

David Briggs

Character Assassination

By

Elliot Ruskin

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First published in 2014

By Leaf and Littlejohn Ltd

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ISBN 12345678912345

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of New Zealand

To FR

About the Author

Elliot Ruskin was born in Richmond, Yorkshire, in 1957, and worked for many years as a lecturer in English Literature at Leeds Polytechnic and the Open University. During that time he published four novels and two collections of short stories, each of which attracted critical notice without making him a household name. In 1998, however, he moved to New Zealand and started writing for a living, and almost immediately found a new voice. His first book published in his new land, *Companions of Honour* won the Millennium Prize for Literature in 2000, *The long walk*, published the next year was short-listed for the Fiction Aetoroa Award, and *Revelations* won the Governor General's Trophy in 2002. Between then and 2006, a further four novels followed, in quick succession, every one a major success. In 2010, he was voted by *Southern Writers* the most influential writer of the decade, but otherwise there was a silence, save for a collection of poetry, *Shadows of Life*, published in 2011. He died in 2013.

Publisher's note

This novel by the esteemed author, Elliot Ruskin, was never published during his life-time; some scholars of his work have argued that it was never completed and that he would not have wanted to see it in published form. The misadventures that befell his estate after his untimely death certainly mean that no verifiable copy of the final version of the manuscript exists. The version presented here has thus had to be compiled from a somewhat disorganised set of papers that were kindly made available to us, as his loyal publishers since he moved to New Zealand, by the trustees of his estate.

Assembling what might be regarded as a definitive version of the work from these papers posed serious challenges. In several cases, for example, the papers included alternative versions of some sections, some of which differed considerably. In these cases, our principle has been to deduce as far as possible the last-written of these versions and to use those. Unfortunately, lack of any dating system means that this could not always be done with certainty. Often, however, it has been possible to identify which was the last from their fit into the plot as a whole. As an example, one alternative section included an additional character – a French woman named Inès – who is not encountered anywhere else in the story: it has to be assumed that this was an earlier version that was later replaced, and the character not developed or subsequently removed. We have noted such insertions in the text.

Elliot also habitually added marginal comments and footnotes to his drafts as he worked. In sending us a manuscript of one of his earlier novels (*Companions of Honour*) he commented: “Writing any novel is an exploration – a tentative trespassing along unknown paths that might lead you almost

anywhere, or nowhere at all, and may leave you lost. Over the years, therefore, I've learned to mark my way, not with breadcrumbs or a cotton thread, but with marginalia and footnotes, usually added either as I write or as I read back over my work, indicating where a little additional explanation might be required, where the story seems to have strayed a little, or where I might have taken a different path. I'm probably not the only author to do this. Sadly, these notes invariably disappear, leaving the editor (as well as the reader) with what seems like a simple, well-planned route. In this case I believe, it might help if you see the things that have pleased me, enlightened me, troubled me as I've travelled, and which in some cases disturb me still."

They were, needless to say, subsequently removed from the published text.

The papers that came to us of this work were no different. They included numerous emendations and annotations. They also included more than one personal note, almost like a diary entry, lamenting some of the special difficulties he was facing in writing the book, and in getting his characters and plot to behave as he wanted. Some observers have argued that this was evidence of Elliot's severely disturbed mental state over these years. Others – no doubt fancifully – have gone further and argued that his struggles with the book actually contributed to his demise.

For all these reasons, and not least in homage to Elliot's own earlier comments about the significance of his notes, we have decided to include them here. To the reader, we would say: if they irritate you, be assured that the book can be read without them. Reading them, however, may give some insight into the dilemmas and doubts that faced Elliot, and perhaps face any author as he or she writes. And they may add to your enjoyment and understanding of the work. We hope they do.

Author's notes
Character sketches

Dr Giles Robson: An *alter ego*, of sorts, though hopefully disguised as a force in his own right. His role in the book is occasional narrator with an all-seeing eye; his role in the plot is mentor, advisor, guardian and, perhaps most crucially, provocateur. In his late forties at the start of the story, he is a lecturer in the Department of Humanities, at Bath University, where he teaches moral philosophy with an Oxfordian heterodoxy. He is rather small – perhaps five feet seven – and tending to portliness, with bushy eyebrows and hair that is already greying, quick eyes. His manner is portentous, sometimes fussy. His students regard him as quirky and avuncular – and with some of the weaknesses for younger women for which uncles are perhaps unfairly known. He is married to Alison, and lives with her in a pleasant, Georgian house (inherited from her parents) in one of the more affluent areas of old Bath.

