Egnaro is a secret known to everyone but yourself. It is a country or a city to which you have never been; it is an unknown language. At the same time it is like being cuckolded, or plotted against. It is part of the universe of events which will never wholly reveal itself to you: a conspiracy the barest outline of which, once visible, will gall you forever.

It is in conversations not your own (so I learnt from Lucas) that you first hear of Egnaro. Egnaro reveals itself in minutiae, in that great and very real part of our lives when we are doing nothing important. You wait outside the library in the rain: an advert for a new kind of vacuum pump, photographed against a background of cycads and conifers, catches your eye. ‘Branch offices everywhere!’ Old men sit on the park benches, and as you pass make casual reference to some forgotten campaign in the marshes of a steamy country. You are always in transit when you hear of Egnaro, in transit or in limbo. A book falls open and you read with a sudden inexpressible frisson of nostalgia, ‘Will I ever return there?’ (Outside, rain again, falling into someone else’s garden; a wet black branch touches the window in the wind.) A woman at a dinner party murmurs, ‘Egnaro, where the long sunlit esplanades lift from a wine-dark sea…’

It is this overheard, fragmentary quality which is so destructive. By the time you have turned your head the woman is speaking of tomatoes and hot-house flowers; someone has switched off the news broadcast with its hints of a foreign war; the accountant in the seat opposite you on the train has folded up his

Daily Telegraph

preparatory to getting off at Stockport. You forget immediately. Egnaro – in the beginning at least – hides itself in the interstices, the empty moments of your life.

Lucas himself had a similar incidental quality. He was a fattish, intelligent, curly-haired man, between thirty and forty years old and prone to migraine headaches, who had worked his way up from records and goldfish in the Shude Hill Market to a shabby bookshop on one of the streets behind Manchester library. I did his accounts once a month in a filthy office he kept above the shop; afterwards he would treat me to a Chinese meal and pay me in cash, for which I was grateful. I sold some of my wife’s books to him when she died. He was quite decent to me on that occasion.

He conducted the business evasively. Receipts were scribbled on decaying brown paper bags, in a variety of hands. He had three signatures. I never knew how many people he employed. He never paid his bills. He concealed from me almost as much as he was concealing from his suppliers, his partners, and his VAT inspector. To tell the truth I let him hide as much as he pleased: no one in the gray streets outside cared, and I was glad of the work. I hated the office, with its litter of half-empty plastic cups and plates of congealed food; but I liked the shop. After the rambling, apologetic evasions upstairs it had a sour candor.

Its window was packed with colorful American comics cellotaped into plastic bags, and its door was always open. Inside it was the relic of a dozen bankruptcy cases: car rental, cheap shoes, do-it-yourself. Lucas had ripped out the original fitments, leaving raw scars on the wall to remind him, and replaced them with badly carpentered shelves. A tape player and two loudspeakers pumped the narrow aisles full of pop music which drew in the students and teenagers who made up his bread and butter clientele. They came in full of a sort of greedy idealism, to buy science fiction and crankcult material – books about spoon-bending, flying saucers and spiritualism – books by Koestler and Crowley, Cowper Powys and Colin Wilson – all the paraphernalia of that ‘new’ paradigm which so attracts the young. As a sideline Lucas sold them second-hand records, posters, novelties, and – from a basement stinking of broken lavatories and mold – film magazines, biographies of James Dean, and children’s comics.

They loved it. Every flat surface was strewn with the poor stuff they wanted, and I don’t think any of them ever realized that Lucas hated them, or that this was his revenge on them.

He kept the pornography at the rear of the shop. On slack afternoons he would stand behind the cash desk, sealing the new stock into plastic wrappers so that the customers couldn’t maul it. This activity seemed to relax him. His plump fingers had performed the task so often that they worked unsupervised, deftly folding the wrapper, pulling the cellotape off the reel, smoothing it down, while Lucas’s thoughts went elsewhere and his face took on a collapsed, distant expression; so that he looked, with his curly hair and smooth skin, like a corrupt but puzzled cherub. Occasionally he would leaf through a copy of

Rustler

or

Big Breasted Women in Real Life Poses

before he sealed it up, or stare with sudden stony contempt at the businessmen browsing the back shelves.

Once or twice a month the police would come unannounced and remove his entire stock in black polythene dustbin bags. No one expected this to have any effect. He had the shelves full again the next day. They treated him with a jocular familiarity – and in the face of their warrants and destruction orders he was resentful but polite. He made no distinction between pornography and science fiction, often wondering out loud why they confiscated the one and not the other.

‘It all seems the same to me,’ he maintained. ‘Comfort and dreams. It all rots your brain.’ Then, reflectively: ‘Give them what they want and take the money.’

Though he believed this, his cynicism wasn’t as simple as it seemed. The art student, with his baggy trousers and his magenta dyed hair, coming in for the latest Carlos Castaneda or John Cowper Powys; the shopgirl who asked in a distracted whine, ‘Got anything about Elvis Presley? Any books? Badges?’; the accounts executive in the three-piece suit who snapped back his cuff to consult his digital watch before folding the new issue of

Young Girls in Full Color

or

Omni

into his plastic attaché case: I soon saw that Lucas’s contempt for them stemmed from his fellow-feeling.

