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Categorie concurs: *TEXT GENERAL*

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The placing of the glass on its paper coaster, the discreet pushing forward of the ashtray and Roddy's quiet withdrawal having been accomplished, we were free to talk.

'Good health, madam.'

'And yours.'

'Have I a feeling,' I wondered, 'that we've met?'

'That's what I was asking myself when I was here before. I decided you were too forbidding to ask, so I disappeared to the corner seat.'

'Forbidding?' I've heard this tosh before. Something to do with jowls, eyebrows and a pugnacious, Bernard Ingham-like set to the lower lip. 'As it happens,' I said, 'I'm a lamb.'

'And then, sitting there, I realised you were Ted Wallace.'

'The same.'

'You may not remember, but...I'm Jane Swann.'

'Jane Swann. And I know you, do I?'

'Cast your mind back to a small font in Suffolk twenty-six years ago. A baby and a rising poet. The baby cried a great deal and the rising poet made a promise to turn his back on the world, the flesh and the devil. A promise that even the baby didn't believe.'

'Well, fuck my best boots! Jane...Jane Burrell!'

'That's me. Though in fact it's Swann now.'

'I must owe you any number of silver napkin rings. And a library's worth of moral guidance.'

She shrugged as if to say that she didn't believe me to be the kind of person whose taste in silver napkin rings or moral guidance coincided with her own. Now that I looked there was that cast of features which recalled her ghastly parents.

'Never got much of a chance to get to know you,' I said. 'Your mother threw me out of the house not half an hour following the baptism. Barely laid eyes on her or Patrick since.'

'I was always very proud of you, though. From a distance.'

'Proud of me?'

'Two of your poems were set texts at school. No one believed you were my godfather.' Too true. Nothing like the parted admiring lips of a seminar of school girls to make a man feel wanted. Why else would anyone try to become a poet? [...]

I coughed. 'Which poems?'

'Mm?'

'Set texts. Which ones?'

'Oh let me see. *The Historian* and *Lines on the Face of W. H. Auden*.'

'Of course. Of bloody course. The only two that ever make the anthologies. Tricky rubbish.'

'Do you think so?'

'Certainly not, but you'd expect me to say so.'

She favoured me with a sad-eyed smile.

'I often read your theatre reviews,' she ventured, sensing that the smile had been a touch too obviously sympathetic.

'Not any more, you won't.'

I told her of my sacking.

'Oh,' she said, and then, 'oh!'

'Not that I give a stuff,' I assured her, in a manner that admitted no condolences.

I unloosed my thoughts on the current state of the British theatre, but she wasn't listening.

'You've time on your hands, then?' she said once I had run down.

'Well...I don't know so much about that. There's a more or less open invitation to fill the restaurant column in *Metro*...'

'I'm not a writer, you see, and I don't know enough...'

'...and there's always room for just one more definitive book on the Angry Young Men...'

'...you are virtually family, after all...'

I stopped. There were tears forming in her lower eyelids.

'What is it, my dear?'

'Look, do you mind coming home with me?'

In the cab she stayed off whatever it was distressing her. She sketched a biography, enough to show me that she wasn't as bright or pretty or stylish or interesting as she had seemed sitting at the bar. But then, no one ever is, which is why it's always worth having shares in whisky and cosmetics.

Jane's house found itself somewhere near Onslow Gardens. There was money in her purse, no question, courtesy of her Uncle Michael no doubt, and, like every rich, ignorant girl these days, she passed herself off as an interior decorator.

Stephen Fry, *The Hyppopotamus*, Soho Press, 1994