Laura Middleton: A Barnsley lass, who has surprised everyone, herself most of all, by getting to university to study something as outrageously irrelevant as Politics, Psychology and Philosophy. From a working class family – her father worked in the mines, though as a rigger rather than a miner – she talks with a strong local accent, lacks fine grace, and can be blunt and coarse-tongued at times. But she is bright, learns quickly, can adapt to most things. She is outgoing, happy, except in cold weather when she is plagued by the zits that

appear around her mouth: the product, she suspects, of too much Tetley's and too many chips. But the town council, the brewery and Harry Ramsden's would all no doubt gladly accept that charge against them, if they could argue in return that they were responsible, equally, for her looks. For zits apart she is stunningly beautiful. Long black hair, dark brown eyes, a monkeyish face, with a sloping forehead, small nose, straight jaw; a body that men lucky enough to experience it would all agree is the closest to perfection that they will ever know.

Zoe Young: A year or so older than the others, by dint of an awkwardly timed birthday, and an illness at school, she might have been a ballerina if the plot had permitted, for she has that spare agelessness that ballerinas seem to have. She is, too, athletic, a frequent jogger, strong, with large feet. She is not pretty – too bony for that – but her face has a haunting quality; one that people notice in a crowd, later remember, wondering 'who was she?' Her hair is auburn, almost chestnut and would be an attraction in itself if she'd give it more freedom, allow it to grow and tumble. As it is, she cuts it short across her forehead; at side and back lets it fall only to just below her ears, where it meets the same sharp-scissored end. Her cheeks are hollowed, her eyes large and seem to fix on whoever they see; it can make her look severe, challenging. Her mouth is wide, but thin-lipped. Her personality matches her looks, for she has a quick wit and a firm sense of justice that, working together, can make her words sound waspish or sharp. She would defend herself by claiming that she simply doesn't suffer fools gladly; the problem is that there are just rather too many fools.

Elizabeth Saville: The innocent grammar school girl – perfect prefect, head-girl – from a middle-class family, now facing the big, cruel world of life on her own. She is preternaturally bright, in a conventional and bookish way. She studies hard, remembers what she’s read or is told, keeps things simple by not questioning too deeply. She is religious: a devout, if somewhat unthinking Anglican, who believes implacably in the power of goodness and the authority of God. So most of the time, life is straightforward, for the rules are clear and she plays by them. She just wishes that others would do so as well. Physically, she is not unattractive, though seemingly not yet fully matured. She is tall, with long blonde hair, which she wears either in a pony tail or curled on her head in a rather old-fashioned bun. She has an oval face, blue eyes, a snub nose. Her bust is small, but if any boy were to see it – heaven forbid – then they might find her body surprisingly alluring, for she has fine skin, a strangely cavernous belly-button, well-proportioned waist and hips. For all her conventionality, however, there is within her a latent wildness. She’s no rebel, but her sense of justice and right can give her missionary zeal, and once let loose this can make her reckless and brave. And on the other side, there is motherliness – the deep desire to see people happy, the world run smoothly, everything to be as it should. So she is complexity in a misleadingly simple frame.

Michael Fiennes: a young man of advantage both physically and by birth. His family is affluent. They have no real ancestry, no titles or castles, nor any special role in history of which he is aware. A generation earlier, they’d have been called nouveau riche, though now they are perhaps slightly old and soiled. In any event, he has enjoyed the privileges his background brings: a

public school education, childhood holidays in Switzerland, use of the family Merc when he's at home. But he is also somewhat embarrassed by it. Not so much the being well off while others are poor, nor the need to hide the fact at times, but the sense that because of it there's an expectation on him – the assumption that he will do something extraordinary – that he's unsure he can ever fulfil. For he has no real ambition to be extraordinary; he just wants to be loved – and as often, and by as many women as he can find. In that, money is not his only asset, for he has looks and personality as well. Thick, light brown hair, a round and boyish face, fleshy lips; an easy charm. But just as those features attract some women, so they warn off others with the message: philanderer, flatterer, cheat. His successes have thus tended to be with women he could never really care for, been consequently brief, and accordingly have confirmed his reputation.

