

IN MEMORY OF UNCLE MACK

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BREXLIT: WRITING THE CONTEMPORARY STATE OF THE NATION NOVEL

SITUATING DOCUMENT – *In Memory of Uncle Mack*

The challenges of producing a contemporary socio-political novel that explores the divisions within British society at a given historical moment – while the domestic and global political landscapes are undergoing a period of intense change – are many and complex. An additional challenge is the question of whether an *engagé* novel can successfully embody its own arguments and tensions without becoming overtly polemical. These challenges can be contextualised by reference to the antecedent literary tradition to which my novel *In Memory of Uncle Mack* derives (that of the Social Problem novel of the mid-nineteenth century), and the contemporary literary mode known as the State of the Nation novel (and the subgenre some literary critics have termed ‘Brexlit’)¹ to which it belongs. Both bodies of work provided strong fictional models and anti-models for my book, with novels such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke*, and Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil, or the Two Nations* in the nineteenth-century tradition; and Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England*, Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*, Anthony Cartwright’s *The Cut*, and Isabel Waidner’s *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* in the contemporary mode.

The problems generated by these novels were similar to my broad research questions: can a novel ask nuanced, complex questions about political, social and economic conflicts? Is a work of the imagination equally adept at stimulating debate around these culturally determined subjects as reportage, campaigning journalism and non-fiction? Is it possible for the political novel to explore the ‘moving target’ of evolving world events? Does presenting ideological differences in fictional familial settings, mediated by a series of close, third-

¹ Self, John, ‘How Brexit Has Reshaped the Modern Novel’ in Penguin Books Features, 31st January 2020 (<https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/jan/how-writers-responded-to-brexit-in-novels.html>)

person subjective points of view, best illustrate how political decisions impact on society?

Finally, given its flexibility of form, is the novel the best vehicle for exploring how shifts in geopolitical ideologies impact locally?

Further questions arose during the writing of the novel that problematized the broader issues above: Can ‘representative’ characters who embody certain ideological positions (showing their evolution or modulation over a lifetime) also be vividly ‘alive’ as human fictional creations? Does building contradictions into the ideological stances of these characters increase their life on the page and validate them artistically? Can choosing a single dominant location (in my novel’s case, Thanet, Kent) for a fictional narrative illustrate how ideological shifts arise or coalesce in certain spaces? Is it possible, or even desirable to write an effective State of the Nation novel in an age where information is disseminated in such a fragmentary and arbitrary fashion over social media and partisan news outlets? And finally, is the social-realist novel the best place to stage these ideological conflicts? Might dystopia, sci-fi or satire (even in the formally experimental mode of Waidner’s *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff*) be better suited to dramatizing the present political moment?

In Memory of Uncle Mack is a work of realist literary fiction set in Kent and London, exploring the ideologically divided, pre-and post-Brexit UK through the prism of a fractious brother-sister relationship. The title derives from a plaque on the Broadstairs seafront commemorating Uncle Mack, a well-known blackface Music Hall performer active between 1900-1948. The novel follows present-day siblings whose lives diverge in every possible way; politically, culturally, and economically. While the liberal older brother Stuart Carter moves to London and gets a job in the media, his sister Jessica stays in Kent and becomes involved in far-right movements, ultimately planning a Jo Cox-style political assassination of a Labour councillor, Yvette Hartford-Jones, who is campaigning for Uncle Mack’s plaque to be removed. For Jessica, Uncle Mack is a symbol of English purity, and her quest to

remember him, and to actively keep his memory alive, becomes emblematic of the weaponizing of cultural artefacts by old and new far-right organisations. For Yvette, and for Stuart also, the plaque is an aberration that should no longer exist in a diverse society.

Among the novel's thematic concerns are immigration, class, populism and racism in the UK, up to and including the aftermath of the Brexit referendum; as well as the impact of the global mobilisation of the far right over the past five years. The objective was to produce a novel that addressed the problems of racial intolerance and the rise of the new far right precipitated by the Brexit referendum, and anatomise – in a fictional context – the political fallout from the UK's decision to leave the EU, and its ongoing consequences. The challenge was to investigate the inherent tensions between characters holding antithetical ideological positions without the novel becoming reductive, schematic or partisan.

