You pull on a thread and little suspect how the whole weave puckers.

In 1998 I plucked a thread from the weave of lives I was then interested in. On Thursday 22 February 2001, the chickens came home, not in search of a quiet perch but wild-eyed, the-worm-turned, and full of wrath.

I knew it was 8 p.m. because the game started just as the door was knocked. I'd been working in the front room, in what I used as a study, right up till the match started. There were piles of books around, and I was deeply irritated that someone should be at the door at this time.

I heard Philip, my son, go to the door, could just hear him say 'Hang on ...' or some such, and then — of an instant — a man whom I had never seen before stood large in the door to my front room. I knew him immediately.

I knew him immediately and immediately situated my guilt before him.

'Doctor Clough,' he said and there were scare-quotes hung with bane around the word, like it was a turd in his mouth.

'Doctor Clough.'

'Lol. Lolly,' I said.

Three, maybe four years before, I had written a story about this man's younger brother, a boy I had met when I worked as a researcher looking at a big inner-city school. The boy was nicknamed Molly, an abbreviation of Molinetti. His family had come to England from Milan shortly after the Second World War and made a decent life and living out of ice cream. But Molly was a Bad Lad, which was what drew me to him. He was of course a good lad, which was perhaps what drew me more.

I had told this story in a book I wrote. I wrote about a boy lost in a school, a big school, fairly downtown in this big, Northern city tired with industrial collapse; a city fitfully tense with a substantial Pakistani community, brought indifferently so many years before thousands of miles.

I told the story of a boy struggling to make a mark within a school which was itself struggling somewhere at the ragged ends of Whitehall policies — a school living on subsistence funding; trying honestly to do right by its kids; to respect — to celebrate, even — its majority, second-generation immigrant community; the backs of the teachers, meanwhile, stabbed by successive swinging government scorns . . .

And in the middle of all this, a local lad.

Well: local, as in 'not Asian', but no more local than many of those; local as one who had lived all his 15 years in that city, and who spoke local. But European-white. And the real locus for Molly was a dense brew of brutally received machismo and deep currents of racial jostling; a filial desire to please, a school struggling with political correctness, and the whole wired with the quirky explosive spurts of testosterone. And I was there when he and the school decided they'd had enough of each other, when Molly struck a teacher and his schooling came to an end. Two years later his life did too, when he died joy-riding with kids a few years younger. I'd written most of this — and more — in my story.

And here was Lorenzo — Lol, his brother — whom Molly had told me about. Molly's mum had had Lol when she was 15. Some 17 years later — when she was 32 — she had Molly himself, no others in between. The man in front of me was about 40, probably actually short but he seemed — from my rooted place down in an armchair — big, menacing and in fact the fire threw his large shadow on the wall behind him.

'Doctor Clough,' he said.

'Lol. Lolly,' I said.

I knew him immediately and immediately situated myself before him, somehow cowering. Whatever animal response to a large stranger suddenly in the nest was fled. Philip had followed him, and was concerned.

'It's all right, Phil,' I said. 'It's all right' (though I could hear how the smallest warble in my voice said otherwise).

Phil said nothing but left the room. Lol remained standing, and I had a sense that it would be impertinent to invite him to sit. I made to stand, but he raised a finger — just the finger — slightly with incredibly powerful economy of movement.

We were both silent, while Lol appraised the room.

'So: this is where it is, where it all happens.'

'I don't know ...' I started.

'Where children are killed. Where families are ... what? Displayed like circus freaks?'

He went to the window.
I wouldn't have taken you for an Ink Spot, man.

He was standing by the window, and had picked up a CD case from a pile of half a dozen on the coffee table.

"Sorry?"

"You didn't know that?"

"I know what it is. Dr. Clough, I know. It's a joke, see?"

"No, it's just..."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know such a thing, right."

"No, it's just..."

"He was holding out my old, flaking reaching copy of Adolescent Boys of East London."

"What's this? A directory?"

"It was a passage which quoted — more or less word for word — the first..."
"Of course she doesn't, Doctor Clough," he laughed loud. "Of course she doesn't!"

But then in an instant was solemn again.

"That was my mother, Doctor Clough. And that was my brother."

He was stood at the window, tracing elaborate little curls on the condensation, and I noticed for the first time that the television was still full on, and the match was stopped while a player, clearly badly hurt, twitched and writhed as assistants tried to calm him.

Lol seemed to be talking to the window, so quietly I could barely hear him.

"What were you doing? What did you want? Eh? What did you want from my brother? 'Cos you certainly got it. A rich story, was it? A rich piece of research? How your audiences must have loved those tales!"

He turned from the window and faced into the room.

"You killed that boy. Mrn? Do you think he'd have been pissing about like that if he hadn't had you for an audience? D'you think so? D'you think he'd have punched that teacher? Do you think he'd have been expelled if you hadn't . . . if you hadn't been there? If you hadn't written the script for him? Eh?"

Lol was silent now for maybe as much as two minutes. I started several times to say something, but each time could find no words. Finally I managed to say, in a sort of tearful whisper:

"Look. Can we sort this out? Can we . . . ?"

Lol was still stood against the window, silent, looking out on the silent street. He raised an indifferent finger to the window and drew a line indifferently across the scars of earlier sketches on the condensation. When he turned, I was little with fear in my chair.

"What d'you want? What can I do? Say, Lol - what d'you want?"

In the back room I heard the phone ring three times and then Phil's voice a room away, faintly.

"Lol, please."

Lol stayed with his back to the window, quite motionless.

"Lol, what do you want?"

And then he moved slowly across the room till he stood above me, looking down.

"Nothing," he said finally. "Nothing."