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SEX AND ITS SUBSTITUTES

When people said, ‘Miss Duboys has a friend,’ they meant something sinister, or at least pretty nasty – that she had a dark secret at home. Because we were both unmarried and grade FSO-4 at the London Embassy, we were often paired up at dinner parties as the token singles. It became a joke between us, these frequent meetings at Embassy Residences. ‘You again,’ she would say, and give me a velvet feline growl. She was not pretty in any conventional way, which was probably why I found her so attractive. Her eyes were green in her thin white face; her lips were overlarge and lispy-looking; her short hair jet-black; and you could see the rise of her nipples through her raincoat.

It took me a little while to get to know her. There were so many people eager to see us married, we resisted being pushed into further intimacy. I saw a lot of her at work – and at all those dinner parties! We very quickly became good friends and indeed were so tolerant of each other and so familiar that it was hard for me to know her any better. I desired her when I was with her. Our friendship did not progress. Then I began to think that people were right: she probably did have a secret at home.

The facts about her were unusual. She had not been to the United States in four years – she had not taken home leave, she had not visited Europe, she had not left London. She had probably not left her apartment much, except to go to work. It made people talk. But she worked very hard. Our British counterparts treated hard workers with suspicion. They would have regarded Margaret Duboys as a possible spy, for staying late all those nights. What was she really doing? people asked. Some called her conscientious; others, obsessed.

There was another characteristic Miss Duboys had that made the London Embassy people suspicious. She bought a great amount of food at the PX in Ruislip. She made a weekly trip for enormous quantities of tax-free groceries, but always of a certain kind. All our food bills were recorded on the Embassy computer, and Miss Duboys’s bills were studied closely. Steaks! Chickens! Hamburg! She bought rabbits! One week her bill was a hundred and fourteen dollars and forty-seven cents. Single woman, tax-free food! She was a carnivore and no mistake, but she bought pounds of fish, too. We looked at the computer print-out and marveled. What an appetite!

‘People eat to compensate for things,’ said Everett Horton, our number two, who perhaps knew what he was talking about: he was very fat.

I said, ‘Margaret doesn’t strike me as a compulsive eater.’

‘No,’ he said, ‘she’s got a very sweet figure. That’s a better explanation.’

‘She’s thin – it doesn’t explain anything!’

‘She’s pretty,’ Horton said. ‘She’s living with a very hungry man.’

‘Let’s hope not,’ I said, and when Horton leered at me, I added, ‘For security reasons.’

She had completely reorganized the Trade Section; she dealt with priority trade matters. It was unthinkable that someone in such a trusted position was compromising this trust with a foreigner who was perhaps only a sexual adventurer. It is the unthinkable that most preoccupies me with thought. Or was she giving all the food away? Or, worse, was she selling it to grateful English people? They paid twice what we did for half as much and, in the past, there had been cases of Embassy personnel selling merchandise they had bought at bargain prices at the American PX: they had been sent home and demoted, or else fired – ‘terminated’ was our word. We wondered about Miss Duboys. Her grocery bill was large and mystifying.

The day came when these PX print-outs were to be examined by some visiting budget inspectors from Washington.

Horton, who knew I was fond of Miss Duboys, took me aside that morning.

‘Massage these figures, will you?’ he said. ‘I’m sure they’re not as lumpy as they look.’

I averaged them and I made them look innocent. Yet still they startled me. All that food! For any other officer it would not have looked odd, but the fact was that Miss Duboys lived alone. She never gave dinner parties. She never gave parties. No one had ever been inside her house.

There was more speculation, all of it idle and some of it rather cruel. It was worse than ‘Miss Duboys has a friend.’ I thought it was baseless and malicious and, in the way that gossip can do real harm by destroying a person’s reputation, very dangerous. And what were people saying about me? People regarded her as ‘shady’ and ‘sly.’ ‘You can’t figure her out,’ they said, meaning they could if you were bold and insensitive enough to listen. And there was her ‘accident’ – doubting people always spoke about her in quotation marks, which they indicated with raised eyebrows. It was her hospital ‘scare.’ Miss Duboys, who was a ‘riddle,’ had been ‘rushed’ to the hospital ‘covered with bruises.’ The commonest explanation was that she ‘fell,’ but the general belief was that she had been beaten up by her mysterious roommate – so people thought. If she had been beaten black and blue no one had seen her. Al Sanger claimed he saw her with a bandaged hand, Erroll Jeeps said it was scratches. ‘Probably a feminine complaint,’ Scaduto’s wife said, and when I squinted she said, ‘Plumbing.’

