

ROADRAGE

M J Johnson (Martin Johnson) was born and brought up in South Wales. He trained at RADA and has worked fairly extensively in all areas of the acting business. He now spends most of his time writing. His first novel *Niedermayer & Hart* was published in 2012. He lives in Kent with his wife Judith. Their son, artist Tom Johnson, is responsible for the cover design. For more information about M J Johnson please visit his website: www.mj-johnson.com

ALSO BY M J JOHNSON

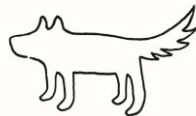
Niedermayer & Hart

Jim Latimer reads of fellow photographer John Loxton's suicide in a daily newspaper. An old friend offers Jim an opportunity to take over Loxton's next assignment. He enters the orbit of Niedermayer & Hart, porcelain dealers with elegant headquarters in Hove. Jim's friends Ruth and Erich sense something isn't right and try to warn him. He is brought face to face with a terrifying manifestation of evil that had its inception in mediaeval Acre.

M J Johnson

Roadrage

ODD DOG



PRESS

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Roadrage

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You become what you think about all day long.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Othello:

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil,
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?

Iago:

Demand me nothing: What you know, you know:
From this time forth I never will speak word.

William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act 5, scene ii.

Hate is a bottomless cup; I will pour and pour.

Euripides, *Medea*



FIRST

25 December - 31 January

1

The rain was driving hard at the windscreen. In places, pools of flood-water stretched half-way across the carriageway. Gil peered into the murk ahead with a weary stoicism, taking the lane lines as his guide. There were times during the journey when he'd felt he was steering a submersible rather than driving a car. He'd grown tired of the radio some time ago, but now the repetitive hum and swipe of the windscreen wipers was really beginning to irritate.

It was downright unseasonal to be experiencing such a torrent, and on Christmas Day of all days. Not that he cared much; Gil Harper avoided Christmas wherever possible.

"Santa must've caught pneumonia last night," he told Spike, a brown and white wire-haired Jack Russell, whose name pictured him well. An attentive companion under normal conditions, the dog had abandoned his habitual vigil at the passenger window to take a nap; tiny snores were the only feedback Gil received from the seat beside him.

He suddenly felt quite sorry for himself, alone in the wretched dark without even Spike to share the boredom; just an empty road and the interminable rain. Actually, the major part of the journey was behind them. He consulted the dashboard clock, estimated about forty minutes driving time, and reckoned to be home around ten.

Gil was returning from the Somerset coast, having travelled there the previous afternoon in a similar downpour. He had stayed the night and taken Christmas lunch with his in-laws, Marjorie and George, that is if

the term in-law still applied to parents of a deceased wife. It was five years since Jules' death and each year Marjorie and George continued to invite him. They still thought of him as family, and never failed to include him at this most poignant of times for anyone who has lost a loved one. They were getting on in years and Jules, christened Julia, had been their only child; Gil could only begin to guess at the pain of their shared loss. It was not an ordeal to visit them, they were kind and sociable, but the whole Christmas thing brought up too many unwanted emotions. He'd considered using the weather as an excuse for not going, but had he done this, he knew he would have felt like a heel.

"It doesn't seem right to be leaving before the day is out, especially with the weather as it is," Marjorie had told Gil as he lent her a hand with the washing up. "You know that you're more than welcome to stay."

"I know that, Marge," he replied, then went on to mumble stock phrases about needing to get back and having things to do. They both knew this was untrue.

Marjorie shook her head, gently reproaching him, "Gil, Gil, what are we to do with you? Both George and I are deeply touched that you loved our daughter, but it hurts us to see you still grieving. Jules has moved on, you know that she would never have wanted you to go on mourning her. Don't you think it's time you allowed her memory to rest in peace?"

Gil scrutinised the dinner plate in his hands with far more attentiveness than he had formerly shown it.

Marjorie misinterpreted the pause, "You must think I'm awful, asking you to forget my own daughter." There was a note of self-chastisement in her voice.

"I'd never think that. You know I wouldn't," he replied, looking into the elderly woman's face with unguarded honesty.

"You'd be quite within your rights to tell me to mind my own business, but we're concerned about you Gil. Nothing any of us can do will ever bring our darling girl back." A large tear appeared at the corner of each eye as she digested her own words.

