

BERG

For Mother

A man called Berg, who changed his name to Greb, came to a seaside town intending to kill his father . . .

Window blurred by out of season spray. Above the sea, overlooking the town, a body rolls upon a creaking bed: fish without fins, flat-headed, white-scaled, bound by a corridor room – dimensions rarely touched by the sun – Alistair Berg, hair-restorer, curled webbed toes, strung between heart and clock, nibbles in the half light, and laughter from the dance hall opposite. Shall I go there again, select another one? A dozen would hardly satisfy; consolation in masturbation, pornographic pictures hanging from branches of the brain. WANTED one downy, lighthearted singing bird to lay, and forget the rest. A week spent in an alien town, yet no further progress – the old man not even approached, and after all these years, the promises, plans, the imaginative pursuit as static as a dream of yesterday. The clean blade of a knife slicing up the partition that divides me from them. Oh yes I have seen you with her – she who shares your life now, fondles you, laughs or cries because of you. Meeting on the stairs, at first the hostile looks, third day: acknowledgment. A new lodger, let's show him the best side. Good morning, nice day. Good afternoon, cold today. His arm linked with hers. As they passed Berg nodded, vaguely smiled, cultivating that mysterious air of one pretending he wishes to remain detached, anonymous. Afterwards their laughter bounced back, broke up the walls, split his door; still later the partition

vibrated, while he paced the narrow strip of carpet between wardrobe and bed, occasionally glimpsing the reflection of a thin arch that had chosen to represent his mouth. Rummaging under the mattress Berg pulled out the beer-stained piece of newspaper, peered at the small photograph.

Oh it's him Aly, no mistaking your poor father. How my heart turned, fancy after all this time, and not a word, and there he is, as though risen from the dead. That Woman next to him Aly, who do you suppose she is?

He had noticed the arm clinging round the fragile shoulders; his father's mistress, or just a friend? hardly when – well when the photo showed their relationship to be of quite an affectionate nature. Now he knew. It hadn't taken long to inveigle his way into the same house, take a room right next to theirs. Yes he had been lucky, everything had fallen into place. No hardship surely now in accepting that events in consequence, in their persistent role of chance and order, should slow down?

Meanwhile he'd find out how they lived, the time they actually spent together. One more clue today: a letter on the hall table, addressed to Mrs. Judith Goldstein, room 19; where then Mr. Goldstein – a hundred feet deep, or perhaps only twenty feet away, yet someone else betrayed, scheming, scratching behind another wall? Berg pushed back the newspaper cutting under the mattress, and sat on the edge of the bed, head reclined from the eclipse that settled over the room, rumpled bed, the chest of drawers, that refused to close; the half open wardrobe doors, the chipped enamel pot with its faded blue flowers; the wallpaper making everything else collide; this morning's dirty dishes, half a brown loaf – a

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monk's cowl – perched on the pale yellow plastic table cloth; pin-striped trousers over the rose-chintz chair; pants, string vests; the case full of bottles, wigs, pamphlets: BUY BERG'S BEST HAIR TONIC DEFEAT DELILAH'S DAMAGE: IN TWO MONTHS YOU WILL BE A NEW MAN. Beside the bed, piled neatly, letters from Edith Berg, devoted unconditionally to her only son:

Oh Aly I don't like you going off to see him like this. I'm sure it's not the proper thing to do, I mean he won't ever recognise you, let alone acknowledge you after all these years.

Through a gap in the curtain, made by one stained finger, and if parted wide enough for a spider to slide through, Berg could watch the illuminated palace across the road lighting up the solid Victorian blocks, surrounded by parked vehicles. On the right a triangular patch of churchyard; perhaps that's what accounted for the burnt smell that invaded his room every night, if some paper was stuffed in the cracks, and he remembered to close the window, then the smell might be kept out. He pulled the window right down, and remained gloating over the couples that entered the dance hall. Once he had ventured across, and brought back a giggling piece of fluff, that flapped and flustered, until he was incapable, apologetic, a dry fig held by sticky hands. Well I must say you're a fine one, bringing me all the way up here, what do you want then, here are you blubbering, oh go back to Mum. Lor' wait until I tell them all what I got tonight, laugh, they'll die. Longing to be castrated; shaving pubic hairs. Like playing with a doll, rising out of the bath, a pink jujube, a lighthouse, outside the rocks rose in body, later forming into maggots that invaded the long nights, crawled out of sealed walls, and