The novel form can be seen as especially adept at addressing political and cultural divisions. A work of fiction can also contribute significantly to a body of knowledge as much as academic research. Dave Gunning, in his book *Race and Antiracism in Black British and British Asian Literature* states: 'If the novel is able to offer a unique and transformative rendering of the world, it is through a process in which the ideological codes of tropes already present in the material world are presented, combined and reshaped'.² Of course, novels, poetry and drama have always reflected and commented upon the eras in which they were written, from Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, to William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Thomas Kyd's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (for Scotland and Italy, read the Jacobean court), to Franz Kafka's parables of totalitarianism. While a work of the imagination may or may not always contain reliable historical information (a novel can be said to contain facts and pseudo-facts recruited to reinforce its verisimilitude), it can be said to 'know' as much about a given

² Gunning, Dave, *Race and Antiracism in Black British and British Asian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), p. 12

subject as the hard data and statistics presented in works of history or political theory. Furthermore, a dramatic rendering of a political moment can often be more compelling than a dry factual account. Sir Philip Sidney, in *The Defence of Poesy* argued (contra Plato) that art was superior to the historical record. While history gives us only ‘what men have done’, the poets ‘deliver a golden [world]’.³ If Plutarch gives us *the* Marc Antony, Shakespeare gives us a *particular* Marc Antony. In this respect, *In Memory of Uncle Mack* seeks to provide a very particular portrait of a given political moment, with an awareness that it is a singular take on the times, not a definitive one, and one written as history continues to unfold unpredictably.

While novels that attempt to anatomise contemporary politics can have a built-in obsolescence, it’s surprising how many survive and become definitive accounts of their times, such as Émile Zola’s *Germinal*, Honoré de Balzac’s *Lost Illusions*, or Dickens’ *Hard Times*. Certainly, works of imagination are as valuable to an understanding of a particular political moment as purely historical or statistical accounts. The Social Problem novels of the nineteenth century, such as Disraeli’s *Sybil* or Gaskell’s *North and South*, tell us as much about the ‘Two Nations’ of 1840s and 50s England as the Blue Books, Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*, and Friedrich Engels’ *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. In the twentieth century, one could point to novels such as George Orwell’s *1984* or Sinclair Lewis’s *It Couldn’t Happen Here*, both of which perform a similar function in elucidating the times and warning against potential dystopias.

Again, the challenge for any novelist is to avoid writing polemically or didactically (as Tolstoy did in his later works). As well as a tendency towards sentimentality and idealism, one of the pitfalls of the Social Problem novels of the 1840s and 50s was their

³ Sidney, Philip, ‘The Defence of Poesy’, in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1989), p. 216, line 185

polemical agenda, often affiliated with the Chartist movement or contemporary campaigns against social inequality. In one sense, these nineteenth-century works might be seen as proto- ‘activist novels’, in which characters are reified or stand for representative ideological positions (such as the mill-owner Gradgrind in *Hard Times*). My aim was to present each ideological stance with as little authorial mediation as possible; without proselytising or trying to persuade the reader of a particular point of view (à la Gaskell and Dickens), allowing the reader to draw their own conclusions. Of course, an author’s own politics will always intrude to a certain degree – novels aren’t written by their characters – and complete ideological neutrality is seldom achievable. However, Salman Rushdie, commenting on the extremist reaction to his 1989 novel *The Satanic Verses*, made the distinction between literature and systems of belief: ‘whereas religion seeks to privilege one language above all others, one set of values above all others, one text above all others, the novel has always been *about* how different languages, values and narratives quarrel’. ⁴

As well as the macro-challenge of keeping up with the evolving global political crisis precipitated by the EU referendum and the election of Donald Trump in November 2016, there was also the micro-challenge of responding to the growing body of literature produced addressing these problems. Two years after the referendum, it was significant that only a few contemporary works of literature addressed the subject of the rise of populism, nativism and white supremacist ideologies. Given that Brexit’s eventual outcome will affect the UK for generations to come, there is still currently a paucity of literary fiction (though much non-fiction) concerning the challenges the country faces. While there maybe extrinsic reasons for this (the glacial pace of publishing, the current risk-averse publishing climate, and the general reluctance of novelists to write politically or polemically), substantial novels on Brexit, the wider rise of the global far-right, European nationalism, and the ultra-conservative Trump

