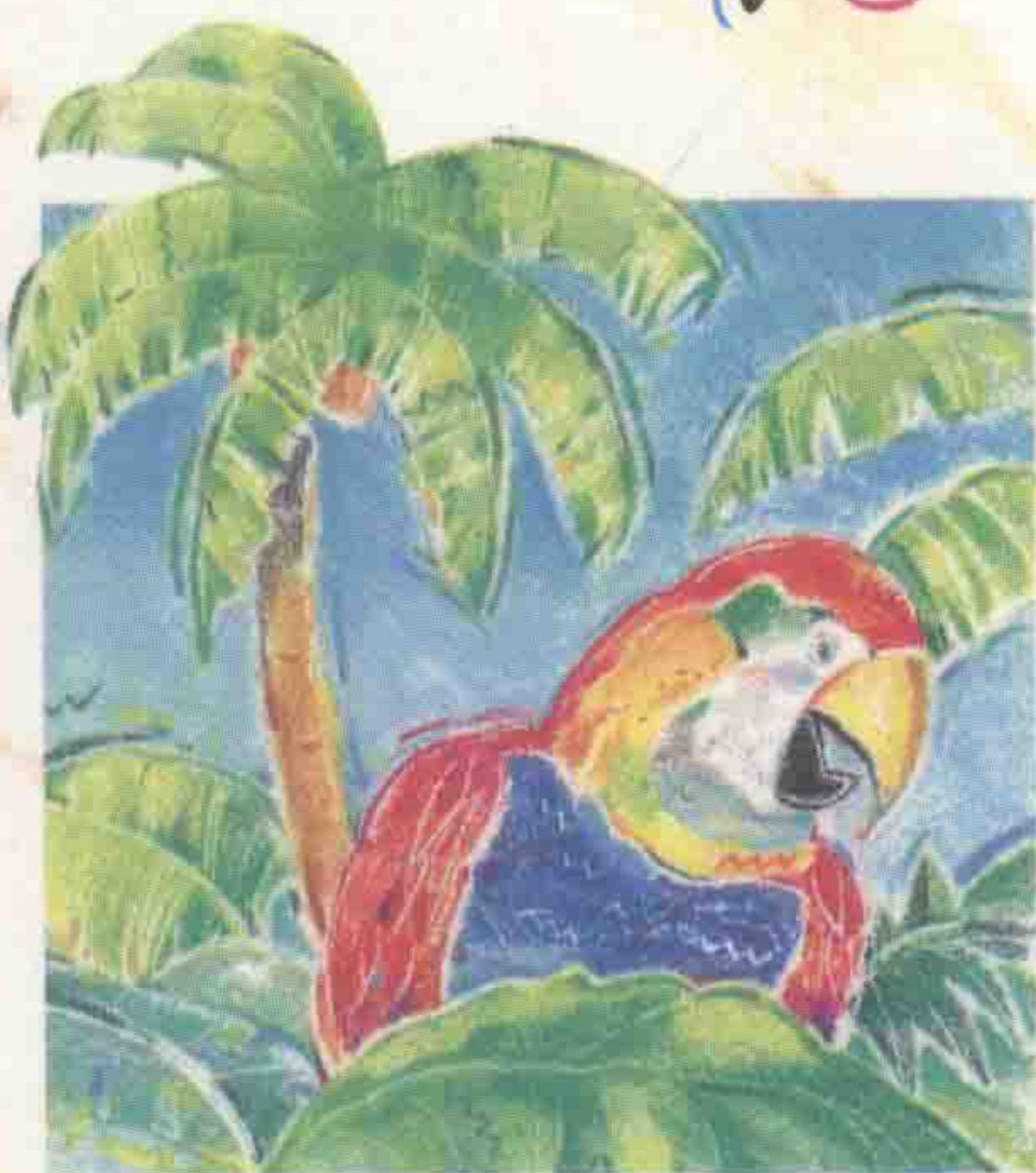




The Difference

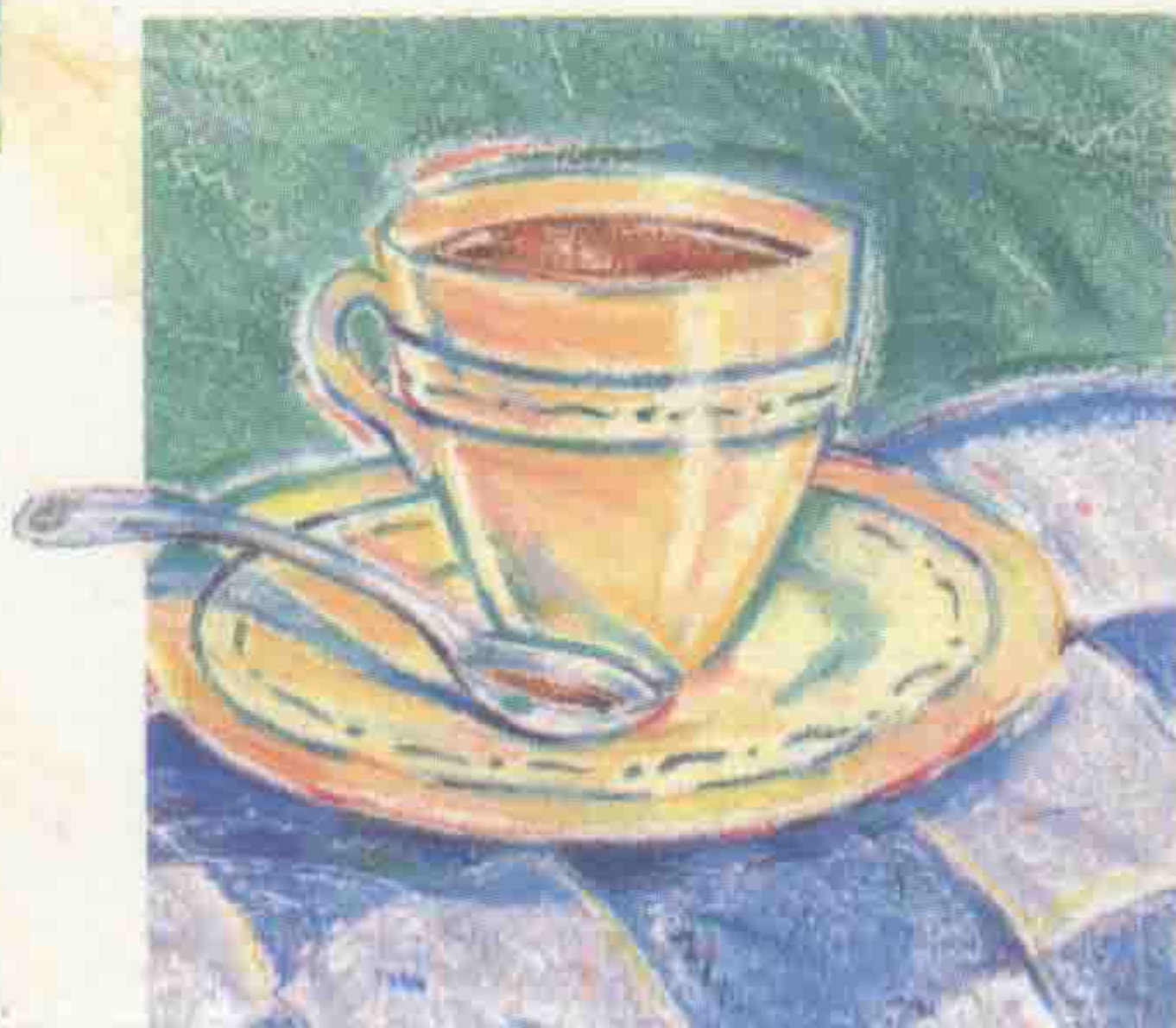
to



Me

PRIZE-
WINNING
STORIES

BY
GARRY
DISHER



THE DIFFERENCE TO ME

GARRY DISHER





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All characters in this book are entirely fictitious, and no reference is intended to any living person.