‘Could be another woman,’ Horton said. ‘Women scratch each other, don’t they? I mean, a man wouldn’t do that.’

‘Probably a can of tuna fish,’ Jeeps said.

Al Sanger said, ‘She never buys cans of tuna fish!’

He, too, had puzzled over her grocery bills.

Miss Duboys did not help matters by refusing to explain any of it: the grocery bills, the visit to the hospital, no home leave, no cocktail parties, no dinners. But she was left alone. She was an excellent officer and the only woman in the Trade Section. It would have been hard to interrogate her and practically impossible to transfer her without being accused of bias. But there were still people who regarded her behaviour as highly suspicious.

‘What is it?’ Horton asked me. ‘Do you think it’s what they say?’

I had never heard him, or any other American Embassy official, use the word ‘spy.’ It was a vulgar, painful, and unlucky word, like ‘cancer.’

‘No, not that,’ I said.

‘I can’t imagine what it could be.’

‘It’s sex,’ I said. ‘Or one of its substitutes.’

‘One of the many,’ he said.

‘One of the few,’ I replied.

He smiled at me and said, ‘It’s nice to be young.’

The harsh rumors, and the way Miss Duboys treated them with contempt, made me like her the more. I began to look forward to seeing her at the dinner parties, where we were invariably the odd guests – the unmarried ones. Perhaps it was more calculated than I realized; perhaps people, seeing me as steady, solid, with a good record in overseas posts, thought that I would succeed in finding out the truth about Miss Duboys. If so, they chose the right man. I did find out the truth. It was so simple, so obvious in its way, it took either genius or luck to discover it. I had no genius, but I was very lucky.

We were at Erroll Jeeps’s apartment in Hampstead. Jeeps’s wife was named Lornette,

which, with a kind of misplaced hauteur, she pronounced like the French eyeglasses, 'lorgnette.' The Jeepses were black, from Chicago. A black American jazz trumpeter was also there – he was introduced as Owlie Cooper; and the Sangers – Al and Tina; and Margaret Duboys; and myself.

The Sangers' dog had just come out of quarantine. When he heard that it had cost three hundred dollars to fly the dog from Washington to London, and close to a thousand for the dog's three months at the quarantine kennel in Surrey ('We usually visited Brucie on weekends'), Owlie Cooper kicked his feet out and screamed his laughter at the Sangers. Tina asked what was so funny. Cooper said it was all funny: he was laughing at the money, the amount of time, and even the dog's name. 'Brucie!'

The Sangers looked insulted; they went into a kind of sulk – their eyes shining with anger – but they said nothing. You knew they wanted to say something like Okay, but what kind of a name is Owlie? But Owlie was black and it was possible that Owlie was a special black name, maybe Swahili, or else meant something interesting, which – and this was obvious – Brucie didn't.

Unexpectedly, Margaret Duboys said to Cooper, 'Taking good care of your dog – is that funny? People go to much more trouble for children. Look at all the time and money that's wasted on these Embassy kids.'

'You're not serious,' Cooper said. 'I mean, what a freaky comparison!'

'It's a fair comparison,' Margaret said. 'I've spent whole evenings at the Scadutos' listening to stories about Tony's braces. Guess how much they cost the American taxpayer? Three thousand dollars! They sent him to an orthodontist at the American base in Frankfurt –'

'I'm thinking of going there,' Lornette Jeeps said. 'I've got this vein in my leg that's got to come out.'

