

– Because imaginings, therefore something. A possibility realized. Like the other.

– The other?

– Your careful photographer, setting them in position. Smiling. Glancing back. Emerging. Examining them from the other side. Returning. Altering the line of an arm. The tilt of a chin. Emerging again. Signalling to them that all is well, that they are not to move. Taking his picture.

– A good picture.

– Yes. Since it has led to this.

– Just a small piece of paper on the table between us. And look at the imaginings to which it has given rise.

– A possibility realized. Like us.

– Us?

– You. And me.

– A possibility?

– It would be tedious to explain. Let me say only that the you who is here is only one of innumerable possibilities, and that goes for me as well. And the fact of our being here and talking in this way is of course itself only one possibility realized out of an infinite number.

– So that it could be that you would not have been here?

– Tortuously put, but there is that possibility.

– Or that I would not have been here.

– Indeed.

– Or the photograph.

– Or, as you say, the photograph.

– Because, perhaps, no photographer walked through the square.

– Or posed them with deliberation.

– Nobody walked through the square.

– Or looked out of a window.

– David, will you remember?

– And remember. What power has remember?

– Who can tell?

– Indeed, who can?

– And where then does it all belong, that picture so suggestively framed? What point in time does it occupy? And in space what point? Is it in my mind? Or in yours? And I mean: this, now.

Gabriel Jospovici

1974

Mobius the Stripper

a Topological Exercise

No one knew the origins and background of Mobius the stripper. 'I'm not English,' he would say, 'that's for certain.' His language was an uneasy mixture of idioms and accents, jostling each other as the words fell from his thick lips. He was always ready to talk. To anyone who would listen. He had to explain. It was a need.

'You see. What I do. My motive. Is not seshual. Is metaphysical. A metaphysical motive, see? I red Jennett. Prust. Nitch. Those boys. All say the same. Is a metaphysical need.'

I first heard of Mobius the stripper from a girl with big feet called Jenny. She was one of those girls who make a point of always knowing what's going on, and in those days she was constantly coming up with bright and bizarre little items of information in which she tried to interest me. Once she dragged me to Ealing where, in the small and smoke-filled back room of a dingy terrace, a fakir of sorts first turned a snake into a rope, then climbed the rope and sat fanning himself with a mauve silk handkerchief with his greasy hair just touching the flaking ceiling, then redescended and turned the rope back into a snake before finally returning the snake to the little leather bag from which he had taken it. A cheap trick. Another time she took me to Greenwich, where a friend of hers knew a man who kept six seals in his bath-tub, but the man was gone or dead or simply unwilling to answer her friend's urgent ring at the doorbell. Most of all, though, Jenny's interest centred on deviant sexuality, and she was forever urging me to go with her to some dreary nightclub or 'ned of wice' as she liked to call it, where men, women, children and monsters of every

To strip. To take off what society has put on me. What my father and my mother have put on me. What my friends have put on me. What I have put on me. And I say to me: What are you Mobius? a man? a woman? A vedge table? Are you a stone, Mobius? This fat. You feel here. Here. Like it's folds of fat, see. And it's me. Mobius. This the mystery. I want to get right down behind this fat to the centre of me. And you can help me. Yes you. Everybody. Everybody can help Mobius. That the mystery. You and you and you and you. You think you just helping yourself but you helping me. And for why? Because in ultimate is not seshual. Is metaphysical. Maybe religious.'

When Mobius spoke other people listened. He had presence. Not just size or melancholy but presence. There was something about the man that demanded attention and got it. No one knew where he lived, not even the manager of the club in

description did their best to plug the gaps in creation which a thoughtful Nature had benevolently provided for just such a purpose. Usually I didn't respond to these invitations of Jenny's, partly because her big feet embarrassed me (though she was a likeable girl with some distinction as a lacrosse player I believe), and partly because this kind of thing did not greatly interest me anyway.

'But it *must* interest you,' Jenny would say. 'They're all part of our world, aren't they?'

I agreed, but explained that not all parts of the world held out an equal interest for me.

'I don't understand you,' she said. 'You say you want to be a writer and then you *shut* your mind to experience. You simply *shut* your mind to it. You live in an ivory bower.'

I accepted what she said. My mistake was ever to have told her I wanted to be a writer. The rest I deserved.

'Did Shakespeare have your attitude?' Jenny said. 'Did Leonardo?'