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Garry Disher was born in South Australia in 1949 and moved to Melbourne in 1974. He has been the recipient of Literary Arts Board fellowships as well as the Stanford University creative writing fellowship.

Garry Disher's short stories have been published in many Australian and overseas magazines and have won major awards. His books include a writer's handbook, four Australian history texts, an anthology of community writing and the novel *Steal Away*.

What the critics said about Garry Disher's *Steal Away*:

"...a clever craftsman and a novelist to watch."

Susan McKernan, *The Bulletin*

"...an accomplished first novel, sensitive and unobtrusively stylish."

Katharine England, *The Advertiser*

A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

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“Now When it Rains” in *True North/Down Under* (Canada), *Kunapipi* (Denmark) and *Island*;

“Amateur Hour” in *Fiction Magazine* (London) and the *Canberra Times*;

“Gently, Gently, Sideways” in *Australian Short Stories*;

“Exchange” in the *Age Monthly Review*;

“Blessed” in *Quadrant*;

“Rudi” in the *Bulletin*;

“Chain” in *Verandah*;

“The Boundary Man” in *Waves* (Canada) and *Open Door*;

“Poor Reception” in the *Weekend Australian*;

“Dead Eye” in *Southerly*.

Some of the stories have won awards:

“Amateur Hour” won the 1986 National Short Story Award;

“Poor Reception” won the Alan Marshall Award;

“Dead Eye” won the Henry Lawson Award;

“Tap”, “Rudi”, “Stinkadora” and “Exchange” won commendations in various awards.

The collection, in a slightly different form, was highly commended in the 1985 FAW/Alan Marshall Award.

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T A P

e p i s o d e 1

They had been living together for a year and a half, and one morning he told her to choose her words carefully when she talked on the telephone. "Our lawyers think there will be a tap on it for the next few months."

"What do you mean?" she said.

"Apparently I'm not using the language clearly. I said our phone's been tapped and I want you to watch what you say."

She said, "I mean why? Who by?"

"Think," he said. He read his newspaper.

She started turning her bracelet round and round. "I don't know. Those leaked documents you published last week."

"Give the girl a guernsey," he said.

e p i s o d e 2

In April the people from work took her to a bistro for lunch. They gave her a present and sang "happy birthday to you" very loudly. There was a good-looking fellow at the next table who couldn't take his eyes off her. When Shirley in the Finance Branch asked her how things were going with Alec and the leaked documents, everyone stopped to listen. She sat up straight and looked at each of them and outlined the latest developments. Everybody understood that there were some

things she wasn't allowed to talk about. "Alec is the best editor that paper's ever had," said Mr Barker.

The good-looking fellow followed her out to the car park afterwards. Before getting into his own car he called, "*You are gorgeous.*"

e p i s o d e 3

In May Mr Barker called her into his office and told her that the Minister wanted a campaign to publicise the Department's activities. "We want you to coordinate it," he said.

"It sounds very interesting," she said.

"We thought you should separate out our broad destination aims and prioritise them," Mr Barker said, "and hopefully people will see our aims are being actualised."

"It will be a challenge," she said.

"We'll provide plenty of back-up," Mr Barker said. "We're bringing in an outside consultant for you to access. How does it sound so far?"

"I'm flattered you asked me," she said.

"We thought, with your contacts," Mr Barker said.

e p i s o d e 4

He usually didn't get home before one on Friday nights. She was asleep when he came in and switched on the light and sat down on her side of the bed. He smelt of whisky.

"Thanks a lot," she said.

"I was right behind an accident," he said. His face was white and shocked. "I stopped and went over to help but it was hopeless. There was blood everywhere."

"My poor baby," she said. She hugged his head against her.

