

By Ali Smith

Novels

LIKE
HOTEL WORLD
THE ACCIDENTAL
GIRL MEETS BOY
THERE BUT FOR THE
HOW TO BE BOTH
AUTUMN
WINTER
SPRING
SUMMER

Short story collections

FREE LOVE AND OTHER STORIES
OTHER STORIES AND OTHER STORIES
THE WHOLE STORY AND OTHER STORIES
THE FIRST PERSON AND OTHER STORIES
PUBLIC LIBRARY AND OTHER STORIES

Ali Smith

Free Love
and Other Stories



virago

Free love

The first time I ever made love with anyone it was with a prostitute in Amsterdam. I was eighteen and her name was Suzi, I don't think she was much older than I was. I had been cycling round the town in a bad mood and had come upon the red light district quite by chance; it was the most pleasant red light district I've ever got lost in. The women there sit on chairs in windows that are lined with furs and fabrics, they sit breast naked or near naked, draped with gowns and furs. It took me a while to work out that they were probably scowling at me so contemptuously not just because I was staring but because I wasn't business.

It was evening and I'd been out cycling by myself. I had wandered down a back street and had stopped to put my jumper on, and my bike had fallen over and the chain had come off. It was when I stood the bike up against the wall of a building to get a proper go at the chain that I noticed the cards stuck by the door. Several of them were in English, one said Need To Relax? Take It Easy No Rush Ring Becky. Another said Dieter Gives Unbeatable Service Floor 2. Another said something about uniforms and domination and had a drawing of a schoolgirl on it. I was just laughing at them to myself when I saw one at the bottom in tiny writing and several languages, Dutch, French, German, English and something eastern, and the English line said Love for men also women, Suzi 3rd floor. The also was underlined.

That's when I left my bike standing and found myself going up the old staircase; on the third floor there was a door with the same card stuck on it and my hand was knocking on the door. I had a story ready in my head in case I wanted to get away, I was going to say I was lost and could she direct me back to the youth hostel. But she came to the door and she was so nice, I took to her at once and wasn't the least bit scared.

The flat had one room and a bathroom off it, some chairs and the bed and a hanging bead thing curtaining off the kitchen area like in photographs of the sixties. On the wall there was a poster of the lead singer from A-Ha, A-Ha were big at the time in Europe and she said she liked him because he was a man but he looked like a woman. I remember I thought that was a very exciting thing to say, I hadn't heard anyone say anything direct like that before. I come from a small town; one

night my friend Jackie and I had been sitting in a pub and two girls had been sitting at a table on the other side of the room; they looked conventional, more so than we did really, they had long hair, were wearing a lot of make-up, and it was when I glanced to see what kind of footwear they had on that I noticed one of them had one foot out of her high-heeled shoe and was running it up and down the other one's shin under the table. This was a very brave thing to be doing now that I come to think about it; chances are if anyone had seen them they'd have been beaten up. At the time I pointed it out to Jackie and she said something about how disgusting it was, I think I even agreed, I never wanted to disagree with her on anything.

The prostitute spoke English with an American accent. She said she had an hour and would that be enough for me, and though I hadn't a clue I said yes I thought so. I showed her my hands all oily from the bike and said I should maybe wash them, and she sat me down in one of the old armchairs and, bringing a cloth and a washing-up bowl over, washed and dried them for me. Then she did this thing, she put my hand to her mouth and put her tongue between my fingers at the place where my fingers meet my hand, and she pushed it in, going along between each. I think my head almost blew off just at her doing that.

She gave me a cup of very strong coffee and a glass of red wine, she told me to help myself from the bottle of wine she left on the little table next to the chair, then she put her arms around my neck and kissed me, and loosened my clothes, and undid my jeans, and I sat there amazed. She took my hand and took me on to the bed, she didn't even pull the covers back,

we stayed on top, it was August, warm, and afterwards she showed me what to do back though I did have a pretty good idea. When eventually she looked at her watch and at me and smiled and shrugged her shoulders, we got dressed again and I took out my wallet and thumbed through the guilder, but she put her hand over mine and closed the wallet up. It's free, she said, the first time should always be free, and when she saw me to the door she said would I be in Amsterdam long and would I like to come back. I said I would very much like to, and went down the stairs in such a daze that when I came to my bike I got on it and tried to cycle it away, completely forgot about the chain and nearly hit my chin off the handlebars. So I pushed it back to the youth hostel and I felt as I walked past the reflections of the tall buildings curving in the leafy surfaces of the canals that life was wondrous, filled with possibility. I stopped there and leaned on the railings and watched the late sun hitting the water, shimmering apart and coming together again in the same movement, the same moment.