Alistair Drummond: Brought up on a Scottish croft in the Southern Uplands, as a Presbyterian and philosopher in the Knoxian tradition, he is reflective, quiet thoughtful, serious; humble and diffident. He has natural left-wing tendencies, believing in equality and human responsibility to make the world right. He reads a lot and while still a teenager had worked his way through Plato and Aristotle, moved on to Hume and Lock and Nietzsche, and by the time the story starts is deep into the Dutch school. He thinks a lot, is content in his own company; he loves the landscape, birdsong, the distant white flash of sheep between heather, the restless tug of the wind. Towns bore him, cities unnerve him; London is a form of hell on Earth, with the power even to threaten his faith. He has an innocence and ungainliness that are endearing, yet sometimes seem like a device, a defence that he uses to excuse himself

from the fray. Physically he is wiry and strong, with a freckled face, weather-beaten skin. He wears spectacles, which he repeatedly pushes up onto his nose with one finger, slightly crooked, as he talks. His accent is soft, lilting. His hair, already thinning, is red. His eyes are blue, and shine large through his unfashionable dark-rimmed glasses.

Tristan Ryder: The deepest and most enigmatic of the characters. The son of an army major father, brought up on military bases in Germany and Cyprus, he is intense, edgy, passionate. His skin is dark, swarthy, almost Mediterranean, hinting at some part of his ancestry about which he is uncertain or uncommunicative – a grandfather of Middle Eastern or North African descent, perhaps. He is of average height, lithe, with straight black hair, brown eyes, long fingers, ears with long lobes. At times he can seem almost effeminate. His voice is soft, musical; he sings in a strong tenor. He is anti-establishment, impatient for change, yet also pragmatic, willing whenever necessary to cut corners or act unconventionally. He believes in the paramountcy of free will, free love, tends towards anarchic beliefs, yet is fiercely loyal and supportive to his friends. He uses drugs, at times, indiscriminately, can be aggressive and wild, yet equally can show a quiet and soothing tenderness. He is sporty (plays football) but uncompetitive. His favourite hobby is climbing, which he learned as an escape route from the various camps in which he'd spent his childhood, and later applied on long and solitary trips to the Alps and Pyrenees.

Part One

1989 - 1992

Chapter One. Is God the author of our lives?

In which we meet the six students, and Dr Robson, their tutor, and they all get to know each other. Dr Robson sets them a challenge, and is amused by Laura's answer.

The room has been carefully prepared. There are canapés laid out on the oval, oak table, the table itself covered with a damask cloth to protect it from any spillage or other misadventures that careless hands, overfilled glasses, too much wine might cause. The glasses are on the dresser, neatly ranked: three rows of crystal for wine, two of short, broad tumblers for juice or other soft-drinks. The cupboards themselves have been locked – always best to be safe – and the cutlery that is laid at either end of the table, ready to be picked up when he gives the command, is not the best set, Sheffield silver plate, but everyday ware, stainless steel. Sheba lies by the hearth, nose on her paws, expectant. She knows what is coming: fuss and pats and hugs from the women to start with, later tit-bits of salmon-paste and cheese and those small, individual pork pies that you only ever see at parties; and at the end, a liberal supply of crumbs to Hoover up. On the writing desk, there's a visitors' book, open ready. On the top of the left-hand page, in his own neat copperplate hand, the heading: *First Year Tutorial Groups: 1989*.

It might almost be a stage set, ready for the actors to appear – which in a way it is. The setting is an Edwardian drawing room on the outskirts of Bath. It is an august, cultured setting. Lining the long, inner wall are Victorian portraits, surrogate ancestors of his wife, whose family home it has been, art-

nouveau drawings, a Ruskin landscape (one of the few contributions of his own, and prized, for Ruskin was a distant relation of some sort). At the far end, opposite where he waits, a high bookcase, bearing leather-bound volumes in matching rows (part of Alison's inheritance). Between the tall, casement windows, a glass-covered display of butterflies (his father's, and kept because of what it now is, an oblique reminder of how values and morals change). Outside, a view of walled gardens, espaliered fruit trees growing golden in the setting summer sun.

Dr Robson – Giles to his friends, but Dr Robson to his students – stands by the hearth ready, relaxed. He likes this event, and is looking forward to the next few hours. He lays it on every year for his new intake. It's good for the students to see him like this, at home, with his wife and dog, and see him in what might be his natural habitat (though actually that would more appropriately be the university library or perhaps one of the better London restaurants). It helps them, also, to meet each other and make friends. He's constantly surprised how difficult that still is, despite all the brashness and confidence that young people seem to have these days. He knows that, for a number of them, friendships made here tonight will see them through to the end of their degree, perhaps even longer. But he likes the evening for another reason. Because it gives him the chance to watch them, size them up, make first predictions to himself about who will be the stars, who the dunces, which ones will need to be watched; which ones, too, amongst the girls at least, will be worth watching, worth – taking an interest in.