"I couldn't risk the breathalyser," he said, "so I left the car and came home in a taxi. He's waiting outside, if you could go back and pick up the car for me. He's putting it on my account."

e p i s o d e 5

She met her friend Vicki for lunch, and before Vicki could say anything she said, "You mustn't look at me. I've been bawling all weekend."

"What about? As if I couldn't guess," said Vicki.

"Don't be mean," she said. "But listen: Barker's given me a new job."

She outlined some of her ideas for the publicity campaign and said, "Does that sound all right? It doesn't sound silly, does it?"

"What does Alec think?" said Vicki.

"Alec? Well, you know what he thinks of the public service," she said.

"Yes, but is he pleased?" said Vicki.

"In his own way. But getting back to this job," she said, "I'm easily the best person for it. When I think of some of the people they could have given it to, God. They're such light-weights where I work. Really."

Vicki said, "I don't know why you stay with Alec."

e p i s o d e 6

They were to have dinner at the house of the man who owned Alec's newspaper. She stood in front of the mirror on the wardrobe door and said, "It was a bit naughty of me, but I didn't have anything that was suitable, except old things."

"No, I expect you didn't," he said.

"Please don't start," she said. After a while she stood back from the mirror. "Do I look all right?"

He put down the afternoon paper and bent over to untie his shoelaces. "One day you might surprise me," he said.

"Oh, what do you mean?"

He began to take off his tie. "I'd have predicted," he said, "that that's what you'd buy. You think, like all the others, that black sets off your kind of hair."

She stood on the rug and stared down at the dress and as

he passed her on his way to the bathroom he put his arms around her waist and kissed her neck. "Don't be such a baby," he said. "You should be used to me by now. You look wonderful."

He came back from the shower, his hair wet. She had laid out his expensive suit and shoes. "I want you to wear these."

He flipped her bottom with his towel. "She said, her voice shy with desire."

"Ho, ho, ho," she said.

e p i s o d e 7

Their hostess had arranged the seating so that couples and husbands and wives sat apart from one another. The seating went male, female, male, female, around the table, and people joked about this as they sat down. Alec knew everybody there, and she knew some of them. There was a different wine for each course. The women sitting on either side of Alec laughed many times and let him help himself to their cigarettes. "Looks like old Alec's away," said the man on her left. Some time later she felt the man's arm and knee brush against her. People spoke to her and she had to ask them to repeat themselves. Coffee was brought in. At the other end of the table Alec drained his glass of wine and a few minutes later he drank from another glass of wine that was near him.

In the car going home she said, "You think you can get away with anything, don't you."

"It would be a change," he said, "to go out and not have you watch me like a hawk."

e p i s o d e 8

She called in to see the mother of a man she once almost married. "My favourite girl," said Mrs Hall. "Just let me look at you, dear. Another one of your beautiful skirts."

"Oh, I've had this old thing for ages," she said. "It's just about ready for the rag-bag, I think."

They had sherry and Mrs Hall said, "Laurie was telling me he received a card from you at Christmas time."

"Yes, I must give him a ring soon," she said. "And how do you like being a grandmother?"

"It's quite a dear little baby," said Mrs Hall.

"Jane struck me as someone who would take motherhood in her stride. I'd be hopeless."

"You mustn't say that dear. I'd always thought you'd make a lovely mother."

Mrs Hall held out the plate of rum balls. "But we'll have to find you a nice fellow first," said Mrs Hall roguishly. "We can't have you living by yourself all your life, now can we?"

"Oh," she said, and her fingers smoothed her skirt and felt along the part in her hair and she made herself laugh along with Mrs Hall.

"And by the way, dear; next time let me visit you for a change."

"Oh no, it's too far Mrs Hall. All that traffic."

e p i s o d e 9

She fell in love with the man from the firm that had been hired to help her with the publicity campaign. He came in two days a week during June and they started meeting for a drink after work. They told each other about the things they liked and disliked and books they had read and who they had been in love with in the past. He told her that he was unattached at the moment and when he realised who Alec was he whistled and said, "Wow."

