miss Byward was holding; the pillow Tanya was hugging; my basketwork fruit holder; me.

I excused myself and went into the kitchen. Mr Momma was putting the finishing touches to his salad. He had made a little hill of chopped lettuce leaves and sprinkled it with olives and pimentoes and drips of dressing.

'You love it?'

I said it was perfect.

'It is a woman's tee-tee,' he said, and made a knob-turning gesture with his hand.

In the parlor, my other guests were engrossed in conversation. I thought they were talking about an author they all respected; a name seemed to repeat (Murray? Gilbert Murray?). I pretended to straighten the leg of the table so I could get the drift of their conversation, but I quickly grasped that they were talking about money. (And I heard myself saying on a future occasion, I thought they were talking about an author they all respected …)

'I don't know how some people manage,' said Sir Charles. 'I really don't. By the way, Michael, this wine is superb. You didn't tell me you had a cellar.'

'I have an attic too,' I said.

'Isn't he a poppet!' said Virginia.

Mr Momma brought out his salad.

'Bravo,' said Virginia, and hearing Mr Momma's accent, she asked him where he was from. His mention of Cyprus had Virginia asking him which particular village was his and brought a long very practiced-sounding story from Sir Charles about a hotel in Limassol. Throughout the meal we talked intimately about Lawrence Durrell and I even found myself chipping in every now and then. I could see that it was considered

quite a coup to have Mr Momma on hand.

‘And what is our friend from Cyprus doing in London?’ asked Virginia.

‘I am a painter.’

Mr Momma did not have the English to amplify this. He was quickly taken to be a tormented artist in exile rather than the hard-working house painter he was. We talked about the Mediterranean sense of color, and afterward Mr Momma ran upstairs for his Cypriot records. He played them, he danced with Virginia, and he told her he loved her. Then he sat down and sobbed into his handkerchief.

‘I’ve been admiring this wine glass,’ said Virginia over Mr Momma’s muted hoots. ‘Is it part of a set?’

I said, ‘Just the one,’ and filled it with the claret I had brought out for the shepherd’s pie.

I was relieved when Sir Charles said he had to go, because that was my signal to open the Krug, which went down a treat. Then Sir Charles and Virginia shared a taxi back to Hampstead and Tanya (making a crack about Ronald) said she had never enjoyed herself more. Hearing what Tanya had said, Mr Momma put his arm around me. He smelled strenuously of his dancing.

‘No,’ I said, and led him to the door. ‘Let’s not spoil it.’

I slept alone, but I was not alone. The evening had been a great success. Both Sir Charles and Virginia sent me notes, thanking me for having them. They were brief notes, but I replied saying that the pleasure had been all mine.

Afterward, I wondered why they had agreed to come. I decided that their very position had something to do with it. They were so grand that most people thought that they must be very busy, so no one dared to invite them. And people believed that they were beyond praise. But my flattery, my offer of a meal, my discount wines had done the trick.

I had worked hard to make the evening festive, and Mr Momma had been an unexpected success. And what had I asked of them? Nothing – nothing but for them to be there.

I had told them I was a writer. Because I had said this no one talked about it: I was one of them. Anyway, a good host is preoccupied with managing his party. His graciousness is silence when it is not encouragement. He isn’t supposed to say much, only to keep the dishes coming and the glasses filled. So, in the end, they did not know

much about me. They talked to each other.

The proof that Miss Byward meant what she said about enjoying herself was her invitation to me several weeks later for drinks at her very tiny flat in Hampstead. It was not until I saw her flat that I fully understood how she could have seen something to admire in mine. She was clearly an untidy person, but I was grateful when she introduced me as ‘Michael Insole, the writer.’ There were six others there, all writers whose names I instantly recognized, but because of the seating arrangements, I had no choice but to talk to Wibbert the poet. He told me a very entertaining story about giving a poetry reading in Birmingham, and he finished by saying, ‘The pay’s appalling. They always apologize when they hand it over.’

Henry Wibbert was a tall balding youth with the trace of a regional accent, and bitten fingernails, something I had always hated until I met him. His socks had slipped into his shoes and I could see his white ankles. His poet’s love of failure was written all over him, and when I told him I did not write poetry he seemed to take this as a criticism – as if I were acting superior – and I wanted to tell him that, in fact, I had never written anything at all.

‘I do the odd spot of reviewing,’ he said, somewhat defensively. And then, ‘I can always go back to teaching yobboes if I find myself really hard up.’ He twisted his finger into his mouth and chewed. ‘I’m sure your earnings have you in the supertax bracket.’

‘Far from it,’ I said. ‘I find it very hard to manage.’

At once, he was friendlier. We had found common ground as struggling writers.

‘It’s hand to mouth with me,’ he said.

I said, ‘I was having this very conversation with Sir Charles Moonman just the other night.’

‘He hasn’t got my worries,’ said Wibbert, though when I had said Sir Charles’s name Wibbert looked closely at me, the way a person peers from a high window to an interesting spectacle below.

‘You’d be surprised.’

‘If it was a struggle for that pompous overpraised old bastard?’ he said. ‘Yes, I’d be very surprised.’

‘Have you ever met him?’

Wibbert shook his head.

‘Why don’t you come over some evening? You might change your mind.’

Wibbert said, ‘He’d probably hate me.’

‘Absolutely not,’ I said.

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘Because I’m sure he’s read your poetry, and if he has how could he fail to be an admirer of yours?’

This did the trick. Wibbert wrote his telephone number on the back of my hand in ballpoint, and as he had to hold my hand in his in order to do this it was noticed by the others at Miss Byward’s as a rather eloquent gesture.

‘You’re not leaving,’ said Miss Byward, when I asked for my cape.