⁴ Rushdie, Salman, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Vintage, 2010), p. 420

administration are thin on the ground. The most often-cited literary reflections on Brexit are Ali Smith's Seasons tetralogy, Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*, and Sam Byers' post-Brexit novel, *Perfidious Albion*, with the critic John Self going so far as to ask, 'Has Brexit led to a golden age of fiction?'⁵ However, Alex Preston, writing in the *Economist* two years after the 2016 referendum, in a piece which explores literature's response to the crisis, suggested that many novels 'refer to [Brexit] only subliminally, maybe even subconsciously, rather than placing the campaign and its aftermath in the foreground'.⁶ While there are obvious difficulties for fiction in providing a rapid response to any given political moment (as opposed to the more agile modes of visual art and theatre), a few recent novels have risen to this challenge. The two most notable are Cartwright's Brexit novella *The Cut* (Peirene Press, 2017), which was commissioned as a response to the EU referendum, and published exactly a year after its date; and Waidner's experimental novella *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* (Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2019), both of which I reviewed for the *Guardian* while researching *In Memory of Uncle Mack*.⁷

Of the fiction, poetry, plays and non-fiction relevant to the themes and locations in the book, the books on my proposed reading list proved ultimately not as fruitful for research as those that emerged post-2018 during the writing of the novel. On my original non-fiction list were works such as David Seabrook's *All the Devils are Here*, and Colin MacInnes's history of music hall, *Sweet Saturday Night*. The plan was also to read as many Kent-based novels as possible, including Nicola Barker's *Darkmans* and Bruce Robison's *The Peculiar Memories*

⁵ Self, John, *Op. cit.*

⁶ Preston, Alex, 'Brexit is Reverberating in British Literature' in the *Economist*, July 7th 2018 edition

⁷ Cook, Jude, 'The Cut by Anthony Cartwright review – The Big Divide in Brexit Britain' in the *Guardian*, June 23rd 2017 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/23/the-cut-by-anthony-cartwright-review?CMP=twl_b-gdnreview; 'We Are Made of Diamond Stuff by Isabel Waidner review – Cutting Edge' in the *Guardian*, Nov 6th 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/nov/06/we-are-made-of-diamond-stuff-isabel-waidner-review>

of *Thomas Penman*. Yet these works didn't prove as instructive in centring my novel in a particular geographical and cultural milieu as works of general social history such as Lynsey Hanley's *Respectable* and Owen Jones's *Chavs*. John Osborne's play about a music hall comedian, *The Entertainer*, was crucial, however, with its setting of a coastal town in decline, and its theme of how art can reflect a nation in shock (in this case post-Suez crisis Britain). It was telling that *The Entertainer* received a major revival by Kenneth Branagh in 2016, which critics and audiences read as speaking to a newly broken Britain: 'What kind of country is Britain, the play asks, what is to become of us?'⁸

Works of non-fiction relating to Brexit and the UK's far-right movements, such as Anand Menon and Geoffrey Evans' *Brexit and British Politics*, and *Bloody Nasty People* by Daniel Trilling, proved to be outdated, superseded by the fast pace of political events. However, reading American political novels and short fiction and examining how US authors have approached their own shifting political reality proved extremely instructive (whether it was Trump's ascendancy in Tom Rachman's *Basket of Deplorables*, or extreme anti-abortion ideologies in Joyce Carol Oates' *A Book of American Martyrs*).

The composition of *In Memory of Uncle Mack*, as with most novels, was a process of both breakthroughs and setbacks. The book's triadic narrative structure – one which would ultimately embody each character's often contradictory ideological stance, without their subjectivities unbalancing the novel's project of asking the reader to empathise with systems of belief potentially alien to their own – only emerged after a great deal of writing, reading and in-the-field research. The catalyst for the book was a visit to Broadstairs in 2010, and the discovery of Uncle Mack's plaque. Controversial even then (a campaign to remove the plaque in 2015 by Labour activists failed), though seemingly innocuous to many local

⁸ Callow, Simon, in 'How John Osborne's *Entertainer* Still speaks to a Broken Britain' in the *Guardian*, 12th Aug 2016