No, I had to admit. Shakespeare had not had my attitude. Neither had Leonardo.

'Well then,' Jenny said.

Notting Hill, behind the tube station, where he stripped in public seven nights a week.

'You want to take Sundays off?' Tony the manager asked when he engaged him.

'Off?' Mobius said.

'We allow you one night a week,' the manager said. 'We treat our artists proper.'

'I doan understand,' Mobius said. 'You employ me or you doan employ me. There an end.'

'You have rights,' the manager said. 'We treat our artists proper here. We're not in the business to exploit them.'

'You not exploitin,' Mobius said. 'You doin me a favour. You payin me and givin me pleasure both.'

'All right,' the manager said. 'I'm easy.'

'You easy with me, I easy with you,' Mobius said. 'Okydoke?'

'You're on at six this evening then,' the manager said, getting up and opening the door of his little office.

Sometimes, at this point, I'd be sorry for Jenny, for her big feet and her fresh English face. Mobius. Mobius the stripper. I could just imagine him. His real name was Ted Binks. He had broad shoulders and a waist narrow as a girl's. When he walked he pranced and when he laughed he.

'Well then,' Jenny repeated, as if my admission made further discussion unnecessary. I sighed and said:

'All right. I'll come if you want me to. But if we're going to go all the way across London again only to find the door closed in our faces and the -'

'That only happened once,' Jenny said. 'I don't see why you have to bring it up like this every time. Anyway, it was you who wanted to see those seals. As soon as I told you about them you wanted to see them.'

'All right,' I said, resigned. 'All right.'

'It's yourself you're doing a favour to, not me,' Jenny would add at this point. 'You can't write without experience, and how the hell are you going to gain experience if you stay shut up in here all day long?'

Indeed, the girl had a point. She wasn't strictly accurate,

Mobius wanted to kiss him but the manager, a young man with a diamond tiepin, hastily stepped back behind his desk. When the door shut behind Mobius he slumped back in his chair, buried his head in his hands, and burst into tears. Nor was he ever afterwards able to account for this uncharacteristic gesture or forget it, hard as he tried.

Mobius arrived at five that afternoon and every subsequent afternoon as well. 'You need concentration,' he would say. 'A good stripper needs to get in the right mood. Is like Yoga. All matter of concentration.'

'Yes,' the manager would say. 'Yes. Of course. Of course.'

'With me,' Mobius explained to him, 'is not seshual, is metaphysical. A metaphysical motive. Not like the rest of this garbage.'

But they didn't mind him saying that. Everybody liked Mobius except Tony the manager. The girls liked him best. 'Hi Moby,' they shouted. 'How's your dick?'

since my mornings were spent delivering laundry for NU-nap, the new nappy service ('We clean dirt' they modestly informed the world in violet letters on their cream van – I used to wake up whispering that phrase to myself, at times it seemed to be the most beautiful combination of the most beautiful words in the language), and my evenings kicking the leaves in the park as I watched the world go by. But not quite inaccurate either, since I recognized within myself a strong urge towards seclusion, a shutting out of the world and its too urgent claims, Jenny included. And not just the world. The past too I would have liked to banish from my consciousness at times, and with it all the books I had ever read. As I bent over my desk in the afternoons, staring at the virgin paper, I would wish fervently, pray desperately to whatever deity would answer my prayers, that all the print which had ever been conveyed by my eyes to my brain and thence buried deep inside me where it remained to fester could be removed by a sharp painless and efficient knife. Not that I felt history to be a nightmare from which I wanted to awake etcetera etcetera, but simply that I felt the little self I once possessed to be dangerously threatened by

'Is keeping up,' he would reply. 'How's yours?'

They wanted to know about his private life but he gave nothing away. 'We're always telling you about our problems,' they complained. 'Why don't you ever tell us about yours?'

'I doan have problems,' Mobius said.

'Come off it,' they said, laughing. 'Everyone's got problems.'

'You have problems?' he asked them, surprised.

'Would we be in this lousy joint if we didn't?'

'Problems, problems,' Mobius said. 'Is human invention, problems.'