There will be twenty-four students there this year, if they all come, for the cuts to university funding mean that teaching is under pressure, and tutorials are always seen as an easy target for savings. So it's four groups of six for him.

He's disappointed, for unlike his colleagues he still values tutorials, the thinking and debate they provoke, the interaction, and six students crowded into his study is too many for that. But needs must, as the Dean repeatedly tells him.

He knows what to expect when they arrive. He's welcomed them like this, in this same room, for every one of the last dozen years or more. And though entry requirements and government policies and grants and job opportunities have changed in that time, the students have remained much the same. They come from the same areas, the same social classes, the same schools. All that will have changed is that they will be indefinably younger, a year more advanced in fashion, and this year – pleasingly – will include a few more women.

Ultimately, they'll become the same people, as well. With their degree in PPP – Politics, Psychology and Philosophy – they'll go into teaching and local government, human resource management (as, distastefully, it now seems to be called), one or two, perhaps, into research or national politics. And from the more dismal ones – the ones with thirds and two-twos and not much spark – there'll be the inevitable bevy of accountants, consultants, homebound mothers and housewives. And somewhere amongst them, perhaps, there'll be one real oddball – the one who will leave a more indelible, if not always welcome, mark on the world. The future Conservative prime minister, newspaper editor, prize-winning novelist, mass murderer.

Alison appears in the doorway, gives a small nod: the first arrivals have been sighted in the driveway. He looks around once more, straightens up, checks his cuffs, dusts a dog-hair from his sleeve. Everything is ready.

Let the drama begin.

* * * * *

The noise in the room has risen now. It is a constant hubbub of chatter, laughter, sometimes a slightly raised voice. Dr Robson moves between the students, offering canapés, pouring out wine. As he does so he listens to snatches of their conversation, offers comments or asks a question. Where are you from? So what made you come to Bath? Wasn't your brother here a few years ago? In the process, he practises their names.

To his satisfaction, they have all come. The last to arrive was Laura Middleton. He greeted her in the hallway. She was flustered, apologetic for being late. "My gran phoned," she'd said, still breathless, her face flushed. "Just as I was leaving. I couldn't not talk to her. She's in her eighties and lives alone; she misses me already." Then, as if it explained everything. "I'm from Barnsley." Her accent was pure Yorkshire, and he liked her immediately. She had a nervy sparkiness, dancing eyes, high and plump breasts. She was exceedingly good-looking.

Back in the drawing room, he'd called them all to order, said a few words of collective welcome, told them a little about himself – that he's their year tutor, that he's been a lecturer here for twelve years, now, and before that was a post-doc in Oxford. He's told them that they were to use the evening to get to know each other, and that they should think of this evening as the first day of the rest of their lives. It was an invocation that he always used, and though he hated it as a cliché it invariably brought a murmur of appreciation. Several times, years later, ex-students had remarked how they had remembered it

ever since.

Now, he moves to his place beside the fireplace, claps his hands again. Slowly the voices are quelled. One continues, loud, indignant: “. . . what a bloody liberty!”

He smiles, letting the laughter die.

“It seems that some of you have been discussing the French Revolution ” he says. “Am I right?” There is another ripple of laughter, more tentative, as the joke sinks in. Then he says: “As you may have noticed, Alison has been loading the table with a plethora of plates and dishes, bearing something more sustaining than the nibbles that I’ve been dispensing so far. Though I warn you: you will need sustenance, for later you have some work to do.” As he anticipated, there is a groan from the students, mostly mock, in one or two cases, he suspects, genuine dismay. “But before that,” he continues, “I’ve a smaller task. A ritual really, which I ask my tutees to perform every year. On the desk there, by the window, is a book. I want you each to sign it, and to add a few words, about yourself. When you’ve all done that, the food table will be declared open.”

There is silence, a few worried looks. A hand goes up. He knows who it is, for he is good with names, learns them without effort, and has already learned hers. But dutifully she introduces herself as if she has been taught that that is the thing to do.

“I’m Elizabeth,” she says. “Elizabeth Saville.” She giggles, says ‘Hi,’ as one or two of the students laugh. “What sort of thing do you want us to write?”

Dr Robson looks down, brow furrowed, as if considering the question – as if it is one that he hadn’t thought about before. Then he gives a small shrug: “Something interesting. Something I will remember you by, long after you’ve

left these hallowed halls and become famous and rich. Anything really.”