residents, the plaque immediately suggested itself as the subject for a novel. The possibility that a novel might have such a potent symbol of racial and cultural division at its heart remained unfocused until the referendum result in the summer of 2016. The divisions of class and race in the country that had been fomenting during the previous three decades – a period defined by a broad acceptance of multiculturalism – abruptly exploded. Overnight, it seemed, the press spoke of the UK containing ‘two nations’: a binary opposition between a metropolitan elite and an angry, apparently racist, white working-class underbelly. The language immediately echoed Disraeli’s subtitle to his 1851 novel, *Sybil, or the Two Nations*. What was most apparent was the surprise registered by the left-wing press that so many had voted to leave the EU – to the left, the disenfranchised had found their voice, a situation which resulted in much cognitive dissonance among liberals. Hate speech and racist attacks multiplied at an alarming rate, yet some argued that a forgotten or marginalised demographic had finally had its say (the inaccurate phrase ‘the will of the people’, and the slogan ‘Take Back Control’ became the mantras of right-wing ideologues and the Tory press between 2016-2019). While populism and nationalism had been on the rise across Europe for much of the decade, the referendum result accelerated the process in the UK, emboldening nativists and white supremacists. Globally, too, the swing to the right was compounded by the election victory of Donald Trump in 2016. The problem for a novelist is: How to dramatize these seismic shifts? If, as David Grossman states, our job as writers must be as ‘witnesses: active, curious witnesses’ to world events,⁹ how might a novelist go about this with the challenge of a continually evolving political landscape? Just as crucially, how might a novelist problematize such a seemingly Manichean political divide? How might they dissolve and

⁹ Grossman, David, ‘David Grossman Calls on Writers to Bear Witness to Pandemic’, in the *Guardian*, 14th October 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/14/david-grossman-writers-witness-to-pandemic-frankfurt-book-fair>

complicate the binary oppositions of Leave versus Remain, or racism versus antiracism, armed with only a set of characters and the mechanism of a plot?

I initially conceived of a novel set in Broadstairs that featured two working-class brothers whose politics diverged. One brother would revere Uncle Mack's plaque as an artefact of the UK's proud patriotic past, while the other thought it abhorrent. Seeking to maximise conflict, I changed their relationship to that of a brother and sister. Initially, the liberal sibling was the sister – then it became more unsettling (in terms of gender stereotypes) to make her the intolerant one; the one who becomes so radicalised she plans to commit murder, following the tragic killing of serving MP Jo Cox by a white supremacist in the lead-up to the referendum of June 2016. This gave the book some real narrative momentum, and a sense of psychological cohesion. As I searched for fictional models for my own novel, one problem I came across was the frequency with which recent 'Brexlit' novels featured romantic partnerships or married couples whose ideologies diverge. This was the case with Coe's *Middle England*, Cartwright's *The Cut* and Nick Hornby's *Just Like You*. This felt, to me, like a highly implausible situation, and one which these novels struggled to make convincing. These books became counter-examples or anti-models, and reinforced my belief that a brother-sister relationship (a relationship that was not *chosen*) was the most fruitful way in which to chronicle the intractable divisions of the country in a fictional setting.

Initially, the brother Stuart was to be a Westminster journalist, but this seemed too schematic and implausible, given his working-class background. Much more scope was opened up by making Stuart a restaurant critic – food being such a fault-line when it comes to class. I realised that what I was ultimately interested in was how these characters *became* who they were, and how the tension between their beginnings and the present situation played out in their psyches and their actions (or procrastinations and inactions). How did Jessica become lethally radicalised when she began by making school projects about Bygone

Kent? How might patriotism slide into racism, and then the intention to commit murder? How did Stuart go from a working-class teenager with no qualifications to a food writer on a broadsheet, married to a Ghanaian teacher in middle-class Muswell Hill? How did Yvette make the journey from a Chelsea childhood, St Paul's School for Girls and an Oxford college to being a campaigning Labour Councillor for Dover and Deal? Answering these questions justified the novel's emphasis on its characters' backstories – the chapters where the 'process of becoming' is concentrated and explained. This investigation into the deep-past of the principal characters was also reinforced thematically in relation to the book's title. As the novel progressed, the theme of memory – of misremembering the past and not learning from history, as well as what a society chooses to memorialise publicly – became crucial.

During the research period, I also learned how the far right had mobilised online over the last four years to an unnerving degree, rendering traditional grassroots protest movements such as the EDL and the BNP virtually obsolete. Essential background for this strand of the book came from Julia Ebner's *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists*, and Andrew Marantz's *Antisocial: How Online Extremists Broke America*. The direct result of this mobilisation was atrocities such as the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre in October 2018 and the Christchurch mosque attacks in March 2019, and the rise of white supremacist conspiracy theories embodied by QAnon, all of which are explored during the chapters that detail Stuart's plunge into the world of online extremists.

