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of the Luke Bitmead Award

# On the Holloway Road

**Andrew  
Blackman**

'Blackman's wonderful book is a modern-day road trip filled with quirky characters and locations. He writes beautifully, making the mundane extraordinary and the everyday fascinating.'

Deborah Wright

'A beautifully written story about friendship and the longing for adventure in an increasingly demystified world, and the eternal question of what life is all about.' Zoe Jenny

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Legend  Press

Independent Book Publisher

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## CHAPTER ONE

I first met Neil not long after my father died. I was living in a big old red-brick Victorian semi in north London with my mother and her vicious cat Sparky, trying and failing to finish a long, learned novel packed tight with the obscure literary allusions and authentic multicultural credentials that the publishers loved in those days. Then out of nowhere Neil rode into town, all bravado and muscles, shaved head and mad, staring eyes. He was still just a boy, really, but a boy with an ASBO at fourteen, a caution at fifteen, a spell in junior detention at sixteen and with a boy of his own by seventeen. He was a boy who was wild, dangerous and soft-hearted, a boy who read Nietzsche one minute and manga the next, a boy who wanted to learn everything, see everything, do everything, a boy who wanted to live more badly than anyone else I knew.

Compared to my own sad, shambling existence in the shadows of life, his was a kaleidoscope. I peeped from behind my mother's curtains at the world outside and wrote about people like Neil. I never believed that he really existed until I met him.

Here's how it happened. It was one of those long,

cold winter evenings in London, when the streets are slick with a rain you don't recall having fallen and the lights are an orange ball above you in the damp, black chill, fighting feebly against the night. Water hangs in the air with nowhere to go and as you brush against these tiny cold needles they stab your face, making you draw your hood closer about you. Long, dark alleyways harbour thieves and villains, furtive drug-dealers, nervous knife-wielders and young drunk couples rutting. Through it all runs the Holloway Road, a long straight road with dismal shuttered shops on either side, the gloom punctuated at infrequent intervals by the bright lights of a pub, kebab shop, curry house, burger joint. One or two of the old fish and chip shops remain, but they are relics of a time fast being forgotten.

A younger crowd roams the streets on these nights, ravenous for real red meat, big slabs of it slathered in ketchup and hot chilli sauce. Fish seems strangely genteel for such a crowd. Even an inch of grease and a side order of thick, stodgy chips cannot hide the slight effeminacy of the tender white fish that melts away at the first bite. The crowd on the Holloway Road these days wants meat that you can bite into, gristle that you can chew on, blood that you can wipe off your lower lip. It wants its beer cold, its curry hot, its lights bright and its music loud. Nothing luke-warm, nothing ambiguous for this crowd.

If you follow the long, straight Holloway Road far beyond the neon horizon, you'll end up in Scotland. It's hard to believe, but this drab parade of tawdriness is the Great North Road by another name. Before too long,

the Holloway Road becomes Archway Road, then Aylmer Road, Lyttelton Road, Falloden Way, then the Barnet Bypass and then you're out of the suburbs and into open countryside. Green fields and hedgerows flash past as you tick off the towns – Stevenage, Letchworth, Peterborough, Newark, Doncaster, Pontefract, Darlington, Durham.

Fight your way through the huge smoky grey sprawl of Newcastle and you then find yourself speeding along quiet open roads, close enough to the sea to smell the salt in the air and hear the seagulls cawing but never quite close enough to see that big grey frigid North Sea until suddenly you're past Berwick-upon-Tweed and hopping over the border into Scotland almost without realising it. And there is the sea in front of you - white-topped waves, freezing and forbidding, bordered by craggy crumbling cliffs. After only a few minutes the road turns away in disappointment and heads inland, cutting across open countryside to grand, regal old Edinburgh, with its magical castle suspended in the clouds above the city.

You skirt over the top of ancient Holyrood Park and, for the last few hundred yards of its existence, the A1 takes on the name of Waterloo Place, as if trying to reassert its Englishness one last time, reminding the burghers of this proud town that the A1 begins on Newgate Street in London, where Rob Roy himself was held in chains.

I was dreaming all these unconnected vague drunken dreams as I sat in a plastic box of light, sound and blood. Donna's Kebabs I think it was called and I was

taking refuge from the oppressive damp mist outside which had, after I'd spent some time walking up and down the Holloway Road, pierced the protective film of alcohol and got to my joints, making my elbows and knees ache arthritically. I sat huddled over a white foam box filled with grey-brown, glistening slices of meat, encased in pitta bread and doused in hot sauce, ketchup, mayonnaise, lettuce, tomato, red onion, white onion, cucumber, gherkins and olives. By the time Neil walked in I had left magical castles and folk heroes far behind and was pondering on the olives, a nice touch but not right. I admired the originality, but originality is not what you expect from a kebab house at midnight on the Holloway Road in the middle of November. You want something to fill your stomach with the expected greasy-sweet flavours. The sourness of the olives was a surprise and left me feeling somewhat dissatisfied.