Gil dropped his gaze towards the floor and quietly said, "Nothing seemed real after the accident. Jules was so full of life, so dynamic. Myself, I've always been a bit retiring ... shy-ish ... a follower, never the leader. That's why she was so good for me ... she burst into my life like ... like ... I don't know ... like dynamite!"

They both smiled at the awkwardness but accuracy of his analogy.

Gil returned to the sink to deflect attention from his moist eyes and dredged a final plate onto the drainer, poured the dishwater away and began drying his hands on a tea-towel. "I've met someone," he confided.

"And?" asked Marjorie when she felt the pause had lived long enough.

"I like her. I think she likes me too."

"When did you meet?" Marjorie asked tentatively.

"A few weeks ago. Not really much to tell. We met at the library."

"The library?"

"Mm, bit sad, huh?"

They shared a laugh.

"We were both getting some research done."

"What does she do?"

"She designs costumes for stage productions."

"Sounds interesting," said Marjorie, then after a pause, "Well, go on then."

"Nothing more to say, we've chatted over coffee and eaten out twice. That's about it."

"It's a start. Is she a 'looker' like our Jules?" she enquired with a smile.

Gil felt his face reddening, "Well, I think so."

"As long as you think so, that's all that matters. Does this beauty possess a name?"

"Her name is Sally. Sally Curtis."

"I hope it works out Gil, you deserve something good."

He had never thought his late wife had borne much physical resemblance to either of her parents. However, at that moment as Gil hugged Marjorie in what was for him a rare display of affection, he saw something of Jules in her face; it was approving and felt good.

This scene was interrupted by George from the lounge, where up until this point he had been snoring on the sofa, mouth agape like a Venus fly trap with Spike in a similar condition in the crook of one arm. He'd suddenly resurfaced from the arms of Morpheus to announce in a sleepy post-lunch drawl, "I think it's the Queen!"

Gil had remonstrated with himself several times over the journey back for not taking up their invitation to stay, at least until morning.

"All the sane people are home!" he exclaimed. These words were wasted too on his sleeping companion.

Marjorie was right. He had become withdrawn since Jules' death, almost reclusive. Life had lost almost all its sweetness. During the three hours since leaving Somerset, Gil had seen relatively few vehicles on the road, it being Christmas Day on top of weather warnings; he'd been

a fool! The concentrated effort required for driving under such conditions was straining his eyes. Driving had never been a favourite pastime of Gil's, even before the accident. For some time afterwards it had been touch and go whether he'd ever go near a car again.

Gil Harper was thirty-nine, married and widowed just the once. He had the kind of features most people seemed to find pleasing: dark hair just beginning to show some grey and a pair of keen blue eyes set in a lean but open face. Despite being quite presentable, and having various dates set up for him by well-meaning friends all of which had come to nothing, five years on from the accident he was still finding it hard to break free of the grief. He had not been ready to form a new relationship.

Gil was quite successful, which always seemed a bit unexpected to those who knew him well, as he possessed very little materialistic drive. He illustrated books, mostly for children, in an anarchic and unique style, often emulated, but rarely executed with anything like the same skill. Success had come early in life and for the past eighteen years Gil had collaborated with one of the world's best loved children's writers. However, this happy partnership was sadly due to end, as Felix Blatt had announced his retirement the previous summer. Gil, with a lot of encouragement from Felix, had begun to write the text of a children's story of his own. When he'd shown him the first draft, Felix had been full of praise, albeit with some positive criticism.

The feeling of isolation from being cooped up in the car for so long, the drone of the engine, constant rain and lack of other vehicles along the route were beginning to produce a sense of mild cabin fever. These vaguely depressive feelings were alleviated a little by Spike, who suddenly opened his eyes, yawned, and went on to perform a languorous dog stretch. His next action was to rise and place his front paws on the window sill to survey the landscape. Clearly unimpressed, Spike sat down again, emitting a sigh much too large for his diminutive stature.

"Only fit for ducks, hey? It's getting me down too, Spikey."

Gil felt cheered slightly when a minute or two later the car's interior was faintly illuminated by the headlights of another vehicle, a good distance behind.

At the same moment Spike gave out an unfamiliar sounding low growl.

"Home before long, boy."

Some people hold to an opinion that animals possess intuitive abilities that we have either lost or never had. Much later, Gil would have occasion to look back at that seminal moment and wonder if Spike

had instinctively felt apprehension; whilst he, with his superior brain, had failed to sense a thing.