In unguarded moments he showed me some of his own collection: florid volumes illustrated in the Twenties and Thirties by Harry Clarke; Beardsley prints and Burne Jones reproductions. He had newspapers from the fifties and sixties, announcing the deaths of politicians and pop stars; he had original recordings by Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry. If he knew exactly what the teenagers wanted to buy, it was because he was privy to their dreams; it was because he had haunted the back streets of London and Manchester and Liverpool only a few years before, searching for a biography of Mervyn Peake, a forgotten novel, a bootleg record. And if he hated them it was because he had lost their simplicity, their ability to be comforted, the ease with which they consummated their desires.

He was trapped between the fantasy on the shelves, which no longer satisfied him, and the meaningless sheaves of invoices floating in pools of cold coffee on the desk upstairs. Therein lay his susceptibility to Egnaro. Where my own lay I am not half so sure.

‘We all love a mysterious country,’ said Lucas.

We were sitting in his office, looking through his collection, warming our hands over the one-bar fire which drew a sour, failed smell from the piles of ancient magazines and overflowing waste bins. The accounts for February were finished. His takings were down, he claimed, his overheads up. All that month a wind from Siberia had been depressing the city center, scouring Deansgate from the cathedral eastward, and forcing its way into the shops. Downstairs the tape-player was broken. Students drifted listlessly past in ones or twos, or clustered round the window with their collars turned up, arguing over the value of the stuff inside.

‘For instance,’ Lucas explained, leaning over my shoulder to turn a page: ‘This tribe has lived for centuries under a volcano on an island somewhere off the south west coast of Africa. The exact latitude is unknown. Their elders worship the volcano as a god; they’re said to have inhuman powers.’ He turned several pages at once, his pudgy fingers nimble. ‘It’s the draftsmanship I love. There! You can see every head under the water, even the straws they’re breathing through. Look at that stipple! You won’t find drawing like that in the rubbish downstairs.’

He sighed.

‘I used to spend hours with this stuff as a kid. See the spider monkeys, trapped in the burning village? They act as the eyes of the witch doctor: he never sees anything for the rest of his life but flames!’

He had been preoccupied all day, sometimes depressed and edgy, at others full of the odd nostalgic eagerness which with him stood in for gaiety. He couldn’t settle to anything. Now he was showing me an illustrated omnibus of some American writer popular in the Nineteen Twenties, Edgar Rice Burroughs or Abraham Merritt, which had cost him, he said, over a hundred pounds. It had been privately printed a decade ago and was very hard to come by. I could make little of it, and was surprised to find he kept it with his treasured editions of

Under the Hill

and

Salome

. The pictures seemed badly drawn and drab, unwittingly comic in their portrayal of albino gorillas and wide-eyed, frightened women; the tales themselves fragmentary, motiveless and unreal.

‘I’ve never seen much of it,’ I admitted.

Personally, I told him, I had adored Kipling at that age. (Even now, if I close my eyes, I can still picture ‘the cat who walked alone,’ his tail stuck up in the air like a brush and that poor little mouse speared on the end of his sword.) When he didn’t respond I closed the book with exaggerated care.

‘It’s very nice,’ I said, ‘but not my sort of thing. Are you hungry yet?’

But he was staring down into the cold black street.

‘It’s almost as if he’d been there, don’t you think?’ he said. ‘Watching the way the ash drifts down endlessly over the pumice terraces.’

He was talking to himself, but he couldn’t do it alone. He was trying to woo me, even though we had so little in common he didn’t know what to say. His obsession had him by the throat, and the Rice Burroughs volume had only been an introduction, a way of preparing me. Later I would begin to recognize these moods, and learn how to respond to them. Now I merely watched while he shook his head absently, abandoned the window, and, breathing heavily through his mouth, made a pretence of fumbling through the heaps of stuff under the desk. The book he came up with fell open, from long usage, at a page about halfway through. I see now that this is what he had wanted to show me all along. He looked at it for a minute, his lips moving slightly as he scanned the text, then nodded to himself and thrust it into my hands.

‘I always wondered what this meant,’ he said, with a peculiar deprecatory shrug. ‘You might be interested in it: what he really meant by it.’

It was an American paperback, one of those with the edges of the pages dyed a dull red and the paper that smells faintly of excrement. There were newer editions of it in the shop downstairs; in fact it was quite popular. Its author claimed to link certain astronomical events with the activities of secret societies and Gnostic sects, although what he hoped to prove by this was unclear. It was called

The Castles of the Kings

, or something similar. The bookstalls have been full of this sort of thing for the last ten years; but Lucas’s copy had been bought in the mid-fifties when it was not so common, and its pages were tobacco brown with age. While I was reading it he fussed round the office, shuffling through the invoices, trying to tidy the desk, warming his hands at the fire: but I could feel him watching me intently.

‘We know what we see,’ the passage began, ‘or think we do …’ And it went on:

… but is it possible that the real pattern of life is not in the least apparent, but rather lurks beneath the surface of things, half hidden and only apparent in certain rare lights, and then only to the prepared eye? A secret country, a place behind the places we know, which seems to have but little connection to the obvious schemes of the universe?

In certain lights and at certain seasons the inhabitants of any city can see enormous faces hanging in the air, or words of fire. Also, one house in an otherwise dark street will be seen to be lit up at night for a week, even though no one lives there. From it will come sounds of revelry, although no one is observed to enter or leave it. Suddenly all is quiet and dark again, as if nothing had happened! But ordinary people will remember.