He looks around, inviting more questions. When he sees that there are none, he holds out a hand, palm up, in the direction of the table. “Please, begin.”

Slowly, a ragged queue forms. From his vantage point by the fireplace, he watches, noting who stands with whom, who stands alone; whether they approach the task seriously or as a game. Which ones drag their heels until the others have gone.

He watches with more than idle curiosity, for the ritual is a source of information as well as mild amusement. What they write will tell him more about themselves than any number of tutorials, any amount of quizzing and discussion; more than countless essays and exam scripts. It tells him who they think they are, in a sudden unguarded moment, or if not that who they want to be. And it fixes them, the women especially, in his memory.

For the last purpose, the arrangements have been carefully made. The table is low, and to write they have to stoop. From where he stands, he can observe them from behind; on the opposite wall, a cleverly placed mirror affords him a view from the front.

Elizabeth is one of the first to sign. She is tall, slim, almost reedy, with long blonde hair, tied in a pony tail, pale skin, translucent blue eyes. She’s wearing a blue summer frock, knee length, high at the neck, but her arms are bare, and the shape of her shoulders where they emerge from the dress, is pleasing. He will remember her for that.

She likes animals, for earlier, when she’d first arrived, she’d noticed Sheba and immediately knelt down, fondled the dog’s ears, eliciting a lazy wag.

“A Bouchard?” she’d said, knowledgeably. “She’s lovely.”

She is, he's decided, one of those students who has always been the bright one in the class, and as such carries with her the expectation to take the lead. That, too, is worthy of note, for every group needs someone like her – the social agent, the reliable envoy, the one who will keep things going when everyone else looks away. Yet they are characteristics that might not always work in her favour, might make her try to speak before she is ready, appear something of a fool. That is happening even now. For though she is first to the table, she now discovers that she is unprepared: she does not know what to write. She picks up the pen, holds it poised above the page, leans forward, changes her mind. She glances around, a look of panic in her eyes, then, as a displacement action, or to buy herself time, inspects the pen. Perhaps she notices the initials engraved on the barrel in an appropriate regal script – *GR* – for she turns, glances towards where he is standing, blushes. He gives her an encouraging smile.

It seems to help, for she turns back, writes something in the book, then quickly straightens up. Is it alright? She's not sure. But too late now. At last, she turns and offers the pen to the next in the queue.

He's a young man, and Dr Robson remembers his name and voice from their introduction when he arrived. Alistair Drummond, Scots, from the Southern Uplands. His face is weathered, freckled; his red-hair already thinning. But he has a ruggedness that only an active, outdoor life can bring. He is also, Dr Robson decides, already smitten by Elizabeth. He had detached himself from the group of young men he was with when she'd started towards the table, followed her, waited beside her, the next in line. Now he thanks her for the pen, says something else that makes her smile, watches her obliquely as she moves away.

He's followed by more men. Dr Robson watches for a while, then uses the opportunity to top up his glass, take the wine round, talk to one or two of the students who have completed the task, joking with them that he will use what they've written in his research. But, he's back in position, ready, when Laura Millington reaches the table. He watches as she stoops to write, observes the shape of her legs, the pleasing bulge of her bottom against her skirt; in the mirror, the enticing V of shadowed cleavage.

Disappointingly, she takes no time to complete her entry, writing with a firm flourish of the pen, then putting it down on the table as if to say: there, job done. As she moves away, she glances up at his reflection, meets his eyes. Did she guess? He thinks it unlikely, but he feels discomforted nonetheless. Fiery, that one, he tells himself. But fun. One to watch in more ways than one.

The process continues. Other students move forward, think for a moment, write. He counts them through, assessing each one. Two more do catch his eye. Tristan Ryder, swarthy, tense; the son – if Dr Robson remembers correctly – of a military family who live overseas. Zoe Young, auburn hair cut short and straight across her forehead, curling round her ears. He's already talked to both of them and knows that they are bright. Tristan has an edginess and anger that he likes, seems ready to challenge anything. Zoe, too, is blunt and direct, though in a more modulated, almost ironic way. Dr Robson searches for a phrase in his memory – one of those modern catch-phrases that he abhors. In your face. That's it. That's Zoe.

When they've finished, he gives a small nod of satisfaction. He has five names already. One more to find. Again it is part of the ritual. Each year he selects what he thinks of as his 'special interest group'. Students who seem more noteworthy than the rest, ones with verve, talent – in the case of the

women, preferably, good looks. During the year he will give them just a little more attention, test them a little more severely, give them a touch more free rein. If they come up to scratch, he will encourage them to take his option course in year two, and a few may continue with it into their final year. With luck, one of them will stay on and do research.