As the car came closer, Spike seemed to become more unsettled, expelling a series of plaintive whimpers.

Gil assumed it to be toilet trouble. "Not long, Spikey," he said and decided to pull over as soon as they were off the motorway.

It was difficult to estimate the speed of the other vehicle, the rapid approach suggested its driver's foot must have been pressed hard on the accelerator. By now Gil had to avoid his mirrors because the fast gaining car had failed to dip its lights.

Spike, whimpering, pressed his head into Gil's thigh.

"I'll stop soon as I can, boy," he told the dog.

Gil stole a quick glance at the rear mirror but immediately recoiled, his eyes momentarily blinded. "Give me a break!" he yelled. He wondered if the driver was drunk.

Suddenly, without indicating, the car shot past. Gil was relieved. He wanted to flash his lights up and down several times, just to let the other driver know how it felt being blinded. He thought better of this, "If he's pissed that might only make things worse," and decided to let him go his merry way. From the speed the car was moving, Gil would have expected to see nothing more than a set of disappearing tail lights half a minute later, but this didn't happen. As soon as the other driver had overtaken, he decelerated and pulled into the lane just ahead of Gil. Gil was forced to brake and then drop his own modest speed of fifty to below forty.

"What the hell is your problem?" Gil shouted in exasperation. This brought Spike to his feet, and taking a full stretch, he leaned onto the dashboard to let out a growl followed by three warning barks.

"That's right Spikey. He is an asshole."

No sooner had Gil expressed this opinion than the other car began to pull away at an incredible lick. Considering the treacherous road conditions, such a speed was extremely ill advised. The gap grew between them so fast that it seemed likely the other vehicle had accelerated to a hundred mph at least. Gil was glad to watch as its tail lights reduced to nothing more than red pin pricks in the haze ahead.

"Thank God for that! We can relax again Spike."

Spike however remained on guard duty. And Gil's moment of elation was short-lived when he noticed through the thick sheets of rain that the car ahead must have braked quite hard and that he was rapidly catching up. At first he wondered if there was more flooding, a speed restriction or some obstruction on the road, only to realise unnervingly, once he

reached the leading car, that there was nothing. Both were now travelling in convoy at less than thirty mph.

Gil wondered if he'd come upon a bunch of joy-riders out for kicks. If this was the case, then he suspected they would only speed up again if he overtook them. He felt slightly better about things when the car in front started flashing its hazard lights and eased over onto the hard shoulder. As Gil passed the slowing car he attempted to catch a glimpse of its occupant or occupants, but the darkness and rain made this impossible. He briefly entertained the idea of stopping to see what was wrong and whether he could offer some assistance, but swiftly dismissed the notion as a bad idea.

"I'd be no use if they have broken down. Anyway, serves them right for driving like morons."

Gil had managed about thirty yards before he realised to his horror that the other car was tagging alongside. He felt enraged by the inanity of whatever this stupid game was about, and against his better judgement, put his foot down hard on the gas to break away. At first it seemed he might make a clear break and leave his tormentor far behind. Sadly, not for long. The wing mirror showed the other car was getting closer on the hard shoulder. The rain was pummelling the windscreen so fast during this acceleration that Gil needed to strain forward in order to catch a fleeting view of the road as the wipers cleared the streams of water. Spike became more agitated and was growling loudly. As Gil's Volvo touched seventy the maniac was only a car's length behind. Having embarked on this direct action, Gil acknowledged he had little alternative but to see it through. He clenched his teeth, screwed up his eyes and stepped on the gas pedal.

"I'll give you a chase if that's what you want you moron!" he snarled.

Somehow the situation had Spike caught in its grip too. He was rushing to and fro, barking with unaccustomed ferocity, one second at the windscreen, the next at the passenger window. Uncontrollable frenzy had seized the moment and the deafening noise coming from the dog provided an aptly manic soundtrack.

The speedometer needle passed eighty, eighty-five, ninety. At each of these stages Gil looked over his shoulder to see if his pursuer had given up. There was no change. Ninety-five, a hundred, a hundred and five; his adversary was right beside him. Gil was beginning to feel a loss of control in the steering as the wheels found it increasingly difficult to gain purchase on the wet surface. At a hundred and ten Gil had nosed ahead by a few yards, a cold sweat breaking out on his upper lip, the car slithering like a toboggan on a slalom run. Spike was gnashing his teeth, frantically dashing about; the car's interior was bedlam.