The challenge all along was never to condescend to these characters, or to simplify their ideological stances, rendering them mere mouthpieces of their particular views, or to deal in clichés and caricatures. One critical response to *Middle England* condemned its politics as 'pantomime'.¹⁰ It's certainly a significant flaw that all *Middle England's* Remainers are portrayed as right-thinking tolerant folk, while all the Leavers are cartoon

¹⁰ Freeman, Laura, 'Is There a Great Brexit Novel?' in *The Sunday Times*, 4th November 2018 edition

bigots. Instructive in this respect was Joyce Carol Oates' *A Book of American Martyrs*, a novel about the so-called 'pro-life, pro-choice' debate in the States, whose opening section puts us in the crazed consciousness of an anti-abortionist for 100 pages. The treatment of such a character became a model for how to address the inherent contradictions and cognitive dissonances present in any inflexible worldview.

The major breakthrough in terms of the narrative method of the book was to have three juxtaposed third-person points of view instead of just two – to include Jessica's victim's point of view, to put the reader inside the head of the book's Jo Cox figure, Yvette. This seemed to allow for more reader empathy and up the stakes and the jeopardy considerably. It's axiomatic that a reader would want to discover what happens to Yvette after getting to know her world, her family, what she has to lose. It also gave room for the book to interrogate issues that the nascent Black Lives Matter movement and protests of 2020 have magnified. Yvette's character became a perfect site to stage the dilemmas of White Saviour Syndrome (during her time in a Kenyan refugee camp, and in her support for Sunny Chakraborty's campaign to remove Uncle Mack's plaque) with its concomitant middle-class liberal guilt, as well as White Silence – all of which Yvette wrestles with during the course of the novel. Furthermore, the novel's triadic structure might metaphorically be seen as emblematic of the 'third way'; as a rebuttal of the reductive binary oppositions apparent in the central ideological stances on show.

A final fictional model for my book was Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, a retelling of Sophocles' *Antigone* within a contemporary British Muslim family, against the backdrop of jihadism and the conflict in Syria, utilising multiple points of view. While not a 'Brexit novel', its uninflected linguistic surface and dextrous handling of the different subjectivities embodied by its characters was highly instructive. If it has a flaw, it was in not completing its narrative with the point of view with which it started. Though even this was helpful in

ensuring that my own novel *did*, ostensibly privileging the character of Stuart, while adding to the novel's strong sense of circularity and resolution. The decision to allow the book's subjective conceptions of racial and class division to be articulated through three – and not two – points of view proved to be key to its functionality. In this respect, the production of meaning provided by two opposing viewpoints could be problematized and questioned throughout.

Overt symbolism was also key to the novel, with the motif of the Thanet windfarm and the Chilterns windmill – both markers of 'invisible time' – reinforcing the semantic field of memory present in the Jessica and Yvette chapters; the characters with the most ideological distance between them. In addition, other motifs were important, such as the island, and the monocultural island mentality. This theme was reinforced by setting the book on the 'Isle' of Thanet. Another motif was stars – present in the decorations of Stella's Room café and the on the ceiling of Yvette's childhood bedroom – echoing the gold stars of the EU flag. A further symbol was Morelli's famous vintage ice cream parlour on the Broadstairs seafront, an emblem of European culture thriving within monocultural Thanet.

Intertextuality was kept to a minimum, though a few allusions were permitted, for instance the trope of the young man seeking to better himself through education in the manner of Jude Fawley in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Alton Locke in Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, and Kipps in H.G Wells's *Kipps* (the moment where Stuart purchases a ukulele is a direct reference to Kipps's attempt at class mobility when he buys a mandolin). In addition, a subplot that mirrored Stuart's journey was introduced with the intention of reinforcing, in a metafictional fashion, the notion of fiction's limitless potentiality (as well as the broader theme of racism in the arts). This was the strand relating to Stuart's wife Efua, and her struggle to get her first novel published, illustrating that Black authors are often only allowed to participate in the middle-class pursuit of novel writing if they address self-

consciously ‘Black issues’ or write politically. This subplot was intended to be contrapuntal to the book’s central discourse of racism and antiracism, reflecting on bigotry in the cultural sphere, as well as the question of literary gatekeepers and who gets to tell certain stories and why.