It's not quite honest, he knows, for there's a form of favouritism in it, privilege. But it serves its purpose. Whatever they ultimately achieve, it helps to bring out the best in them, spark possibilities that otherwise they might miss. That can't be a bad thing.

* * * * *

Half way through the evening, and Michael was bored. He considered himself a party-animal, but not this sort of party. It was all too conditioned; it felt too choreographed. It made him yearn to do or say something outrageous.

He amused himself in the only ways he knew. By drinking liberally and chatting up the girls. In the first, he'd been successful: to his credit, Dr Robson did not stint with drinks, and the wine was good. Even his father would have been impressed. With the latter, though, progress had been slow.

There were half a dozen women there whom he'd declared worthy of the endeavour. On closer encounter, the first two soon disappointed him; they were glassy, bland. He tried Zoe. She was slim, had that sinewy sexiness that he liked; high cheek bones, big eyes, a careless way of standing. But she bristled like a starched hedgehog. Everything he said seemed to be cause for challenge; she was always waiting for him with a ready riposte. After a while, the parrying became tedious and he moved away.

As a distraction, he talked to Elizabeth. She wasn't really on his list. Not much bust, legs too thin, a steely ring to her voice. She laughed a bit too easily, and with a bleating cadence that reminded him of his father's goats. He guessed that she was virgin. But she had class. Though she'd not gone to public school, the grammar school in Bristol that she'd attended was the next best thing. Her father was a surgeon, her mother ran a charity helping provide food aid to Africa. He couldn't say that she excited him in any deep way – though the thought of defrocking her was still interesting – but she was good company, and they had enough in common to find it easy to talk.

Even so, his attention kept drifting. At the corner of his vision, or half seen amidst the crowd in the centre of the room, another woman kept catching his eye. Her name was Laura, Elizabeth told him when he asked; from somewhere up north. She was lively, laughing, had a body he'd happily die for, or if that didn't work, for which he'd be willing to kill. Yet somehow she constantly eluded him. She always contrived to be out of reach, with a group of eager boys around her, or talking to Dr Robson, or wandering away from him through the crowd, just too far away to chase.

After a while, he detached himself from Elizabeth, went across and introduced himself to Dr Robson's wife, thanked her for the food, commended her cooking. She smiled at his compliments, told him to call her Alison, already seemed to know his name and things about him. He felt disadvantaged, and she teased him with her eyes, mocking either his presumption or his politeness.

Her manner intrigued him. She must be in her forties, he deduced: erect, with a somewhat imperious air. But she had a good figure, nice legs – better, he thought, than Dr Robson deserved. As they talked, he tried to imagine

undressing her, liked what he found. Once, she seemed to read his thoughts, and held his gaze, head on one side, as though sharing the possibility, perhaps even finding it to her taste.

Then, abruptly, she said: "It's nice to talk to you, Michael. But you're not here to waste your time on me. Why don't you find another of those pretty young girls to talk to. I'm sure that both you and they would much prefer that."

Dismissed, he made his way upstairs. He'd have a prowl. Out of curiosity, out of irritation too at the way she'd rejected him, he wanted to see Alison's bedroom, imagine her there, find something personal of hers that might let him into the life.

He was wandering back down the corridor, musing on his discoveries, when Laura appeared, from out of the bathroom.

He caught hold of her, said: "Come with me. I've something to show you," earning the obvious put-down in response.

"No. You need to see this."

"I really don't think I do."

"I'm serious. It's just down here." He pulled her after him.

For a moment she resisted, then she laughed again. "This had better be for real."

He led her back down the corridor, past two closed doors. "Study, family bedroom," he said as they passed. "They share a king size. Maybe they need room to play in." They reached the corner. "It's round here."

"What is?"

"This." He threw the door open to the next room, stepped inside. "Cool, or what?"

Hesitantly Laura followed. He switched on the lights. “A kid’s room,” she said. “So what?”

“They’ve two daughters. About our age. Alison told me. This isn’t theirs.”

“Grand-children then.”

“No. None.”

“You seem to know a lot about them.”

“I make it my business to know things. ‘Curiosity is one of the permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous mind.’ Samuel Johnson.”

“It also killed the cat, I seem to remember. My grandma said that.”