Donna did not have any other customers that night - perhaps others felt the same about olives in a kebab - so I was surprised when this big, shaven-headed hulk of a man ignored all the empty tables and eased himself creaking into the little red plastic chair opposite me. His gruff "Dja mind?" was uttered far too late to admit any response but an impotent shrug.

For long minutes he said nothing, just attacked his extra large kebab as if he hadn't eaten for a month. I sat saying nothing, eating nothing. I couldn't. I got a sensation that was strange to me at the time but would soon become familiar: that Neil was doing enough living for the two of us, and there was nothing left for me to do but watch. Soon he had ketchup and chilli

sauce all over his stubbly chin, and bits of lettuce had flown all over the table, the floor, his jeans, his t-shirt. Whereas I had been eating my kebab using a small folded piece of pitta bread as an ersatz fork, Neil just shoved the whole bundle of meat, salad and sauce into his face and began chomping with his huge strong jaws. Slashing the food to pieces and somehow ending up with most of it in his mouth, he chewed only perfunctorily before gulping it loudly down and setting those chomping blades immediately to work again.

The noise was astonishing. The dull beat of the radio, the squealing roar of the traffic on Holloway Road, and the underlying buzz of the slowly rotating lump of grizzly meat in the window were all drowned out by the sound of Neil's bones crashing against each other, his saliva washing around among the sauce, ketchup and meat, his muscles working so hard that his temples pulsed furiously with each pincer-like motion of those powerful jaws. His face, already blood-red, became redder with each mouthful and, just as I was beginning to fear that he would choke, he put the remains of the kebab down, took a big slurp of Coke and belched softly.

"So whatcha doing tonight?" he asked. He looked like a child suddenly, all eager energy and bright eyes, waiting for the next amazing thing to come his way.

"I was looking for my friends," I replied. "I lost them somewhere back there." I gestured vaguely over my shoulder into the misty wet darkness, and Neil's eyes followed my arm faithfully, searching the night for people he'd never seen before.



“Can’t you call them?” he asked. “Text them? Page them? Email them? IM them? Photograph yourself holding up a sign saying ‘Where the fuck are you?’ and send it to them? I mean, who loses people these days?”

I looked down at my kebab and picked up a small mouthful with my piece of pitta bread. “I don’t have a mobile,” I said awkwardly. Usually it was a sentence I pronounced with pride, as it portrayed one of my few truly distinguishing features. People would draw in their breath and regard me with awe, as one who had asserted his individuality and resisted the siren call of technology. But suddenly, that night, my lack of a mobile phone felt like what it really was, an affectation. To my relief and astonishment, Neil did not pass judgement one way or the other, just accepting it baldly as one more simple fact to add to his growing store of knowledge about the world around him.

“Well, if you can’t find them, they’ve either gone home or gone to a club in the centre. Or they just don’t want to be found,” he said after a moment of intense concentration. “So here is what I propose. We’ll finish our food here, and then go around the corner to the Dog’s Head and talk to as many people as we can, until we find someone who’s going to a party afterwards. Then we tag along and have the time of our lives. How’s that sound? By the way, I’m Neil Blake.”

“Jack Maertens,” I replied, and Neil took that for assent to his plan of action, for he began attacking the rest of his kebab and motioned for me to do the same. I did, feeling a little sick a few minutes later as I lurched back out into the dark wet Holloway night and followed

Neil to the Dog's Head. It was a dive of the worst kind, so bad that I didn't want to go in until he told me patiently and seriously, as if talking to a slow child, that he had chosen it precisely for the reason of its awfulness, which would make anyone in it naturally keen to get out and on to somewhere better. He was soon proved right, too, as after only a half-hour or so of working that tight-packed smelly young crowd, he hit upon a group of students who were heading to a party up in Highgate. All he had to do was tell them a few jokes and buy a couple of rounds of drinks, which he left me to pay for, and suddenly we were on the night bus chugging up Highgate Hill, where a few hundred years ago Dick Whittington had heard the Bow Bells calling him back to fame and fortune in London, and where today middle-class families drive their huge snorting Landrovers up to huddle together in expensive refuge from the pulsating violent ugliness below.

For Neil and me that night, Highgate Hill was a place of cheap wine in plastic cups, vodka jelly, cheap cigarettes, expensive hashish from a reputable dealer on the Edgware Road, tequila slammers, half-grabbed kisses with a girl on a sofa, loud music, shouting and some attempts to dance.