'They didn't even work!' Margaret was saying. 'Skiddoo says the kids still call him Bugs Bunny. And Horton's kid, eight years old, and he's got a bodyguard who just stands there earning twenty grand a year while Horton Junior plays Space Invaders at these clip joints in Leicester Square –'

'It's an antikidnap measure,' Erroll Jeeps said. 'It'd be easy as shit for some crackhead in the IRA to turn Horton Junior into hand luggage –'

And then the two Sangers smiled at each other, and while Margaret continued talking, Al Sanger said, 'We're pretty fond of Brucie. We've had him since Caracas –'

There were, generally speaking, two categories of bores at the Embassy dinner

parties: people with children, and people with animals. Life in London was too hectic and expensive for people to have both children and animals. When they did, the children were teenagers and the animals disposable – hamsters and turtles. One group had school stories and the other had quarantine stories – and they were much the same: both involved time, money, patience, and self-sacrifice.

‘You certainly put up with a lot of inconvenience,’ I said to one woman with a long story.

‘If that’s what you think, you completely missed my point,’ she said.

She was proud of her child – or perhaps it was a puppy.

Margaret Duboys was still talking!

I said, ‘Are we discussing brats or ankle-biters?’

‘It’s still Brucie,’ Tina Sanger said.

‘Give me cats any day,’ I said, sipping my gin and trying to keep a straight face. ‘They’re clean, they’re intelligent, and they’re selfish. None of this tail-wagging, no early-morning sessions in the park, no “walkies.” Dogs resent strangers, they get jealous, they get bored – they stink, they stumble, they drool. Sometimes dogs turn on you for no reason! They revert! They maul people, they eat children. But cats only scratch you by accident, or if you’re being a pest. Dogs want to be loved, but cats don’t give a damn. They look after themselves, and they’re twice as pretty.’

‘What about kids?’ Al Sanger said.

‘They’re in between,’ I said.

Erroll said, ‘In between what?’

‘Dogs and cats.’

Margaret Duboys howled suddenly. A dark labored groan came straight out of her lungs. I had a moment of terror before I realized that she was just laughing very hard.

I had been silly, I thought, in talking about cats that way, but it produced an amazing effect. After dinner, Miss Duboys came up to me and said in a purr of urgency, ‘Could you give me a lift home? My car’s being fixed.’

She had never accepted a ride from me before, and this was the first time she had ever asked for one. I found this very surprising, but I had a further surprise. When we

arrived at her front door, she said, ‘Would you like to come in for a minute?’

I was – if the Embassy rumors were correct – the first human being to receive such an invitation from her. I found it hard to appear calm. I had never cared much about the Embassy talk or Miss Duboys’s supposed secrets; but, almost from the beginning, I had been interested in offering her a passionate friendship. I liked her company and her easy conversation. But how could I know anything about her heart until I discovered her body? I felt for her, as I had felt for all the women I wanted to know better, a mixture of caution and desire and nervous panic. A lover’s emotions are the same as a firebug’s.

There was a sound behind the door. It was both motion and sound, like tiny children hurrying on their hands and knees.

‘Don’t be shocked,’ Miss Duboys said. She was smiling, she looked perfectly serene. In this light her eyes were not green but gray.

Then she opened the door.

Cats, cats, cats, cats, cats, cats –

She was stooping to embrace them, then almost as an afterthought she said, ‘Come in, but be careful where you step.’

There were six of them, and they were large. I knew at once that they resented my being there. They crept away from me sideways, seeming to walk on tiptoe, in that fastidious and insolent way that cats have. Their bellies were too big and detracted from their handsomeness. Why hadn’t she told anyone about her cats? It was the simplest possible answer to all the Embassy gossip and speculation. And no one had a clue. People still believed she had a friend, a lover, someone with a huge appetite, who sometimes beat her up. But it was cats. That was why she had not left Britain for the duration of nearly two tours: because of the quarantine regulations she could not take her cats, and if she could not travel with them she would not travel at all.

But she had not told anyone. I was reminded then that she had never been very friendly with anyone at the Embassy – how could she have been, if no one knew this simple fact about her that explained every quirk of her behavior? She had always been remote and respectful.

That first night I said, ‘No one knows about your cats.’

