Ben had been taken to a place in the North of England; it would be four or five hours' drive—perhaps more, if she was unlucky with the traffic. There was bad traffic, and she drove through grey wintry rain. It was early afternoon when she approached a large solid building of dark stone, in a valley high among moors she could hardly see for grey drifting rain. The place stood square and upright among dismal dripping evergreens, and its regular windows, three rows of them, were barred.

She entered a small entrance lobby that had a handwritten card tacked on the inner door: "Ring for Attendance." She rang, and waited, and nothing happened. Her heart was beating. She still surged with the adrenaline that had given her the impetus to come, but the long drive had subdued her, and this oppressive building was telling her nerves, if not her intelligence—for, after all, she had no facts to go on—that what she had feared was true. Yet she did not know exactly what that was. She rang again. The building was silent: she could hear the shrill of a bell a long way off in its interior. Again, nothing, and she was about to go around to the back when the door abruptly opened

to show a slatternly girl wearing jerseys, cardigans, and a thick scarf. She had a pale little face under a mass of curly yellow hair that had a blue ribbon holding a queue like a sheep's tail. She seemed tired.

"Yes?" she asked.

Harriet saw, understanding what this meant, that people simply did not come here.

She said, already stubborn, "I'm Mrs. Lovatt and I've come to see my son."

It was evident that these were words this institution, whatever it was, did not expect to meet.

The girl stared, gave an involuntary little shake of the head that expressed incapacity, and then said, "Dr. MacPherson isn't here this week." She was Scottish, too, and her accent was strong.

"Someone must be deputising for him," said Harriet decisively.

The girl fell back before Harriet's manner, smiling uncertainly, and very worried. She muttered, "Wait here, then," and went inside. Harriet followed her before the big door was shut to exclude her. The girl did glance around, as if she planned to say, You must wait outside, but instead she said, "I'll fetch someone," and went on into the dark caverns of a corridor that had small ceiling lights all along it, hardly disturbing the gloom. There was a smell of disinfectant. Absolute silence. No, after a time Harriet became aware of a high thin screaming that began, and stopped, and went on again, coming from the back of the building.

Nothing happened. Harriet went out into the vestibule, which was already darkening with the approaching night. The rain was now a cold deluge, silent and regular. The moors had disappeared.

She rang again, decisively, and returned to the corridor.

Two figures appeared, a long way off under the pinpoints of the ceiling lights, and came towards her. A young man, in a white coat that was not clean, was followed by the girl, who now had a cigarette in her mouth and was screwing up her eyes from the smoke. Both looked tired and uncertain.

He was an ordinary young man, though worn down in a general way; taken bit by bit, hands, face, eyes, he was unremarkable, but there was something desperate about him, as if he contained anger, or hopelessness.

"You can't be here," he said, in a flurried indecisive way. "We don't have visiting days here." His voice was South London, flat and nasal.

"But I am here," said Harriet. "I am here to see my son Ben Lovatt."

And suddenly he took in a breath, and looked at the girl, who pursed her lips together and raised her eyebrows.

"Listen," said Harriet. "I don't think you understand. I'm not just going away, you know. I've come to see my son, and that is what I am going to do."

He knew she meant it. He slowly nodded, as if saying, Yes, but that isn't the point. He was looking hard at her. She was being given a warning, and from someone who was taking the responsibility for it. He might be a rather pitiable young man, and certainly an overtired and inadequately fed one, doing this job because he could not get another, but the weight of his position—the unhappy weight of it—was speaking through him, and his expression and his reddened, smoke-tired eyes were severe, authoritative, to be taken seriously.

"When people dump their kids here, they don't come and see them after," he said.

"You see, you don't understand at all," said the girl.

Harriet heard herself explode with "I'm sick of being told I don't understand this and that. I'm the child's mother. I'm Ben Lovatt's mother. Do *you* understand that?"

Suddenly they were all three together in understanding, even in desperate acceptance of some kind of general fatality.

He nodded, and said, "Well, I'll go and see . . ."

"And I am coming, too," she said.

This really did alert him. "Oh no," he exclaimed, "you are *not!*" He said something to the girl, who began running surprisingly fast down the corridor. "You stay here," he said to Harriet, and strode after the girl.