"Actually, things could be better than they are," she said.

e p i s o d e 10

On a Sunday morning in July Alec flew interstate for a conference with the lawyers. "I'll be away for a while," he said. She drove him to the airport. He kissed her goodbye and told her that he would ring her and let her know how he was

getting on. "Though I won't be able to say much over the phone," he said.

During the week she said to people that she was busy and she read every newspaper closely and she waited up until midnight on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights. Friday afternoon arrived. She rang her new friend on her work phone and said that if he wasn't doing anything tonight she could drive over to his house and she would cook something for them both.

"Well, sure, great," he said.

e p i s o d e 11

When she arrived at his house he said, "Now let's see. Alec's away, right?"

She smacked his arm. "Oh, stop it," she said.

They made pasta and a green salad and after dinner they sat drinking port on the rug in front of the fire.

"What are you thinking?"

"I want to make love to you," he said. "I've wanted to all these weeks."

She leaned against him. "I think it's time," she said.

Afterwards he said, "Let's get into bed where it's warmer."

"No, Stephen, I mustn't stay."

e p i s o d e 12

In the morning she made herself a cup of coffee and picked up the newspaper. More than once she read the same line twice. She walked from room to room and then she stood by the telephone. She picked up the receiver and put it down again. She got her purse from her bag on the chair in the hall and walked down to the pay phone in the shopping centre.

"I just had to hear you," she said.

"God I love it when your voice goes down like that," he said.

"Can I see you today?" she said.

He said that would be great and asked her how come she was ringing on a public phone.

"Oh," she said, "I was just doing some shopping and I saw the phone and I had to ring you."

"I'm glad you did," he said.

e p i s o d e 13

On Monday Vicki rang her and said, "Anyone would think you were having a mad affair or something. I've been trying to contact you for days."

"I've been pretty busy at work," she said.

"I thought I'd ask you and Alec to dinner soon," said Vicki.

"Could we leave it for a couple of weeks? Do you mind? It's not a good time at the moment."

"Don't tell me Alec's giving you a hard time again."

She said, "Why do people have to assume the worst about Alec and me? I'm tired of it."

e p i s o d e 14

The newspaper reports were not very encouraging that week. As she was coming in the front door on Thursday night the telephone rang and Alec asked her to send up some documents by courier. She looked at her watch: it was half past eleven.

"Got all that?" he said.

"Yes."

"Do you miss me?"

"You know I do," she said. His voice was thrilling and far away.

"I'm flying home on Sunday night," he said, "so you'd better get rid of all your boyfriends."

"Oh," she said, "don't say that."

e p i s o d e 15

On Friday morning her new friend rang her at work and suggested that they go out to dinner that night. "It's our anniversary," he said. "One week."

They met at an out of the way restaurant and after five minutes a fellow she knew sat down with them and said hello. "Alec's been printing some pretty heavy stuff lately," the fellow said. He looked from one of them to the other. She gave him her attention and for fifteen minutes she cleared up some finer points for him. "We expect they'll announce a Royal Commission," she said.

When the fellow had gone her friend said, "Who's he?"

"Oh darn," she said. "Sorry, Stephen. I'm always forgetting to introduce people."

When they got to his house she said she didn't want to make love. She listened to what he had to say, and when he had finished she said again, "It's not the right time."

e p i s o d e 16

The telephone rang while she was having breakfast. "It's only me. I want to apologise for the way I carried on last night and I'd like to take you out somewhere today."

"Oh, hello Stephen," she said. "That's very nice of you. But I'm driving down to our farm, Alec's farm, for the weekend."

He said, "You're sounding very formal this morning."

Quickly and quietly she said, "I don't remember giving you this number."