When I arrived back at the hostel Jackie put the chain back on for me. Jackie and I had been friends since school, she'd been in the year above me, and we'd stayed friends now we were both students. We'd saved our summer money to go on this trip. I'd been serving in the souvenir shop on the caravan site since the end of June and she'd been behind the bed and breakfast counter of the tourist information board; we made a pittance but it was enough to get us return tickets for a cheap overnight bus to Amsterdam.

Jackie was blonde and boyish and golden in those days. One day I had simply seen her, she was sitting on the school wall by

the main door and I had thought she looked like she was surrounded with yellow light, like she had been gently burnt all over with a fine fire. At a party we'd sat in a dark corner and Jackie had nudged my arm, her eyes directing me to a handsome thuggy boy lounging on the couch opposite watching us, her mouth at my ear whispering the words, see him? Tonight I only have to smile, you know, that's all I have to do.

I had thought this very impressive, and had held her head for her later in the upstairs bathroom when she was being sick after drinking a mixture of beer and wine; we sat on the stairs laughing after that at the girl whose party it was going round the living-room hoovering up other people's sick into one of those small car hoovers; after that we had been friends. I don't know why she liked me, I think because I was quiet and dark and everybody thought I must be clever. I'd thought Jackie was beautiful, I thought she looked like Jodie Foster on whom I had had a crush, she looked like Jodie Foster only better. I'd thought that when we were at school and I thought it then, even though Jodie Foster's film career had hit rather a low spot at the time.

I'd had these thoughts for years and they were getting harder and harder to keep silent about. I didn't really have a choice. Once we got to Amsterdam and she saw there were people selling big lumps of hash in the street she was filled with moral outrage, that's what she was like. But the overnight bus had been a great excuse to lean my head on her shoulder, to have my nose in her yellow hair and pretend I was asleep, which meant I was very tired the first day we were in Amsterdam, going round in a stupor telling myself it was worth it.

Already Jackie had made contact with a boy from Edinburgh whom we met in the youth hostel kitchen, his name was Alan; already they were big friends and he'd suggested she should go and watch him sword-fight at a tournament that night, which is why I cycled off in a terrible mood. I was in really rather a good mood by the time I came back to the hostel, and Jackie, who hadn't gone to the sword-fight after all, went into a sulk because I was happy for some reason and because when she asked me where I'd been I wouldn't tell her.

Nothing could spoil my holiday after that, I didn't care any more. And that's when Jackie started being unusually nice to me; this was confusing because although we were best friends we were pretty horrible to each other most of the time. The next day she hired a bike too and we cycled up and down by the canals and the crammed parked cars, we drank beer and ate ice cream under restaurant parasols, we visited the Van Gogh Museum and Rembrandt's House and the Rijksmuseum full of old Dutch paintings, we went to a shop where they made shoes while you watched. The day after, we cycled to a modern art gallery; downstairs they had a room sculpture where people were sitting round a bar and their faces were made of clocks. We wandered this gallery for a while and upstairs I lost Jackie and fell asleep on one of the wooden seats. When I woke up she was sitting very close to me, her arm on my shoulder. I sat up and she didn't move away; we sat there looking at the picture I'd fallen asleep in front of, it was a huge rectangle of red paint with one thin strip of blue paint down the left hand side. Her leg was pressing firmly into my leg. Do you like this? she asked, looking at the picture, and I

said I did, and she suggested we should go and visit the Heineken factory now.

