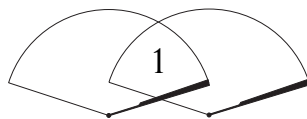


**UNDER
THE SKIN
MICHEL
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ISSERLEY ALWAYS DROVE straight past a hitch-hiker when she first saw him, to give herself time to size him up. She was looking for big muscles: a hunk on legs. Puny, scrawny specimens were no use to her.

At first glance, though, it could be surprisingly difficult to tell the difference. You'd think a lone hitcher on a country road would stand out a mile, like a distant monument or a grain silo; you'd think you would be able to appraise him calmly as you drove, undress him and turn him over in your mind well in advance. But Isserley had found it didn't happen that way.

Driving through the Highlands of Scotland was an absorbing task in itself; there was always more going on than picture postcards allowed. Even in the nacreous hush of a winter dawn, when the mists were still dossed down in the fields on either side, the A9 could not be trusted to stay empty for

long. Furry carcasses of unidentifiable forest creatures littered the asphalt, fresh every morning, each of them a frozen moment in time when some living thing had mistaken the road for its natural habitat.

Isserley, too, often ventured out at hours of such prehistoric stillness that her vehicle might have been the first ever. It was as if she had been set down on a world so newly finished that the mountains might still have some shifting to do and the wooded valleys might yet be recast as seas.

Nevertheless, once she'd launched her little car onto the deserted, faintly steaming road, it was often only a matter of minutes before there was southbound traffic coming up behind her. Nor was this traffic content to let her set the pace, like one sheep following another on a narrow path; she must drive faster, or be hooted off the single carriageway.

Also, this being an arterial road, she must be alert to all the little capillary paths joining it. Only a few of the junctions were clearly signposted, as if singled out for this distinction by natural selection; the rest were camouflaged by trees. Ignoring junctions was not a good idea, even though Isserley had the right of way: any one of them could be spring-loaded with an impatiently shuddering tractor which, if it leapt into her path, would hardly suffer for its mistake, while she would be strewn across the bitumen.

Most distracting of all, though, was not the threat of danger but the allure of beauty. A luminous moat of rainwater, a swarm of gulls following a seeder around a loamy field, a glimpse of rain two or three mountains away, even a lone oystercatcher flying overhead: any of these could make Isserley half forget what she was on the road for. She would be driving along as the sun rose fully, watching distant farmhouses turn golden, when something much nearer to

her, drably shaded, would metamorphose suddenly from a tree-branch or a tangle of debris into a fleshy biped with its arm extended.

Then she'd remember, but sometimes not until she was already sweeping by, narrowly missing the tip of the hitcher's hand, as if the fingers might have been snapped off, twig-like, had they grown just a few centimetres longer.

Stepping on the brake was out of the question. Instead, she'd leave her foot undisturbed on the accelerator, stay in line with the other cars, and do nothing more than take a mental photograph as she, too, zoomed past.

Sometimes, examining this mental image as she drove on, she would note that the hitcher was a female. Isserley wasn't interested in females, at least not in that way. Let them get picked up by someone else.

If the hitcher was male, she usually went back for another look, unless he was an obvious weakling. Assuming he'd made a reasonable impression on her, she would execute a U-turn as soon as it was safe to do so – well out of sight, of course: she didn't want him to know she was interested. Then, driving past on the other side of the road, as slowly as traffic allowed, she'd size him up a second time.

Very occasionally she would fail to find him again: some other motorist, less cautious or less choosy, must have slewed to a halt and picked him up in the time it had taken her to double back. She would squint at where she thought he'd been standing, and see only a vacant hem of gravel. She'd look beyond the road's edge, at the fields or the undergrowth, in case he was hidden in there somewhere, urinating. (They were prone to do that.) It would seem inconceivable to her that he should be gone so soon; his body had been so good – so excellent – so *perfect* – why had she

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thrown away her chance? Why hadn't she just picked him up as soon as she saw him?