But they felt melancholy in the late afternoons, far from their families, and in the early hours of the morning when the public had all departed. 'Where do you live?' they asked him. 'Do you have a man or a woman? Do you have any children, Moby?'

the size and the *assurance* of all the great men who had come before me. There they were, solid, smiling, melancholy or grim as the case might be, Virgil and Dante and Descartes and Wordsworth and Joyce, lodged inside me, each telling me the truth – and who could doubt it was the truth, their very lives bore witness to the fact – but was it *my* truth, that was the question. And behind that, of course, another question and another: Was I entitled to a truth of my own at all, and if so, was it not precisely by following Jenny out into the cold streets of Richmond or Bermondsey or Highgate that I should find it?

At other times I'd catch myself before I spoke and, furious at the degree of condescension involved in feeling sorry for Jenny – who was I to feel sorry for anyone? – would say to her instead: 'Fuck off. I want to work.'

'Work later.'

'No. I've got to work now.'

'It's good for your work. You can't create out of your own entrails.'

'There are always excuses. It's always either too early or too late.'

'You want to be another of those people who churn out

To all these questions he replied with the same kindly smile, but once when he caught one of them tailing him after a show he came back and hit her across the face with his glove so that none of them ever tried anything like that again.

'I doan ask you you doan ask me,' he said to them after the incident. 'I have no secrets but my life is my own business.' And when Tony came to have a talk with him about the girl's disfigured cheek he just closed his eyes and didn't answer.

'If it happens again you're out,' Tony said, but although he would, in his heart of hearts, have been relieved had this in fact occurred, they both of them knew it was just talk. For Mobius was a gold mine. He really drew them in.

Alone in his little room, not many streets away from the club, he sat on the edge of the bed and stuffed himself sick on bananas. 'Meat is meat,' he would say. 'I'm no cannibal.' Bananas he ate by the hundredweight, sitting with bowed

tepid trivia because it's the thing to be a writer? Why not forget that bit and live a little for a change?"

Dear Jenny. Despite her big feet – no, no, because of them – she never let go. She knew I'd give way in the end and if she'd come to me with the news in the first place it was only because she hadn't found anyone else to take her anyway. Jenny had a nose for the peculiar, but she was an old-fashioned girl at heart and felt the need of an escort wherever she went.

'Look,' I said to her. 'I don't want to live. I want to be left in peace to work.'

'But this guy,' she said. 'The rolls of fat on him. It's fantastic. And the serenity. My God. You should see the serenity in his eyes when he strips.'

'Serenity?' I said. 'What are you talking about?'

'It's like a Buddha or something,' Jenny said.

'What are you trying to do to me?' I said.

'Am I one of those people who fall for Zen and Yoga and all the rest of that Eastern crap?' Jenny said.

I had to admit she wasn't.

'I'm telling you,' she said. 'It's a great experience.'

'Another time,' I said.

shoulders and sagging folds of fat on the narrow unmade bed, staring at the blank wall.

Those were good hours, the hours spent staring at the wall, waiting for four o'clock. Not as good as the hours after four, but good hours all the same. For what harm was he doing? If you don't pick a banana when it's ripe it rots, so again, what harm was he doing? Who was he hurting?

Sometimes the voices started and he sat back and listened to them with pride. 'Who's talking of Mobius?' he would say. 'I tell you, everybody's talking of Mobius. When I walk I hear them. When I sleep I hear them. When I sit in my room I hear them. Mobius the stripper. The best in the business. I've seen many strippers in my time but there's none to beat Mobius. I first met Mobius. I first saw Mobius. I first heard of Mobius. A friend of mine. A cousin. A duchess, the Duchess of Folkestone.

Cheltenham hadn't prepared her for this. Her eyes popped.

'Another time,' I said again.

'You mean – you're not going to come?'

'Another time,' I said.

'Wow!' Jenny said. 'Something must be happening to you. Are you in love or something?'

'I just want to work,' I said.

'You always say that,' Jenny said, suddenly deflated.

'I'm sorry,' I said, and I was. Desperately. What sort of luck is it to be born with big feet? 'Another time,' I said. 'O.K.?'

'You don't know what you're missing,' Jenny said.

True enough, but I could guess. Mobius the stripper, six foot eight and round as a barrel: 'That time Primo Carnera was chewing my big toe off, I couldn't get a proper grip on the slimy bastard so I grope around and he's chewing my toe like it'll come off any minute and then I find I've got my finger up his nostril and.' Yes. Very good. He was another one I could do without.