Scientists give us many explanations to choose from. Are we really to believe that reality is built from tiny motes whirling invisibly about one another?

There was more of this; an account of an eclipse witnessed in China during the fourteenth century; and then the following curious paragraph:

In India newly married couples wade in the estuarine mud catching fish in a new garment. ‘What do you see?’ their friends call from the bank. ‘Sons and cattle!’ is the answer. Are we to doubt that India exists? In the Dark Ages they had never heard of America! When the Jew of Tunis exhibited a fish’s tail on a cushion, did anyone doubt that it was a fish?

‘I don’t quite see what he’s getting at,’ I said.

‘Ah,’ said Lucas. He thought for a moment. He had expected my reaction, I could see, but was disappointed all the same. ‘You saw the hole in his argument though?’ He took the book gently from my hands and returned it to its heap. ‘You saw through that?’

‘Oh yes,’ I said, as positively as I could: ‘I saw that.’

But he seemed dissatisfied. He stared at me for some time as if I had tried to mislead him over something obvious – the time of a train, say, or the name of a film actress. I put my coat on under his watery blue-eyed gaze and we went out of the office in silence. It occurred to me suddenly that he saw no flaw at all in that ‘argument,’ such as it was; and I wondered briefly how many casual acquaintances like myself had been invited up to the office to puzzle over

The Castles of the Kings

; and how many more he had lent it to, in the hope that they would see what he saw in its skeins of unoriginal rhetoric and curious misinterpretations of the world.

Downstairs he looked round the shop with dislike; pocketed the take – perhaps eighty pounds – after a short discussion with the bored lad behind the cash desk; and locked up. As we stood on the doorstep, fastening our coats against the scatter of snow coming down on the black Manchester air, he turned to me and dismissed it all with,

‘Good for a laugh, though, that passage? Good for a laugh, anyway!’ And I had the feeling he’d said that many times, too. ‘By the way,’ he went on, in the same dismissive tone: ‘Have you heard of this place they call “Egnaro”?’

‘That’s the Javanese place on Cross Street, isn’t it?’ I said. I thought perhaps he was bored with Chinese food. ‘Would you like to try it tonight instead of the Lucky Lotus? We could easily go there.’

He looked at me as if this was the last answer in the world he had been expecting; then gave a queasy, almost placatory laugh.

‘Easily go there!’ he said, and took my arm.

Egnaro: it was a word, I found, that came easily to the tongue.

‘Do you ever think,’ said Lucas later, prodding his chicken curry, ‘that the only part of your life that really mattered is over?’ And, without giving me a chance to answer: ‘I do.’

We were sitting in the Lucky Lotus, listening to the wet raincoats dripping in the alcove behind us.

‘No, don’t laugh,’ he said. ‘I’m serious. Once your childhood’s over up here, they put you in the toothpaste factory. You get a council house in Blakely. You get piles, and watch

Coronation Street

for the rest of your life.’

He ate in the Lotus two or three times a week, mostly on his own, because it saved him the trouble of cooking for himself when he got home. The little Malay waitresses, I think, realized he was lonely, and surrounded him as soon as he sat down, joking about the weather in their gluey inexplicable accents. They had made of him a fixture, a fetish; and the Lotus, with its hideous maroon flock wallpaper, dirty tablecloths and congealed rice, seemed like a natural extension of the office on Peter Street. He ate his food with a sort of lugubrious greed, planting his elbows firmly on the table before he began, eyeing his plate suspiciously, and surrounding it with his forearms as if he thought someone might take it away before he had finished.

‘That hasn’t happened to you,’ I pointed out. ‘You’ve got the shop. You’ve chosen a different kind of life.’

He stared for a long time at a piece of meat on the end of his fork. ‘You never escape,’ he said finally. Then: ‘Look, I don’t want to put you off, but could you just smell this?’ He waved the fork under my nose. ‘It tastes a bit funny.’

He had been in a curiously self-pitying state since showing me

The Castles of the Kings

. I suspect that he regretted revealing even this small corner of his private life. We make ourselves vulnerable with confidences. But whether this was so or not, now he had broached the subject he was unable to leave it alone. I had an uneasy impression that he was approaching some sort of crisis. He had drunk a lot of lager with the barbecued spare ribs, but I could see that it had given him little relief from whatever was worrying him. After I had reassured him about the chicken, which seemed perfectly all right to me, he said:

‘I used to think: “What if the maps were all wrong and the world was full of undiscovered countries!” Undiscovered countries! What a joke.’

His jaws moved slowly from side to side; then he shook his head, swallowed, and pushed his plate away.

‘It was too late even then. The world was full of housing estates.’ He stared into the distance. ‘The twenties and thirties – that was the time to be young. You could still have believed they’d made a mistake then.’

While I was thinking about this a waitress came up and asked, ‘Dya wa’ so’ costa’ na’?’

‘What?’ I said.

She giggled.

‘Wan’ costa’? Rass pa’?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Lucas. ‘Custard and rice pud.’ He nodded vigorously at her. ‘I’ve been having that all week,’ he explained to me. ‘They soon get used to your habits here. Sometimes I can’t understand a word they say. I think that’s why I come.’

She brought him his sweet.