I decided early on that the book’s Black and Asian characters would only be seen from the POVs of the three main, white British narrators. To have put a person of colour at the centre of the novel (writing them from ‘the inside’) seemed ethically risky and also something that would undermine the book’s credibility if it was done incorrectly or insensitively. My own view is that fiction’s innate and unique capacity for rendering interiority confines a novelist to their own fundamental experience of being in the world. Which is not to say they can’t imagine the experience of others very different to themselves. But the crucial distinction (for my praxis) is that these others should only be seen *through the subjective eyes* of a narrator who the novelist has at least some proximate understanding, in terms of race or class. This principle was employed in my previous novel, *Jacob’s Advice*, which featured Black, Asian and Jewish characters. The debate over cultural appropriation in fiction has been wide and vigorous lately, with many critics damning writers for representing experiences that are not their own, and of co-opting marginalised lives into novels without fully understanding or respecting their worldview. In contrast, outspoken libertarian novelists such as Lionel Shriver (in her controversial keynote speech to the Brisbane Writers’ Festival in 2016)¹¹ have spoken about a writer’s freedom to inhabit any character they wish, a stance that has been shared by a minority of authors (significantly by Zadie Smith, who, while differing with Shriver on many matters, asserts the right for a novelist to inhabit multitudes:

¹¹ Convery, Stephanie, ‘We Need to Talk about Cultural Appropriation: Why Lionel Shriver’s Speech Touched a Nerve’ in *The Guardian*, 15th September 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/15/we-need-to-talk-about-cultural-appropriation-why-lionel-shrivers-speech-touched-a-nerve>

‘For many years now, in the pages of my novels, “I” have been both adult and child, male and female, black, brown and white, gay and straight’).¹² However, even while almost two-thirds of my book is written against gender from a female perspective, I didn’t feel qualified to move any further away from my own experience than this. So while there *is* a campaigning Labour councillor of colour in *In Memory of Uncle Mack* (Sunny Chakraborty), we do not see the world of the book through his eyes, nor do we see Efua’s experience of racial discrimination in the publishing world from her perspective, but only refracted through that of her husband, Stuart. Furthermore, to have done otherwise in a novel that addresses race and minstrelsy would have felt, ironically, like an act of ‘fictional blackface’ in its own right.

Geographically, the novel was always going to oscillate between London and Kent. However, it was necessary to complicate the Kent location by having the largely middle-class Deal and Whitstable contrasted with working-class Dumpton, Margate, and Ramsgate. The reasons for this were twofold. First, to emphasise that Kent is far from a homogenous monoculture: like any area of the UK (or London postcode for that matter) it represents a spectrum of classes, cultures, and opinions. And second, to have Yvette living in Deal (where a person of her background *might* gravitate, along with Whitstable) reinforced her as a Kent ‘outsider’, a meddler in another borough’s disputes, and as a do-gooder with a White Saviour Complex, an issue addressed by Thanet councillor Sunny Chakraborty in chapter nine. The Isle of Thanet itself was a necessary central location, not only because of the continued existence of Uncle Mack’s plaque, but also because of its importance to the history of the blackface minstrel tradition. These shows were central to seaside entertainment in Thanet during the early part of the twentieth century, and their legacy is still controversial. After the petition to remove Uncle Mack’s plaque from the Broadstairs seafront failed in 2015, the

¹² Smith, Zadie, in ‘Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction’ in *The New York Times Review of Books*, 24th October 2019 issue <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/zadie-smith-in-defense-of-fiction/>

plaque remained in place until it was covered up – despite local opposition ¹³ – following the Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020 (a political moment which was ultimately beyond my novel’s timeframe, and a phenomenon too global and complex to address along with the pandemic). As a result of choosing this dominant location, I did a great deal of qualitative in-the-field research, spending much time in Broadstairs, Margate and Ramsgate, researching the area, recording attitudes towards immigration, racism, and Brexit. I also did some research into Kent-aligned far-right organisations, such as the English Defence League, the South East Alliance, The East Kent English Patriots, and White Lives Matter. Finally, I undertook research into the history of music hall and blackface minstrelsy in the UK from the nineteenth century to the middle of twentieth century.

In terms of narrative tone, the hardest problem to address was that of making it consistent across the three, close third-person narrators while allowing their individual idiolects and cultural references to be reflected both overtly and covertly in the prose. While narrative tone and lexical choices are in a sense determined by a novelist’s ‘natural’ voice on the page – one a writer is made more aware of if they have published previous novels – the task was made easier by the fact that I chose not to use distinct first-person monologues juxtaposed with each other (in the manner of Joyce Carol Oates’ *A Book of American Martyrs*) but voices with the distance and flexibility offered by using the third person (as utilised in Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*). A conscious shifting of emphasis was made when writing in the third-person voice furthest from my own – for instance, the vocabulary used in Jessica’s sections are limited adjectivally and adverbially to words she might only use herself. This is a common enough device in fiction to reinforce verisimilitude, and proved

¹³ Hall, Marijke, ‘Petition launched to keep the controversial Uncle Mack plaque in Broadstairs after Thanet District Council announces its permanent removal’ in *Kent Online* 3rd July 2020
<https://www.kentonline.co.uk/thanet/news/petition-launched-to-keep-racist-plaque-229800/>

useful in this instance. Equally, for the Oxford-educated Yvette, the linguistic palette was expanded to reflect her background.