‘Why should they?’

‘They might be interested,’ I said, and I thought: Don’t you want to keep them from

making wild speculations?

‘Other people’s pets are a bore,’ she said. She seemed cross. ‘And so are other people’s children. No one’s really interested, and I can’t stand condescension. People with children think they’re superior or else pity you, and people with cats think you’re a fool, because their beasts are so much better behaved. You have to live your own life – thank God for that.’

It was quite an outburst, considering that all we were talking about were cats. But she was defensive, as if she knew about her mysterious reputation and ‘Miss Duboys has a friend’ and all those coarse rumors.

She said, ‘What I do in my own home, on my own time, is my business. I usually put in a ten-hour day at the Embassy. I think I’m entitled to a little privacy. I’m not hurting anyone, am I?’

I said, no, of course not – but it struck me that her tone was exactly that of a person defending a crank religion or an out-of-the-way sexual practice. She had overreacted to my curiosity, as if she expected to be persecuted for the heresy of cat-worship.

I said, ‘Why are you letting me in on your little secret?’

‘I liked what you said at Erroll’s – about cats.’

‘I’m a secret believer in cats,’ I said. ‘I like them.’

‘And I like you.’ She was holding a bulgy orange cat and making kissing noises at it. ‘That’s a compliment. I’m very fussy.’

‘Thanks,’ I said.

‘It’s time for bed,’ she said.

I looked up quickly with a hot face. But she was talking to the cat and helping it into a basket.

We did nothing that night except drink. It had got to the hour – about half-past two – when to go to bed with her would have been a greater disappointment than going home alone to Battersea. I made it look like gallantry – I said I had to go; tomorrow was a working day – but I was doing us both a favor, and certainly sparing her my blind bumbling late-night performance. She seemed to appreciate my tact, and she let me know, with her lips and a flick of her tongue and her little sigh of pleasure, that someday soon, when it was convenient, I would be as welcome in her bed as any of her cats.

Cat-worship was merely a handy label I had thought of to explain her behavior. Within a few weeks it seemed an amazingly accurate description, and even blunt clichés, such as cat-lover and cat-freak, seemed to me precise and perfectly fair. Cats were not her hobby or her pastime, but her passion.

I got to know her garden apartment. It was in Notting Hill, off Kensington Park Road, in a white building that had once been (I think she said) the residence of the Spanish Ambassador. Its ballroom had been subdivided into six small apartments. But hers was on the floor below these, a ground-floor apartment opening into a large communal park, Arundel Gardens. The gardens, like the apartment and most of its furnishings, were for the cats. The rent was twelve hundred dollars a month – six hundred pounds. It was too much, almost more than Miss Duboys could afford, but the cats needed fresh air and grass and flowers, and she needed the cats.

On her walls there were cat calendars and cat photographs and, in some rooms, cat wallpaper – a repeated motif of crouching cats. She had cat paperweights and cat picturebooks, and waste-baskets and lampshades with cats on them. On a set of shelves there were small porcelain cats. There were fat cats stenciled on her towels, and kittens on her coffee mugs. She had cats printed on her sheets and embroidered on her dinner napkins. Cats are peculiarly expressionless creatures, and the experience of so many images of them was rather bewildering. The carpet in the hall was cat-shaped – a sitting one in profile. She had cat notepaper, a stack of it on her desk (two weeks later I received an affectionate message on it).

And she had real cats, six of them. Five were nervous and malevolent, and the sixth was simple-minded – a neutered, slightly undersized one that gaped at me with the same sleepy vacuity as those on the wall and those on the coffee mugs. The largest cat weighed fifteen or twenty pounds – it was vast and fat-bellied and evil-spirited, and named Lester. It had a hiss like a gas leak. Even Margaret was a bit fearful of this monster, and she hinted to me that it had once killed another cat. Thereafter, Lester seemed to me to have the stupid, hungry – and cruel and comic – face of a cannibal.