‘As a kid (and you’ll laugh at this, I warn you),’ he said, ‘I used to believe that I’d been born on some unknown continent and brought here by slavers. When I shut my eyes at night I could hear voices like hers, above the sound of the breakers on some rotting beach. It was the most frightening country in the world. The river deltas were full of radioactive silt. The natives mined a kind of green gold. They were beautiful – almost white, very intelligent, very tall and kind. It was somewhere in the Antarctic.’

He put down his spoon and stared around. He gulped suddenly. ‘Christ,’ he whispered. ‘I’d still rather be there than here!’ And he looked quickly down into the sticky mess on his plate.

I didn’t quite know what to say.

‘I’m sure we all feel like that sometimes,’ I tried. ‘But isn’t it escapism? Perhaps the housing estates are the real undiscovered countries–’

He gave me a look of contempt.

‘Very clever. You’ve never lived on one of the fuckers.’

He was silent for a long time after that. The place had been full of clerks and secretaries having their dinner before they went to the cinema round the corner on Deansgate, the women in their winter boots, the men in their three-piece suits. Now it emptied itself steadily, marooning me with him. The manager, who spoke no English though his arithmetic was perfect, came out from behind the bar; and, with the girls clustered twittering around him, began some sort of game at a vacant table. Lucas stirred his pudding round in its thick white dish until it was cold, taking small sips of the sticky, coffee-flavored liqueur he had ordered earlier. I bit my lip and concentrated on the wall, embarrassed. Suddenly he looked up again. Tears were running down his cheeks.

‘Are you sure you’ve heard nothing about Egnaro?’ he said. ‘The thing is,’ he continued, before I could say anything, ‘that I’ve just about convinced myself a place like that exists.’ He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. ‘I’m sorry. It’s that I get the feeling everyone else knows, you see: and they aren’t telling me.’ He laughed. ‘Stupid, isn’t it? I suppose we all get stupid ideas.’ He got up and pulled a roll of dirty five pound notes from his pocket. ‘Will twenty quid do you this month? I’m a bit short at the moment. You know how it is. I’ll get the bill.’

I made him sit down and drink a cup of coffee. I made him tell me about Egnaro, and now I wish more than anything else in the world that I hadn’t.

The dead miners of Egnaro lie looking up at the sun, the blackness of their flesh tarring the long bones. A gull spread-eagles itself on the air above them; a hot wind blows along the shore, peeling off a few flakes of gold leaf that still cling to their darkened skin. Egnaro! – it is a dangerous place, which steals over you like a dream. It is the name of your most basic questions about the universe, it is the funnel-tip from which your life fans back. All myths are perversions of its history; it is the secret behind the apparent history of the world. It is at once inside and outside you, and it signals all men at some time in their lives, like a flare of electricity along their nerves. It is as simple as a conversation half-heard on top of a bus –

‘A woman sitting near me spoke to her neighbor. It was my stop. The bus gave a lurch and I had to get off. Standing there on the pavement in the rain I realized she had said: “Egnaro, where they have so many more senses to choose from!” I knew immediately I had misheard her: I laughed and walked off. But I recalled it later, and it has come to haunt me.’

This was how Lucas began his explanation, under the dripping raincoats in the Lucky Lotus that evening at the end of February. I had to prompt him to begin with. (Had he, for instance, heard the other woman’s reply? It turned out he hadn’t.) But as his confidence grew, though he was often confused and incoherent, he seemed to exchange his self-pity for a kind of puzzled wonder: his eyes took on a watery glint of enthusiasm, his speech a crude lyrical quality. He spoke for a long time. Couples came in, ate under the dim lights, and went out again. The waitresses eyed us benignly and giggled. After all he was a fixture there. Would he like some more costa’?

‘Egnaro, where they have so many more senses to choose from!’

From the moment he heard that meaningless half-sentence, a kind of dam seems to have burst in his brain. ‘It was like rubbing condensation off a window pane and looking out at a landscape you don’t understand.’ He was inundated by hints and clues, often of the slenderest nature. In an issue of the

Sunday Times Business News

he had picked up from the floor of a train he read: ‘Exploration budget cutbacks could still stall our industrial recovery.’ He knew exactly what he was supposed to gather from that, but he couldn’t say how. In two critical lines of Louis MacNeice’s

Streets of Laredo

he discovered this misprint: ‘Egnaro the golden is fallen, is fallen/Your flame shall not quench nor your thirst shall not slake.’ It was someone else’s copy of the book. And once, sheltering from a thunderstorm in the doorway of Tesco’s, he had this bizarre experience –

The lightning flickered like a broken fluorescent lamp. Between flashes the sky was dim and greasy. The porch began to fill up with cripples also sheltering from the rain. ‘Every poor handicapped bastard in Blakely seemed to have ended up in that porch.’ They had been gathered in, Lucas felt, not by the wind and the rain, but by omens and premonitions experienced that morning in front of the gas stove. They came prodded by ‘instincts that last meant something when we were all frogs.’ There were old ladies with blasted arthritic fingers and great varicose carbuncles; a tall man staring at the shiny stump of his left arm and singing hymns; a girl with a deformed lip and leg-irons. There was a very small woman with a hump on her back. ‘You felt,’ Lucas said, ‘that if you asked them why they’d come here the answer would be:“My dog spoke to me of Egnaro, the queer old thing, and I came”; or, “I heard we would all be cured there”. I felt that very strongly.’ But they only looked at him; and, when the rain had stopped, left him there with his shoes full of water. ‘None of them actually spoke.’