At the Heineken factory they give you a tour of where and how the beer is made, all the steps in its brewing process, how it's bottled, how the labels are stuck on and where it goes after that. At each stage they give you a generous glass of beer and everyone on the tour shouts cheers or *pröst* and drinks it. Then they take you into their office for after-tour drinks. By the time we'd done the Heineken tour we were so drunk we shouldn't have been cycling at all and had to leave the bikes against a tree and lie on our backs in a park, laughing at nothing and looking at the sky. It wasn't as if we'd never been drunk together before, but somehow this time it was different, and we sat in the grass in the late afternoon and I told her all the things I'd felt for years now, and she looked at me woundedly, as if I'd slapped her, and told me she felt exactly the same. Then she put her arms round me and kissed my mouth and my neck and shoulders, we were kissing in the middle of Amsterdam and nobody even noticing. Even after the Heineken wore off the afternoon didn't, it lasted for the rest of the holiday, me with my arm through hers on the street, at nights in the youth hostel dormitory Jackie reaching up from her bunk below mine to press her hand into my back, us holding hands between bunks in the dark in a room full of sleeping people. Very romantic. Amsterdam was very romantic. We took photos of each other at the fish market, I still have that photo somewhere. We went boating on a lake and took pictures of each other rowing.

The day before we were supposed to be leaving, on the

pretext of going out to do some mysterious present buying I cycled back to the red light district and left my bike at the bottom of the stairs again. I had to wait this time for half an hour. Suzi remembered me, I know for sure because afterwards she sat up, looked at her watch, smiled and ruffled my hair, saying, it's sad darling but the second time you have to pay. It was good, but not as good as the first, and it cost me a fortune. On top of which I had to buy Jackie a present; I remember it was expensive but I can't remember what it was I actually bought her. I think it was a ring.

Of course when we got home we stopped being able to do things like hold each other's arm in the street, though we did manage to snatch a little time after hours in the back gardens of unsuspecting people, in lanes and alleyways between houses or garages, in the back of her father's van parked in the dark by the river. Otherwise it was downstairs at either of our houses after everybody else had gone to bed, on the floor or on the couch, one of us with one hand over the other's mouth, both of us holding and catching our breath.

The first place we really made love was arriving back home after Amsterdam in the women's toilets at the bus station, hands inside clothes, pushed up against the wall and the locked door in the minutes before her father was due to come and take us and our rucksacks home. It was one of the most exciting things I have ever done in my life, though Jackie always called it our sordid first experience. About a month after, I walked past the tourist information board and saw through the window in the back office Jackie heavily kissing the boy who worked on the Caledonian Canal tourist boats. I thought

that remarkably more sordid, I remember. But then, what people think is sordid is relative after all; the person who saw us holding hands between our seats at the theatre one night thought it sordid enough to tell our mothers about us in anonymous letters. We both had a lot of denying to do and that's something that certainly brought us closer together at the time. We had that to thank them for. Recently Jackie and I lived in the same city again for a while, and we were always nice to each other when we'd meet occasionally in the street. We both know we owe each other that, at least.

But I date the beginning of my first love from that August in Amsterdam, and we lasted over five years on and off before we let go. I think about it from time to time, and when I do the picture that comes first to mind is one of the sun as it breaks apart and coheres on the waters of an unknown city, and I'm there, free in the middle of it, high on its air and laughing to myself, a smile all over my face, my wallet in my pocket still full of clean new notes.

To the cinema

I

There's the cinema, the ticket-tearer, the person whose ticket gets torn in two and the film playing in the dark.

Today's film is *Les Enfants du Paradis*, a revived French classic made nearly half a century ago when Hitler was shown in the newsreels with an affable smile on his face, the Eiffel Tower his backdrop. It was made at a time when people in Paris who went to the cinema were forced to watch this image, the doors barred by the armed police who would stand near the screen and watch over the audience to see that any reactions were the correct ones. It is a sumptuous film set in the nineteenth century, about a woman who refuses to be owned

by any one of her many admirers, even by the man she truly loves; to her audience when the film was first released she came to stand for a liberated France. After the war the actress who played her was imprisoned for a short while for collaboration; during the shooting she had had an affair with a German officer.

The film is in black and white and it lasts over three hours. It ends on the image of the woman's true lover, after their only night of passion, seeing her disappear. She melts into a street filled with carnival revellers and noise, she is carried away aloft and separate in a waiting carriage. He is left calling her name, caught up in a sea of indifferent people. Today as the curtains close on the end of the film the audience actually applauds, is animated and slow to leave. People marvel at the clarity of the print, they talk excitedly and wave their arms about as they filter through the fire exit into the sun. It's still my favourite film, it's probably my favourite film of all time, one man is heard to say. It's so romantic, I loved every minute of it, says a woman, I thought it would be very long but I didn't even notice the time passing.

