

Paradise

For years Ben was kept awake at night by cars pulling into and out of the twenty-four hour parking-lot next to his home. At first he wrote a letter to the council, stating his concerns and seeking their assistance; they wrote back to apologise for their complete inability to help. No one, they said, could stand in the way of commerce.

Next he called a late night phone-in show and told the rest of the nation's insomniacs about his troubles; a man who identified himself as Big Dave appeared on the line to say that there were many things he could do to help Ben, for a price.

Finally he described to the owner how his life was being destroyed by a lack of sleep. 'Maybe you could close in the evenings,' suggested Ben. 'Six would be perfect but I could live with seven or eight. I understand that business is business.'

'It wouldn't be much of a twenty-four hour parking-lot,' came the reply, 'if we closed at all, now would it?'

Ben conceded the point and decided that he had no choice but to move. He placed his home on the market but interested buyers were put off by the parking-lot next door. 'Take 40% off your asking price,' advised one lady, 'and I'll consider making an offer.' Ben, tired and disoriented, called her an unpleasant name and closed the door in her face. Two hours later her husband, a rather small man, arrived and caused trouble.

Time went by, years really, and Ben rarely got more than two or three hours sleep a night. His work suffered, his social life evaporated and he took to drink. He read that Mrs Thatcher had never slept for more than a few hours when she was Prime Minister and he began to realise why she had committed so many unspeakable acts.

One morning a sign appeared outside the parking-lot which stated that it had closed for business. The cars stopped coming. The street fell quiet. Slowly, over a matter of months, Ben's sleep habits improved and before long he was sober and had found new employment as a cartoonist with a local newspaper. A week or two later he met a woman, a divorcee, and an intimacy evolved. She was a kind lady who couldn't see him on Tuesday nights, for that was when she took her language class.

A year later, a new building sprung up where the parking-lot had been; the foreman told him that it was to be a nightclub. 'It's called *Paradise*,' he said.

'Is that some sort of joke?' asked Ben.

It was true, he decided as he lay awake at night, half drunk (for he had fallen off the wagon), alone in his bed (for he had alienated the divorcee) and with only empty days before him (for he had lost his cartooning job); you don't know what you've got till it's gone.