Sometimes the loss would be so hard to accept that she just kept driving, for miles and miles, hoping that whoever had taken him from her would set him down again. Cows blinked at her innocently as she sped by in a haze of wasted petrol.

Usually, however, the hitcher was standing exactly where she'd first passed him, his arm perhaps just marginally less erect, his clothing (if rain was setting in) just that little bit more piebald. Coming from the opposite direction, Isserley might catch a glimpse of his buttocks, or his thighs, or maybe how well-muscled his shoulders were. There was something in the stance, too, that could indicate the cocky self-awareness of a male in prime condition.

Driving past, she'd stare straight at him, to verify her first impressions, making totally sure she wasn't pumping him up in her imagination.

If he really did make the grade, she stopped the car and took him.

Isserley had been doing this for years. Scarcely a day went by when she didn't drive her battered red Toyota Corolla to the A9 and start cruising. Even when she'd had a run of successful encounters and her self-esteem was high, she'd worry that the last hitcher she'd picked up might prove, with hindsight, to be her last truly satisfactory one: perhaps no-one in the future would measure up.

In truth, there was for Isserley an addictive thrill about the challenge. She could have some magnificent brute sitting in her car, right next to her, knowing for sure that he was coming home with her, and she could already be thinking ahead to the next one. Even while she was admiring him,

following the curves of his brawny shoulders or the swell of his chest under his T-shirt, savouring the thought of how superb he'd be once he was naked, she would keep one eye on the roadside, just in case an even better prospect was beckoning to her out there.

Today hadn't started well.

Driving the car across the railway overpass near the comatose village of Fearn, before she'd even reached the highway, she became aware of a rattle somewhere above the wheel on the passenger side. She listened to it, holding her breath, wondering what it was trying to tell her in its quaint foreign language. Was the rattle a plea for help? A momentary grumble? A friendly warning? She listened some more, trying to imagine how a car might make itself understood.

This red Corolla wasn't the best car she'd ever had; she especially missed the grey Nissan estate she'd learned to drive in. It had responded smoothly and placidly, made almost no noise, and had lots of room in the back – enough to put a bed in, even. But she'd had to dump it, after only a year.

Since then, she'd had a couple of vehicles, but they were smaller, and the customized bits, when transplanted from the Nissan, caused trouble. This red Corolla handled stiffly and could be temperamental. No doubt it wanted to be a good car, but it had its problems.

Only a few hundred metres short of the junction with the highway, a hairy youngster was ambling along the side of the narrow road, thumbing a lift. She accelerated past him, and he threw up his arm lazily, adding two fingers to the gesture. He knew her face, vaguely, and she knew his, vaguely. They were both locals, though they'd never met except at moments like this.

Isserley had a policy of steering well clear of locals.

Turning onto the A9 at Kildary, she checked the clock on the dashboard. The days were lengthening fast: only 8:24, and the sun was already off the ground. The sky was bruise blue and flesh pink behind a swaddling of pure white cumulus, hinting at the frigid clarity to come. There would be no snow, but frost would sparkle for hours yet and night would fall well before the air had a chance to get warm.

For Isserley's purposes, a clear raw day like this was good for safe driving, but wasn't so good for assessing hitchers. Exceptionally hardy specimens might go short-sleeved, to show off their fitness, but most would be bundled up in overcoats and layers of wool to make things difficult for her. Even a starveling could look musclebound if he had enough gear on.

There was no traffic in her rear-view mirror and she gave herself permission to pootle along at 40 miles an hour, partly to test out how the rattle was doing. It seemed to have fixed itself. That was wishful thinking, of course. But it was a cheering thing to think when setting out in the morning, after a night of nagging pain, bad dreams and fitful sleep.

She sniffed deeply and laboriously through her narrow, barely patent little nostrils. The air was fresh and sharp, slightly intoxicating, like pure oxygen administered through a mask, or ether. Her consciousness was hesitating at a crossroads between hyperactive wakefulness and a return to sleep. If she didn't get the stimulation of some action soon, she knew which way it was likely to go.

