

The Dog Catcher

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SCEPTRE

BARCELONA CHAIRS

rupert's haircut (whenever people referred to him as 'Rupert' he'd say, 'No, no, it's rupert, no capital, I've got a small r' – to which more than one person thought 'You've got a small something') cost him ninety pounds, which came out at about six pounds fifty a hair. Still it was worth it, there was something Trevor Scorbie did, even with such slim pickings, that was just wonderful, the man really did deserve the term 'genius'. What remained after each strand had been individually trimmed with tiny silver scissors, was pale yellow going on white with a hint of urine. Below were eyebrows of vaporous grey, scallop-coloured eyes, skin the pink of a prawn cocktail. On his thin body a lapel-less suit by Yamamoto, collarless shirt by Paul Smith, slip-on shoes by Patrick Cox. He thought that there was something purposeful about the 'lessness' of his clothes, like he just didn't have the time to fuck about with lapels

and collars and laces and buttons and shit like that. (Not that any of these people with their names on these things had actually made them. They had told somebody else who'd told somebody else who'd told somebody else who'd got some hard-up women in lands far away to really run up the clothes.)

rupert looked in the mirror and liked what he saw. But then what he saw possibly wasn't what you saw. rupert was an architect and after modern artists, architects are the next best people in the world at seeing what isn't there. You might see, for example, a building that was a rust-streaked concatenation of concrete forsaken on a traffic island, they would see a subtle evocation of the baroque cathedrals of Europe set on the confluence of mighty rivers. They talk a very good edifice, architects do; pity they aren't quite as good at building the fuckers.

Still smiling into the mirror, rupert dwelt on how his life in the last few years had really turned around, after all he hadn't always been so content. At one point, like one of the modernist buildings he so admired, rupert had been going nowhere. It had dawned on him after seven years of university and fifteen years of private practice that apart from the big bastards of the building world, the Richard Rodgers and the Norman Fosters, the work tended to be of the piddling kind. Mostly in rupert's case it was too rich, too little taste, private clients who spoilt his grand designs by whining about mundane practicalities, demanding shelves

to put their horrible knick-knacks on and ruining his spatial flow by insisting on stupid things like walls and doors. At least, he consoled himself, he hadn't fallen so low that he'd been forced to do any work for local authorities. If you worked for them, apart from the more or less continuous meetings, you had to design hideous bloody ramps all over the fucking place, just on the off chance that any passing spastic (or whatever they were called these days) chose to drop in. Though he had made a very good living, rupert had not been satisfied with being piddling, who would be? He wanted to be a player like Norman Foster or, even better, he realised he wanted to be the top half of a player couple like Richard and Ruthie Rodgers. Richard was pretty much the architect of choice for the new Britain and Ruthie of course ran the River Café in Hammersmith, which had been at the forefront of a revolution in British catering by setting new standards for what you could get away with charging for stuff you could have bought in a shop and plonked on a plate. See that's why Norman wasn't as big as Richard because nobody knew what Mrs Foster did or even if there was a Mrs Foster. Equally, if Norman was gay he should start taking the boyfriend to awards dinners and stuff like that and should get him to give an interview to the papers about a friend who'd died of Aids, if he really wanted to get on that is. rupert'd observed that if both you and your wife were famous, then there was an exponential increase in your celebrity. When you stood in

front of some bloke, said some words, signed some forms, then right away the media power of the two of you wasn't suddenly just doubled or tripled, instead it was squared or cubed, thus all kinds of incompatible people got strapped together till falling ratings did them part. Fame-research scientists called it 'The Liz and Hugh Effect'.

So at that low point in his life rupert decided to take it all in hand and his first project had to be his own wife who'd been dragging her arse for far too long. Helen, who he'd met at college, had seemed to be satisfied with being at home, raising their two kids, Mies and Corbu, but he was having none of that.

Once he knew what he wanted then rupert generally got what he wanted. As a child he would simply go on and on at his parents or his Scout troop leader or his sister till they did what he wished them to do, moved the family to a lighthouse, made him troop leader or jerked him off. He even gave this process of going on and on a pet name: after trying out 'Persuagement', 'Coercetration' and 'Argueforcement' he finally settled on 'Forcesuasion'. He saw no reason not to continue this behaviour as an adult. So once it had been decided that Helen his wife needed to get out of the house and play her part in his rise he would, day and night, go on at her. He would point out successful women in magazines and say how good they looked, he would point out younger, more successful women at parties and imply he might fuck

and then marry them if she didn't pull herself together. She got the message.