"Shut up Spike!" Gil shouted, but Spike, who, as a rule, liked to please, either didn't hear or was too overwrought to check himself.

Gil felt an insanity take hold of him. He put his foot right down until the accelerator was pinned to the floor. The car surged forward; a hundred and fifteen, a hundred and twenty and increasing; it was like trying to manoeuvre a drunk on roller-skates. When the speedometer read a hundred and twenty-seven mph, Gil's control of the steering was so tenuous that to have gone beyond must surely have brought destruction. Even so, the temptation remained when he saw the pursuing car draw level; but sanity won.

Perhaps sensing that Gil had reached his limit, the other car suddenly burst into the lead and cut into the lane with just a few feet to spare. Gil, his heart in his mouth and fearing they might touch, swerved out to the middle. At this point Spike lost his balance and tumbled onto the floor but almost immediately recovered to resume barking at the window. The other car then suddenly veered right, directly into Gil's path. He had no option but to slam his foot on the brake. As they screeched into play, the car began to aquaplane across the wet surface. Fortunately Gil remembered to steer into the skid, although he wasn't certain whether it had been this action or just sheer luck that saved them from hitting the central barrier.

"Oh Christ! Oh hell no! Oh Christ!" he screamed. For a split-second it was like he'd been transported back five years to the accident.

As the car's speed dropped, Gil regained control of the steering. The other car had gotten clear and was now about two or three hundred yards ahead. Gil settled back into the slow lane at forty. It looked as though the machismo game was finally over. This was until Gil noticed the car's brake lights flash up again.

"Fucking idiot! Fucking idiot! Fucking idiot!" he raged.

Spike had hit the deck again when they had gone sliding across the carriageway and this time he stayed there; he'd stopped barking too and lay trembling before the passenger seat giving short heartfelt whines. Gil identified with the dog's anxiety; he too was shaking like a leaf, his breathing shallow and rapid.

Gil was determined not to engage in any more of these lethal games. He would not be goaded into increasing his speed again and would stick to 40 mph whatever. The other driver certainly wanted to play some more and did everything he could to engage him. The first ploy was to plant himself directly before Gil and cause him to brake unexpectedly. The next tactic was to come out of the lane, drop behind, flashing his lights, travelling so close that if Gil's speed had wavered they would have collided. Out of desperation, Gil considered braking hard as a

drastic means of disabling the other car. "But I might put myself out of action too, or get off worse. Christ, a maniac like that might be carrying a weapon!" His thoughts betrayed the point close to despair that he had now reached.

A motorway sign brought with it new hope of breaking free. The Clacket Lane Services were three miles ahead. An idea formed: it required the other car to be in front when they reached the exit. There was only one thing to do, speed up as if to get away, and hope his adversary would take the bait.

It worked. Gil shot off as though he planned to make another escape bid and the other car immediately gave chase. Gil had no intention of reaching the dangerous speeds he previously had; this time he would stay in control of the situation. Sensing Gil had reached his top speed, the other car careered out into the middle lane before overtaking and cutting in recklessly close. It was stupidly dangerous but it worked, and although Gil was forced to brake, the speed was far lower than before, only around seventy. And this time Gil was expecting it.

As the services approached, they sailed past the first countdown point with the other car just ahead. At the second marker Gil was praying that whoever was at the wheel of the other car wouldn't anticipate his intention.

"Just keep going you arsehole!"

The final countdown; Gil showed no sign of wavering, shadowing the lead car and playing perfectly the role assigned to him of being the taunted prey. Then, at the very last moment, when it was already too late for his adversary, he took the exit. He couldn't resist flashing his lights in what he knew was an impotent show of defiance as the enemy car sailed off into the dark, wet night.

"I hope you go blind you mad bastard!" he exclaimed with much feeling.

As might have been expected there were only five cars in the parking area. He let Spike out onto a grass verge and scrambled out himself to take deep gulps of air. He was unconcerned by the rain that soon drenched through his sweatshirt, and feeling that his legs might give way, he leaned against the car for support. It actually came as a relief when he began to throw up.

Thursday 25 December

I did laugh when I saw you vomit over your car.

You just didn't have the stomach for our brief encounter, did you? Or perhaps a bit too much stomach? (Tee hee!)