Isserley drove past some of the usual spots where hitchers were set down, but there was no-one. Just the road and the wide world, empty.

A few stray drops of rain spattered the windscreen, and the

wipers smeared two filthy monochrome rainbows across her line of vision. She squirted bottled water from inside the bonnet, a seemingly endless stream of it against the glass, before she was able to get a clear view again. The manoeuvre left her more tired somehow, as if she'd had to give up vital fluids of her own.

She tried to project herself forward in time, visualizing herself already parked somewhere with a hunky young hitchhiker sitting next to her; she imagined herself breathing heavily against him as she smoothed his hair and grasped him round the waist to ease him into position. The fantasy was not enough, however, to keep her eyes from drooping shut.

Just as Isserley was considering finding a place to pull in and doze for a while, she spotted a silhouetted figure just below the horizon. Instantly she roused herself and dilated her eyelids attentively, pushing her glasses on straight. She checked her face and hair in the rear-view mirror. Experimentally, she pouted her lips, which were red as lipstick.

Driving past the hitcher the first time, she noted he was a male, quite tall, broad-shouldered, casually dressed. He was using both thumb and forefinger, rather slackly, as if he'd been waiting ages. Or maybe he didn't want to appear too eager.

On the way back, she noted he was quite young, with a very short haircut in the penal Scottish style. His clothing was drab as mud. What he had inside it filled up his jacket impressively, although whether with muscle or fat remained to be seen.

Driving towards him the final time, Isserley realized he really was uncommonly tall. He was staring at her, possibly figuring out that he had already seen her a couple of minutes before, as there wasn't much other traffic. Nevertheless, he

didn't beckon to her any more urgently, just kept his hand lazily extended. Begging was not his style.

She slowed down and brought her car to a standstill right in front of him.

'Hop in,' she said.

'Cheers,' he said breezily as he swung into the passenger seat.

Just from that one word, delivered without a smile despite the smiley facial muscles involved, Isserley already knew something about him. He was the type who needed to swerve round the saying of thanks, as if gratitude were a trap. In his world, there was nothing Isserley could do for him that would put him in her debt; everything was only natural. She had stopped to pick him up off the side of the road; fine. Why not? She was giving him, for free, something a taxi would have charged him a fortune for, and what he said to that was 'Cheers', as if she were a drinking pal and had just done him a trifling, perfunctory favour like sliding an ashtray into his reach.

'No problem,' responded Isserley, as if he'd thanked her anyway. 'Where are you heading?'

'South,' he said, looking south.

A long second idled by, then he pulled the seatbelt across his torso as if reluctantly conceding this was the only way to get the two of them moving.

'Just south?' she enquired as she eased the car away from the kerb, careful, as always, to flip the toggle for the indicators rather than the headlights or the windscreen wipers or the icpathua.

'Well . . . it depends,' he said. 'Where are *you* heading?'

She made a calculation in her head, then looked at his face to judge where he might figure in it.

'I haven't decided yet,' she said. 'Inverness, to begin with.'

'Inverness is fine with me.'

'But you'd like to go further?'

'I'll go as far as I can get.'

Another car had appeared suddenly in her rear-view mirror and she had to gauge its intentions; by the time she was able to turn back to the hitcher his face was impassive. Had his remark been impish arrogance? Sexual innuendo? Or just dull matter-of-fact?

'Waiting long?' she asked, to tease out more of his wit.

'Pardon?'

He blinked at her, interrupted in the act of unzipping his jacket. Was the challenge of pulling a zip and simultaneously listening to a simple question more than his intellect could manage? He had a thin black scab etched across his right eyebrow, almost healed – a drunken fall maybe? The whites of his eyes were clear, his hair had been washed in the not too distant past, he didn't smell – was he just stupid?