Thus Egnaro simultaneously hid from and revealed itself to him; in obliquities. ‘It was impossible to verify anything,’ he complained. ‘The taxi was always driving away from me; by the time I looked up it had gone. I always found I’d used the newspaper to light the fire. People took back books I hadn’t finished reading.’

He searched through all the atlases and encyclopedias he could find, but discovered nothing (although once, in

Baedeker’s Northern Italy,

he came upon a typographical error which looked like ‘Ignar’ or ‘Ignari;’ it was on a map of Livorno, near the new port). Nothing was made public, but by now he could hear the conspiracy all around him. It made an expectant sound, he said, like people filing into a cathedral or an empty concert hall. It had affected the economy of the country, he believed; it had soured and complicated international relations. Fleets were outfitting on both sides of the Atlantic, in the Channel, the Baltic, and all along the Mediterranean seaboard, in a race to exploit the new country. Whoever got there first would reap enormous wealth from its mineral resources, the new sciences of its mysterious inhabitants, its incredible new animals; besides an immense strategic advantage. As soon as its exact whereabouts were known they would put to sea. Although this secret was jealously guarded, preparations so massive were necessarily known to many; ordinary people had been quick to pick up the rumor.

‘They discuss it as a place to go for their

holidays

!’ said Lucas, in tired disgust. ‘Will it be cheaper than Majorca? Its beaches less crowded than the Costa Blanca?’

(‘Costa’? Costa’?’)

Suddenly we were back at the beginning. His face had collapsed into self-pity again and he had buried his head in his hands. ‘Don’t you see?’ he appealed. ‘If I don’t find something out soon they’ll get there before me!’ His shoulders shook. ‘That’s the real horror of it, don’t you see? If there really is such a place then by the time I get there it’ll be just the same as it is here!’

And he stared miserably at the maroon flock walls of the Lucky Lotus, the tears streaming down his cheeks again.

What could I do? I was appalled by his condition. And yet what he had said did not really touch me. I had always rather admired his cynical resilience; I couldn’t begin to imagine as yet the state he had got himself into. I remember thinking, ‘How can anyone have become so desperately lost?’ But that may have been much later; and besides we never quite know what we mean by thoughts like that. Somehow I got him to cheer up and pay the bill. It was nine or ten o’clock at night by now. The waitresses fussed round him but he didn’t seem to notice them. He forgot his briefcase and they came running out after us with it. He thanked them absently. All it ever had in it was an old copy of

Rustler

and some broken pencils. When we emerged onto the deathly quiet streets behind Deansgate he said he’d walk up to the cab rank in St Peter’s Square. I went with him that far but I couldn’t wait.

‘You’ll be all right?’ I asked him.

‘Oh yes,’ he said. ‘I’ve just got a bit of headache now. I’ll have a couple of Veganin at home. They’ll get me off to sleep.’ He got hold of my arm. ‘It’s just a silly idea, all this, you know. I’ll get over it.’

There he stood, looking battered and out of place in the February wind, his loneliness outlined by the great doorway of the Midland Hotel behind him. There didn’t seem to be many taxis about.

The city center was slow to recover from that winter. March was bitter; late snow in April flattened the daffodils and filled the gutters with brown slush; Easter came early but did nothing to help trade. People were reluctant to come out in the sharp unseasonable winds: they had no money when they did. Turnover fell in all the luxury shops and most of the supermarkets. Deansgate took on a deserted, shabby appearance. You could find a few office workers hurrying out at lunchtime, but they were avoiding the pedestrian arcades of King Street where the spring fashions made colorful but somehow remote displays behind the plate glass windows. The sandwich bars were empty. How much of Lucas’s failure was part of this wider picture, how much his own fault, is hard to say.

Towards the end of March, government waste committees threatened to cut the student grant for the third time in twelve months. (A few puzzled protesters marched down Peter Street with placards and a petition, only to drift off aimlessly when they reached the Square.) Shortly afterwards Lucas fell out with his main paperback suppliers, who were justifiably sick of him not paying his bills. Then, as the students trickled back and trade picked up, a series of leading articles devoted to ‘these brokers of porn and purveyors of filth’ appeared in the

Evening News

; and for a while the shelves at the back of the shop were raided almost every afternoon. This made Lucas’s staff nervous and edgy: they ran out of false names to give the police and, tiring of Lucas’s promises to have the tape player mended, left him one by one.

Throughout this period he was preoccupied and indecisive. He fobbed his creditors off with increasingly dull excuses; absent-mindedly signed his own name on agreements he could not hope to keep; and, whenever he could find someone to look after the shop for him, sat upstairs trying to control his headaches with handfuls of Veganin. ‘You’d better start coming twice a month,’ he told me, sensing that someone had to keep track of his called-in loans, convoluted trade-offs and trails of broken promises. ‘Why don’t we work out a system for you?’ I suggested, but he couldn’t follow it, and he never wrote anything down now anyway. The take went straight into his trouser pockets at the end of each day and he paid off his bills in cash installments, twenty or thirty pounds at a time. When I complained that the VAT people weren’t happy with his figures he asked pettishly, ‘What sort of figures do they

want

? Surely that’s your job!’