Now Helen had her own highly successful, flag cleaning business. Casting around desperately for some way to make herself a big success she had noticed one day how grimy and torn were the flags of all nations flying from the Arding and Hobbs department store in Clapham (just like life, Zaire was in a particularly tattered state). Enquiring of the manager she found that the care of the flags was nobody's responsibility. She pointed out to this woman that not only did the condition of the flags make the store look scruffy but they were risking offending wealthy Zairean shoppers by the state of their flag and they also risked annoying peripatetic Ukrainians, whose beloved national standard, symbol of freedom, icon of the throwing off of a thousand years of Russian imperialism, was flying upside down. She got the contract to clean and maintain the flags and since then had obtained many more. At the moment she was in the midst of pitching to look after the flags of the entire Italian Navy, that'd be a big job if she pulled it off. If it hadn't been for rupert she would be a simple housewife instead of a woman with her own Audi A6, internet capable mobile phone and six hundred thousand unused air miles.

It was reading that had made rupert want to be an architect. From an early age he had read everything he could get his hands on, except fiction. rupert simply had no time for works of fiction; he would happily read a

newspaper or a hi-fi magazine or an engineering text book, or of course any sort of web site. You could learn something from them, fiction though? He couldn't see the sense in it. Who could possibly care about the actions and doings of made up, non-existent, fabricated persons? Whether they jumped under trains or solved crimes or got married, who gave a fuck? They didn't exist! They didn't have identities! They didn't have phone numbers or dicks or lawn furniture and they most certainly didn't give dinner parties where Rupert could meet powerful people. They were no fucking use at all.

When Rupert was growing up in the 1960s all the features in the newspapers seemed to be about the future, the past you couldn't give away for sixpence. Papers and magazines were overflowing with visionary line drawings, Rotring-enscribed prophecies for the rebuilding of the World. Siefert's plot to replace Covent Garden with tower slabs; the long-forgotten 'traffic expert' Colin Buchanan who schemed to lay six-lane motorways where Canterbury Cathedral stood, taking up valuable land, doing nothing and looking old; T. Dan Smith's Newcastle. Abroad, whispering the names of future cities with impossible enchantment: Brazilia, Canberra, Ottawa; and at home, of course, the magic that would become Milton Keynes. All done by young men in architects' offices, thin black lines rendering stark towering workers' housing, shopping precincts, industrial zones, flowers growing where they were

told to grow in conical concrete tubs, white families walking hand in hand. There was usually a monorail in there somewhere and the sun always shone. Who wouldn't want to live there, in Skelmersdale New Town? Or even better, how great must it be for 'there' to be your creation. To change the real world, to jumble it up and to spit it out looking different, not for good or ill but simply to change it, to say: 'I put that there, that building. The particular headache that its abiding ugliness gives people, that's my doing.'

But at his low point rupert wasn't changing the world, he was lucky if he got to change a step or a walk-in wardrobe a little bit.

So once he had sorted out his wife and she was a player in the flag cleaning business, rupert started to consider how he could bring power to himself. It came to him in his dissatisfaction that politics, that had to be the game, that was all about reshaping society, wasn't it? Closing down hospitals, letting terrorists out of prison, starting minor wars in little countries, moving people around like the cursor on your computer screen.

'The wastebasket contains fifty thousand miners. Do you want to remove them permanently?'

'Click yes I do.'

'Find/change five hundred cottage hospitals into ten gigantic, super sickness centres.'

'The find/change feature is not undoable. Continue/cancel?'

‘Continue, continue, continue, you stupid machine, the future is not undoable. Click!’

So the problem now was how was rupert to get into politics at this late stage? Certainly not standing as an MP or any of that nonsense, who had the time for that? Going around housing estates kissing Pakistani women, then being unelected if you’d displeased your ungrateful constituents.

It was during the early Nineties when rupert was thinking these thoughts and one day he heard two magic words: ‘Think tank’. He knew right away he had to find out more about these cognitive panzers. Like all the best ideas, the idea for ‘Think tanks’ came from the United States. What they were was groups of brainy individuals who were paid to think up all kinds of new ideas for how society should be organised and then to suggest these new ideas to the government.