I'm content to let you wallow under the delusion that you somehow bettered me by escaping into the services.

It's what I wanted you to think!

I suspect there aren't too many people who'd have the guts to back up along the motorway like I did? Even over Christmas with nothing else around.

After you came out of the toilets you sat in your car for ages, head in hands poor, poor, thing, until you plucked up enough courage to get back on the road. A white van started up and went out directly after you - accommodating I thought. I followed on behind. And you, deluded fool, didn't suspect a thing!

Perhaps you were half expecting me to have parked up on the hard shoulder, waiting to pounce on you like the wicked wolf?

Bet you'd need a change of trousers if you knew I'd followed you - wee wee wee - all the way home.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Gil arrived home, quite exhausted, just after 11 pm; a journey he generally managed in less than three hours had taken over five.

He had never experienced anything even remotely like the encounter on the motorway and couldn't prevent himself from going over the events in the order they happened.

Had he provoked the other driver in some way?

No. Nothing he'd done could have warranted such aggression.

He brought the car to a standstill on the pea shingle drive before his garage doors.

'Christ, it was like being ten years old again,' he thought. At this age, Gil had suffered some pretty nasty bullying. His family had uprooted from the West Midlands and moved south when he was eight to resettle in a village in Berkshire. For a small boy, with an accent, a different cultural identity and who was appallingly bad at sport, it was alienating to say the least. At primary school, a group of children had conspired to make his every day a living nightmare. The kids who might have gravitated towards the school newcomer were frightened off by the ruling schoolyard junta and Gil became a loner. He learned to fake illnesses to avoid school. His parents despaired; his mother took to worrying about him; his father preferred to believe the boy was congenitally lazy, a trait undoubtedly inherited from his wife's side. Gil never breathed a word to anyone about the bullying.

Subsequently, it had always struck him as odd how nature appears to balance up her weakest points. All those hours alone, looking at comics, drawing grotesque caricatures of his enemies in embarrassing situations, had honed and developed skills that as an adult had provided him with lucrative employment.

Although he knew it was irrational, the motorway experience had awakened some of these bad memories, and had left him feeling impotent and ashamed. This may explain, at least in part, why he hadn't called the police as soon as he stopped at the motorway services. However, he knew he'd been in the wrong too: the law was unlikely to accept that he'd been simply goaded into driving fifty miles beyond the speed limit; it would probably result in an automatic ban.

Not in the mood to get soaked again, instead of putting the car away in the garage, he and Spike made a dash for the front door. Gil opened up, went inside and immediately punched in the code to disarm the security alarm. He made straight for a bottle of scotch in the dining room, and poured himself a large one. The alcohol brought a soothing warmth which seemed to root its way to just the right spot. Gil was not a heavy drinker but on this occasion he didn't mean to stop at one. He took the bottle with him when he went through to sit with a fairly blank expression at the long oak table at the heart of the kitchen.

"What a bastard of a night!" he exclaimed with heartfelt conviction.

Spike appeared with a well-mauled pink toy rabbit in his jaws.

"Glad to get home hey, Spikey? Me too," he said, patting the dog's head. Spike growled playfully, dropped the pink rabbit at Gil's feet and scarpered away expectantly. Gil made a dummy throw, which only fooled Spike for a fraction of a second, then bowled it underarm into the

conservatory. Spike recaptured his favourite toy then settled into an armchair in the conservatory for an affectionate chew.

Gil returned his attention to the glass of scotch and took another sip. He let out a deep sigh, there was still sadness attached to coming home. Then, recognising that if he got stuck into the bottle without eating he would end up maudlin and morbid, he found smoked salmon and an assortment of cheeses in the fridge, which together with oatcakes made supper in minutes.

Gil Harper had lived for fourteen years in the same detached Edwardian house on a broad, tree-lined road near the Vine cricket ground in Sevenoaks. The house was sizeable, with five bedrooms and a quarter acre of garden. He and Jules had stretched themselves financially in order to buy it, although its value now made the original sum look paltry. He'd considered selling after Jules' death, so much of her personality was stamped everywhere on it. But so far he had stuck it out.

Gil was in the process of making coffee when Spike dashed past him into the hallway. He assumed the dog's sense of purpose was an entirely canine matter, but paid more attention once he heard him bark. It was the sound he made when someone unrecognised came to the door. Gil felt a twinge in the pit of his stomach as the doorbell rang; it was almost midnight.