Les Enfants du Paradis is a sure bet. Even on a Sunday morning with a ten a.m. start the people who run the cinema know it will bring in a good box-office return. It does so every time they show it; this morning the queue of people waiting for the cinema to open stretched round the corner into the next street.

Or maybe the film this morning is a more recent classic, something like *North by Northwest* or *Barbarella* or *Taxi Driver* or *Betty Blue*. Or a very recent film, already a classic, like *Reservoir*

Dogs. A fading cinemascope musical, an arthouse film, a thriller, as long as it's a classic, that's what gets them up and brings them in on a Sunday. Usually anything black and white or silent or made in France in the fifties or sixties is a classic; films with cult status, very long or very controversial films also count. It's good to have something with a bit of cinematic history; perhaps the film this morning is D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, made in 1915 and described in the programme notes, with references to Steven Spielberg and Spike Lee, as 'the single most important movie in the evolution of the screen'. This is the film that made heroes out of the Ku Klux Klan. Today's audience makes aghast knowing noises when the vitriolic racism of the classic is at its most obvious.

Or maybe it's a French New Wave double bill, a Truffaut and a Rivette. Or no, today at the cinema there's a Screen Goddess double bill, two films starring the silent movie star Louise Brooks, both made in the years just before her immense fame first faded. The first on the bill is the celebrated *Pandora's Box*, the second is the less well known *Beauty Prize*, released in 1930, it's a rare opportunity to see it today. In *Beauty Prize* Brooks is an ordinary young woman leading a humdrum existence until she enters a beauty contest, wins, and goes on to become a famous film star. At the end she is shot dead in a cinema as she watches her own film, killed by her lover, jealous of her success, maddened by his loss of her. She dies below a screen filled with her own giant face, that's the end, the curtains close and the lights come on and the audience leaves in search of Sunday lunch and the papers.

The person who tears the tickets at the door of the cinema

on Sunday mornings is slipping between the empty rows picking up whatever the audience has dropped, to leave the cinema pleasant for the next ticket-tearer and the afternoon's audience. She stops and straightens up, one hand holding crisp bags and discarded programmes; she frowns. She goes to the bin in the entrance hall and pushes this morning's rubbish well down into it.

The cinema is empty, the last of the audience out of the toilets, out of the back seats and gone. The ticket-tearer heaves the fire doors shut from the inside. She doesn't see that outside, leaning against the wall opposite, watching as the doors are closed, someone is there. Someone is standing there still holding the half-torn piece of ticket from today's film stuck with sweat to the palm of one hand. The ticket is the same as all the other Sunday morning tickets, it is grey, it has words printed on both sides. On one side the torn ticket says Admit One; on the other, Available At Time Of Issue Only. A few moments after the doors have closed there is nobody at all in the street outside.

II

I had the postcard of Louise Brooks on my wall in the Klipframe for years before I even knew who she was. Black helmet of hair, black lips, white profile, white string of pearls. Lying dead below the picture of herself. Imagine her arriving at the gates of heaven, I wonder which her it was. If she was older, her bone structure would have been even more

remarkable. So much nearer the surface. I wonder if it was the drunken her, the one lying on the filthy chaise longue with the gin bottle stretching the stitches in the pocket of her dress, one moment looking at the ceiling, the next yelling and swearing with that stunning articulacy at God for making life such an unfaithful whore. Or was it the star, the lit beauty, the innocent who knows it all, the girl light enough to swing on the large man's arm as if it's a trapeze in that film this morning, swinging saucily past St Peter in a soft-focus halo like a latter-day saint, smiling shyly at the Virgin Mary, ready to seduce God into giving her a blessed kiss and a starring role?

What a joke. Even if there were such a thing as a good Catholic heaven you wouldn't enter it bodily, only Jesus and Mary were allowed to do that. There's only advertising. There's only adverts, everything on television, the movies. At least here there's a sense of occasion, at least it still feels like there's a dignity, a cheap dignity, about it. I think I love that most, how tacky it is. Somebody somewhere will be watching, somebody will care. That's the promise, and the lie.

The difference is that it feels good when I get up on Sunday mornings now. Almost exactly a year ago I stopped going to Mass. One week there I was, I was saying the words and doing the sitting and kneeling and standing like everybody else, and I noticed a couple, middle-aged I guessed from their back view. Holidaymakers, going by the hopeful clothes. There were crutches leaning between them and at all the kneeling parts of the Mass so far they had stayed sitting. Now it was time for the Consecration and everybody knelt down except these people. When I lifted my head I saw they were standing.