By the time we left it was already morning and people in suits and raincoats were climbing sourly onto buses. The sun was still not up, though, and neither was my mother when I sneaked in and crept quietly to my room. What had happened to Neil I didn't know, but he must have followed me home because the next day, although I hadn't given him my address or phone

number, and was caught between relief and regret over it, I went downstairs and found him there - sitting in my mother's living room sipping a cup of tea, and chatting amiably with her about the beautiful bright yellow winter jasmine climbing across the walls of her garden.

Soon we were out again onto the Holloway Road, dodging cars and buses, and mingling with crazy throngs of shoppers as we hopped from pub to pub, our talk becoming more bizarre at each place until the orange glow of evening took hold and the shoppers on the street became drunks like us. After numerous pubs, Neil was able to finagle us into another party, this time in Hackney.

Almost every night and every day passed this way in the new period of my life where the morose brooding behind my mother's curtains suddenly gave way to a riotous drunken haze of colour and noise. If I felt any regret it was only because my novel was unwritten on my laptop and by the time I woke up each afternoon it was time to go out again. However, there was a slight, lingering feeling of being a hanger-on. At the parties we went to I knew nobody, and usually Neil didn't either. Yet soon he was virtually playing host, while I was merely being suffered as a necessary side-effect of Neil's irrepressible presence. I tried to introduce him to some of my friends, but he quickly tired of them while they just thought he was mad, and we left early from whatever gathering we had ruined.

As for Neil, he said he had no friends. Since leaving Feltham Young Offenders Institution he had drifted from town to town, making deep and intimate but not

lasting connections. He had more phone numbers than his mobile's memory could handle, but each of them was accompanied by a long and extravagant story about why he couldn't call because he owed the person money or a favour or had slept with his wife or stolen his car. So we sloped around north London from pub to pub and invited ourselves to parties with strangers.

Then, one day, Neil was gone. For several weeks I heard nothing until, just before Christmas, a battered postcard smudged with rain informed me that Cornwall in December was a truly beautiful place, full of crags and rocks, and monuments to people and gods nobody can remember anymore. He was staying in a friend's old cottage working his way quickly through a dusty old Cornish dictionary, he told me, as if he were remembering the ancient words rather than having to learn them anew. He had got as far as 'gwreg' ('wife'), but couldn't find anyone to teach him the correct pronunciations. So he was fumbling through, making up his own sounds and planning to get all the way through to z by New Year. He signed off 'Dha weles' without even putting his name.

Though who else could it be? The friends with whom I now spent my time, the collection of failed writers and 'mature students' who only a few weeks ago had been in my naïve young eyes the height of wit, erudition and wisdom, seemed like shades. None of them could have composed something so spontaneous and true as that smudged, creased old postcard. Its spidery black script streaked across the page, winding its way between the lines of the address and spilling over onto the bright

yellow sands and blue sea on the other side. I was gripped by it and wanted to jump into my old blue-green Nissan Figaro and burn down the M4 to spend Christmas with Neil, learning Cornish and drinking whisky in the rickety old fisherman's cottage with the fire crackling and the treacherous winds lashing the windowpanes. But I lacked the heart for it. Instead I toasted Christmas with sherry in my mother's living room with relatives who always made me feel dead.

New Year's Eve came around and I was feeling as lonely as the grave. I had been invited to a couple of parties but knew exactly what they would be like and had no interest in going. I fully intended to see the New Year in with my mother, using my desire for solitude as a pretext to be a good son for once and help her through what my vapid relatives had sententiously predicted would be a 'difficult time' for her. By ten o'clock, however, the canned laughter from the television was making me suicidal and I knew that my mother could see it because she offered to turn it off. I hastily declined and she looked relieved as I sped out of the door and into the cold dark night that was full of animal yelps and whoops.

I pulled the top down on my Figaro so I could hear all the roistering and perhaps let some of it rub off on my lonely soul. I drove down Hornsey Road into the madness of Holloway. But it did nothing for me. After driving up and down for some time, I parked in a side street and did something truly absurd. I went to Donna's Kebabs, ordered an extra large kebab with hot sauce and chomped down on it, watching the clock tick

down to midnight. All the time I fully expected Neil to come crashing in, full of ideas and enthusiasm, dragging me out of my solitude into some pulsating pit of desperate young drinkers trying to live just a little more before the end of the year.

Of course, nothing happened. Neil was buried in his Cornish dictionary, probably halfway through ‘y’, feverishly fighting his way to the end, and I was left with myself. It was another slow night for Donna’s Kebabs – everyone with anywhere to go was somewhere else. Around midnight, the spotty young man who had been left in charge shuffled out from behind the counter with two cans of beer and set one before me, saying, “Don’t tell anyone, yeah?”