Harriet saw the girl turn right and disappear, and without thinking she opened a door at her right hand. She saw the young man's arm raised in imprecation, or warning, while what was behind that door reached her.

Extract n°6 (part 1) : the institution.

She was at the end of a long ward, which had any number of cots and beds along the walls. In the cots were—monsters. While she strode rapidly through the ward to the door at the other end, she was able to see that every bed or cot held an infant or small child in whom the human template had been wrenched out of pattern, sometimes horribly, sometimes slightly. A baby like a comma, great lolling head on a stalk of a body . . . then something like a stick insect, enormous bulging eyes among stiff fragilities that were limbs . . . a small girl all blurred, her flesh guttering and melting . . . a doll with chalky swollen limbs, its eyes wide and blank, like blue ponds, and its mouth open, showing a swollen little tongue. A lanky boy was skewed, one half of his body sliding from the other. A child seemed at first glance normal, but then Harriet saw there was no back to its head; it was all face, which seemed to scream at her. Rows of freaks, nearly all asleep, and all silent. They were literally drugged out of their minds. Well, nearly silent: there was a dreary sobbing from a cot that had its sides shielded with blankets. The high intermittent screaming, nearer now, still assaulted her nerves. A smell of excrement, stronger than the disinfectant. Then she was out of the nightmare ward and in another corridor, parallel to the one she had first seen, and identical. At its end she saw the girl, followed by the young man, come a little way towards her and then again turn right. . . . Harriet ran fast, hearing her feet thud on the boards, and turned where they did, and was in a tiny room holding trolleys of medicines and drugs. She ran through this and was now in a long cement-floored passage that had doors with inspection grilles in them all along the wall facing her. The young man and the girl were opening one of these doors as she arrived beside them. All three were breathing heavily.

"Shit," said the young man, meaning her being there.

"Literally," said Harriet as the door opened on a square room whose walls were of white shiny plastic that was buttoned here and there and looked like fake expensive leather upholstery. On the floor, on a green foam-rubber mattress, lay Ben. He was unconscious. He was naked, inside a strait-jacket. His pale yellow tongue protruded from his mouth. His flesh was dead white, greenish. Everything—walls, the floor, and Ben—was smeared with excrement. A pool of dark yellow urine oozed from the pallet, which was soaked.

"I told you not to come!" shouted the young man. He took Ben's shoulders and the girl Ben's feet. From the way they touched the child, Harriet saw they were not brutal; that was not the point at all. They lifted Ben thus—for in this way they had to touch very little of him—out of this room, along the corridor a little way, and through another door. She followed, and stood watching. This was a room that had sinks all along one wall, an immense bath, and a sloping cement shelf with plugs all along it. They put Ben on this shelf, unwound the strait-jacket, and, having adjusted the temperature of the water, began washing him down with a hose that was attached to one of the taps. Harriet leaned against the wall, watching. She was shocked to the point where she felt nothing at all. Ben did not

move. He lay like a drowned fish on the slab, was turned over several times by the girl, when the young man interrupted the hosing process for the purpose, and was finally carried by them both to another slab, where they dried him and then took a clean strait-jacket from a pile and put it on him.

"Why?" demanded Harriet, fierce. They did not answer.

They took the child, trussed, unconscious, his tongue lolling, out of the room, down the corridor, and into another room that had a cement shelf like a bed in it. They put Ben on it, and then both stood up and sighed: "Phew."

"Well, there he is," said the young man. He stood for a moment, eyes closed, recovering from the ordeal, and then lit a cigarette. The girl put out her hand for one; he gave it to her. They stood smoking, looking at Harriet in an exhausted, defeated way.

She did not know what to say. Her heart was hurting as it would for one of her own, real children, for Ben looked more ordinary than she had ever seen him, with those hard cold alien eyes of his closed. Pathetic: she had never seen him as pathetic before.

"I think I'll take him home," she said.

"It's up to you," said the young man shortly.

The girl was looking curiously at Harriet, as if she were part of the phenomenon that was Ben, of the same nature. She asked, "What are you going to do with him?" She added, and Harriet recognised fear in her voice, "He's so strong—I've never seen anything like it."