The priest at the altar left too long a pause between one line and the next, the Mass came to a halt. This was the priest who had decided that the main doors at the back of the church would be locked at Communion to stop people leaving straight after it, because leaving before the final blessing, he said, was as impolite to God as leaving halfway through a wedding would be to the bride and groom. The one who had given a sermon a few months ago on how ridiculous and blasphemous it was that women in America wanted to be ordained and in certain liberal places had made priests use 'she' instead of 'he' for God throughout the Mass. Unthinkable that He had a sex, he said. The one who, in one of the first Masses I ever went to in this town, announced without explanation that the most evil and wicked man of the twentieth century wasn't Hitler or Stalin, but Andy Warhol. Priests come and go in your life if you grow up Catholic, and I think I've known priests of all sorts. Some seemed truly holy men, some fools, some very learned, some could make you feel that something real was happening in the Mass without you having to try as hard as with others. Now the man who had stopped and looked up from his book at the altar, the man staring at the standing couple among the kneeling people, made something real happen for me.

People whose heads had been bowed looked up now to see why there was a sudden silence in the wrong place. The priest, the only other person standing, leaned forward and spoke into his microphone. At this point in the Mass, he said, we, the gathered congregation of this Church, do not *stand*. We, the gathered congregation of this Church, *kneel*. Those

who do not wish to adhere to the sanctified ritual of this Mass in this holy place should not expect to celebrate the Mass here.

I could see the back of the neck of the standing man, it had gone a bright red. His wife was flustering with the crutches. I watched the man struggle to get to some kind of stiff kneeling position, I watched his wife, already down, giving him her arm. I heard the priest's nasal monotone start again over our heads and then I stood up. The people kneeling in my row had to sit up to let me past. I turned and walked down the aisle to the back, I put my hymnsheet on the spare pile and I crossed to where the big glass doors were. The doors were automatic like doors at airports and railway stations, they had been installed the year before and hailed as an important modernisation for the church. They weren't yet locked for Communion, they slid open as soon as I stepped on the rubber and I heard them hiss smoothly shut behind me a few seconds later sealing in the Mass. I went to the newsagent's and bought the papers as usual, and I went home and made Geoff and myself a huge and greasy breakfast, bad for our hearts, which we ate in bed. That was the last time I went. I didn't even go at Christmas. Now I let people in here instead, I watch the film with them from the special folding chair – even if the cinema's packed I still have an excellent view, one of the best in the place. As soon as the end credits begin I run across in the dark to the fire exit doors and throw them open. The daylight blazes in when you do that, the people sitting in the seats nearest the doors turn their heads to shy away from it. My senses are good in the dark now, they have to be. Part of the job is making sure

nobody illicitly smokes or talks or does anything that might disturb anyone else, like eating things out of scrunchy paper or plastic. Then, after everyone else has gone, I pick up the rubbish left between the rows, the applecores and empty cans, the dropped half-tickets. The occasional condom.

The projector here makes a noise like faraway heavy rain. Sometimes it's a shock to open the doors and see that the pavement's dry and the sky's clear. I savour even the moments before I let the people in to sit down. The decayed paint on the walls. The carpet trodden into paths. The curtains over the screen humming across by themselves like some Victorian magic trick.

I hadn't realised it made Geoff so angry that I like it so much. Chris and Mike came to supper last night and I saw it for what it was, we were sitting at deadlock over the tuna salad. It especially seems to anger him that I pick up other people's litter, the cinema should have a machine for that, apparently, or it should be done by a cleaner or teenagers with no GCSEs. I was stopped in my tracks when he said this. I was left holding my fork, a slick piece of egg on it an inch from my mouth. I'd been declaiming Belmondo and Seberg at them, *tu es vraiment dégueulasse*. I'd been trying to explain the way the film jumps about on purpose, so that in the same second the people on screen might still be in the same place but because there's been a tiny jump-edit they've moved on, they're in a different place altogether too. Chris said she'd started watching *A Bout de Souffle* on TV and had got bored with it, had switched it off. Nothing's as good on TV, what could I say? I'd been telling them how people had walked out of the Woody

Allen film because the hand-held camera had made them feel sick. Like a fool I'd even been singing them bits of the song the girl sings at the beginning of *Beauty and the Beast*, trying to explain how it is that a cartoon scene can be as good as, better than, one in a real-life film. God, I was saying, anything's possible. I was probably talking too much. I was certainly being far too enthusiastic for good taste.