'Where I picked you up,' she elaborated. 'Had you been standing there long?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I don't have a watch.'

She glanced down at his nearest wrist; it was big, with fine golden hairs, and two blueish veins passing over onto the backs of his hands.

'Well, did it feel long?'

He seemed to think this over for a moment.

'Yeah.'

He grinned. His teeth weren't so good.

In the world outside, the sun's rays intensified abruptly as if some responsible agency had just noticed they were shining at half the recommended power. The windscreen lit up like a lamp and beamed ultraviolet rays onto Isserley and the

hitcher, pure heat with the nip of breeze neatly filtered out. The car's heater was on full as well, so the hitcher was soon squirming in his seat, taking his jacket off altogether. Isserley watched him surreptitiously, watched the mechanics of his biceps and triceps, the roll of his shoulders.

'OK if I put this on the back seat?' he presumed, bundling the jacket up in his big hands.

'Sure,' she said, noting the ripples of muscle momentarily expressing themselves through his T-shirt as he twisted round to toss the jacket on top of her own. His abdomen was a bit fatty – beer, not muscle – but nothing too gross. The bulge in his jeans was promising, although most of it was probably testicles.

Comfortable now, he settled back in his seat and flashed her a smile seasoned by a lifetime of foul Scottish fodder.

She smiled back, wondering how much the teeth really mattered.

She could sense herself moving closer to deciding. In fact, to be honest, she was more than half-way already, and her breathing was quickening.

She made an effort to forestall the adrenaline as it leaked from her glands, by sending calming messages into herself, swallowing them down. All right, yes, he was good: all right, yes, she wanted him: but she must know a little more about him first. She must avoid the humiliation of committing herself, of allowing herself to believe he would be coming with her, and then finding out he had a wife or a girlfriend waiting.

If only he would make some conversation. Why was it always the desirable ones that sat in silence, and the misshapen rejects that prattled away unprompted? She'd had one miserable creature who'd removed a voluminous parka to reveal

spindly arms and a pigeon chest: within minutes he was telling her his whole life's story. The brawny ones were more likely to stare into space, or make pronouncements about the world in general, deflecting personal questions with the reflex skill of athletes.

Minutes flashed by and her hitcher seemed content to say nothing. Yet at least he was taking the trouble to peek at her body – in particular at her breasts. In fact, as far as she could tell from glancing sideways and meeting his own furtive eyes, he was keen for her to face front so he could ogle her undetected. OK, then: she would let him have a good stare, to see what difference it might make. The Evanton turn-off was coming soon, anyhow, and she needed to concentrate on her driving. She craned forward a little, exaggerating her concentration on the road, and allowed herself to be examined in earnest.

Immediately she felt his gaze beaming all over her like another kind of ultraviolet ray, and no less intense.

Isserley wondered, oh how she wondered, what she looked like to him, in his alien innocence. Did he notice the trouble she had gone to for him? She straightened her back against the seat, pushing her chest out.

The hitcher noticed all right.

Fantastic tits on this one, but God, there wasn't much of her otherwise. Tiny – like a kid peering up over the steering wheel. How tall would she be? Five foot one, maybe, standing up. Funny how a lot of women with the best tits were really really short. This girl obviously knew she had a couple of ripe ones, the way she had them sitting pretty on the scoop of a low-cut top. That's why this car was heated like an oven, of course: so she could wear a skimpy black top and air her boobs for all to see – for *him* to see.

The rest of her was a funny shape, though. Long skinny arms with big knobbly elbows – no wonder her top was long sleeved. Knobbly wrists too, and big hands. Still, with tits like that . . .

They were really odd, actually, those hands. Bigger than you'd think they'd be, to look at the rest of her, but narrow too, like . . . chicken feet. And tough, like she'd done hard labour with them, maybe worked in a factory. He couldn't see her legs properly, she was wearing those horrible flared seventies trousers that were back in fashion – shiny green, for Christ's sake – and what looked like Doc Martens, but there was no disguising how short her legs were. Still, those tits . . . They were like . . . they were like . . . He didn't know what to compare them to. They looked pretty fucking good, nestled next to one another there, with the sun shining on them through the windscreen.