After Jenny had gone I stared at the virgin sheet of paper on the table in front of me. When I did that I always wanted to scream. And when I left it there and got out, anywhere, just out, away from it all, then all I ever wanted to do was get

We had been childhood friends. I remember her remarking that Mobius the stripper was the most amazing man she ever knew. I hear them all. But what do I care? That too must be stripped off.' Give him the choice and he preferred the beautiful silence. The peace of stripping. But if they came he accepted them. They did him no harm.

He flicked another skin into the metal waste-paper basket and bit into another banana. When it was gone he would feel in the corners, between the molars, with his tongue, and sigh with contentment. How many doctors, wise men, had told him to pack it in, to have a change of diet and start a new life? But then how many doctors had told him he was too fat, needed to take more exercise, had bad teeth, incipient arthritis, a weak heart, bad circulation, bronchitis, pneumonia, traces of malarial fever, smallpox? He was a man, a mound of flesh, heir to all that flesh is heir to. Mobius sighed and rubbed the folds of

back and start writing. Crazy. In those days I had a recurrent nightmare. I was in my shorts, playing rugger in the mud against the giants. Proust, languid and bemonocled, kept guard behind the pack; Joyce, small and fiery, his moustache in perfect trim, darted through their legs, whisking out the ball and sending it flying to the wings: Dostoyevsky, manic and bearded; Swift, ferocious and unstoppable; Chaucer going like a terrier. And the pack, the pack itself, Tolstoy and Hugo and Homer and Goethe, Lawrence and Pascal and Milton and Descartes. Bearing down on me. Huge. Powerful. Totally confident. The ball kept coming out at me on the wing. It was a parcel of nappies neatly wrapped in plastic, 'We clean dirt' in violet lettering across it. I always seemed to be out there by myself, there was never anyone else on my side, but the ball would keep coming out of the loose at me. It always began like that, with the ball flying through the grey air towards my outstretched arms and then the pack bearing down, boots pounding the turf as in desperation I swung further and further out, knowing all the time that I would never be able to make it into touch or have the nerve to steady and kick ahead. There was just me and this ball that was a parcel of nappies and all

his stomach happily. It was a miracle he had survived this long when you thought of all the things that could have happened to him. And if so long then why not longer? 'Time,' he would say, 'she mean nothing to me. You see this? This fat? My body she my clock. When I die she stop.' And after all he had no need of clocks, there was a church the other side of the street and it sounded for him especially for him, a particular peal, at four o'clock. Then he would get up and make the bed ('You got to have order. Disorder in the little thing and that's the beginning of the end'), wash his teeth and get his things together. No one had ever known him to get to the club after five ('You need time to meditate if you do a show like mine. Is like Yoga, all meditation').

When Tony the manager took his annual holiday in the Bermudas he locked up the place and carried the keys away with him. Mobius, a stickler for routine and with a metaphysical need to satisfy, still got up at four, made his bed, emptied the

of them coming at me. Descartes in particular obsessed me. I would wake up sweating and wondering how it was possible to be so sure and yet so wrong. And why did they all have to keep coming for me like that, with Proust always drifting nonchalantly behind them, hair gleaming, boots polished, never in any hurry but always blocking my path? What harm had I done any of them except read them? And now I wanted to forget them. Couldn't I be allowed to do that in peace? You don't think of it when you look at a tempting spine in a library or bookshop, but once you touch it you've had it. You're involved. It's worse than a woman. It's there in your body till the day you die and the harder you try and forget it the clearer it gets.

I tried aphorisms:

'If a typewriter could read what it had written it would sue God.'

'He is another.'

'The trouble with the biological clock is it has no alarm.'

No good. They weren't even good enough to fit end to end and send in as a poem to the *TLS*. In the streets Rilke walked

banana skins into the communal dustbin in the back yard, cleaned his teeth, packed his things, and went on down to the club. He rattled on the door and even tried to push it open with his shoulder, but it wouldn't give and he wasn't one to be put off by a thing like that. 'I got my rights, same as you,' he said to the policeman who took him in. 'Nobody going to shut a door in my face and get away with it.'

'That's no reason to knock it down,' the policeman said, staring in wonder at Mobius.

'I got my rights,' Mobius said.

'You mean they don't pay you?' the policeman asked.

'Sure they pay me,' Mobius said.

'I mean in the holidays.'

'Sure,' Mobius said.

'Well then,' the policeman said.