It's as well I stopped when I did. I'd been just about to tell them how ridiculously pleased with myself I am if someone's dropped money between the seats and I find it. The week before last I picked up three pounds fifty off the floor. Twenty thousand a year and I'm excited when I find an illicit three pounds fifty. I could hear it jingling in my pocket when I left the cinema, I bought a ham sandwich and the Sunday papers with it and ate the sandwich reading in the sun, sitting on the wall outside the shopping centre. That's when I read in the papers what we'd been shown all week on television, that in Bosnia there were people cutting off other people's heads with chainsaws, and about the camps where women are kept especially for rape. I sat there for a long time but I didn't know what to do about it, or even how to make myself believe it. I looked at the pictures very hard. I didn't get home until four and my arms had gone brown from the sun. I told Geoff it had been a very long film, it was my first lie for quite a while and it left me full of adrenalin.

Geoff made up cappuccinos, he shouted across the noise of the machine that it was my vulgar streak that made me want to work at the cinema, and we all laughed, he and Mike especially. It's interesting that he reacts like that. I don't know what

else to call it. Before, years ago when we first started, one night when we were new at our curling into each other in the dark, he told me what had made him decide he loved me. He had been off work with flu, watching afternoon television, flicking channels aimlessly, and he aimlessly began watching a terrible film on Channel Four where a man dressed in sixties clothing is cycling round some green and pretty parts of London on a bike too small for him. He goes freewheeling down a hill when suddenly he realises the brakes on his bike don't work, and he ends up smashing into a massive billboard advertising Raleigh Bikes. When he opens his eyes at the foot of the billboard the first thing he sees is the model advertising the bicycles, and he falls in love with her. That's what it was like, he whispered to me. It was like smashing into a billboard with your name written all over it, your picture ten feet high. I couldn't help myself, he said. I stroked his head. I knew what he meant. I was happy. I was happy for quite a long time really.

But now it's all so obvious. We've done all the right things, we've got the jobs, we've bought the flat, we've eaten out at all the restaurants, we've paid for the groceries in cash and the luxuries on our access cards, we've even started talking about doing the evening classes in Italian and Art. Worse, Chris is pregnant, she told us last night. Mike was very excited. Geoff got excited. It's what I hate most about it, the predictability. Eventually I tried to change the subject. I didn't dare talk about films any more, the only other thing I could think to tell them about was the letter I read in the paper from the priest who was writing a book about the phenomenon of rosaries that spontaneously change colour. He wanted to know when,

where and under what circumstances people's rosaries changed, and whether there was any particular pattern to the change. It didn't really work. That's what shagging's all about after all, Geoff said to me after, while I was washing up. His arms snaked round me from behind and his tongue blocked my ear. God. I hate that word, shagging. Geoff got very angry before he fell asleep, afterwards his breathing kept me awake for hours, I eventually got some sleep on the couch. His breathing has been keeping me awake for weeks.

I'd work here all day every day if I could, I wish my whole week was spent like this, with music to tell you when and what to feel, and I could sleep through the films I'd already seen. I'd give up my salary in a minute; all I do is spend it on things I don't really want. Friday was standard enough, the Christmas catalogue copy. I had to do the mailshot and colour supplement leaflet, aimed mainly at busy housewives and older people who don't have the energy to go to the shops. Christmas is a magical time, and we all look forward to Christmas preparations with the special excitement of children. But wouldn't it be bliss if you could do all that dreaded Christmas shopping this year without even leaving the comfort of your armchair? With Homeshop your Christmas wish can come true. Whether it's an unusual or fun-packed item for a friend, or that something special for someone very important, we've got all your Christmas shopping under wraps. No stamp needed! The Christmas Homeshop Catalogue is our gift to you.

Be confidential, be informal, be warm, use the word *special* as much as possible. It was my idea to send everyone who fills

in the reply-paid coupon a free small stuffed polar bear holding a Christmas tree, to do a run with a no strings gift as the main theme, Huggles the Bear Will Help You Shop From Home With Homeshop. They were very pleased with it as a concept, it brings families to the centre of the promotion, kids will demand the free bear, mothers will read the catalogue. A gift to their children. All's right with the world. I'd done well again. I'm a high flyer.