Sensing the way the wind was howling, it was a left-wing think tank that rupert joined. It was called ‘The Lozenge Institute’, and was financed by a group of left-wing individuals who were involved in the businesses of vivisection, nuclear reprocessing and Formula One motor racing.

After the inevitable avalanche election victory rupert then set about moving from where the ideas were thought up, to where the ideas were put into practice. He had to jump out of the think tank, towel himself off and leap into the ‘Taskforce’.

Tony’s government had created more than four hundred

taskforces so that Tony could stick his snout up every crevice and cranny of your life, which was what he liked. Taskforces were groups of the right people who studied burning issues of the day and could be relied on to fiercely, independently and freely come up with the answers Tony wanted. They had names like 'The Creative Industries Taskforce', 'The Achieving 20% Market Share Sub-group' and 'The Review of the List of Nationally Important Sporting Events Which Must be Made Available to Terrestrial TV Channels'. Taskforces were great for the likes of rupert, real power and no responsibility. There was only one wasp in the lemonade: there was a terrible, shocking shortage of the right kind of tonythinking individuals to stock these taskforces and because there weren't enough reliable right thinking persons to go round, taskforces as often as not reported to other taskforces with exactly the same people on them. Ruthie Rogers often found herself reporting to herself. So the initiatives just went round and round, important initiatives in the field of fire-proofing pet toys went uninitiated.

rupert knew, with the signals he gave off and the work he'd done at the Lozenge Institute, that it would be easy for him to get onto some ordinary, bog-standard taskforce (though perhaps not the 'Cowboy Builders Working Group' or its four sub-groups, since none of the sixty-three people involved in it were architects or surveyors). Instead he wanted to get into a taskforce that

was right up close to the juice, to the power, which of course meant Tony, because even when your taskforce came up with some dazzling new ideas in the field of the regulation of artificial meat products nothing happened unless you reported to some big bastard on the way up with real spunk. rupert was determined to get onto a taskforce that reported to Tony, the biggest bastard of all. If rupert wanted to discuss something he just bloody well wanted to get on the phone to Tony or walk over to Number 10 and bloody well talk to Tony.

So rupert waited and wheedled till he could get an invite to a dinner with Tony so he could explain his ideas. Finally it happened at Helena Kennedy QC's (Baroness Kennedy of the Shaws) place. Once Salman's bodyguards and Tony's bodyguards had gone into the other room to eat the pizzas that had been delivered for them by a boy on a scooter, rupert went into his dance.

It came in two parts. The first part. rupert explained that the work of his heroes, the architects Mies van de Rohe and le Corbusier, had been unfairly traduced by the enemies of progress like that reactionary cunt Prince Charles with his organic oatmeal biscuits and his visions of self-effacing stone cottages. In fact it wasn't that they had gone too far but rather that they hadn't gone far enough – what was needed was more organisation, more planning, more control. The second part. People had to be convinced that they wanted this themselves, that's where

his childhood creation of Forcesuasion came in. Through Forcesuasion rather than the government doing what the people demanded (which when you thought about it was terribly old-fashioned) you could get the people to demand what you wanted to give them in the first place. If all the powers of the government, all the ministers, all the civil servants, simply went on and on and on and on without deviation or deflection, ignoring all interjection, then in no time at all the populace would be clamouring to be given the chance to live in planned housing, in controlled housing zones, eating nutritious balanced meals in airy spacious communal canteens (Ruthie Rogers was already hard at work designing the menus).

'I've proved it in my own life,' he said to the Prime Minister. 'I've proved it over and over again. It's not undoable, Tony,' he asserted feverishly over the granita of summer fruits. Tony leant forward to hear more.

On the doorstep of Helena's house, as the Jags growled smokily in the night air and the bodyguards' eyes snapped this way and that, Tony said to rupert, 'rupert, I want you to do the undoable.'

'I'll do it, Tony,' he replied and they shook hands, staring into each other's eyes like lovers.

As he was driven home rupert thought about what somebody had told him was the epitaph of the German poet and playwright Bertholt Brecht: 'He had opinions and people listened to them.' He had opinions and soon

they would be rammed down the throats of the Strasbourg Goose of the populace. That was rupert now, a man who had everything: an influential position, a powerful good-looking wife, a family and a house.