Never mind the tits, though: what about the face? Well, he couldn't see it just now; she had to actually turn towards him for him to see it, because of her haircut. She had thick, fluffy hair, mouse-brown, hanging down straight so he couldn't even see her cheeks when she was facing front. It was tempting to imagine a beautiful face hidden behind that hair, a face like a pop singer or an actress, but he knew different. In fact, when she'd turned towards him, her face had kind of shocked him. It was small and heart-shaped, like an elf in a kiddie's book, with a perfect little nose and a fantastic big-lipped curvy mouth like a supermodel. But she had puffy cheeks and was also wearing the thickest glasses he'd seen in his life: they magnified her eyes so much they looked about twice normal size.

She was a weird one all right. Half Baywatch babe, half little old lady.

She *drove* like a little old lady. Fifty miles an hour, absolute max. And that shoddy old anorak of hers on the back seat – what was that all about? She had a screw loose, probably. Nutter, probably. And she talked funny – foreign, definitely.

Would he like to fuck her?

Probably, if he got the chance. She'd probably be a much better fuck than Janine, that was for sure.

Janine. Christ, it was amazing how just thinking of her could bring him right down. He'd been in a great mood until now. Good old Janine. If ever your spirits are getting too up, just think of Janine. Jesus . . . couldn't he just forget it? Just look at this girl's tits, blazing in the sun, like . . . He knew what they looked like now: they looked like the moon. Well, two moons.

'So, what are you doing in Inverness?' he said suddenly.

'Business,' she said.

'What do you do?'

Isserley thought for a moment. It was so long since anything had been said, she'd forgotten what she'd decided to be this time.

'I'm a lawyer.'

'No kidding?'

'No kidding.'

'Like on TV?'

'I don't watch TV.' This was true, more or less. She'd watched it almost constantly when she'd first come to Scotland, but nowadays she only watched the news and occasionally a snatch of whatever happened to be on while she was exercising.

'Criminal cases?' he suggested.

She looked him briefly in the eyes. There was a spark there that might be worth fanning.

'Sometimes,' she shrugged. Or tried to. Shrugging while driving was a surprisingly difficult physical trick, especially with breasts like hers.

'Anything juicy?' he pushed.

She squinted into her rear-view mirror, slowing the car to allow a Volkswagen pulling a caravan to overtake.

'What would you think was juicy?' she enquired as the manoeuvre slipped gently into place.

'I don't know . . .' he sighed, sounding doleful and playful at the same time. 'A man kills his wife 'cause she's playing around with another guy.'

'I may have had one of those,' Isserley said noncommittally.

'And did you nail him?'

'Nail him?'

'Did you get him sent down for life?'

'What makes you think I wouldn't be defending him?' she smirked.

'Oh, you know: women together against men.'

His tone had grown distinctly odd: despondent, even bitter, and yet flirtatious. She had to think hard how best to respond.

'Oh, I'm not against men,' she said at last, changing lanes reflectively. 'Especially men who get a raw deal from their women.'

She hoped that would open him up.

But instead he was silent and slumped a little in his seat. She looked aside at him, but he didn't allow eye contact, as if she'd failed to respect some limit. She settled for reading the inscription on his T-shirt. AC/DC, it said, and in large embossed letters, BALLBREAKER. She had no idea what on earth this might mean, and felt suddenly out of her depth with him.

Experience had taught her there was nothing to do about that but try to go deeper.

'Are you married?' she asked.

'Was,' he stated flatly. Sweat was glistening beneath the hairline of his big prickly head; he ran his thumb under the seatbelt as if it were smothering him.

'You won't be so keen on lawyers, then,' she suggested.