Midnight came and went. We clinked cans. For the kebab boy, the fear of getting caught seemed to outweigh the pleasure of rebelling against Donna, and he looked constantly out of the window for the police, hardly talking to me. About ten minutes later, with his can still half-full, he went back behind the counter. I was bad company anyway and, to avoid getting Donna’s Kebabs closed down over the worst, smallest, most dismal and depressing New Year’s party in history, I took my beer out into the street. People were cheering as they swayed past in flush-cheeked groups, arms around each other, and several tried to gather me up and carry me along in their tide of celebration, but I resisted and broke free. Everything felt wrong, and all I could think about was that one more year had passed with my great literary novel still unwritten. I had wasted too many nights on the Holloway Road and too

many mornings lying in bed too sick and confused to do anything. My laptop brimmed with half-finished thoughts. Abandoned chapters littered the dark corners of its hard drive. It was taking longer and longer to start up in the mornings, evidence, the shop said, of a virus, but to me a symptom of the weight of hackneyed, cliché-ridden prose clogging its arteries. The more I wrote, the slower it ran, as if in protest at the poverty of my writing.

A few days later, in a grand New Year experiment, I tried taking a notebook to a café and writing there, as I had on long dreamy university days, but the process now felt foreign. My hand ached quickly, the dull characters in the café distracted me too easily, and writing even the simplest sentence seemed to require far too much effort. I realised that I could never have churned out so many megabytes of dross had I been forced to write longhand, or even to feed paper through an old-fashioned typewriter. At some point my body would have rebelled against the wasted effort, as it rebelled now in those cafés at every trite sentence that my tired brain formed. I went back to my room and let my fingers glide swiftly over the keys. Better to produce garbage than to produce nothing at all, the writing books always said. So for two months I cluttered my hard drive with more megabytes of ponderous, inelegant prose, all the while feeling like more of a fool.

So when Neil came racing into my mother's house one bright March morning, I embraced him as my saviour. He did look curiously messianic, standing there

in the hallway with the bright orange sun flooding in through the open door at his back. It made him almost glow around the edges as his bright brown eyes shone childlike and his thick face smiled broadly but serenely at me. He looked at once like a man who had discovered some important secret and like a child eager to discover a new one. Probably all this was in my head, a product of the months of despair and their sudden end in a blaze of glorious spring light. We hugged like old brothers, and my mother stood watching us in bemusement. She liked Neil for his polite talk of winter jasmine and for the simplicity and kindness that lay beneath all that loud masculine youth, laughter and energy, but she could sense that he was dangerous too. She knew he would leave again soon but that this time I would go with him, and she warned me before I left not to follow him everywhere he went.

“Keep your own mind, Jack,” she said. “Don’t let yourself be led anywhere you don’t want to go.”

I kissed her and said I’d be fine, and indeed at that time I felt stronger and more independent than at any time in my life; the idea of going anywhere I didn’t want to was ridiculous and slightly hurtful. By that time Neil and I had spent a week or two exploring every pub, bar, club and kebab shop, curry house, chicken shack and burger joint on the Holloway Road, and were thoroughly sick of London and all its grey grimy misery. We’d even taken to trying the pubs around my mother’s house in sedate little Crouch End, disturbing the faithful old dogs at the feet of the old men with their crossword in one hand, pipe in the other and their pint



of bitter half-drunk on the table in front of them.

We decided to cause some havoc to shake them out of their dead filmy-eyed smiling expressions and get them to put down their pipes and papers and express something, if only anger. But the first place we tried it, a tiny little place with net curtains on the window, a crackling fire and a leafy beer garden out back, nobody rose to the bait. We cursed loudly, danced and shouted and even took a swig of one old man's beer. But nobody said a word. The barman stared at us with an ambiguous expression on his face, and the customers just buried themselves in their crosswords, waiting for us to go away and leave them alone. We soon did, feeling so ashamed of the whole thing that we bought a round of beers for everyone before we left.

After that we got a bottle of whisky from an off-licence on Hornsey Road and went down the hill to dark dirty old Elthorne Park to sit among the sad old winos, to drink and smoke. Neither of us said very much, not even Neil, who usually only seemed to stop speaking to eat, sleep or kiss someone. I don't know what he was thinking, but I was thinking of my father, who had worked all his life in a government office up in the city and travelled home on the same train every night, always stopping on his way back from the station for a quick pint and a chat with his friends before coming home to dinner. I imagined how he would have looked at Neil and me if we'd interrupted his quiet pint one tired evening with foolish attempts to goad him, how he would have told the story later over dinner with a sad shake of his head.

“We must leave tomorrow,” Neil said into the night.  
A couple of winos looked over; we’d been silent so  
long that they must have forgotten we were there.