"Shush Spike," he said as he strode into the hallway. For the second time that day Spike ignored a command.

A figure was partly delineated through the glass panes of the door, but it was too dark to identify it. Gil remedied this by putting on the porch light before he rushed to open the door.

"Sally!"

"I'm sorry Gil, I hope you don't mind. I saw your light was on. You said you'd be back sometime this evening and ..." Her speech was rapid, almost garbled.

"That's okay. Come in. Be quiet Spike!"

Spike, slightly behind Gil's leg, had adopted a warning-off pose, but on this command he stopped barking and sat down, albeit suspiciously.

"Thanks. I'm really sorry about this." There was an anxious note in her voice. The light jacket she was wearing had been soaked through.

Once she'd entered the well-lit hall, Gil could see the tell-tale signs that she'd been crying.

"Something's upset you?" he asked with genuine concern.

"Oh God Gil, I was really scared," she replied. The tears began to flood from her eyes. "I've been driving around for ages. I thought I was being followed!"

Gil closed the front door, took Sally's jacket and hung it over a radiator. He poured her a glass of scotch and fetched a towel.

As he watched her dry her short dark hair, he realised what a long time it was since any female had performed this simple action in his home. There was something oddly sensual about it.

Sally Curtis was thirty-one, five foot seven inches tall, with a lean and rangy frame. Gil had gleaned, after their two dinner-dates less than a week ago, that her background, like Jules', had been more conventionally middle-class than his own. Sally had been educated at a series of girls' boarding-schools. On their second date, she had talked briefly of her parents' divorce and how her late mother had struggled to make ends meet. She'd studied textiles at St Martin's, but had not found the world of fashion much to her liking. Later on, she had somehow fallen into making costumes for several theatre and opera companies on a freelance basis. She liked the variety of the work and being on the periphery of the theatrical world, enjoyed its bonhomie without needing to be totally immersed in it.

"I must look terrible," she said, attempting to smooth her tousled hair with trembling fingers.

"You look fine," he replied, and meant it.

She smiled and their eyes momentarily engaged; hers he'd noticed at the time of their very first meeting, were brown, doe-like and warm.

She took a sip of scotch, gripping the glass in both hands, shivering slightly. "You're very kind," she said.

"So what happened?" he asked.

She sighed heavily. "Old boyfriend trouble ... story of my life. No matter what I do I always seem to end up with dickheads."

Gil felt suddenly crestfallen; although she was not referring to him, the statement still seemed damning.

She looked up apologetically, "I'm sorry, you don't need this."

"If you'd care to tell me, I'd like to understand why you looked so troubled when you rang my doorbell?"

"It's after midnight ... I have to set off for Birmingham in the morning, very early."

"Visiting friends?" he asked.

"Work," she replied, "Costume emergency on a pantomime."

"Then stay the night," he said, and immediately regretted making the suggestion, fearing it might have sounded predatory. He quickly amended, "I mean, there's plenty of room ... four empty bedrooms to choose from." He added as a joke, "Spike and I share."

She laughed, "I don't think Spike has taken to me. To be honest, I don't feel very secure with dogs."

"You'll be alright with Spikey then, because he isn't one. He's actually a reincarnated lama from the farthest reaches of the Himalayas taking a bit of time off from too much karmic harmony and enlightenment. Aren't you boy?" Spike wagged his tail and came forward hesitantly.

"I don't suppose there were many girls up at the monastery," Sally said, joining in the fantasy and tentatively offering her hand for Spike to check it out.

"About once a year some nuns from a nearby convent might go past and wave."

"It must be a pretty good thing being your dog," she said. Spike had begun to mellow; Sally had discovered his Achilles heel - a spot just under his chin.

"Mostly it is. But we didn't have a very good time on our way home tonight."

"I bet! That awful rain!"

"That didn't help. There was an idiot on the motorway playing dangerous silly buggers."

"Did you get his number?"

"No," Gil scowled. "To be honest it didn't cross my mind until I pulled into the services. The visibility was dreadful. I probably wouldn't have been able to make it out anyway."

"Oh well, you got back safe and sound, that's the main thing."

"And what about you, you said you thought someone was following you?"

"I think my imagination got the better of me."

"It gave me quite a fright when you landed on my doorstep."

"Poor Gil, I'm really sorry if I frightened you," she laughed.