I watch the pre-film adverts here; this girl in a white volkswagen draws up to the edge of a cliff. It's dark, she's crying, her elbow shows bare through her shirt with a faint sensuality, a faint sense of breast. She looks devastated, tired, sad, it's all over. Suddenly she notices her Nescafé in the back of the car, she plugs a heating element into her dashboard, and with some mineral water she also just happens to have she makes herself a cup of it. It's dawn, she drinks it, the sun's out, she feels better. It's going to be a bright bright bright sunshiny day. No matter how dark it seems, no matter how much you've cried, with instant coffee there'll always be another day.

It's true after all. If you believe it, it's true. I hate it. I love it. I love this place, it tells people lies all week, and on Sunday mornings it tells them classics. When I go home after working here my pockets are full of the stubs of their tickets. On a wet Sunday it fills up fast with people, with the smell of wet animal. On a hot Sunday the air conditioning blurs into action, we're glad of the dark, the big cool cave. Whatever the weather we take the commercials willingly, like sweetened vitamin pills, then we sit back and let the films go right inside us. The next few Sunday mornings will be good. On the other side

of *The Seventh Seal* there's a Marx Brothers film, there's *Rashomon* and then there's a restored print of *The Wizard of Oz*, Judy Garland shining in that too-tight gingham pinafore, in the ruby slippers, skipping round the spiral of the yellow brick road again. Kansas she says is the name of the star, that's what the Good Witch sings. I know so much of it by heart. Lions and tigers and bears – oh my! That's what Dorothy, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man say when they're scared going into the dark wood. They link arms and chant it over and over again. Lions and tigers and bears – oh my. It'll be good to see it.

III

I am in love with the girl who tears the tickets at the door of the cinema on Sunday mornings. I love her. I love her desperately. I have never been so desperately in love.

I can't eat. I don't sleep. My mouth is dry and my tongue sticks to the roof of it. I think about her all the time. When I give her my ticket to tear sometimes our hands touch. Her fingers are beautiful, she bites her nails, I've seen her. Her knuckles are beautiful. When I pass her on the steps every week and she gives me my piece of ticket back and sometimes she smiles at me, I can't get myself to breathe properly, it's like something is stuck in the back of my throat. When I sit down in the cinema and I think of how there's just thin air between us it feels as if something in my body is strung so tight it will snap and I'll fall in pieces on the ground. She doesn't even notice.

She never notices me watching. I watch her in the dark all the time and she doesn't even know.

In the light from the film playing I can see her profile. I can see every time she changes her sitting position. I can see her putting her fingers in her mouth. Rubbing her eye. Running her hand through her hair. Rubbing her nose, pushing at the muscles in her neck. She makes little creaking noises shifting in the chair as she crosses or uncrosses her legs, or folds her arms, or leans forward with her elbows resting on her thighs. I love the sounds that she makes. I listen for her to cough or clear her throat or sniff. Sometimes she falls asleep in the middle of a film. I see the moment she shuts her eyes and the moment she opens them again. I watch everything about her. Once she took her shoes off, she pushed them off with her feet, I couldn't see properly without leaning too far over the person sitting next to me. But once I was the only person in the cinema with her before the film started, for almost five minutes. Five whole minutes, just me and her. As the lights went down the rows of empty chairs between us were like waiting cats.

I have saved all my torn tickets since she started putting them in my hand. I keep them in the suitcase under the bed. Every Sunday I add another one. I lie on the bed in the dark. If we were on a bus trip together and she were to fall out of the emergency door down the side of a dangerous cliff, I would jump down after her as fast as anything and save her from falling into the ravine by catching her hand just at the moment when she couldn't hold on to the tree root any longer, I would climb up the side of the cliff with her on my back, her arms

round my neck, and everybody on the bus would clap as we reached the top and she opened her eyes. If we were standing over a fiery pit with flames leaping at us, and I was given the choice of which of us would be flung into it, me or her, I wouldn't hesitate, I would throw myself into the furnace and disappear down amongst the molten rocks never to return. She would realise then how much I would give for her. If we were lost in the desert, she and I, and we had had no water for two days, and all we had was a peach, I would sit on the burning sand and take the peach and peel the velvet off with my teeth for her, I would give her the peeled peach, put the flesh of it wet into her hand, maybe hold it to her mouth for her, if she'd let me, so that her lips wouldn't be cracked. Then she would know, then she would give herself over to me. Then I can take out the her that I keep in my head, then I can pull all the strings, make her do what I want and what I like. In the morning my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth again.