Or rather, he thought happily, A House. His House deserved the capital letters that he forswore. His house in Belgravia, a mere half a mile from Richard and Ruthie Rogers' place. A dream of a house. When he bought it, it was a dark poky six-bedroom, end-of-terrace London house and now it was transformed into an oasis of light and space. As soon as you entered the plain front door you were met with a vision, a spectacular glass staircase which shot vertiginously up in front of you. The staircase was not, rupert would insist, 'an object', something with which to impress the neighbours, it was simply what it was, a direct link from the new roof lights right down to the basement. A conventional staircase would have destroyed this sense of lightness and space which he was trying to achieve. The treads of the staircase were etched with three rows of opaque dots to make it easier to see the stair edges. rupert had not wanted them and they had not been there originally but one night, finding his son Mies half-way up the clear glass staircase in a puddle of urine, clutching the treads in terror, Helen forced him to have the dots put in. They gave him a twitch of revulsion every time he descended the stairs. The sitting room was sited up these stairs. The only thing to sit on once you got up there were four of the

cantilever steel chairs that Mies van de Rohe had designed for the German pavilion at the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition, the famous 'Barcelona chairs'. Apart from that the room was empty.

If you looked closely you could see that one wall was all cupboards which were crammed with the couple's books, music, TV. There was an absolute lack of clutter. Rupert and Helen even kept the phone in the cupboard, which meant that occasionally they did miss some important phone calls – such as the one from Corbu's school saying his stitches from the foot wound he'd received from the sharp steel edges of the floor in the kitchen had sprung open again and they'd sent him back to the hospital, so he'd sat alone in casualty for eight hours being molested by blood-encrusted drunks – but it was better than clutter. Because that was the thing about minimalism, it was demanding, it asked a lot of you, everything that was in the minimalist room was balanced on a hair trigger of harmony, every object was precisely where it was supposed to be and the slightest thing out of place threw the whole delicate equilibrium into utter chaos. One pencil out of its box, one picture at the wrong angle and everything was completely ruined, a single toy on the floor and you might as well wallpaper the room in a Laura Ashley print and order matching velour sofas from DFS. And disorder you couldn't see couldn't be allowed either, it still seemed to give off telepathic waves of disharmony, seeping under the door and polluting the

pristine atmosphere, which is why he had to insist that the kids kept their sleeping space in the same ordered state as the rest of the house, even though he never visited it. Minimalism is becoming increasingly *de rigueur* but most are just playing at it. By her own admission not the tidiest of people, Helen now said to friends at dinner parties that ‘once you start living here you get into the habit of putting things away’.

This pleased rupert but then he had found out she was renting a small bedsit in Vauxhall, rammed to the ceiling with pottery turtles, leatherette footstools and flowery, appliqué table mats, where she would sneak off as if visiting a lover and would sit for hours, rocking backwards and forwards stroking a ceramic clown amidst a mountain of knick-knacks. He didn’t shout at her when he found out but they had a long, long talk about it and of course she saw in the end that it was best to give the place up. Anyway these days she was too busy cleaning flags to have time to stroke a ceramic clown.

The only really showy aspect of the living room was a piece of glass, a metre square, set in the floor just over the front door. Sometimes rupert thought he could see a faint stain of yellow on the crystal-clear glass from another pool of Mies’ urine, after the boy had blindly chased a ball onto it, then frozen in fright, seemingly floating in thin space above the front door.

Though Helen went on as usual, he refused to mutilate

this glass, pointing out that Mies would no longer go within ten feet of it without violent spasms accompanied by vomiting. Also he insisted that as the glass was bonded with acrylic even if it cracked it wouldn't go anywhere, surely they could all see that.

So on the night when Tony gave him his task, he sat happily in the back of the Jaguar, dreams of power seemed to seep out of the car's heater and wrap him in a contented fug. The long black limousine turned into his street and the headlights, the powerful new sort that shone like blue stars, lit up the side wall of his beloved house. Lit up the end-of-terrace side wall that had been smoothed, over and over again, to the finish of an egg and then coated five times in a special paint imported from Germany. On that wall which had been beautiful and clean and pristine and white as a sea mist when he left it, on that wall was now written in letters perhaps two foot high a single word: 'PATRICK'.