Gil found the effect laughter had on her features totally absorbing. "So, are you going to tell me about it?"

"The smell of that coffee is intoxicating, may I have some?"

He poured the coffee and filled a jug with cold milk from the fridge. As he put the hot drinks down on the table he noticed that both their whisky glasses were empty, "Would you like some more?"

"You're sure I wouldn't be putting you to too much trouble if I stayed?"

"Course not."

She held out both glasses for him to top them up.

They sipped their drinks for a few moments in silence.

"You probably won't be interested in seeing me again if I tell you about myself ... when you find out just how stupid and neurotic I really am."

She had said these words half jokingly, but Gil could see that underlying this she was quite troubled.

"You don't have to tell me anything unless you want to," he reassured her. "I'd like us to get to know each other better no matter what."

Sally was clearly touched by this declaration, and she replied, "I'd like to at least try and explain, if that's okay?"

"Fine by me," he answered.

"About four years ago I met someone. To begin with it was fun, he was successful, urbane. I felt I deserved a break on the relationship front. To begin with it had all seemed very different, so romantic. He'd send me bouquets every day for a week, take me to lavish hotels for romantic weekends, one time he even booked a weekend in Vienna just to surprise me. I suppose I found all the attention flattering, but as the months went by he became more and more possessive; he didn't want me to work away from home, didn't like me doing anything much unless he was there to hold my hand." As she spoke she made two fists with her hands and brought them up to her temples in a gesture of frustration. "I felt like I was being suffocated. His personality was so dominating," a look of despair came over her face, "and I'm so bloody weak and vacillating."

"Don't talk about yourself like that, we've all found ourselves vulnerable at times," remonstrated Gil.

She grew calmer again. "I allowed him to take over my life. He insisted I move in with him. He took over my finances. He put my house up for sale, bought me a new car, though I loved my old one. He even started buying clothes for me, like I was his property or something. He went so far as arranging the time and place for our wedding without consulting me. Can you imagine that?"

"But you didn't marry him?" Gil asked uncertainly.

"No. In fact it was the wedding that brought me to my senses. When I had the temerity to protest that I should have been asked, he went berserk. He became so aggressive, I was ready to cave in just to appease him, which usually worked; but this time he just got madder." Sally paused; Gil could see the tension on her face. "He started using me as a punch-bag." She was shaking now. "Then ... he raped me."

"Christ, what a bastard!" Beyond this Gil found himself speechless.

"I took off next morning after he'd left for work. I left the car, clothes, jewellery he'd bought. A friend collected me and took me to her home for a few weeks. He'd found a buyer for my cottage, but fortunately the contracts hadn't been exchanged and I managed to hang on to it."

"Was he charged?"

"I took out a non-molestation order against him. He wasn't allowed to come within three miles of my house for a year. All my friends wanted me to take him to court. I wasn't sure. Michael has a habit of getting out of scrapes."

"That's his name then, Michael?"

"Yes. He's quite a big-shot in the city. He could easily have afforded a good lawyer. I took legal advice from a friend who reckoned Michael would get a suspended sentence at most."

"That's appalling."

"Apparently it's still true that judges aren't keen to sully the reputation of a formerly upstanding citizen, especially someone with all the right credentials."

"That's awful!" exclaimed Gil.

"I can't say I was too eager to go through the legal process, suffering all the humiliation it might entail, only to come off the loser. I've already told you what a coward I am."

"I don't think it was cowardly, you sought advice and after consideration chose the best course available."

She smiled, leaned forward and kissed Gil's cheek.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"For listening, and being considerate."

"Not all of us men are arseholes, you know."

She nodded, "I admit that for a time I wondered."

Gil changed tack, "So he's been troubling you again? I mean, since all that happened?"

"Yes, for about a month now. I left him just under two years ago. He kept well clear of me after the order was put in place. I thought it was all over. Then one evening in late November, I saw him across the road; he was watching me getting off the train from London. I thought it might have been coincidence. Then a week later the same thing happened again, only this time he followed me home. I was scared stiff."

"I bet you were."

"Since then it's happened twice more."

"Did he attempt to talk to you or anything?"

"No. I think he just wanted to unnerve me. He can be a vindictive sod! He's been ringing me too from time to time, at least I'm certain it was him, he never spoke."

"What, heavy breathing or something?"