tumbled between the creases in the sheets. Beyond this a faint recollection of a grizzled face peering over, being lowered, on string, to kiss – but no surely to smother you? Edith calling, stifled giggles with Doreen; wanting desperately to go somewhere, how it had come, a shower of golden rain over her new scarlet dress. Later Uncle Billy, home on leave, drunk, drenched with sweat and tobacco smells, drawing you over his knees; kissing taboo, you just confirmed, it's dirty, not the thing to do, leads to other things. Like photos of nudes, Nicky and Bert kept pasted in their scripture books, relieving the laceration of Miss Hill's vagina; spinsterhood personified, with her sadistic fascination for boys' backsides. Alistair Berg come here, bend over please.

Darkness, radio on. Inside something stirred – a child murmuring in its sleep. A moth bumped against the wall, the door, the light. Berg's fingers strayed, lingered on the switch. The moth sizzled against the bulb, now wingless fell. The stairs creaked, could it be the old man, by himself? Berg switched the light off, and opened the door a little. Striking a match he waited, unaware that the flame licked his hand. A movement nearby, followed by a woman's voice. Soon Judith appeared, groping her way along by the landing walls. Berg heard the jingle of keys, the sound of their door being opened, closed.

She was, without doubt, a good deal younger than his father, attractive, he supposed, in the artificial style, and who would wish to go beyond the surface in a woman anyway? But what did she see in the old man, certainly not the lure of money, to all intents and purposes he seemed to be living on and off her. A form of mutual perversion? But their sex life hardly concerned him, not at the moment anyway; let the interpretation of their relationship remain in the abstract.

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He must present himself one evening, suggest a drink, which would certainly be taken up by his father; every night the old man stumbled up the stairs, followed by raised voices for half an hour or more, then the creaking of their bed the other side for hours, literally hours, while he buried himself under the blankets.

He yawned, stretched; the music distracted, he went to the window. A microscopic eye upon a never-changing scene, except perhaps the weather. Youths nonchalantly leaned from the windows, behind them twisting shapes of couples could be seen, and as from an umbilical cord Berg strung himself through their weaving arms and legs. An eye, then two, stared across. He pulled the curtains, and leaned against the wall, choking over a cigarette. Gradually he calmed down, and pushed his face against the window. Another eye gazed as through a telescope, held his own, then fell. He faced the room. Why get into such a state, just because someone had seen him, surely there was nothing to fear, nothing to be ashamed of? He drew back the curtains, the lights swirled in and round every available object, frantically searching for something, heard of perhaps, but never allowed to see. Berg remained in one beam of light, trying hard not to expose the internal rustle, or lay bare the final draft: abide by the rules and regulations of your chosen part; surrendered, sealed. Full signature here please ALISTAIR CHARLES HUMPHREY BERG, born third of the third, nineteen hundred and thirty-one. Father's profession: gentleman of unknown origins, scoundrel of the first order. Mother: lady of unequalled measure, mother of genius . . .

Now you're out of the Army Aly you'll have to find a job.

Berg

At seventeen discovered to be sterile, followed by secret injections: incurable. But think of the others, those who inevitably fulfil their obligations, he was one of the lucky ones, be thankful for small mercies, at least he wasn't impotent.

Well my boy what are you thinking of taking up eh, following in your father's footsteps I suppose, or is it the Civil Service – they look after you well there you know?

No denying that, never forgotten once filed away, numbered, documented. Respectability was what Edith had regard for, expected of him to be a good, solid-working citizen.

You see I've never had the better things in life Aly. Of course I don't expect you to understand, but what I haven't had I want you to have.

The martyred airs, the coughing, sometimes all night long, over the weekends; a special shave, blunt blades, her pleasure in putting on the dabs of cotton wool.

When will you be down again Aly? Now you know that's not true, I'm just wondering that's all, as I like to know, but then you have your own life to lead, and I'll not stand in your way.

Confronted by her flushed face from the neck up, her hands fluttering; the faded brilliance of a saved-up birthday brooch on her nylon-fur coat lapel, the rusty pin at the edge that always caught something in your throat; the tear-glazed eyes, intake of breath not allowed to escape until the train's steam merged with the clouds going West. Screwing his eyes up,