He got out of the car and stood on the pavement, shaking. rupert couldn't have felt more violated if he'd been forcibly fucked up the arse by some Irish labourers on Hampstead Heath. This couldn't happen to him, he was part of the power. He felt awful and sick with rage. Just the single, stupid, cretinous name 'PATRICK', spray-painted in the shaky tentative hand of an illiterate. He wouldn't have minded so much, he told himself, if it had been some sort of a political slogan, something to do with

tortured Kurds, say, or that bloke in Peru who looked like one of the Grateful Dead. It wasn't even as if the name was a proper graffiti artists' tag, which at least had some aspirations to funky street art; he'd read all about it in *MSR* magazine, how generally these tags were the products of teams or crews wending their way home from clubs, late-night, hit-and-run signwriters, enscribing their 'Noms de disco', 'Wot', 'Hemp', 'Waste' as a homeward slug's trail. Never, though, something as bland as an ordinary name: 'PATRICK'. Indeed rupert suddenly remembered that he actually owned a Keith Haring painting, done with a spray can, of his trademark little jumping men, that's how down with graffiti art he was.

This, though, well this was vandalism pure and simple. He briefly thought of asking Jack to get his cops to investigate but quickly dismissed it, part of being part of the power was knowing how far you could go. rupert assumed the work had been done by some idiot, lower-class child of the slums, but how had the child got here? He reckoned it must have taken a taxi from the working-class suburb where it lived. There were no buses or tubes that penetrated this upper-class faubourg and he knew from reading the government reports that no proletarian kid was capable of waddling for more than a few hundred yards without having to sit down for a packet of crisps, a bottle of Sunny Delight and some crack cocaine.

rupert had thought the term 'hopping mad' was simply

an expression, but that's what he did; he hopped, right there on the pavement he stood and he hopped. He had to do something to stop the hopping. Even if he phoned his decorators now to come and paint out the graffiti he knew they wouldn't turn out till the morning if they turned out at all, bloody obdurate British workmen. He wished he could fly them in from Germany like the paint. Fumbling with his keys he jacked the front door open and brushing the au pair aside ran downstairs to the dark-filled basement, and immediately felt utterly confused. When he had designed the house he had insisted that he didn't want handles on any of the doors and that indeed the doors shouldn't be distinguishable from the walls so that you couldn't tell where wall ended and door started, simple flat planes everywhere. He said that if you were down there in the basement then you should know where you were going and if you didn't know you shouldn't be down there. Helen had pointed out that guests might need some guidance as to the whereabouts of the toilet so after hours and hours of discussion late one night he'd conceded a sandblasted square cut into the spare bathroom door; they'd have to locate that or pee in their pants, he would go no further.

Now his house, suddenly unfamiliar to him, seemed to sway and turn. He spun round and round, all around him blank walls. What he wanted was the door that let out into the small open area between the basement and the street. Frantically he pushed and shoved at the walls until one bit

gave with a click and he was thrown into a narrow space smelling of soap, grazing his face on the brickwork as he cannoned into it. Out there to the left was another door that gave access to what had been the house's coalhole, now a damp-dripping brick cave under the pavement.

The damp must have made the wooden door swell because he had to tug hard to open it and in so doing a projecting nail tore a huge rip in the three-thousand-pound Oswald Boateng suit he was wearing. Swearing to himself and wreathed in cobwebs he rootled through the coalhole until he found a quarter-full tin of the paint that had been flown in from Germany and used for the mutilated white wall. He grabbed a big paint brush from a shelf and ran back upstairs to obliterate the offending word. With big broad strokes he painted over the name, getting splashes of paint on his Boateng but not caring. After he had finished he stepped back to admire what he had done. Though his breath was ragged and shallow the unaccustomed physical effort had filled him with a happy feeling of fatigue, in addition to which he felt what every man longs to feel, a sense of having vanquished an enemy.

The feeling didn't last long. Something must have happened to the paint while it was under the stairs in the coalhole because it had come out a much darker shade of white than when it had coated the wall, or perhaps it had reacted with the black spray paint underneath; either way it was now grey, quite dark grey at that, and because

rupert had merely followed the contours of the word, the name, there was now written in much bigger letters on his wall: 'PATRICK'.