'I got my rights,' Mobius said. 'He employ me, no?'

beside me and whispered in my ear. He said beautiful things but I preferred whatever nonsense I might have thought up for myself if he hadn't been there. In the mornings I drove my cream van through the suburbs of west London and that kept me sane. I screamed to a halt, leapt out with my neat parcel of clean nappies, swapped it for the dirty ones waiting on the doorstep in the identical plastic wrapper, 'We clean dirt' in violet lettering. 'Like hell you do,' said a note pinned to the wrapper once. 'Take it back and try again.'

I took it back. They weren't my babies or my nappies and I didn't give a damn but my life was sliding off the rails and I didn't know what in God's good name to do about it.

'Why don't you come and see Mobius the stripper?' Jenny said. 'It'll change your ideas. Give it a break and you'll all of a sudden see the light.'

'That's fine,' I said, 'except I've been saying just that for the last fifteen years and I'm still in the dark.'

'That's because you don't trust,' Jenny said. 'You've got no faith.'

I had to admit she might be right. Unto those who have etcetera etcetera. But how does one contrive to have in the

'If it's a holiday why not go away somewhere?' the policeman said. 'Give yourself a break.'

'I doan want a break,' Mobius said. 'I want my rights.'

'I don't know about that,' the policeman said. 'You've committed an offence against the law. I'm afraid I'll have to book you for it.'

'You doan understand,' Mobius said to the policeman. 'This is my life. Just because he want to go to the fucking Bermudas doan mean I got to have my life ruined, eh?'

'Are you American or something?' the policeman asked, intrigued.

'You want to see my British passport?' Mobius said.

'Stay at home,' the policeman advised him. 'Take it easy for a few days. We'll look into the matter when the manager returns.'

The next time Tony took his holiday he gave Mobius the key of the club, but without the audience it wasn't the same,

first place? There was a flaw somewhere but who was I to spot it?

'All right,' Jenny said. 'Make an effort. Anybody can write *something*. Just put something down and then you'll feel better and you can come out with me.'

Something. Mobius the stripper was a genial man when in the bosom of his family. Etcetera. Etcetera etcetera. 'Oh fuck off,' I said. 'I told you I didn't want to be disturbed.'

'It'll do you good,' she said, standing her ground. The worse the language I used the more she responded. She had a lot of background to make up for. 'Besides,' she said, 'it's all good experience.'

'I don't need experience,' I said. 'I need peace and quiet. And, if I'm lucky, a bit of inspiration.'

'He'd give you that,' Jenny said. 'Just to look at him is to feel inspired.'

'What do you mean just to look at him?' I said. 'What else are we expected to do?'

'Go to hell,' Jenny said.

'Tomorrow,' I said.

and after a day or two he just stayed in his room the whole time except for the occasional stroll down to the park and back, heavily protected by his big coat and Russian fur hat. But he wasn't used to the streets, especially in the early evening when the tubes disgorged their contents, and it did him no good, no good at all. Inside the room he felt happier, but the break in the routine stopped him going to sleep and he spent the night with the light switched on. The bulb swung in the breeze and the voices dissolved him into a hundred parts. I first saw Mobius at a club in Buda. In Rio. In Albuquerque. A fine guy, Mobius. Is he? Oh yes, a fine guy. I remember going to see him and. I first heard of Mobius the stripper from a kid down on the front in Marseilles. From a girl in Vienna. She was over there on a scholarship to study the cello and she. I met her in a restaurant. In a bar. She was blonde. Dark. A sort of dark skin. Long fingers. A cellist's fingers. There's nobody like Mobius, she said.

'You said that yesterday.'

'Nevertheless,' I said. 'Tomorrow.'

Jenny began to sob. It was impressive. I was impressed. 'Just because I have big feet,' she said, 'you think you can push me around like that.'

'Jenny,' I said. 'Please. I like big feet.'

'You don't,' she sobbed. 'You find them ridiculous.' When she sobbed she really sobbed. Nothing could stem the tide.

'In men,' I said. 'I find them ridiculous in men. In women I find them a sign of solidity. Stability.'

'You're just laughing at me,' she said. 'You despise me because of my big feet.'

M.E. the foot fetishist. He was a quiet man, scholarly and abstemious. Everyone who ever met him said he was almost a saint. Not quite but almost. Yet deep inside there throbbed etcetera etcetera.