'It was OK,' he said. 'Clean break.'

'No children, then?'

'*She* got 'em. Good luck to her.' He said this as if his wife were a distant and repugnant country on which there was no point trying to impose the customs of a more civilized society.

'I didn't mean to pry,' said Isserley.

'S'alright.'

They drove on. What had seemed like growing intimacy between them hardened into mutual unease.

Ahead of them, the sun had risen above the car's roof, leaving the windscreen filled with a harsh unpunctuated whiteness that threatened to become painful. The forest on the driver's side thinned out and was replaced by a steep embankment infested with creepers and bluebells. Signs printed in several languages unknown to Isserley reminded foreigners not to drive on the wrong side of the road.

The temperature inside the car was approaching stifling, even for Isserley, who could tolerate extremes without particularly caring. Her glasses were starting to fog up, but she couldn't take them off now: he mustn't see her eyes without them. A slow, subtle trickle of perspiration ran down her neck onto her breastbone, hesitating on the brink of her cleavage. Her hitcher seemed not to notice. His hands were drumming desultorily on his inner thighs to some tune she couldn't hear; as soon as he realized she was watching,

he stopped abruptly and folded his hands limply over his crotch.

What on earth had happened to him? What had brought on this dismal metamorphosis? Just as she'd grown to appreciate how attractive a prospect he was, he seemed to be shrinking before her eyes; he wasn't the same male she'd taken into her car twenty minutes ago. Was he one of those inadequate lugs whose sexual self-confidence depended on not being reminded of any real females? Or was it her fault?

'You can open a window if you're too hot,' she offered.

He nodded, didn't even speak.

Isserley pressed her foot gingerly down on the accelerator, hoping this would please him. But he just sighed and settled further back in his seat, as if what he considered to be an insignificant increase in speed only reminded him how slowly they were getting nowhere.

Maybe she shouldn't have said she was a lawyer. Maybe a shop assistant or an infant teacher would have brought him out more. It was just that she'd taken him to be a rough, robust kind of character; she'd thought he might have a criminal history he'd start to talk about, as a way of teasing her, testing her out. Maybe the only truly safe thing she could have been was a housewife.

'Your wife,' she rejoined, striving for a reassuring, companionable, male sort of tone, a tone he might expect from a drinking buddy. 'Did she get the house?'

'Yeah . . . well . . . no' He drew a deep breath. 'I had to sell it, and give her half. She went to live in Bradford. I stayed on here.'

'Where's here?' she asked, nodding her head at the open road, hoping to remind him how far she had taken him already.

‘Milnafua.’ He sniggered, as if self-conscious about the name.

To Isserley, Milnafua sounded perfectly normal; more normal in fact than London or Dundee, which she had some trouble getting her tongue round. She appreciated, however, that to him it represented some outlandish extreme.

‘There’s no work anywhere up there, is there,’ she suggested, hoping she was striking a matter-of-fact, masculine note of sympathy.

‘Don’t I know it,’ he mumbled. Then, with a startling boost of volume and pitch: ‘Still, got to keep trying, eh?’

Looking at him in disbelief, she confirmed what he was playing at: a pathetic gesture towards optimism, missing the mark by miles. He was even smiling, his face sheened with sweat, as if he’d suddenly become convinced it was dangerous to admit to too much sloth, as if there could be serious consequences for admitting to her that his life was spent on the dole. Was it all her fault for telling him she was a lawyer? Had she made him afraid that she’d get him in trouble? Or that one day she might turn out to have some official power over him? Could she apologize, laughing, for her deception and start all over again? Tell him she sold computer software or clothes for the larger lady?

A big green sign at the side of the road announced how many miles remained before Dingwall and Inverness: not very many. The land had fallen away on the left side, revealing the gleaming shore of the Cromarty Firth. The tide was low, all the rocks and sands exposed. A solitary seal languished on one of those rocks, as if stranded.