Ruthie's dinner rose up in his throat and he vomited all over the pavement, soiling the few previously unblemished bits of his Boateng. rupert realised he had made a big mistake, he shouldn't have let passion seize him. That was the thing about the big bastards, the Richards and Tonys and Alastairs, they were as cool as a sorbet, as frosty as a granita, they never got taken over by their emotions; in fact, come to think of it, they didn't seem to have any emotions, the only time they showed emotions was when they were faking them for the TV cameras. He'd foolishly given in. Well, he could learn. There was nothing for it, he had learnt an important lesson: patience, the long view, that was the thing. He would have to get the whole wall re-painted, he knew that now, by professionals, like he should have done in the first place.

Helen got home at 2 a.m. crabby and tired. She'd been attending 'Drycleanex 01' a dry-cleaning convention in Glasgow and couldn't really see why he was so agitated. 'It's only a bit of graffiti for God's sake,' she said. At that point rupert couldn't see why he had married her, she was his partner, she was supposed to understand. He would have gone and slept in the spare room if they'd had one. They didn't. There had been six bedrooms before he'd turned their house into a temple of light and space, now there was

only one, the boys slept on a sheet steel landing suspended by wires above the light well, their hands clamped on the edges of their beds. rupert and Helen's bedroom looked out through plate glass doors on to the light well, inconspicuous doors in the wall led to a utility room, cupboards and walk-in wardrobe for all of rupert's identical Boateng suits. They'd had another of their long debates about the tall strip of clear glass in the outside wall of the attached bathroom, which admitted extra light but also allowed the neighbours to see them on the lavatory.

After a restless night he got on the phone to his painters first thing in the morning but they were doing up Lord Winston's place and couldn't get back till the day after tomorrow. He would have to spend two whole days with the desecration on his house.

It was torture, those two days; though he was in the house with the door slammed behind him there was no relief. Notwithstanding that he was inside it made no difference – the wall might as well have been made of his beloved glass for the violation had given him X-ray vision, he could see straight through it to the sacrilege on the other side: 'PATRICK' 'PATRICK' 'PATRICK' 'PATRICK' 'PATRICK' 'PATRICK' 'PATRICK' 'PATRICK' 'PATRICK' 'PATRICK'. And as his office was at home he was trapped with 'PATRICK' patrolling up and down outside like an escaped tiger.

After the long wait the painters turned up in their

horrible van at 7 a.m., got out their special builders' portable radio which seemed to be tuned to two stations at the same time and set it blaring, hissing and honking on the pavement. They then went off for a fried breakfast leaving the radio yodelling and scraping to itself. They came back over two and a half hours later, big fried breakfasts being hard to hunt down in Belgravia. Then they set to work.

About ninety minutes later the head painter, a tall laconic black man called Tommy, who always had a copy of the *Sun* in the back pocket of his overalls with the daily xenophobic headline clearly displayed, rang at the door and asked to speak to rupert. 'Mr . . . erm . . . Mr . . . rupert. I fink you should come outside, we . . . erm . . . dere's a bit of a problem.' He led the trembling rupert round the corner.

What must have happened was that there appeared to have been some chemical reaction that had gone on between the paint underneath and the paint being put on top, so that rather than obliterating the offending name, it was now rather splendidly picked out in bright orange against an immaculate white background. And it seemed to have got bigger: 'PATRICK'. It shouted as if rupert's house was some new kind of bar called 'PATRICK' or something. 'We give it tree coats,' said Tommy. 'But de damn ting keep comin true.'

rupert went back through the front door quite calmly then turned into the kitchen dining area which led off the main entrance. He lay down full length on the nice cool

stainless steel floor. A stainless steel kitchen with a stainless steel floor. They used to have a cat but it went to live over the road because it got sick of sliding and skidding all over the place on the slippery floor. rupert was frankly glad it had gone because it had made the place look messy, lying on its back with its legs open in hot weather. The boys must have loved it though because they spent a great amount of their time now over the road with the Saudi Arabian family who had taken it in. From his nice place on the floor rupert looked up at the wire Bertoia chairs he had insisted on for the kitchen. They were originally without cushions, as they should have been, so that dinner guests were left with savage criss-cross lines on their bottoms, as if they had spent the evening with a particularly savage dominatrix. On this one, this one time, Helen put her foot down and went out and bought cushions for the chairs from Liberty and rupert let her and was secretly relieved she'd done it, after all he didn't want people to be getting the wrong idea about Baroness Jay from marks his chairs had given her on her bottom.