'But I don't,' I said. 'You've no idea what I feel about feet. I can't have enough of them. That's just what I like about you, Jenny. Your big feet.'

She stopped crying. Just like that. 'You're despicable,' she said. 'You're obscene.'

Mobius smiled and listened to the voices. They came and went inside his head and if that's where they liked to be he had no objection. There was room and more. But he missed his sleep and he knew bronzed Tony had a point when he said: 'Mobius, you look a sight.'

That was the day the club re-opened. 'Why don't you take a holiday same as everyone?' Tony said. 'You must have a tidy bit stacked away by now.'

'A holiday from what?' Mobius asked him.

'I don't know,' Tony said. Mobius upset him, he didn't know which way to take him. Maybe one of these days he'd cease to pull them in and then he could get rid of him. 'Just a holiday,' he said. 'From work.'

'Look,' Mobius said to him. 'That the difference between us, Tony. You work and you spit on your work. But for me my work is my life.'

'Look Jenny,' I said. 'I'll come with you. I'd love to see this chap. But tomorrow, O.K.?'

An incredible girl, Jenny. A great tactician. 'You promise?' she said before I had time to draw breath.

'You know I'd love to go,' I said. 'I just don't want to be a drag on you. And if I'm sitting there thinking of my work all the time instead of being convivial and all I -'

'You'll see,' Jenny said. 'You'll love him. He's a lovely man.'

Lovely or not I didn't think I could face them, either Jenny or her stripper, so I locked the door and went out into the park. Walking around there and kicking my feet in the leaves and seeing all those nannies and things kept the rest of it at bay. Had Rilke seen this nanny? Or Proust that child? Had Hopkins seen this tree, this leaf? So what did they have to teach me? They were talking about something else altogether. They were just about as much use to me as I was to them. And if it's eternity they wanted, why pick on me? There are plenty of other fools around for them to try their vampire tricks on. I can do without them, thank you very much. And if it's this tree I want to see they only get in the way. And if it isn't what use am I to myself? Their trees they've already seen.

'O.K.,' Tony said. 'I'm not complaining.'

'Is there a holiday from life?' Mobius asked him. 'Answer me that, Tony.'

'For God's sake!' Tony said. 'Can't you talk straight ever? You're not on stage now you know.'

'You just answer me first,' Mobius said. 'Is there a holiday from life, Tony?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Tony said, and when Mobius began to laugh, his great belly heaving, he added under his breath: 'You shit.'

At home he said to his wife: 'That guy Mobius. He's a nut.'

'Is he still drawing them in?' his wife asked as she passed him the toast.

'I don't know what they see in him,' Tony said. 'A fat bloody foreigner stripping in public. Downright obscene it is. And they roll in to see him. It makes you despair of the British public.'

After a while, though, I felt the urge to get back in there and sit down in front of that blasted sheet of white paper. What use is this tree even if I do see it? No use to me or to the world. And even if it is, who says I *can* see it? When I sit down in front of that sheet of paper I have this feeling I want to tear right in and get everything down. Everything. And then what happens? He was a small man with a, I remember once asking Charles and. Gerald looked round. Christophèr turned. When Jill saw. When Robert saw. Elizabeth Nutely was. Geraldine Bluett was. Hilary McPherson wasn't exactly the. Everything is the enemy of something, and when my pen touches the paper I go blank. Stories. Stories and stories. Mobius the stripper sat in his penthouse flat and filed his nails. Sat in his bare room and picked his nose. Stories and stories. Anyone can write them. All you need is a hide thick enough to save you from boring yourself sick. Jack turned suddenly and said. Count Frederick Prokovsky, a veteran of the Crimea. Horst Voss, the rowing coach. Peter Bender, overseer of a rubber plantation in. Etcetera etcetera. This one and this one and this one. When all the time it's crying out in me (Henry James was much

'Try the blackcurrant jam,' his wife said. And then: 'You hired him. You couldn't go on enough about him at first.'

'It makes you sick,' Tony said. He pulled the jam towards him. 'Bloody perverted they are,' he said. 'Bloody twisted.'

But when Mobius said it wasn't sexual it was metaphysical he had a point. Take off the layers and get down to the basics. One day the flesh would go and then the really basic would come to light. Mobius waited patiently for that day.

'You read Prust,' he would say. 'Nitch. Jennett. Those boys. See what they say. All the same. They know the truth. Is all a matter of stripping.'