Except on Sunday morning, Sunday morning is different. I like to drop things on the floor, I know she'll be the one picking them up. One time I wrapped up chewing gum in a piece of silver paper and left it, so I could have the thought of her picking it up still warm from my mouth inside the paper. I drop money sometimes. I like to think she could be in a shop buying something with money that came out of my hand. I am careful not to drop too much because then she might give it in at the box office and not spend it herself.

We are getting very close now. I have been allowing myself to sit one seat closer each week. Now that it's summer she wears open-topped shirts and I'm close enough to see her

collarbone. The hollow of it is one of the places I think about touching. I don't know what I will do when I reach the chair closest to her. Perhaps before that we'll meet in a shop or at the supermarket and she will look at me and realise, and say, oh, you come to the cinema, don't you, why don't we go for a cup of coffee? Or I'll say, oh, I see you when I come to the cinema, don't I, and she'll say, yes, I feel like I know you very well because I see you every week, and I'll say, let's go for a cup of coffee and she'll say, yes, like that. I'll ask her if she'd like to come out for a drink with me, or if she'd like to go to the cinema, and she'll laugh. Then we'll be friends, that'll be the start. I'm always watching out for her when I'm at the supermarket or in town at the shops. But I've never seen her anywhere else. I only ever see her when I go to the cinema. It is the only place I can find her, she's there every week. I go every week. I have loved her since the very first moment I saw her there.

IV

It's Sunday morning again. The cinema is three-quarters full, the lights go down. The ticket-tearer shuts the outer doors, pulls the curtain across, shuts one of the inner doors and waits there with one door still open for latecomers. The screen curtains draw back. A picture is behind them, Greek pillars with the words Pearl and Dean suspended in a blue sky, there is a fanfare of trumpets. Then there are pictures of a tropical beach, a parrot, a beautiful thin dark woman with long legs and

inviting eyes, and then some people drinking Bacardi in a bar next to the ocean, which they speed across by motorboat under a perfect night sky. Next, a young man walks through an American town followed by many people and buries his jeans in a hole in the ground. A young woman drives her car to the edge of a cliff and makes herself a cup of coffee. An escaped prisoner breaks back into his cell bringing cornflakes for his cellmates. A man walks across a desert and bangs his head on a giant beer bottle.

And now the main feature. A woman melts into a street filled with carnival revellers and noise leaving her lover calling her name in a sea of people. A man runs across a field, he is being chased by an aeroplane. A woman is caught in a machine which gives her orgasms. A man shaves almost all his hair off and covers his body in hidden guns. A man suffocates his girlfriend in a hospital because she has gone blind and mad. Some men shoot each other in a warehouse. A woman wanders through a hospital silently playing the banjo to wounded soldiers. A boy runs away from a reform school to the sea. Two women enter a house full of ghosts to rescue a little girl. A woman is stabbed by Jack the Ripper at Christmas-time. A woman is shot in a cinema by her lover. A man is shot by policemen while his lover who betrayed him looks on pretending she doesn't understand his last words to her. A middle-aged man tells the camera why he doesn't love his wife any more. A young girl bored with her provincial life falls in love with a beast. A man on a bicycle, the brakes of which don't work, hits a billboard and knocks himself out. Death plays chess. An orchestra floats out to sea. Some people sitting

in the pouring rain listen to several versions of the same murder story. A girl and her dog are trapped in a house thrown high into the sky by a tornado, she opens the door in black and white and finds herself in technicolor paradise. It is only the beginning, all sorts of things will happen. It's well worth the price of a ticket.

The touching of wood

Today we're standing in the ruins of a village taking pictures of the houses because they're falling apart. Straggly olive trees and other kinds we don't know the names of are growing through the places where so many floors have been. Some of the houses still have roofs, some just have sky. Geraniums are growing wild, bright red; down in the light and the dust at the end of the shadowed pathway the combination of sun and the colour of the flowers is a shock, beautiful, hard on the eyes.

We are four days into our holiday with three days left. We have one Kodak Gold spool left each; in a rush of fever I