‘I won’t just make things up,’ I warned him, and he shrugged. It was an argument we had been through before. ‘Everyone’s corrupt,’ he said. ‘In the end.’ I couldn’t tell if it was a statement or a prediction. A worse row blew up between us in mid-April, when I found among his ‘accounts’ a bit of paper on which he’d written,

Egnaro! My heart yearns for some sight of your cloud-capped cliffs!

It was hard to read the rest, which had something to do with an oil rig disaster and a ‘secret’ television play.

‘I thought you’d got over this,’ I said, as lightly as I could. ‘I’m not sure what George will make of it.’ George Labrom was the Customs and Excise inspector. We were expecting him that afternoon. I knew him slightly: he was a decent, even indulgent man, but he disliked Lucas, and his patience was diminishing. ‘Still, if you want me to I’ll try and fit it in somewhere… ’But Lucas wouldn’t let me make a joke of it. He bit his lip, sighed heavily, and went over to the window where it would be easier to ignore me.

‘Come on Lucas,’ I said angrily. ‘Don’t make me do all the work.’

He shrugged.

‘You never “get over it”, ’ he whispered. ‘I thought you understood that. It never lets you go.’ Then he laughed sourly. ‘What use is all this anyway? I’d rather have Egnaro than bloody George Labrom. If you don’t want to help me–’

‘I can’t help you if you won’t help yourself,’ I pointed out. ‘Fuck off then if that’s your attitude.’

And we faced one another across the desk, the litter of unpaid bills and falsified invoices stretching between us like a paper continent neither of us remembered how to cross. After that I got used to his silences as I had got used to the smell of his waste bin. Every fortnight when I pushed open the office door I would find him staring out of the window at the pedestrians below. ‘Christ, how I hate those bastards!’ he would say, apropos of nothing; or, pushing out his lower lip petulantly, complain about the headaches that stopped him from sleeping. ‘I had a sickener last night. A real sickener.’ I caught him pasting press cuttings into a series of scrap books he had kept since he was fourteen – recording with a kind of morose glee the bankruptcies and deaths of the fifties pop stars who had been his adolescent heroes.

In his absence (for it was an absence, as I now know from experience, even if he sat there all day) someone broke the shop window and stole most of the more valuable comics; he had allowed the insurance to lapse, and it was never properly reglazed. Inside he put up notices saying,

We do not want people reading these magazines if they have no intentions of buying!

– but by now his stock was so old that even the businessmen had abandoned the back shelves. (They were the last to go: years afterwards, you felt, they would still be wandering hopefully along Peter Street in their lunch hour, like animals searching for a lost waterhole.) Once or twice I sat behind the desk myself, putting books in bags under the dusty, flickering strip lights. It was a novelty at first but the cold cavernous silence, the filthy blue carpets, and the innuendos of the debt-collectors soon frightened me off. One Tuesday morning in May I had the bailiffs in, two heavily built men in sheepskin car-coats, who knew Lucas of old.

They leafed through old issues of

Cockade

while they waited for him to turn up with his last quarter’s rent. It was, they said, a month overdue. When he arrived he was smiling, puffed, red in the face, the jacket of his safari suit flapping open as if he had been running all over the city since eight o’clock in the morning. ‘Oh, hello, gents,’ he said. ‘If you’d given me a bit more time… Still, I’ve got just under half of it here, and I’m off for the rest now.’ In fact he only had a third, and when he came back again he had nothing at all, so they took his keys, locked the shop up, and over the next few days sold off the remaining stock by auction. It went for an average of ten pence a book, I believe, and certainly didn’t fetch enough for the rent.

Included among all the bales of

Count, Peaches

and

Chariots of the Gods

was Lucas’s collection from the upper room: every one of his Beardsleys, Harry Clarkes, first editions of Ishmael Reed.

He wanted to try and buy some of the stuff back, so I went with him to the auction. It was a dismal affair conducted in a large empty Edwardian room. A lot of his competitors were there, nodding to him nervously as they bought up his assets, hoping he wouldn’t commit suicide in the lavatories and wondering who would ‘go bump’ next. He hardly bought anything.

Lysistrata

had gone at the beginning, stuffed in among a bunch of old science fiction magazines. He seemed stunned that no one there could tell the difference. ‘They can’t even bloody pronounce it,’ he kept saying. ‘The bastards!’ He drank a lot at lunchtime and began to complain of a headache. He seemed reluctant to be on his own and in the afternoon insisted we go to the cinema, where we watched uncomprehendingly some sort of comedy. The flickering of the screen made his migraine worse, and when we came out he was blinking and shaking his head.

‘What will you do now?’ I asked him.

‘I don’t know,’ he said irritably. ‘Go home and watch

Crossroads

, I suppose. What else is there?’

It was the rush hour. As we pushed our way through the pedestrians the traffic was beginning to congeal at the junction of Peter Street and Deansgate, where no one ever obeys the traffic lights. Lucas turned down toward the shop. He had spotted quite a large crowd of students and children gathered in front of the cracked window. They seemed to be waiting for the door to open. The younger ones kept trying it, rattling the handle then pressing their noses to the plate glass; they peered into the gloomy depths of the place, where they could just make out looming empty shelves and torn posters. The students, meanwhile, leaned against the wall with their hands in their pockets; and it was one of them who got up the courage to approach us, unzipping a plastic holdall.