## Chapter Two

The next morning we packed all our things into my little blue-green Figaro, waved goodbye to my mother and weaved through back streets clogged with parked cars and school children. Finally we reached the big bustling A1, snorting with buses, taxis and commuters. The little Figaro eased its way through a gap in the solid London-bound traffic and nosed over to the right, heading up the broad main road towards the holy parks and magical castles of Edinburgh. We put the top down, even though it was a grey, cold March morning, and Neil stood up and yelled at the commuters to turn around and head north.

“You’re free! You’re free!” he kept shouting, but all he got for his trouble were a few shy smiles and a stern ticking off from a policeman who flagged us down in Hendon. He was about to give Neil a lot more than a ticking off until his radio crackled and he got called away to something more important than a couple of over-exuberant young men in a poncey old car. As the blue lights flashed off up the street, Neil laughed a dry laugh and said, “Tosser. C’mon, let’s get going again.”

I pulled out and headed north, but the altercation had

created an embarrassing fluttering in my chest as my heart briefly took on a funky syncopated jazz rhythm. I pulled over at a dreary parade of shops and said I wanted to get a cup of coffee for the road. Neil didn't want anything and he stayed in the car as I walked uncertainly to the smoky little café with fogged-up windows. I bought a coffee that I didn't really want, watching fascinated as the girl behind the counter performed some complex operation with frothing milk, loud gurgling and huge clouds of steam, before dropping into the paper cup a spoonful of Sainsbury's instant coffee granules from a huge budget-sized tin.

I couldn't believe that such an innocent little conversation with a policeman could have left me so shaken. I bought a bottle of water, too, drank that and took my sad little cup of instant coffee back to the car, feeling ashamed. Neil held it for me as I drove, and fortunately he ended up drinking it too, all the while telling me in great detail about his first contact with the police at the age of thirteen and his great wide-eyed terror of those big black uniforms, their batons, helmets and radios.

Somewhere near Borehamwood, after a slow steady crawl towards the M25, he finally got tired of talking and, reaching shyly into the battered old leather bag at his feet, said in his deep dry voice, "Got a surprise in here for you, mate." He rummaged for a good few minutes in the small bag, muttering under his breath all the while, until with a flourish he produced a big square box. "On the Road," he said, slipping an old cassette into the player. "I discovered this in Cornwall and

listened to it right through from start to finish three or four times. That's how come I only got to 'k' in Cornish. I would've finished learning that beautiful ancient language if it hadn't been for this tape that kept me up all night listening to its sweet aching search for enlightenment in a big old drive all across America and back again, with parties, girls, drinks, cabooses, jalopies and Dean Moriarty balling the jack at every turn. Now all that talk about angels, locusts, lambs and crosses I could take it or leave it, but if you told me that this stuff was the word of God I might just believe you."

He played it, and the slightly nasal young voice of Matt Dillon twanged out the famous opening sentences that I had read myself many years earlier; although I didn't want to tell Neil that because he was so excited with his discovery and wanted desperately to share it with the closest friend of that particular time. Who was I to tell him that I had read it when I was thirteen and had fallen in love with it for a year or two, along with some of the other great American romantic classics, before abandoning them for the more subtle, nebulous attractions of Peter Nadas and Gao Xingjian? He would have been crushed, and I would have felt like a supercilious literary type who couldn't take anything seriously unless it had at least thirty pages of endnotes unravelling its convoluted and deliberately opaque intertextuality. So I smiled and listened along with Neil, amused to glance across and see him muttering the lines along with Matt Dillon, as if it were a psalm and he was a faithful worshipper obeying Kerouac's call to prayer.

The traffic slowed to walking pace, and up ahead blue lights flashed. The Figaro juddered, its engine restless. It had a tendency to heat up when it stayed still too long - it liked to feel the cooling air flowing through. I glanced at the dial, which seemed to be broken because it was slumped at the bottom indicating that the engine was stone cold. The line of cars was moving just enough to prevent me from turning the engine off, and I fretted and tried to listen to the sound of the engine over Matt Dillon rattling on about Carlo Marx and holy lightning.

The police cars were pushing traffic off the A1, which was closed up ahead, and onto the M25 - a long crawling grey stream of frustration beneath us. "I don't believe it," I said sullenly. "All our plans to follow the same road all the way to Edinburgh just shot to shit because the police decided to close the road."

Neil stared ahead placidly. "It's alright, Jack," he said. "A1, M1, Z1, none of it's really important. When you think about it, this here diversion was in fact the most inevitable thing that could possibly have happened to us. The road is like life. How many times does life let you take a straight road all the way to where you're going? No, it has to throw up obstacles and diversions and make you go all around the back of beyond just to get a few yards further up the line.