"Just nothing. I'd pick up, and silence, as though he wanted to make sure I was at home. He's an incredibly jealous man."

"Did you try to trace the calls?"

"Public telephones."

"And tonight?"

"Tonight he spoke. He rang me on his mobile. He was very drunk. He said he wanted to come over and put things right between us. I told him that if he came anywhere near me I'd call the police. Then he got abusive, called me an effing whore, said I was still engaged to him and that he knew I was seeing someone." Sally paused before adding, "Presumably that meant you, because I haven't been seeing anyone else. More than likely it's all in his head; he used to suspect me of seeing other men if I spoke to the paper boy."

"But you were afraid he might come over so you got in the car?"

"Yes, and for a while I thought he was following me, but I think it was just that I was so worked up by then. He was very drunk on the phone. I drove around for well over an hour, through villages I'd never been to before. Eventually I found myself in Sevenoaks."

"You did the right thing. I'm glad you decided to come here."

4

The next morning, Gil woke just after nine. Sally had left a note on the kitchen table which read:

*Thanks for being there last night. If you're still interested
in seeing me again, I should be back on Tuesday.*

Say hi to Spike.

Sally x

Gil smiled. Even though the note was concise, he knew from its tone and what it left unstated that she was declaring an interest in him; he was very attracted to her.

"It's mighty strange this romantic business," he told Spike, who was watching his master attend to a pot of simmering porridge. "It's nowhere near as simple for me as it is for you, dog, sniffing around any accommodating backside. We humans have romance, courtship and there's such a thing as subtext to contend with."

Spike responded with a quizzical look, cocking his head to one side.

Gil replied as though a genuine question had been posed, "Subtext ... what isn't said. A bit like when you take to your basket and sulk if I'm late with your walk."

Spike's tail began to wag at mention of the 'w' word; there was nothing more to learn about subtext.

"You are utterly transparent, dog."

The rain had finally stopped during the middle part of the night and had not resumed. After breakfast, he let Spike out into the garden while he sat in the conservatory with coffee and settled down with the novel he was reading. But however much he tried to involve himself in the book Gil found that his thoughts kept returning to Sally's unannounced appearance. They had chatted until just after 2 am. He was glad they had not ended up sleeping together; he suspected it might have happened given different circumstances, but after she'd confided in him about the rape it would have been utterly the wrong moment.

Unable to settle, Gil went upstairs to dress, followed by Spike, who'd grown tired of the garden. After dressing, he went into his office, a large comfortable room purpose-built above the garage. Along the wall beside the door was a nineteenth century draughtsman's desk built out of solid oak. He had bought it at a junk shop in Kilburn out of the first advance he had received as an illustrator. Beneath the window on the opposite wall was another desk with a monitor and keyboard. To one side of this modern desk was a comfy chair draped with an old blanket showing grubby paw marks and liberally covered with white hairs. At the study's farthest end were French windows opening onto a small verandah with cast iron steps leading down to the rear garden.

He sat at the desk and logged on to his computer. The first thing he did was to check his emails, mostly spam and nothing of any importance. Then he typed in the password and opened up his diary. It was good to catch up; the last entry he'd made was on 23 December before leaving for Somerset. For Gil, getting stuff off his chest in this way had always had a cathartic effect; it was probably the reason why he had kept a diary for so long. On this occasion he wrote:

Had the misfortune to meet a complete arsehole on the motorway tonight. Luck of the draw I expect. I was certainly at the wrong place at the wrong time ...

After this, he replied to the half dozen or so letters from children waiting in the in-tray to be answered. Although he employed Megan to assist with general paper work, he tried to respond personally to letters from children.

By midday Gil had completed all the correspondence. Spike was getting restless; the dog's body clock never failed. Gil put on his wellies and a coat and allowed Spike to eagerly lead the way from the front door to the car.

The sight that met his eyes caused his jaw to drop.

The car windscreen, side, rear windows and bodywork were streaked white: trails of paint, long dry, had run in all directions; the rain had interfered with the paint's solvents, causing it to dry in ugly pustules like chicken pox. The quality gloss was guaranteed to remain durable for up to five years; at least this is what it proclaimed on the can now sitting on the car roof with several holes punched in its base.

A gasp was all Gil could manage.

If you enjoyed reading this excerpt of *Roadrage* and would like to read more, the print version is available from 3 June, 2013. It will also be available as an ebook.