There was nothing offensive in the air, none of that hairy suffocation that is usual in a catty household. The prevalent smell was of food, the warm buttery vapor of homecooking. Margaret cooked all the time; her cats had wonderful meals: hamburg in brown gravy, lightly poached fish, stews that were never stretched with flour or potatoes. Lester liked liver, McCool adored fish, Miss Growse never ate anything but stews, and the others – they all had human-sounding names – had different preferences. They did not eat the same thing. Sometimes they did not eat at all – did not even taste it but only glanced and sniffed at the food steaming in the dish and then walked away and yowled for something else. It made me mad: I would have eaten some of that food! The cats were spoiled and overweight and grouchy – ‘fat and magnificent,’ Margaret called them. Yes, yes; but their fussy food habits kept her busy

for most of the hours she was home. Now I understood her huge shopping bills. She was patient with them – more patient than I had even seen her in the Embassy. When the cats did not eat their food, she put it into another dish and left it outside for the strays – the London moggies and the Notting Hill tomcats that prowled Arundel Gardens. Why the other dishes? 'My cats are very particular about who uses their personal dishes!'

I said, 'Do you use the word "personal" with cats?'

'I sure do!'

And one day she said, 'I never give them cans.'

It was the sort of statement that caused me a moment of unnecessary discomfort. I ate canned food all the time. What was wrong with it? I wanted to tell Margaret that she was talking nonsense: Good food, fresh air, no cans! Me and my cats!

No, absolutely no cans – the cats drew the line there – but they were not particular about which chair leg they scratched, or where they puked, or where they left their matted hairs. They sharpened their claws on the sofa and on the best upholstered chairs, and went at the wall and clawed it and left shredded, scratched wallpaper, like heaps of grated cheese, on the carpet. The cats were not fierce except when they were protecting their food or were faced with the London strays; but they were very destructive – needlessly so – and it made me angry to think of Margaret paying so much money for rent and having to endure the cats' vandalism. She did not mind.

I made the mistake of mentioning this only once.

She replied, 'But children are a hundred times worse.'

I said, 'How does it feel to have six children?'

If it seemed that way, she said – that they were like children – then how did it seem from the cats' point of view? I thought she was crazy, taking this line (look at it from the cats' point of view!), but she quoted Darwin. She said that Darwin had concluded that domesticated animals which grew up with people regarded human beings as members of their own species. It was in The Voyage of the Beagle, where the sheepdogs treated sheep in a brotherly way in Argentina. From this, it was easy to see that cats regarded us as cats – of a rather inconvenient size, but cats all the same, which fed them, and opened doors for them, and scratched them pleasantly behind their ears, and gave them a lap to sit on, and pinched fleas from around their eyes and mouths, and wormed them.

'Darwin said that?'

‘More or less.’

‘That cats think we’re cats?’

‘He was talking about dogs and sheep, but, yes,’ she said uncertainly. With conviction she added, ‘Anyway, these cats think I’m one.’

‘What about their natural instincts?’

‘Their instincts tell them no, but their sympathies and learning experience tell them yes. These cats are sympathetic. Listen, I don’t even think of them as cats!’

‘That’s one step further than Darwin,’ I said.

By now I knew a great deal about Miss Duboys’s cats, and quite a lot about Miss Duboys. We had spent the past five Sundays together. Neither of us had much to do on the weekends. It became our routine to have Sunday lunch at an Indian restaurant and, after a blistering vindaloo curry, to return to her apartment and spend the afternoon in bed. When we woke, damp and entangled, from our sudden sleep – the little death that follows sex – we went to a movie, usually a bad, undemanding one, at the Gate Cinema near the Notting Hill tube station. Sunday was a long day with several sleeps – the day had about six parts and seemed at times like two or three whole days – all the exertion, and then the laziness, and all the dying and dreaming and waking.

London was a city that inspired me to treasure private delights. Its weather and its rational, well-organized people had made it a city of splendid interiors – everything that was pleasurable happened indoors: the contentment of sex, food, reading, music, and talk. Margaret would have added animals to this list. When she woke blindly from one of these feverish Sunday sleeps, she bumped me with an elbow and said, ‘I’m neglecting my cats.’