'There's sharks in the deep end of my think tank,' he found himself thinking, and then he thought that he no longer understood his own thoughts. He had to get off the floor, he knew that, it was extremely important; Tony wouldn't like him lying on the floor. At that point his mobile phone rang and seeing it was in his pocket, down there on the floor with him, he got it out and answered it.

As if he had sensed his distress it was Tony ringing him in his hour of need.

'Awright, geez?' Tony said in the funny wide-boy voice he used sometimes when he was larking about.

'Yeah sound geez,' replied rupert.

'Listen,' said the Prime Minister reverting to his normal tones. 'We've got the President of Indonesia over here and he's a bit sick of being a dictator. Alastair was telling him about your ideas. Wanna come over and tell him yourself? Marco Pierre White's doing us all Nasi Goreng.'

He still mattered. 'I'll be there in twenty, Tony.'

Then he went back outside where his workmen were perfecting their oafish impersonations. He had a special cockney voice he used with his workmen. 'Listen, yew cunts,' he said, 'I just want you to get rid of this fucking word. Do you understand me? I don't care what you have to do. Get shot of it, chop it out if you have to, but get the fucking job done!'

Then he went to Number 10 Downing Street for Nasi Goreng.

Coming back later in his own car, swinging into the street, rupert turned his headlights to high beam to look more clearly at what his workmen had done.

What they had done was this. With their sharp chisels and their little hammers the workmen had chipped the name out of the brickwork, painfully they had hacked away the plaster leaving the rest of the wall completely

untouched, so that now there was carved into the wall in huge letters, perhaps eight foot high, the one word, the one word: 'PATRICK'.

More or less without thought rupert drove his foot almost through the floor of the car as he pressed the accelerator pedal and drove the Audi straight at the word, the wall, the word was the wall, by now so big that he couldn't miss the word wall.

They're known for their safety, big Audis are, so he walked away without a mark on him, the German car's crumple zones having crumpled and all its airbags dangling like big used condoms. Inside the kitchen he hunted under the sink for a bottle of bleach then sat down on the nice cool stainless steel floor to drink it. As it poured down his gullet he felt it scouring him, reducing the untidy tangle of his insides to a minimalist shell.

He would have died if the varnished pine-coloured Finnish au pair hadn't come in looking for some polenta for a late night snack. Being Finnish and with suicide being so common in that country that they teach antidote administration at junior school, she immediately knocked the bottle out of his hand and poured bottle after bottle of Evian down him till the paramedics came.

After he got out of hospital rupert and Helen and the kids went to stay in a whitewashed farmhouse just outside a lovely little walled town in a valley in Southern Spain. All the time he'd been in the Chelsea and Westminster none of

the government had come to see rupert, though Gordon Brown had sent some balloons. Now the family was back together. They went walking through the orange groves, swam in the pool, had simple dinners on the Arabic-style terrace. Over the phone Helen sold her flag cleaning business to the Granada Group and they were free of all worries, the money she got allowed them to live in delirious clutter, the kids running in and out all day.

rupert let his hair grow and tied it in a little pony tail at the back. They talked about buying a small farm and raising sheep and goats. But then slowly rupert began to return to the world; he bought a radio that could pick up the BBC World Service and would impatiently sit through reports of government reshuffles in Malawi, falling groundnut prices in the Congo and requests to play Celine Dion records for teenagers in Damascus ('I am most wishing to hear the marvellous Canadian songbird trill her hit song from the film *Titanic* . . .') all so he could catch a fragment of news from back home, a sliver of information of his former pals, Gordon and Jack and Tony.

Helen caught him looking discontentedly at the mess in their farmhouse, studying the shape and the layout, thinking of improvements. One day he shouted at Corbu, 'For God's sake, can't you clear up some of this bloody mess.'

Helen and the two boys stood frozen, it was like a Siberian farmer hearing the howl of the first wolves of winter. They knew He was back.

The Dog Catcher

In the middle of that night as rupert lay sleeping, wrapped in dreams of towering cities, Helen rose and went outside to the white moonlit wall of the farmhouse. With a Pentel pen she wrote in tiny letters on the wall, the one word: 'PATRICK'.