The last problem to address was the organisation of narrative time in general, and the chronological extent of the narrative in particular. For the structural purposes of the book, the Brexit narrative was pretty much completed by the Tory election victory of 2019. Brexit was going to happen – the three People’s Vote marches had failed. And now a global pandemic had arrived to magnify the economic consequences. Initially, the attempt on Yvette’s life was going to happen at the third People’s Vote march in October of 2019, but the Brexit-deciding election of that December presented itself as the perfect opportunity to stage it there. This allowed for the novel’s conclusion in Broadstairs, where Yvette and Stuart’s children meet the following year, intimating that any future racial harmony in British society can only be achieved through friendship and the education of the young. Currently, the narrative scope of the book runs all the way to the week before the first Covid-19 lockdown of March 2020.

In conclusion, *In Memory of Uncle Mack* is a psychological realist novel whose traditional form seeks to challenge and augment more conceptual or experimental takes on the tumultuous political upheavals of the last five years, such as Chris Beckett’s Brexit sci-fi dystopia *Two Tribes*, or the magic realist, linguistically adventurous *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* by Isabel Waidner. While Historicist readings of texts maintain that artistic works can affect the times in which they were produced to the extent that they might influence politicians and decision makers (a well-known example is Dickens’ *Nicholas Nickleby*, which was instrumental in precipitating educational reform), it is yet to be seen whether any State of the Nation or ‘Brexit’ novels will have the same power of influence in making a strong contribution to the debate, or tackling negative attitudes towards immigration and class so prevalent since the EU referendum of June 2016.

It is my hope that the novel will find an audience not only among a readership of progressive, liberal, consumers of contemporary literary fiction, but among a readership with a wide social range. While a novel's reception can never be predicted, I hope the book will be assessed as one that encompasses the whole Brexit narrative (unlike the partial-narrative 'Brexit' novels cited above), as well as being a more even-handed account than many others. I also hope the novel will become a valuable addition to Kent studies, as well as the political novel in English. Its themes have only become more live and relevant since Brexit became a reality for the UK, also since the Black Lives Matter protests and the subsequent Topple the Racists campaign to remove statues and monuments that celebrate England's colonial history. In 2020, Thanet District Council finally decided to remove Uncle Mack's plaque,¹⁴ and I hope that my novel might contribute to the discussion about re-evaluating the history of racism in Britain. As such, my novel's immediate application would be to provide a compelling fictional analysis of a unique political moment, one that is rigorously researched and grounded. Further to this, the work might become important in elucidating future, unforeseen political crises, in the way that works of speculative, counter-factual or alternative reality fiction become doubly potent. An example of this is the re-evaluation of Philip Roth's uncannily prescient 2004 novel *The Plot Against America* during the Trump Administration of 2016-2020. While its plot is not analogous with that of *In Memory of Uncle Mack*, it is a novel that can now be seen as a cautionary tale against electing a wholly unsuitable presidential candidate. This hard-to-predict 'long tail effect' is especially pertinent when it comes to works of imaginative literature – an advantage they hold over the straightforward historical record.

Ultimately, racism and class hatred are symptomatic of hatred of the 'other'. I feel that fiction's unique ability to allow the reader to empathise with characters we would

¹⁴ Hall, Marijke, *Op. cit.*

otherwise struggle to understand is crucial. Philip Roth, on receiving his lifetime achievement medal at the 2002 National Book Awards commented on ‘the ruthless intimacy of literature, its concreteness, its unabashed focus on the particulars... the passion for the singular and the aversion to generality that is fiction’s lifeblood’. ¹⁵ In this respect, the novel form is supreme at presenting opposing ideological differences and dramatizing how political decisions impact on individuals and society as a whole. An important strand of the Brexit debate was how the Remainers failed to comprehend the anger and desperation that led many to vote Leave. *In Memory of Uncle Mack* will hopefully contribute to a wider and more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon, providing a valuable addition to imaginative works on the subject of Brexit and the ideological divisions of the UK in the early twenty-first century, as well being a contribution to the political novel in English. The best works of art ask more questions than they answer, and it is my hope *In Memory of Uncle Mack* will do the same.