Isserley bit her lip, slowly adjusting to her mistake. Lawyer, saleswoman, housewife: it wouldn’t have made any difference. He was wrong for her, that’s all. She had picked up the wrong type. Again.

Yes, it was obvious now what this big, touchy bruiser was up to. He was going to Bradford to visit his wife, or at least his children.

This made him a bad risk, from her point of view. Things could get very complicated when there were children involved. Much as she wanted him – it was sinking in now how much she'd already invested in the idea of having him – she didn't want complications. She would have to give him up. She would have to put him back.

They both sat in silence for the rest of the journey, as if conscious of having let each other down.

Traffic had accumulated all around them; they were caught up in an orderly queue of vehicles crossing the multi-laned tightrope of Kessock Bridge. Isserley glanced at her hitcher, felt a pang of loss at finding him turned away from her, staring down at the industrial estates of the Inverness shore far below. He was appraising a dismal toy-town of prefab ugliness as intently as he had admired her breasts not so long ago. Tiny trucks disappearing into factory mouths: that was what made sense to him now.

Isserley kept to the left, drove faster than she'd done all day. It wasn't just the pace demanded by the traffic around her; she wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. The tiredness had returned with a vengeance; she longed to find a shady bower off the road, lean her head against the seat and sleep a while.

On the far side, where the bridge rejoined the mainland, she negotiated the roundabout with pained and earnest concentration, to avoid being caught up in the town-bound traffic and herded to Inverness. She didn't even bother to disguise her grimace of anxiety as she did this: she had already lost him, after all.

However, to fill the silence of their last few moments together, she offered him a small parting consolation.

'I'll drive you just a bit further, get you past the Aberdeen turn-off. Then at least you'll know all the cars passing you are going south.'

'Great, yeah,' he said passionlessly.

'Who knows?' she jollied him. 'You might get to Bradford by tonight.'

'Bradford?' he frowned, turning to challenge her. 'Who says I'm going to Bradford?'

'To see your kids?' she reminded him.

There was an awkward pause, then:

'I never see my kids,' he stated flatly. 'I don't even know where they live, exactly. Somewhere in Bradford, that's as much as I know. Janine – my ex-wife – doesn't want anything to do with me. I don't exist anymore as far as she's concerned.' He peered straight ahead, as if roughly calculating all the thousands of places that lay south, and comparing that number to what he himself amounted to.

'Bradford was years ago, anyway,' he said. 'She could've moved to fuckin' Mars by now, for all I know.'

'So . . . ' enquired Isserley, changing gear with such clumsiness that the gearbox made a hideous grinding noise, 'where *are* you hoping to get to today?'

Her hitcher shrugged. 'Glasgow will do me,' he told her. 'There's some good pubs there.'

Noticing her looking past him at the signs announcing imminent parking areas, it registered with him that she was about to discharge him from the car. Abruptly he mustered a last incongruous burst of conversational energy, fuelled by bitterness.

'It beats sitting in the Commercial Hotel in Alness with a

bunch of old boilers listening to some idiot singin' fuckin' "Copacabana".'

'But where will you sleep?'

'I know a couple of guys in Glasgow,' he told her, faltering again, as if that last squirt of fuel had already sputtered into the atmosphere. 'It's just a matter of running into them, that's all. They'll be there somewhere. It's a small world, eh?'

Isserley was staring ahead at the snow-capped mountains. It looked like a pretty big world to her.

'Mm,' she said, unable to share his vision of how Glasgow might greet him. Sensing this, he made a small mournful gesture, an opening out of his beefy hands to show there was nothing in them.

'Although people can always let you down, eh?' he said. 'That's why you always got to have a plan B.'

And he swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bulging like a real one stuck in his neck.

Isserley nodded approvingly, trying not to let her feelings show. She was covered in sweat now, cold chills running down her back like electric currents. Her heart hammered so hard her breasts shook; she disciplined herself to take just one deep breath instead of many shallow ones. Keeping her right hand clamped securely to the steering wheel she checked the rear-view mirror, the other lane, her speed, the hitcher.