She had no other friends. Apart from me (but I occupied her only one day of the week), her cats were the whole of her society, and they satisfied her. It seemed to me that she was slightly at odds with me – slightly bewildered – because I offered her the one thing a cat could not provide. The cats were a substitute for everything else. Well, that was plain enough! But it made me laugh to think that for Margaret Duboys I represented Sex. Me! It made life difficult for us at times, because it was hard for her to see me in any other way. She judged most people by comparing them with cats. In theory this was trivial and belittling, but it was worse in practice – no one came out well; no one measured up; no humans that she knew were half so worthwhile as any of her cats.

‘I make an exception in your case,’ she told me – we were in bed at the time.

‘Thanks, Marge!’

She didn’t laugh. She said, ‘Most men are prigs.’

‘Did you say prigs?’

‘No, no’ – but she dived beneath the covers.

Usually she was harder on herself than on me. She seemed to despise that part of herself which needed my companionship. We saw each other at parties just as often as before, because we concealed the fact that we had become lovers. I was not naturally a concealer of such things, but she made me secretive, and I saw that this was a part of all friendship – agreeing to be a little like the other person. Margaret thought, perhaps rightly, that in an informal way the Embassy would become curious about our friendship and ask questions – certainly the boys on the third floor would keep us under observation. So we never used the internal Embassy phones for anything except the most boring trivialities. There was plenty of time at the dinner parties for us to make plans for the following Sunday. People were still trying to bring us together! When I did phone her, out of caution I used the public phone box near my apartment, on Prince of Wales Drive. Those were the only times I used that phone box, and entering it – it was a damp, stinking, vandalized cubicle – I thought always of her, and always in a tender way.

She was catlike in the panting gasping way she made love, the way she clawed my shoulders, the way she shook, and most of all in the way she slept afterward, as though on a branch or an outcrop of rock, her legs drawn up under her and her arms wrapped around her head and her nose down.

I don’t think of them as cats. A number of times she repeated this observation to me. She did not theorize about it; she didn’t explain it. And yet it seemed to me the perfect reply to Darwin’s version of domestic animals thinking of us as animals. The person who grew up with cats for company regarded cats as people! Of course! Yet it seemed to me that these cats were the last creatures on earth to care whether or not they resembled an overworked FSO-4 in the Trade Section of the American Embassy. And if that was how she felt about cats, it made me wonder what she thought about human beings.

We seldom talked about the other people at work or about our work. We seldom talked at all. When we met it was for one thing, and when it came to sex she was single-minded. She used cats to explain her theory of the orgasm: ‘Step one, chase the cat up the tree. Step two, let it worry for a while. Step three, rescue the cat.’ When she failed to have an orgasm she would whisper, ‘The cat is still up the tree – get her down.’

From what she told other people at dinner parties, and from Embassy talk, I gathered that her important work was concerned with helping American companies break into the British market. It was highly abstract in the telling: she provided information about industrial software, did backup for seminars, organized a clearing-house for legal and commercial alternatives in company formation, and liaised with promotional bodies.

I hated talking to people about their work. There was, first, this obscure and silly language, and then, inevitably, they asked about my work. I was always reminded, when I told them, of how grand my job as Political Officer sounded, and how little I accomplished. These days I lived from Sunday to Sunday, and sex seemed to provide the only meaning to life – what else on earth was so important? There was nothing to compare with two warm bodies in a bed: this was wealth, freedom, and happiness; it was the object of all human endeavor. I was falling in love with Margaret Duboys.

I also feared losing her, and I hated all the other feelings that were caused by this fear – jealousy, panic, greed. This was love! It was a greater disruption in the body than an illness. But though at certain times I actually felt sick, I wanted her so badly, at other times it seemed to me – and I noted this with satisfaction – as if I had displaced those goddamned cats.

It was now December. The days were short and clammy-cold; they started late and dark; they ended early in the same darkness, which in London was like faded ink. On one of these dark afternoons Erroll Jeeps came into my office and asked whether he could have a private word with me.

‘Owlie Cooper – remember him?’

‘I met him at your house,’ I said.