‘Want to buy some records?’ he asked in a slow voice. He offered the open bag for inspection. This seemed to incense Lucas, who blinked and rubbed his forehead wildly. ‘It’s closed down, you stupid bugger!’ he shouted. ‘Can’t you see?’

The rest of them turned slowly, like cattle interrupted drinking, and stared at him.

‘Closed! Finished! Understand? You won’t be getting any more of that here!’

He laughed. He swayed.

‘What’s the matter Lucas?’ I said. ‘Come away!’

He pushed at me.

‘Leave me alone, I’m all right,’ he said. In a quieter voice he advised the crowd, ‘Piss off and find someone else.’ They watched him stagger off down Peter Street towards the Midland Hotel, their eyes uncommunicative and inturned. Some of the younger ones laughed or catcalled uncertainly. He was obviously in difficulties. He kept stopping, holding his head, looking round as if he wondered where he was. I went after him. Suddenly he wobbled over to the edge of the pavement, got down on his knees, and began to vomit almost carefully into the gutter. People from the bus queues on the steps of the Free Trade Hall moved hesitantly toward him. He looked lonely and embarrassed, wiping his mouth with his handkerchief, blinking and grinning up into the light that was causing him so much pain. ‘What can I do, Lucas?’ I said. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Just piss off.’

Twenty or thirty people now surrounded us. At the front stood the women from the bus stop, clutching their shopping bags and umbrellas, a ring of grayish anxious faces. Behind them men from the car showrooms and drawing offices struggled quietly for a better view. What was the matter? It was a car accident: it was two men fighting. A woman had fainted. It was a dog. Lucas squirmed about, moaning with pain, squinting up at them as they discussed him, screwing up the flesh round his eyes against the migrainous, coronal light that flared round their heads. Then, quite suddenly, the headache seemed to leave him. He shoved me away and jumped lightly to his feet. He looked more relaxed and healthy than I had ever seen him.

‘What do

you

know of Egnaro?’ he demanded in a loud and scornful voice.

Surprised and puzzled, the crowd drew back from him. This seemed to amuse him. He laughed, and spat in the gutter.

‘What will you

ever

know?’ he pressed them.

Some of them shook their heads. He winked horribly at the women, grinned at the men. They backed off further, but he had their attention.

‘You,’ he went on, ‘with your supermarket tunes and your Wimpey houses! You with your

insurance policies

!’

He darted forward, ransacked briefly some woman’s shopping while she stared helplessly on, and held up a packet of ‘Daz.’ ‘You,’ he accused triumphantly, ‘with your Blue Whitener!’

He sneered at them; he imitated their favorite TV personalities; his effect on them was astonishing.

‘If you want to know about the Golden Land,’ he challenged them, ‘you must

go there

!’ The schoolchildren worked their way forward through the crush and gazed up at him. He regarded them indulgently. ‘You must suffer as I have,’ he told them, ‘in its swamps! You must itch with its fevers and yellow rashes, tremble on its lee shores, wade through its fetid deltas until your feet rot on your legs!’

The children cheered.

Lucas shook his finger in admonition. He put his hands on his hips. ‘I know you!’ he cried. ‘You whisper that word among yourselves when you think I can’t hear! But dare you speak it aloud? Dare you?’

I hadn’t any idea what to do for him. In the end I abandoned him there with his puzzled but enchanted audience: a fat latter-day Errol Flynn or Mario Lanza, recruiting for some trumpery, desperate expedition against the Incas among the crumbling jungles of Hollywood’s ‘new’ world. His eyes were flashing, his curly hair was plastered to his forehead, he had gone insane. As I walked off I thought, ‘He’s spent his life exploiting their fantasies to subsidize his own. This is his punishment.’ I was quite wrong.

‘That place is not for you!’ I heard him cry, and they groaned. ‘That place is for dreamers!’

One word hung in the air above him, heavy with promise yet bubbling and buoyant, a marvelous word sparkling with mystery and force: he had only to open his mouth and it would speak itself.

A policeman was approaching the crowd from the direction of St. Peter’s Square.

That was four months ago. I did not see Lucas again until yesterday, although for a while I made regular visits to Peter Street, hoping he might be drawn back to the scene of his failure. What I expected of him I don’t know: that he should recover from his breakdown, I suppose, and begin again – he had, after all, paid me in cash. I imagined him in the dirty streets behind Woolworths or the Ardwick Centre, trying to raise finance among the market stalls and pet shops where he had begun his career, two patches of black sweat growing steadily under the arms of his safari suit as his peculiar splay-footed walk carried him from disappointment to disappointment. But the place remained deserted (it was to re-open much later as an extension of Halfords’ already profitable bicycle department); Lucas seemed to vanish into his own fiction; and all I could do was stare at my reflection in the cracked plate glass.

At about this time I began to have my own intimations of Egnaro.

There was nothing original about my seduction; it was dismally similar to Lucas’s own, except that it began with a dream.

I was standing in a high narrow room with white walls. It was very hot; but in through the room’s single window came the sound of waves, and those scents which water draws from a dry shore. There was a thread of music, one phrase repeated over and over again on some stringed instrument. I went to the window but the view was blocked by a tree. All I could see through its long dark branches was a blur of sunlight. Where a ray of light penetrated the curious leafage, it filled the room with a dusty glow the color of geranium petals; from this I guessed it would soon be dark. Standing in that room, soothed by its proportions, I knew I was in some country so foreign I could not imagine it. Hearing those few notes endlessly repeated, I felt assuaged and expectant, as if by a glimpse of happiness to come. I heard someone begin to say,

‘Comfort us now & in the hour of our deaths.’