Michael was standing by the bench. It ran along one wall of the room, waist high, a metre and a half in depth. On it, was a make-believe world. A model railway, a long double-track, winding through a bucolic landscape of wooded riversides, green fields, hedgerows, contented cows. There was a station, with milk-churns on the platform, a bearded stationmaster with a whistle to his mouth. A red post-van, a Castrol lorry, a green bus waited by the level-crossing. A steam engine peered from the engine-shed; another stood with its tender, a pair of coaches in the sidings.

“It’s his,” Michael said. “Robbo’s. It has to be.”

“Dr Robson’s? No way.”

Michael wasn’t listening; he’d found the control box, was feeling underneath the bench for the switch. He located it, flicked it on, played with the controls. The train in the sidings jerked, moved. Grinning, Michael turned the control. The train speeded up.

“Stop it,” she said. “We’ll be found out.”

He was laughing, unconcerned. He brought the other engine from its shed.

“Runaway Train! Yeh?”

Laura looked blank and he said: “Jon Voight. Rebecca de Mornay. Terrific film.”

“You’ll break it,” she scolded. “Stop.”

Even as she spoke, one of the carriages left the track, lurched. The engine toppled down the embankment, scattering the lichen-trees. It lay at the bottom, wheels spinning helplessly, like a swotted insect.

Michael laughed. “We need an ambulance.” He grabbed the bus. “This’ll have to do.” Making wow-wow noises, he sped it along the roads to the site of the accident.

Laura shrugged. “Well, boys with their toys. I can see you’re happy. I guess I’ll leave you to it.”

“Girls with theirs as well. I bet you have something.”

She thought of the two yellow plastic ducks, Bobby and Flotte, that she’d had as a child, had kept since, had brought to university with her and which still accompanied her whenever she had a bath; decided not to tell him. “Not likely – we’re far too sensible for that. Anyway, enjoy.”

“No, hang on.” He clicked off the power and the remaining engine slowed to a halt. “I’m with you.”

“What about that?” She indicated the railway. “He’ll know you’ve been playing with it.”

He shrugged. “He won’t mind.” He walked to the door, stopped, looked back. “Cool though, don’t you think. Who’d have thought it of Robbo.” He put out his hand as if to open the door, but instead raised the other arm, bracketing her against the wall, leaned towards her.

For an instant she resisted, turning her head, but he followed her with his lips. She relented, let them find her. They kissed.

His hands went down onto her shoulders, pulling her against him.

“Enough,” she said, pushed him back.

“One more,” he insisted.

She relented again. Why not? He kissed well. His lips were rather fleshy, soft. He had large hands. They were on her waist now, drawing her towards him. She could feel the press of his hips against hers.

“No.” She said, more firmly this time. “No. We need to go back.” She slid past him, and out of the room.

* * * * *

Dr Robson stands by the door, Alison at his side. The students are leaving now, spilling out into the warm night. They leave not as they came, in ones and twos, awkwardly, but in small groups chatting, joking, arguing, some remembering their courtesies and pausing to wave goodbye or call back their thanks.

The evening has gone well, he thinks. The students have had fun, got to know each other, will believe that they’d got to know him. In his turn, he’s prepared them, provoked them, started to shape their thinking a little, and in his mind sorted the sheep from the goats. He has his six candidates for his special interest group.

To his satisfaction, they had all been up to his challenge – and it is this, now, that they still argue about. It was another part of the initiation. He used the device every year and it always seemed to work, though beforehand he could never be sure. He’d waited until the time seemed to be right: two-thirds of the way into the evening, after they’d been there a couple of hours, were off-

guard and relaxed, then once more called for their attention. This time it was hard won. They stopped talking reluctantly, and he'd had to call again, winning just enough awareness to trigger off a process of shuffling and hushing and nudging for silence to spread around the room.

Even as the last voice faded, there was an interruption. Michael and Laura entered from the hallway, laughing about something, their shoulders close. Then they stopped in obvious surprise at the unexpected quietness of the room. Dr Robson smiled at them. They moved apart.

“My apologies,” he said. “I can tell that you are all getting to know each other, and it is unfair of me to interrupt.” For an instant his eyes rested on Michael and Laura. She looked down, smoothing her skirt over her hips, as if afraid that it might be creased. Michael gazed back, defiant. “However, you're all at university now, and you're here I hope mainly to learn to think. Or if you already know that, to learn how to apply the skill. That means critically and with imagination, and to any question or problem that might confront you. Even in the middle of a party!” To his satisfaction, there was a groan or two, and some answering laughter – a sign that some of them, at least, would rise to the bait. “So I've a question for you.” He'd paused, holding them for a moment in suspense. “Is god the author of our lives?”