"Poor old Sal Paradise just wanted to go west, and here he is now standing up on big old Bear Mountain in the rain with no prospect of a ride. And sorry to spoil it for you old friend but soon he'll give up and get a ride back to New York where he started from, before

heading west on an expensive interstate bus ride that eats up half the money he's saved for the trip. So really there's almost no point in planning anything out at all, because life is so infinitely complex that you can almost never just take a straight road from A to B without going via the whole rest of the alphabet first, and all because a butterfly happened to flap its wings in Thailand."

He chattered happily on in this vein, not bothering to turn off the tape, so that his words merged with those of Jack Kerouac, Sal Paradise and Matt Dillon, and the effort of trying to disentangle them distracted me from the misery I would normally have felt at the hopelessly clogged traffic, drivers honking impotently and forcing their way urgently from one blocked lane to the next.

Nevertheless, it was impossible to avoid being touched by the sad lonely need with which Neil poured his heart and soul into living out Sal Paradise's ancient quest, utterly oblivious to the fact that while Sal had hitched a ride on some farmer's old jalopy that was now halfway across the Great Plains, our old jalopy was stuck in traffic on the outskirts of Potter's Bar, on the wrong road and heading very slowly in the wrong direction. And, furthermore, it wasn't even a real old jalopy, but a modern hatchback made to look old by some clever marketing executives in Japan.

At the next service station I pulled off. "There's no point," I said. "We might as well sit here instead of out there."

Neil agreed happily, and the Figaro found itself a spot in the middle of a colossal sprawl of asphalt under grey

skies that were starting to spit rain. In the comforting neon of the service station we ate junk food and watched the nervous salesmen in white shirts and red ties making loud calls on their mobiles, the bad-tempered families taking refuge, as we were, from the traffic outside, old couples cheerfully drinking tea, the only people with nowhere to go in a hurry. We made up lives for them and when that got boring Neil stood up abruptly and went over to a young suited man who was talking particularly aggressively into his phone about meetings and sales targets. He leaned over his shoulder and, mimicking a female voice, said, "Come back to bed, big boy. I want you so bad it hurts."

The poor man covered his phone too late, grabbed his bag and ran away from Neil, pouring pleading explanations into the phone as he went. That kept us entertained for a time, but Neil, I now became aware, was like a child who tires quickly of every diversion. In the drunken, loud mobs of life in the pubs of Holloway Road I had never really noticed it, but sitting there in the sober neon glare of morning, with my brain tired and sluggish, and nothing but the inside of a service station to look at, I felt Neil to be a vortex voraciously sucking life out of those around him and still constantly needing more.

In desperation I proposed video games, and he jumped up, raced across the hall and had deposited his pound coin in the slot before I was even halfway there. I slid my coin in, too, but it was a car racing game and I was far behind. Still, he generously slowed down to let me catch up, and just as I was overtaking him he



turned his wheel and slammed his car into mine, whooping and laughing as my imaginary car hurtled off into an imaginary stand full of spectators. I cut across the grass and was back on the track just behind him, and we gleefully fought it out lap after lap, sinking our coins into the machine to keep it going for another couple of minutes, not caring that in our zeal to fight each other we were constantly losing the race. Ten more minutes, though, and Neil was bored with this, too, and so was I, for I was itching to get out into a real car again, even if it was slower, older and more ponderous than the flashy sports cars that danced and weaved across the screen, and even if the traffic was still a solid sticky mass on the vast motorway somewhere outside this windowless world of lights and emptiness.

The road was not on Neil's mind, however. "Look at those girls over there," he said, nudging me. "Let's go wherever they're going."

I looked over. They were a gaggle of giggling girls, barely old enough to be out of school. They saw us staring and sent a screeching volley of giggles echoing up into the heights of the vast rain-smeared perspex roof far above.

Neil walked over with the swagger of a gunman in a saloon, took the tallest, blondest one lightly by the arm and whispered to her, "Do you believe in love at first sight?"

She giggled, looked back at her friends and finally shook her head.

"I know, neither did I," said Neil in an urgent whisper. "I thought it was a bunch of romantic crap

designed to sell bad books and boring films. But then I saw you and all that changed. I've seen the light. Felt the thunder clap, seen the lightning-bolt flash before my eyes. It's a beautiful thing."

The look in his face was beatific, and I swear he had tears in his eyes. If he wasn't chatting up young girls in service stations, he could have had a successful career as an extra in a televangelist's show.

The girl seemed to buy it, too, for she was soon telling him her name, which I have long since forgotten, and that the four of them were heading for Wales on their Easter holidays, from school or college I could never tell, but I was glad to know that at least one of them was old enough to drive. Neil casually invited himself along and was gesturing to me too. The girls appraised me like a ragged dress in a second-hand charity shop sale. I couldn't stand it and told them to go along without me.

"Aw, come on, Jack, it'll be fun," Neil said pleadingly, and I admit I did look at the three remaining girls for a few seconds, but they looked back at me with such distaste that I muttered a curt, "It's fine."