"None of us have seen anything like it," said the young man.

"Where are his clothes?"

Now he laughed, scornful, and said, "You're going to put his clothes on and take him home, just like that?"

"Why not? He was wearing clothes when he came."

The two attendants—nurses, orderlies, whatever they were—exchanged looks. Then both took a drag on their cigarettes.

He said, "I don't think you understand, Mrs. Lovatt. How far have you got to go, for a start?"

"Four or five hours' driving."

He laughed again, at the impossibility of it—of *her*, Harriet—and said, "He's going to come round on the journey, and then what?"

"Well, he'll see me," she said, and saw from their faces that she was being stupid. "All right, then, what do you advise?"

"Wrap him in a couple of blankets, over the strait-jacket," said the girl.

"And then drive like hell," he said.

The three now stood in silence, looking at each other, a long, sober look.

"You try doing this job," said the girl suddenly, full of rage against fate. "You just try it. Well, I'm leaving at the end of this month."

"And so am I, no one sticks it longer than a few weeks," said the man.

"All right," said Harriet. "I'm not going to complain, or anything."

"You'll have to sign a form. We have to be covered," he said.

But they could not easily find the form. At last, after a lot of rummaging about in a filing cabinet, they produced a slip of paper, mimeographed years ago, that said Harriet acquitted the institution of all responsibility.

Now she picked Ben up, touching him for the first time. He was deadly cold. He lay heavy in her arms, and she understood the words "a dead weight."

She went out into the corridor, saying, "I'm not going through that ward again."

"Who could blame you?" said the young man, wearily sarcastic. He had got hold of a load of blankets, and they wrapped Ben in two, carried him out to the car, laid him on the back seat, and piled more blankets over him. Only his face showed.

She stood with the two young people by the car. They could hardly see each other. Apart from the car lights, and the lights of the building, it was dark. Water squelched under foot. The young man took out of his overall pocket a plastic package containing a syringe, a couple of needles, and some ampules.

"You had better take these," he said.

Harriet hesitated, and the girl said, "Mrs. Lovatt, I don't think you realise—"

She nodded, took the package, got in.

"You can give him up to four shots a day, not more," said the young man.

Extract n° 6 (part 2) : the institution.

As she was about to let the clutch pedal out, she asked, "Tell me, how long do you think he would have lasted?"

Their faces were white patches in the gloom, but she could see that he shook his head, turning away. The girl's voice came: "None of them last long. But this one . . . he's very strong. He's the strongest any of us have seen."

"Which means he would have lasted longer?"

"No," he said. "No, that's not it at all. Because he's so strong, he fights all the time, and so he has to have bigger shots. It kills them."

"All right," said Harriet. "Well, thank you both."

They stood watching as she drove off, but almost at once vanished into the wet dark. As she rounded the drive, she saw them standing in the dimly lit porch, close together, as if reluctant to go in.

She drove as fast as she could through the wintry rain, avoiding the main roads, keeping an eye on the heap of blankets behind her. About half-way home she saw the blankets heave and convulse, and Ben woke with a bellow of rage, and thrashed about, landing on the floor of the car, where he began to scream, not like the thin high automatic screaming she had heard at the institution but screams of fear that vibrated through her.

She stuck it out for half an hour, feeling the thuds that Ben made vibrate through the car. She was looking for a lay-by that had no other car in it, and when she found one, she stopped, let the engine run, and took out the syringe. She knew how to use it, from some illness of the other children. She broke open the capsule, which had no brand name on it, and filled the syringe. Then she leaned over the back of the seat. Ben, naked except for the strait-jacket, and blue with cold, was heaving and struggling and bellowing. His eyes looked up at her in a glare of hate. He didn't recognise her, she thought. She did not dare unwind the jacket. She was afraid of injecting him anywhere near his neck. At last she managed to grab, and hold, an ankle, jabbed the needle into the lower part of his calf, and waited until he went limp: it took a few moments. What was this stuff?

Again she put him on the back seat under the blankets, and now she drove on the main roads home. She got there at about eight. The children would be sitting around the kitchen table. And David would be with them: he would not have gone to work.