For a while, no-one spoke, and he had to prompt them. “Well?”

“Yes,” a voice said, provoking nervous laughter, an embarrassed cough or two.

It was Elizabeth again – as he might have guessed, though he feigned not to, and short-sightedly peered in the general direction of its source.

A hand had shot up. “Sorry, that was me, Elizabeth. But I think He is.”

“Is that it?” Dr Robson asked.

She'd looked around, then back at Dr Robson. "Well, I suppose so. It's an answer to your question." There was more laughter.

"Yes. It's certainly that." He'd smiled across at her, nodded, then hesitantly, as though thinking aloud, asked. "Though is it a sufficient answer, or the only one, do you think?"

"I – I don't see why not."

"I think so, too," said Alistair, quick to come to her aid. "And the reason is simple. Because I believe in God."

"So it's a statement of faith?"

"Yes."

"Does a statement of faith give an answer to a question of fact, do you think?"

"It can do."

"And vice versa?"

"Yes," said more uncertainly.

"So if I asked you – what, shall I say?" Again, Dr Robson had looked around as if for inspiration. "If I asked, is Laura pretty? – you'd say yes." He'd paused then added: "I would hope so, anyway," earning a small cheer of support. "And that would be a matter of fact. Not just an opinion – albeit one most of us would share; though probably if I asked Laura, she'd disagree, being, I imagine, a modest young woman."

"Anyway, the answer's no," Laura said. "There isn't a god. And that is fact."

"You can prove it, can you?"

"You can't prove a negative."

"So aren't there any negative facts? No facts about the absence of anything?"

After that, the discussion had gathered pace, sintered, come together again, split once more. He'd let it run, and went to the bureau, poured himself another drink, took up his position by the hearth, listened and watched. The level of debate wasn't high, the arguments weren't coherent. Jokes and jibes vied with attempts at more serious reasoning. Now and then, he'd had to nudge at them, encouraging them to provide the rationale to back up their opinions, guiding them back to the question – or something that approximated to it – when they strayed too far. But it was serving its purpose. Without realising it, without intention they were exploring modes of argument and thought, sharpening their skills. And at the same time a rapport developed between them.

Tristan had provoked a tangential debate with a question of his own: if god is the author of our lives, who wrote god?

“No-one,” someone said. “He's eternal.”

“What makes you think it's a he?” Zoe had asked. “Why can't it be a she?” And he let them have fun with this for a while, the discussion terminated by Zoe herself: “No you're right. He must be a man. No woman would have made such a mess of things as this.”

Another issue had suddenly flared. What sort of god were they talking about? A personal god, a god of love, on one side; a god of vengeance and wrath on the other; or merely an unthinking automaton, who just drafted out the laws of nature, and left everyone to deal with them as best they could.

“Not much of an author, then,” Tristan had commented, if he leaves the characters to do all the hard work themselves.”

As they argued, he moved between them, drawing small groups together, so that the debate became localised. Alistair and Elizabeth had already teamed

up, linked by their mutual belief. Zoe and Tristan were arguing against them, she terse but offhand, as though there was no need for debate; he cold, scowling, as if anger bubbled inside. Dr Robson guided Laura across to join the fray, Michael following because that's where he belonged, in pursuit. He left them together, squatting in a circle in the centre of the room, united in dispute.

They leave together now, Michael and Laura first, then the others, still debating. Tristan's voice is urgent, resonant as they go down the path. He walks backwards, hammering his fist into his palm. "We're missing the point. The question wasn't is there a god, but is he author of our lives? That's different."

"How?" Alistair asks.

"Because it's about who defines our lives, whether we're free agents or not. Whether we have free will. That's what he wanted us to discuss."

At the gate, Zoe looks back, makes a quick grimace: see what you've done? She raises her hand in acknowledgement. Then they are gone.

Dr Robson kisses Alison, thanks her for the evening, turns back into the house. In the drawing room, he picks up the book that he had asked them all to sign. He scans down the page, pausing to read the messages that particularly interest him. Elizabeth's is earnest and predictable. Zoe's is worthy but with a lighter touch. Alistair's is in Gaelic. He nods in appreciation: smart move. But it's Laura's that he seeks. He finds her name. Beside it is a simple entry – .V. – written large. It takes him a moment to make sense of it, but then he remembers the image of her bent over the table, the slight gape of her blouse.

He smiles.