'You talk too much Moby,' the girls said to him. 'You're driving us crazy with all your talk.'

'You gotta talk when you strip,' Mobius explained to them. 'You gotta get the audience involved.'

'You can have music,' the girls said. 'Music's nice. Whoever heard of a stripper talking?'

obsessed by this but there the similarity between us ends, Good-bye, Henry James, good-bye Virginia Woolf, good-bye, good-bye) crying out in me to say *everything, everything*.

They keep peacocks in the park. I don't know why. But they do. One of them was strutting about in the path in front of me. With big feet like Jenny. Who was I to say if big feet are attractive or not? And why ask me anyway? Think of the stripper Mobius with his nightly ritual, slowly getting down to the primal scene and after that what? Why do men do things like that and do they even know themselves etcetera etcetera? All the stories in the world but you've only got one body and who would ever exchange the former for the latter except every single second-rate writer who's ever lived? And they still live. Proliferate. And believe in themselves, what's more. Why then the daily anguish and the certainty that if I could only start the pen moving over that sheet of paper my life would alter, alter, as they say, beyond the bounds of recognition? Because I've read them all? The Van Gogh letters and the life of Rimbaud and the Hopkins Notebooks and the N. of M.L.B. Have they conned me even into this? It was possible. Everything is

'O.K.' Mobius admitted. 'Perhaps I do like to talk. Like that I talk I feel my essential self emerging. Filling the room.'

Outside the club, though, Mobius rarely opened his mouth. Certainly he never spoke to himself, and as for the voices, if they wanted to settle for a while inside his head, who was he to order them away? He sat on the bed and stared at the wall, eating bananas and dozing. I first saw. I first heard. I remember His Excellency telling me about Mobius the stripper. In Prague it was, that wonderful city. I was acting as private secretary to the Duke and had time on my hands. I was down and out in Paris and London. A girl called Bertha Pappenheim first mentioned Mobius to me. Not the famous Bertha Pappenheim, another.

Once or twice he would pull a chair up to the mirror on the dressing-table which stood inevitably in the bay window, and

possible. 'Tell me the truth,' I said to the peacock with the big feet. 'Go on, you bastard. Tell me the truth or just fuck off.'

A woman with an unpleasant little runt of a white poodle backed away down an alley. 'Don't you want the truth?' I asked her. She turned and beetled off towards the gates. 'Lady!' I shouted after her. 'Don't you want the truth?'

It's always the same. That's what gets me down. If I can say *anything* then why say anything? And yet everything's there to be said. Round and round. Mobius sat on his bed and ate one banana after another. But did he? Did he?

The bird had gone and I sat down on a bench and looked up at the sky through the trees. Jenny would have been and gone by now. Or perhaps not been at all. I sometimes wondered if Jenny knew quite as many people as she said she did. Wondered if perhaps there was only me she knew in the whole of London. Otherwise how to explain her persistence? Unless those feet of hers kept perpetually carrying her back over the ground they had once trodden. Myth. Ritual. An idea. More than an idea. A metaphor for life. 'It is!' I shouted, suddenly understanding. 'It is! It is! A metaphor for life!'

A little group of people was standing under the trees some way along the path. One or two park wardens. A fat man with

stare and stare into his own grey eyes. Then he would push the chair violently back and go over to the bed again.

'For what is life?' he would say. 'Chance. And what is *my* life? The result of a million and one chances. But behind chance is truth. The whole problem is to get behind chance to the TRUTH!' That was when the jock strap came off and it brought the house down. But Mobius hadn't finished with them. Sitting cross-legged on the little wooden stage, staring down at more than his navel, he let them have the facts of life, straight from the chest:

'Beyond a man's chance is his necessity. But how many find? I ask you. You think this is seshual thing, but for why you come to see me? Because I give you the truth. Is a metaphysical something, is the truth. Is the necessity behind the chance. For each man is only one truth and so many in the world as each man is truths.'

Mobius, staring into his own grey eyes in the little room in

one of those Russian fur hats. My friend the poodle woman. I waved to them politely. They seemed to expect it. One of the wardens stepped forward and asked politely why I was chasing the peacocks and using bad language. The man was preposterous. Couldn't he see me sitting silent on the bench? I'd chased Pascal down a back alley once, but peacocks? What am I to peacocks or they to me? I asked the man.

'I saw you,' the poodle woman said. 'Chasin and abusin.'