‘That’s the cat,’ Erroll said. ‘He’s in a bind. He’s a jazzhead – plays trumpet around town in clubs. Thing is, his work permit hasn’t been renewed.’

‘Union trouble?’

‘No, it’s the Home Office, playing tough. He thought it would just be routine, but when he went to renew it they refused. Plus, they told him that he had already overstayed his visit. So he’s here illegally.’

‘What can I do?’

‘Give me a string to pull,’ Erroll said.

‘I wish I had one – he seemed a nice guy.’

‘He laughs a little too much, but he’s a great musician.’

My inspiration came that evening as I walked across Chelsea Bridge to Overstrand Mansions and my apartment. I passed the public phone box on Prince of Wales Drive and thought: Owlie Cooper was a man with a skill to sell – he made music, he was American, he was here to do business. He had a product and he was in demand, so why not treat it as a trade matter, Margaret?

I saw her the next day and said, ‘There’s an American here who’s trying to do business with the Brits. He’s got a terrific product, but his visa’s run out. Do you think you can handle it?’

‘Businessman,’ she said. ‘What kind of businessman?’

‘Music.’

‘What kind?’ she said. ‘Publishing, record company, or what?’

‘He makes music,’ I said. ‘Owlie Cooper, the jazzman we met at Jeeps’s house.’

Margaret sighed and turned back to face her desk. She spoke to her blotter. ‘He can get his visa in the usual way.’

‘We could help him sell his product here,’ I said.

‘Product! He plays the trumpet, for Pete’s sake.’

‘Margaret,’ I said, ‘this guy’s in trouble. He can’t get a job if he hasn’t got a work permit. Look, he’s a good advertisement for American export initiative.’

‘I’d call it cultural initiative. Get Scaduto. He’s the cultural affairs officer. Music is his line.’ Then, in a persecuted voice, she said, ‘Please, I’m busy.’

‘You could pull a string. Skiddoo doesn’t have a string.’

‘This bastard Cooper –’

‘What do you mean, “bastard”? He’s a lost soul,’ I said. ‘Why should you be constantly boosting multinational corporations while a solitary man –’

‘I remember him,’ Margaret said. ‘He hates cats.’

‘No, it was dogs. And he doesn’t hate them. He was mocking Al Sanger’s dog.’

‘I distinctly remember,’ she said stiffly. ‘It was cats.’

There was a catlike hiss in her cross voice as she said so.

She said, ‘People will say I don’t want to help him because he’s black. Actually – I mean, funnily enough – that’s why I do want to help him – because he’s black and probably grew up disadvantaged. But I can’t.’

‘You can!’

‘It’s not my department.’

I started to speak again, but again she hissed at me. It was not part of a word but a whole warning sound – an undifferentiated hiss of fury and rebuke, as if I were a hulking, brutish stranger. It embarrassed me to think that her secretary was listening to Margaret behaving like one of her own selfish cats.

It was the only time we had ever talked business, and it was the last time. Owlie Cooper left quietly to live in Amsterdam. He claimed he was a political exile. He wasn’t, of course – he was just one of the many casualties of Anglo-American bureaucracy. But I felt that in time he would become genuinely angry and see us all as enemies; he would get lonelier and duller and lazier in Holland.

Two weeks later I was calling Margaret from a telephone booth, the sort of squalid public phone box that, when I entered it, excited me with a vivid recollection of her hair and her lips. She began telling me about someone she had found in the house quite by chance, how he had stayed the night and eaten a huge breakfast, and how she was going to fatten him up.

I had by then already lost the thread of this conversation. I had taken a dislike to her for her treatment of Owlie Cooper. I hated the stink of this phone box, the broken glass and graffiti. What was she talking about? Why was she telling me this?

I said, ‘What’s his name?’

‘Who?’

‘The person who spent the night with you.’

‘The little Burmese?’ she said. ‘I haven’t given him a name yet.’

My parting words were ineffectual and unmemorable. I just stopped seeing her,

canceled our usual date, and Sunday I spent the whole day bleeding in my bedroom. She hardly seemed to notice, or else – and I think this was more likely – she was relieved that I had given up.