"Come on, we'll come back for the Figaro later," he said in a high-pitched wheedling voice.

"I'm not leaving my car at some service station."

"Well then, you can follow us."

"I'm not following anybody," I said, and walked off, giggles ringing in my ears.

The rain was coming down hard as I stalked back across the car park. The Figaro has never coped well with rain: its roof retracts easily in sunshine but never

quite snaps back into place firmly, leaving thin cracks into which rainwater irresistibly insinuates itself. The water then trickles slowly down the insides, pools on the floor and steams up the windows. When I got in, I could feel the damp already, as wet inside as out. I switched on the engine, and instantly the cassette whirled into life with the interminable saga of Sal Paradise speeding across some State or other.

I switched it off with a violence that surprised me, resolving that very minute to have nothing further to do with Mr Neil Blake, a man who betrays his friends for a lark in a car with a group of giggling schoolgirls. How could he expect me to abandon my car and go off to Wales with a group of strangers? I pulled out of my space angrily, drawing a timid peep of the horn from an old man who was trying to pass and had to swerve to avoid me. I didn't care. I drove through the lines of parked cars at reckless speed, accelerating all the way back to the motorway, where the cars were now starting to crawl again.

I crawled with them for a while and then swerved off at the next junction to fiddle my way through quaint old St. Albans and up to the A5, deliciously straight on the map but, as it turned out, so clogged with cars and lorries that I couldn't reach top gear. Around Milton Keynes the traffic thinned, the cars sped up, and my mood started to lighten again. Neil Blake was not my only friend in the world. I would head up to York to see my old university mate Oscar, writer of romances for women of a certain age. I envied his success with a passion as violent as my contempt for his novels, which

were of the kind that I believe will soon be produced automatically by computers. Nevertheless, I always did my best to hide this from him, and we had a good time when we concentrated on drunken remembrances of times past. I had planned to stop off there on our way north, introduce him to my new friend Neil and have a great old time. Well, I decided, I would do the same without Neil.

I fumbled for the radio, found a decent tune and turned it up high as the green hills rolled past and I followed the straight old road north, feeling good about myself and finished with my friend. So straight, this road. Somewhere from the back of my mind I dredged up the knowledge that this used to be Watling Street, the old Roman road from Dover to Wroxeter, at that time a major city. I slowed down as I approached Towcester, an important staging point on the old road. It was a disappointment, of course. Even to imagine Roman legions at camp was impossible in this anonymous agglomeration of clothing chains, supermarkets and dark pubs. Only a few bored teenagers on bikes stared blankly at my Figaro as it purred through the town and out the other side in no more than a couple of minutes. Soon I was back on the main road, heading north again, and gunning the engine as much as my Figaro would allow. I became slowly hypnotised by the way the white centre line seemed to roll out from the side of my right wheel for mile after mile after straight, monotonous mile.

The rain had stopped now and I put the windows down, letting fresh country air flood me and clear my

head of Neil, his foolish talk and his childish needs. I ejected his tape and tossed it onto the back seat, where I noticed all his luggage piled up in a big ungainly heap. I tapped the brakes momentarily, absurdly thinking of going back to the service station to give him his bags, but then I pressed firmly on the accelerator and jumped forward, ever further north. Neil had four young girls to attend to him, so what need had he of luggage?

Still, the sight of the bags in my rear-view mirror irritated me. I had rid myself of Neil, Jack Kerouac and the tiresome pointless travels and travails of Sal Paradise. I was immersed in the calm, quiet solitude of a long journey on an open road. I had time and space to think without another person thinking for me. I had freedom to do what I wanted without being told. Yet his bags were still there, a battered old brown leather suitcase and a ragged cloth bag stuffed full of crumpled clothes that spilled out of the burst seams. Their shambling impracticality mocked my straight-laced, neat little wheeled suitcase on the seat beside them.

I kept my foot pressed down. The Figaro roared its protest, but complied. With speed, Neil faded from my mind again. Even the fields, cows and occasional houses on either side faded into an impressionistic blur, and all that remained was the shuddering wheel I gripped and the solid, unwavering white line peeling out in front of me for mile after mile after mile, widening occasionally to accommodate a right turn but bending inexorably back into alignment with the front of my Figaro. I thought of the Joads heading west, of Sal Paradise hitching rides across America and back

again, even of poor perverted old Humbert Humbert drifting from State to State with his beloved Lo chewing bubble gum at his side. I thought, then, that I understood some of what Neil was saying about the mystique of the road. It truly didn't matter that I was on the A5 instead of the A1. The feeling of swift progress, even in the wrong direction, is an immensely powerful one, and speeding past Astcote in an old blue-green Figaro exhilarated me.