When I woke it was with an unbearable pang of nostalgia. Boarding the train at Stockport that morning I heard a woman say distinctly, ‘The coast, they claim, is a must at this time of year,’ and I knew I was lost. Since then I have kept a little notebook. The television advertisements are full of clues. One shows a tiger running in slow motion across a heartbreaking landscape of sand dunes; another, for banking services, a horse splashing through shallows. I record them all.

Like Lucas I have ransacked the atlases and encyclopedias, finding nothing. Unlike him I have visited the great seaports: London, Glasgow, Liverpool. By Southampton Water I sat down and wept; the wind was full of the sound of foreign voices, the scent of foreign fruit; I was dizzy with expectation. But no great fleet is gathering. Nothing can be seen of the great preparations which haunted Lucas and which now haunt me. In the governmental buildings near St. James’s Park, they look blankly at you if you mention Egnaro; in the offices of the Geographical Society they can tell you nothing. And yet somewhere they are gutting the records of old expeditions; repairing ancient maps; cross-examining old sailors who – three days battered by ice and gales in 1942 under the Southern Cross, hunted by some lean German raider – saw, or only thought they saw, a smudge of land on a heaving horizon, a ripple of white ice cliffs out from which may flow that current of warm, fresh, mysterious water…

I am able to see myself quite clearly on these useless journeys, these errands run on behalf of my own imagination: but I cannot stop: and I understand now why Lucas had such difficulty in describing his condition. It is like inhabiting two worlds at once.

As I take my first hesitant steps away from the seashore, setting out through the shattered limestone hinterlands into the deep interior of the mystery, I begin to feel a need for reassurance – for an exchange of maps and notes – for some dialogue with those who have made the journey before me. Yesterday, on an impulse, I went back to the Lucky Lotus, that staging post or coaling port on the way to Egnaro. I suppose I had known all along that I would find him there when I needed him. He was sitting at his table in the alcove, putting bits of sweet and sour pork into his mouth while he read the paper folded alongside his plate.

‘Oh, hello,’ he said. ‘I was just thinking about you.’ And when I had ordered my food he began talking about himself.

He had been to America, he said, since getting his affairs in order. If he was a bit fatter, that was why. New partners – he didn’t want to be specific at this stage – had paid off most of his old debts, and he was ready to start a new business. America had opened his eyes. ‘Fast food,’ he said. ‘That’s where the real money is. Hamburgers. Bloody hell, you should see the way they do it over there!’ It was like a production line. You took the customers’ money, passed them through the system as quickly as possible, and ejected them at the other end. ‘They hardly have time to get the muck down them before they’re out on the street again and the next lot are coming in!’ It was wonderful. ‘Fast food, that’s where it is.’

I watched him eat his rice pudding and custard, smacking his lips appreciatively, nodding and winking at the waitresses. I noticed that he had replaced his old leather briefcase with a brand new plastic one. He used the word ‘secret’ constantly. ‘The secret’s in the condiments,’ he would say: ‘Give them onion relish and they’ll eat anything.’ And: ‘In and out fast, that’s the secret.’ He had a second liqueur; he seemed quite willing to stay and talk. He asked me if I would like to get in on the ground floor of fast food with him, and I said I would. He didn’t turn the conversation to old times, and I suspected he would have resisted me if I had. I sat listening to his new dreams, watching the hands of the clock.

‘Well,’ he said eventually. ‘Time to push off I suppose.’

I still had not brought myself to ask. I knew now how he had felt every time he took out

The Castles of the Kings

and offered it to some puzzled traveling salesman. I watched the waitresses surround him – twittering ‘Costa’ costa’ costa’ ’, like little drab birds – as he got up to go, and my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. He paid the bill with a credit card. We walked along Deansgate and down Peter Street towards the cab rank outside the Midland Hotel. As we passed the shop, with its mended window and brand new Halfords’ sign, I managed to say:

‘By the way. All that “Egnaro” stuff–’

For a moment he looked puzzled. Then he laughed. ‘Oh, you don’t have to worry about that,’ he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. ‘I’ve finished with all that. I can’t think why I made so much fuss. It’s nothing at all when you know, is it?’

I knew then that if I reached out I would touch some transparent membrane which had grown up between us to protect the secret. I nodded hopelessly. ‘That’s fine,’ I said. ‘Good.’ I arranged to meet him again soon. I arranged to meet his backers. I walked away, and later caught my train. I shan’t see him again. Old maps are useless. I confess to you now as Lucas confessed to me under the coats in the Lucky Lotus last February – out of fear, out of puzzlement, out of loneliness.

Wherever I am I think about it: whatever I do is tainted by it: but if you were to ask me what Egnaro is I could give you no answer. In my most despairing moments I believe that the human race exists solely to give it expression. No one, I suspect, can have any clear understanding of it. All events are its signature: none are. It does not exist: yet it is quite real. The secret is meaningless before you know it: and, judging by what has happened to Lucas, worthless when you do. If Egnaro is the substrate of mystery which underlies all daily life, then the reciprocal of this is also true, and it is the exact dead point of ordinariness which lies beneath every mystery.