Everything was ideal, everything pointed to this moment.

Noticing her excitement, he grinned at her uncertainly, removing his hands from his lap with an awkward jerk, as if waking up, dazed, to something that might yet be expected of him. She grinned back in reassurance, nodding almost imperceptibly as if to say 'Yes'.

Then the middle finger of her left hand flipped a little toggle on the steering wheel.

It might have been for the headlights or the indicators, or for the windscreen wipers. It was neither. It was the icpathua toggle, the trigger for the needles inside the passenger seat, to make them spring up silently from their little sheath-like burrows in the upholstery.

The hitcher flinched as they stung him through the fabric of his jeans, one needle in each buttock. His eyes, by chance, were facing the rear-view mirror, but no-one but Isserley witnessed the expression in them; the nearest vehicle was a giant lorry labelled FARMFOODS which was far away still, its driver an insect head behind tinted glass. In any case, the hitcher's look of surprise was momentary; the dose of icpathua was adequate for body sizes considerably larger than his. He lost consciousness and his head lolled back into the padded hollow of the headrest.

Isserley flipped another toggle, her fingers trembling ever so slightly. The gentle tick of the indicator lights set the rhythm of her breathing as she allowed the car to drift off the road and smoothly enter the lay-by. The speedometer wobbled to zero; the car stopped moving; the engine stalled, or maybe she turned off the ignition. It was over.

As always at this moment, she saw herself as if from a height; an aerial view of her little red Toyota parked in its little asphalt parenthesis. The FARMFOODS lorry roared past on the straight.

Then, as always, Isserley fell from her vantage point, a dizzying drop, and plunged back into her body. Her head slammed against the headrest, quite a lot harder than his had done, and she inhaled shudderingly. Gasping, she clung to the steering wheel, as if it might stop her falling further down, into the bowels of the earth.

Finding her way back to ground level always took a little

while. She counted her breaths, slowly getting them down to six a minute. Then she unclenched her hands from the steering wheel, laid them over her stomach. That was always oddly comforting.

When at last the adrenaline had ebbed and she was feeling calmer, she re-applied herself to the job in hand. Vehicles were humming past from both directions, but she could only hear them, not see them. The glass of all the car's windows had turned dark amber, at the touch of a button on the dashboard. She was never aware of having touched that button; it must happen during the adrenaline rush. She only remembered that always, by the time she was at this point, the windows were already dark.

Something massive drove past, vibrating the ground, sweeping a black shadow across the car. She waited till it was gone.

Then she opened the glove box and fetched out the wig. It was a wig for males, but blond and curly. She turned to the hitcher, who was still frozen in position, and placed the wig carefully on his head. She smoothed some wayward locks over his ears, pecked at the fringe with her sharp fingernails to help it settle over the forehead. She leaned back and evaluated the total effect, made some more adjustments. Already he looked much like all the others she had picked up; later, when his clothes were off, he would look more or less identical.

Next she scooped a handful of different spectacles from the glove box and selected an appropriate pair. She slid them into position over the hitcher's nose and ears.

Finally she retrieved the anorak from the back seat, allowing the hitcher's own coat to slip onto the floor. The anorak was actually only the front half of the garment; the back had been cut away and discarded. She arranged the

fur-lined façade over the hitcher's upper torso, tucking the edges of the sleeves round his arms, draping the bisected hood over his shoulders.

He was ready to go.

She pressed a button and the amber faded from the windows like dispersion in reverse. The world outside was still chilly and bright. There was a lull in the traffic. She had about two hours' grace before the icpathua wore off, yet she was only fifty minutes' drive from home. *And* it was only 9:35. She was doing well after all.

She turned the key in the ignition. As the engine started up, the rattling noise that had worried her earlier on made itself heard again.

She would have to look into that when she got back to the farm.