"An old journalist's trick of mine," he said.

e p i s o d e 17

Alec came home again, and one night in August she woke up and looked at the bedside clock and saw that the time was

twenty-five minutes past two. She found Alec talking to himself over several files open upon his desk.

She squeezed his neck and shoulders and said, "It will be all right."

"The ground keeps shifting," said Alec. "They're a devious mob. I'd love to topple them."

He rubbed his head against hers. She turned the desk lamp away. "You keep me going. Did you know that?" he said.

e p i s o d e 18

In the morning she had an appointment with Mr Barker to tell him how she was getting on with the publicity campaign. Mr Barker walked out from behind his desk and said, "Lovelier than ever. You're positively glowing today."

They recovered themselves and sat down and she outlined what she had been working on.

"Excellent," said Mr Barker. "If you could write it up as a progress report for the Minister? And the consultant fellow? How's that working out?"

"I found him quite helpful in the preliminary stages," she said. "But now that it's running smoothly I find that I don't need to call on him very often."

"Good, good," Mr Barker said. "Though I think it's best if you keep liaising with him. When the campaign is up and running he can exit the situation."

The meeting was over, but Mr Barker remained in his chair, and she remained seated too, and after a while he leaned closer to her and he lowered his voice. "I couldn't help wondering," he said. "About this latest development: Alec must be feeling quite worried."

"Oh we don't expect it to go to court," she said. "No. Nothing like that."

Mr Barker sat back and said, "My apologies. I just thought."

e p i s o d e 19

August became September. The days were cold and she was very busy. When she finally caught up with Vicki, they were invited to dinner. She told Alec about it when he got home from work. "Do come," she said. "I went by myself the last two times."

"No thanks," he said.

"Oh why? People always ask where you are and I have to make excuses and I hate it."

"I said no," he said.

"I just can't wait for your damn case to be finished. Look," she said, "if you come it will take your mind off things."

He put down his newspaper and said, "Now let us imagine it." He counted on his fingers: "Vicki's brat. Who's involved with whom at the moment. Everything that your little friends from your university days are doing now. And other weighty intellectual matters. About on a par," he said, "with that job of yours. Am I to suffer all of that gladly?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "I always make an effort for your ghastly things."

"You love it and you know it. We'll drop the subject," he said.

She opened the door of the crystal cabinet and took out one of the champagne glasses that she had given him for Christmas. She told him that she was going to break every single one of them.

"Fine," he said.

e p i s o d e 20

At work she found it hard to concentrate. She rang Vicki and said she felt gloomy.

"What about?" said Vicki.

"Oh, everything," she said.

"If it's Alec I don't suppose you'd tell me."

“Don’t be a meanie,” she said. “Can I just tell you again what I’ve been doing for this publicity campaign? Do you mind?” She told Vicki about the book she was putting together and about the posters, pamphlets and advertisements. “Do you think that sounds all right? Will the Minister like it?”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” said Vicki.

“You don’t think it sounds too lightweight or anything?”

“Don’t be silly,” said Vicki.

“People won’t laugh, will they? You’d tell me, wouldn’t you?”

“You’ll do an excellent job,” said Vicki. “That’s why they chose you.”

“I hope so,” she said.

“Listen,” said Vicki, “I’m still pretty cross you didn’t come to dinner.”

“But I told you: things came up and we couldn’t go,” she said.

e p i s o d e 21

Then she rang Stephen. “Help,” she said.

“Hello stranger,” he said. “How have you been?”

“Terrible,” she said.

“Have you? Why?”

“I’m having one of my gloomy days,” she said. “I think I need a cuddle.”

e p i s o d e 22

They met at their old pub for lunch and sat with their knees touching. “God you look great,” he said. “It’s been ages. Now, tell me what’s wrong.”

“Don’t get me started,” she said. “I’ve been such a monster lately. I’ve just bitten poor Vicki’s head off, and yesterday I even snapped at the cleaning lady because she was still there when I got home from work.”

“Oh well,” he said, “not all of us have cleaning ladies to snap at.”