‘A dinner engagement. Unfortunately. I would so much rather stay here and chat. It’s been lovely.’

She released me and afterward I wondered whether she had not said those very words to me. On the bus home I thought how much more satisfying it was to be a host than a guest.

I went home and after four tries typed a letter to Sir Charles, which I copied out in longhand – I liked the look of spontaneous intimacy in a handwritten letter. I was sure he would appreciate it. I told him about Wibbert and said that Wibbert was dead keen to meet him, if we could fix a day.

The reply from Sir Charles came in the form of an invitation from the Royal Society of Literature in which I was named as his guest at a lecture by Cyril Crowder on ‘Our Debt to Hugh Walpole.’ Although a reply was not requested I dashed off a note to the Society’s secretary and said I’d be delighted to attend. And another to Sir Charles. On the day, I was so impatient I arrived early and chatted to the only person I could find, a little old lady fussing at a table. I had very nearly invited her to meet Sir Charles when she revealed herself as one of the tea ladies and said, ‘I should have a cream bun now if I was you. They’re always the first to go.’

Just before the lecture the room filled with people, Sir Charles among them. I blushed when a man, on being introduced to me by Sir Charles, said yes, indeed, he knew my work well. Sir Charles was pleased, and so was I, but I quickly took myself to a corner of the room. Here, a group of people were talking to a man who was obviously the center of attention. I made a beeline for this man, but instead of speaking, simply

listened to what the others were saying. The man smiled at me a number of times.

‘His friendship with James amounted to influence,’ someone said. ‘I believe it was very great.’

‘Deep,’ said the man, and smiled at me.

I swallowed my fear and said, ‘Profound.’

‘That’s it,’ said the man and thanked me with his eyes.

‘They’re calling you, Cyril,’ said a woman. ‘You’re on.’

This was Cyril Crowder! But he took his time. He said, ‘You’ll have to excuse me. I must do my stuff. Perhaps I’ll see you afterward. There are drinks downstairs in the Lodge.’

Cyprus sherry, Hungarian Bull’s Blood that was red ink, a semi-sweet Spanish white, and a mongrel Corsican rosé.

The dinner I gave for Cyril Crowder, Sir Charles and Lady Barbara, Virginia Byward, and Wibbert was one of my most memorable. It was further enhanced by the appearance after dinner (I had only six chairs) of Tanya and Mr Momma – and Mr Momma brought his records. Naturally I left them to themselves, kept their glasses filled with some vintage Muscadet (1971), and let them become quite tipsy. Very late in the evening, Cyril took me aside. I told him again how much I had enjoyed his lecture, but he interrupted, saying, ‘Have you ever thought of addressing the Society?’

‘I wouldn’t dare.’

‘Oh, do.’

‘I’m not even a member,’ I said.

‘We can put that right,’ he said, and he hollered across the room, ‘Charles – how about making Michael a Fellow at the next committee meeting? All in favor say, “Aye!”’

‘Aye!’ came the shout from the sofa.

And Mr Momma said, ‘High!’

‘Motion carried,’ said Cyril. ‘Now what will you speak on?’

‘First things first,’ I said, and uncorked a bottle of port (1972), decanted it through my

hanky, and poured three inches into a schooner.

‘That wine’s a gentleman,’ said Cyril.

‘So you can understand why I was so keen to lay it down.’

After Sir Charles and Lady Barbara left, Mr Momma put his records on the gramophone and did his drunken Cypriot shuffle. Wibbert waltzed with Tanya. I was tapped on the shoulder. Cyril had taken off his spectacles. He said, ‘May I have the pleasure?’ and slipped his arm around my waist.

Friendship is algebra, but there are operations most people are too impatient or selfish to perform. Any number is possible! There is a cynical side to this. Ronald used to say that you can sleep with anyone you like – you only have to ask. That is almost entirely selfish. But one can be unselfish, even in sleeping around – in giving everything and expecting nothing but agreeable company. ‘Giving everything,’ I say; but so little is actually required – a good-natured remark, a little flattery, a drink.

But I have been bold. Not long after my election to the Royal Society I saw a production of Streetcar Named Desire, with Annette Frame playing Blanche Dubois. I wrote her a fan letter. She replied. I replied. We exchanged letters on a weekly basis – mine were letters, hers postcards. Then I popped the question. Would she join me for a drink? We agreed on a date and though she was leery at first she stayed until the wee hours. Now I count her as one of my dearest friends. Algebra.

I sometimes think that in my modest way I have discovered something that no one else knows. When Virginia Byward got her OBE it was I who helped her choose her dress and I who drove her to the Palace. A year before I would not have believed it to be possible, and yet as we rounded Hyde Park Corner I realized we were hurrying to meet the Queen. ‘Alice,’ Virginia calls me when she is a little tipsy and tearful. But the life I have is the life I have always wanted. I am surprised that no one has realized how simple it is.

Once, I thought that in agreeing to attend my parties these people were doing me an enormous favor, taking time off from busy schedules to flatter my vanity. Later I saw how empty their lives were. ‘I’d have lunch with anyone remotely human,’ Wibbert once said. It was the saddest thing I had ever heard. Now it is clear that if it were not for me they would drearily write their books and live drearily alone and be too proud and unimaginative to invite each other round.

They take me as I am. I pose no threat; but more, I believe I have brought some joy into their lives – as much into Mr Momma’s as Sir Charles’s. It is only awkward when, very late in the evening, their gratitude gets the better of them and they insist on hearing something about my latest book. I say it’s dreadful, everything’s up the wall, I

haven’t written a word for ages. And they accept this. They even seem a bit relieved when I change the subject and uncork another bottle.