Flash! My stomach lurched, and my foot impotently stabbed at the brake. Sixty pounds and three points on my licence, in an instant. All automatic, impersonal. I raged at the injustice of it, and slowed to a steady sixty as my blood raced in torrents through my body. The camera had been placed just past the brow of a hill and was partially obscured by a tree, so that even if I had been paying more attention I would have struggled to see it in time to slow down. There wasn't even a policeman I could plead with or lie to, before having to grudgingly accept that I was in the wrong. Just a flash of a camera and an automatic penalty that I couldn't fight except by going to court, and that would be pointless due to the evidence; there was something dishonest about it. I remembered Neil yelling at me in one of our long rambling bar conversations on the Holloway Road: "It's all about power," he'd said. "They trot out all these casualty statistics and tell you it's all for your own good, but really it's about letting you know they are watching you and can fuck with you any time they want." And, as we came out of the pub, he'd yelled abuse at a CCTV camera on the corner,

drawing quite a crowd, to his delight.

I rolled on sourly, the peace and happiness gone. The road lost its mystique and became something to be endured, just half a day of tarmac tedium separating me from York. Soon I was yawning and pulled into a roadside café for a cup of watery tea and a tough gristly old sausage in spongy bread. A trucker stood smoking a cigarette and blowing clouds of steam from the top of his tea. I raised my eyebrows in greeting, and he looked away to the fields. I walked back to the car, tossing the dried-up remains of my sausage in the bin.

I got a few clear miles done before slowing through the outskirts of Rugby, and I took the opportunity of the dawdling traffic to balance the atlas on my knees and discover that the A5 was veering too far west and I would need to turn off. I jagged back east through the anonymous, slow-moving streets of Leicester, and veered north-east on the A46, until at Newark-on-Trent I met up again with the great A1 that I had left behind so long ago. Soon the road widened and the traffic slackened, and I pressed forward, ever further north. With speed and a fixed destination, all the tortured memories and furious imagined confrontations with officialdom slowly faded away into the blur of the passing fields. For an hour or two, as I drove through the weakening afternoon light, all that mattered was the road. I willed the Figaro forward as fast as it would go without breaking the speed limit, always going due north, leaving London and Neil and the speeding fine far, far behind. So intent was I on heading north that I missed the turning completely, and had to swing round

onto minor roads and cut across high, open country all the way back to York.

Up there on the moors you can get a sense of the wild England that existed before Boots and Sainsbury's and Toys 'r' Us. You can picture shepherds, nomads and horse-riders following ancient tracks through the mist and mud to God-knows-where. You can see old dusty careworn tribes killing and dying for causes that time would swiftly make irrelevant. The heather-coated hillsides seem to be the custodians of these memories, keeping the old tribesmen alive as if the Roman legions had never marched down Watling Street, killed them with ease, and renamed their towns and gods. Towcester doesn't seem to exist up there, its bored teenagers and vacant shoppers seeming to belong to a different time and place. This landscape is empty and lonely and, unusually for England, spacious. It's a landscape of possibilities, where for a while you feel as if you can breathe air that hasn't recently passed through someone else's lungs. Then the road dips down into the suburbs, and you find yourself waiting at a red light by an off-licence as tired men shuffle past and cars flash across the junction in front of you on meaningless errands to nowhere. You're back in the conqueror's territory, the old camp of Eboracum, where the tribesmen whose presence you felt up on the lonely hillsides don't dare to venture for fear of crucifixion. You might even swing your car around, as I did, and head back into the hills, but you won't find what you're looking for. Those feelings come quickly and pass forever.



You could spend a lifetime driving across the Yorkshire moors and never see anything more than acres of swaying grass. Or that fleeting glimpse of something unfathomably big might come to you at a completely different time, when you're at home in bed, or on a train through the suburbs, or waiting for a bus. And the absolutely certain thing is that you will never understand it or even be able to explain it to anyone else, except in the vague, confused way that I am doing now. And you will go back to the same suburb where the same tired men shuffle past and the same cars buzz around, going nowhere, and you will forget about the ancient tribesmen, or the angels or gods or the clouds or the big black void or whatever it was you thought you saw or imagined, and you will tell yourself it was all in your head. Soon you will be firmly among the living again, and it will be as if you are dead.

If you are particularly foolish, you will become one of those writers or artists who spends their whole career trying to describe or recapture that fleeting glimpse, which everyone gets once but only once, and like Shakespeare and Van Gogh and Schiele and Steinbeck and Nadas and Hendrix and Borges and Soyinka and Cervantes, you will fail to describe anything but a small individual corner of the vast reality you thought you saw. All your work will be a pale shadow of what you know to be possible, and when you realise it you will either wish yourself a shopping drone like the people who shuffle around you or, like Hemingway, you will kill yourself.