'Don't be more absurd than you can help,' I said to her.

'Don't you dare talk to me like that, young man,' she said.

What would Descartes have done in my place?

'Chasin peacocks and usin abusin language,' she said.

'Are you going to stand there and listen to this woman's grotesque accusations?' I asked them.

'It is an offence under the regulations,' the warden said, 'to chase the peacocks.'

'But I love those birds,' I said. 'I love their big feet.' For some reason I was still sitting there on that bench and they were standing grouped together under the trees staring in my direction. 'What would I want to go chasing them for?' I said.

Notting Hill, occasionally sighed, and his gaze would wander over the expanse of flesh exposed and exposable. Sometimes his right hand would hover over the drawer of his dressing-table, where certain private possessions were kept, but would as quickly move away again. That was too easy. Yet if you talk of necessity how many versions are there? His hand hovered but the drawer remained unopened.

'These girls,' he would say, 'they excite you seshually. But once you seen me your whole life is change.' He had a way of riding the laughter, silencing it. 'For why? For you learn from me the difference between on one hand clockwork and on other hand necessity. Clockwork is clockwork. One. Two. In. Out. But Necessity she a goddess. She turn your muscles to water and your bones to oil. One day you meet her and you will see that Mobius is right.'

He went home after that session more slowly than usual. If he was going to give them the truth where was his truth? His heart heavy with the weight of years he opened the drawer and

How could they be expected to understand? Or, understanding, to believe? Had I a beard like Tolstoy's? A moustache like Rilke's? 'Gentlemen,' I said. 'I apologize. Good evening.'

'He's going away,' the woman said. 'You can't let him go away like that. He insulted and abused me.'

'In that case, madam,' the warden said, 'I suggest you consult a lawyer.' Bless his silver tongue. The first thing I'm going to do when success comes my way is give a donation to the wardens of the London parks.

I was shaken, though. And who wouldn't be? Examples of prejudice are always upsetting. Upsetting but exhilarating, too. They make you want to fight back. Something had happened down there inside me in those few minutes and now I couldn't wait to get back. This was it. After all those years.

There was no message from Jenny on the door. Not even a single word like 'Bastard!' or 'Fuck you!' or any of the other affectionate little words we use when we are sufficiently intimate with a person. Well fuck her. I could do without her. Without them all. I was sitting at my desk with this white

took out his little friend. Cupping it in his hand he felt its weight. There was no hesitation in his movements now and why should there be? If his life had a logic then this was it. The weight on his heart pressed him to this point. When you have stripped away everything the answer will be there, but if so, why wait? Easy to say it's too easy but why easier than waiting? As always, he did everything methodically. When he had found the right spot on his temple he straightened a little and waited for the steel to gather a little warmth from his flesh. 'So I come to myself at last,' Mobius said. 'To the centre of myself.' And he said: 'Is my necessity and my truth. And is example to all.' He stared into his own grey eyes and felt the coldness of the metal. His finger tightened on the trigger and the voices were there again. Cocking his head on one side and smiling, Mobius listened to what they had to say. He had time on his hands and to spare. Resting the barrel against his brow

sheet of paper in front of me and suddenly it was easy. I bent over it, pen poised, wrist relaxed, the classic posture. It was all suddenly so easy I couldn't understand what had kept me back for so long.

I looked at the white page. At the pen. At my wrist. I began to laugh. You have to laugh at moments like that. It's the only thing to do. When I had finished laughing I got up and went to the window. What I couldn't work out was if I had actually believed it or really known all along that today was going to be no different from any other day. That between everything and something would once again fall the shadow. Leaving me with nothing. Nothing.

I turned round and sat down at the desk again. At least if Jenny had been there it wouldn't have been so bad. We could have talked. I looked at my watch. There was still time. She might still come.

I picked up the pen and wrote my name across the top of the sheet, for no reason that I could fathom. And then, suddenly, out of the blue it started to come. Perhaps it was only one story, arbitrary, incomplete, but suddenly I knew that it would make its own necessity and in the process give me back

and smiling to himself in the mirror as the bulb swung in the breeze over his head, Mobius waited for them to finish.

151
my lost self. Dear Jenny. Dear Mobius. Dear Peacock. 'Gone out. Do not disturb.' I scrawled on a sheet of paper, pinned it to the door and locked it. Then I sat down and began to write.