¹⁵ Roth, Philip, quoted in Bailey, Blake *Philip Roth: The Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2021), p. 66

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IN MEMORY OF UNCLE MACK

by Jude Cook

PART ONE

2016

STUART

Stuart Carter didn't think about his sister often, but when he did he thought of her as dead. She was no longer in his life, and that's just the way he liked it. She was cancelled in his psyche. An absence, a ghost, a persona non grata. He hadn't spoken to her for so long he'd forgotten what her voice sounded like, or what she even looked like. Because of certain views she held, because of how it had ended with their family and their mother's house, they'd had zero contact for over a decade. He'd erased her memory from his mind.

Until now, that is.

Until the jolting moment – at 9.30 on a Wednesday morning in the plate-clanking, jazz-tinkling ambience of Stella's Room, his favourite Muswell Hill café – when he saw her name clearly in print. *Jessica Carter*. There it was before him; constricting his heart to read it in full, not abbreviated to 'Jess', as it had been in childhood. Stark as an accusation, on page eight of the *Guardian*, in a report about an incident of racist abuse on the Herne Bay to Margate train.

He picked up the paper again to prove he wasn't dreaming. It seemed his sister and two men – one named as English Defence League member Ryan Meades – had been travelling in the same carriage as two Spanish women in their early twenties. They'd begun abusing the unnamed women by throwing cones of chips at them, and finished by verbally

and physically attacking them; telling them to ‘speak English’ and to get back to their ‘own country’. One of the women alleged that his sister had pulled her hair while showering her with racist slurs, screaming, ‘This is how it’s going to be from now on, so you better get used to it!’

Stuart put the paper down. He was so shocked that he slumped back in his cane chair, his hands trembling, unable to think coherently for a moment. Though it was a balmy morning in early September, the sense of shame seemed almost physically cold; seeping into his body like a chill through the soles of his Chelsea boots. Outside, through the café’s distinctive arched window hung with gold stars, the world was going by as usual. Cars and bikes and white vans streaked past on the busy Fortis Green Road. Opposite, he could see the imposing edifice of the Everyman cinema, until recently an art deco Odeon multiplex, but now gentrified into the sort of place where you could drink a glass of Terres d’Azur Merlot while watching the latest mumblecore or subtitled masterpiece. Further along, the American diner, the gentleman’s barber’s, and the children’s bookshop were thronged with early customers. The pavement streamed with three-wheeler Bugaboos, reminding him he’d arranged to meet his wife and young son in JoJo Maman Bébé at ten o’ clock. A singular Muswell Hill morning. Yet the news about Jessica seemed to change everything.

According to the piece, his sister was due to appear at Margate Magistrates Court on Friday, along with Meades and the other man. She might face a custodial sentence. Someone had filmed the incident on their phone, so there was enough evidence to convict her, though the footage had since been taken down from social media sites. Just as well, Stuart thought, or he would be searching Twitter at that moment to see the awful proof that it really was his little sister who had done something so vile. The piece also made it clear that Jessica’s offence was part of a wider pattern of hate-crime currently on the rise in the country. Since the referendum in June to decide whether the UK was going to leave the European Union,

Stuart had looked on in horror as the nation had been polarised in the most vicious way. Over the course of a few months, he'd seen an emboldened, populist far right somehow make xenophobic and racist language legitimate in public debate.

For Stuart, married to a Ghanaian woman, the force of this sea-change was something he felt every day – racism was no longer notional, something that happened to other people, as it had been during his childhood in Broadstairs. He and Efua had always received looks as a mixed-race couple, but now more than ever. They'd even been thrown a couple of derisory glances as they walked together to Stella's Room that morning in the heart of middle-class Muswell Hill. He thought decades of acclimatisation to the sight of a black woman and a white man wheeling a mixed-race kid along a London street might have afforded them anonymity. Obviously not. Just last month, Efua had returned in tears after walking Kwesi around Highgate Woods. Some piece of trash at a bus stop had told her – in the same fashion as his sister, it seemed – to *fuck off back to where she came from*. When Efua had shouted at her abuser that 'where she came from' was Wood Green, he had called her a black bitch and said her six-month old son didn't deserve to live. Her son. His son. *Their* son! Most days, when the three of them went out, he was aware of how tense he'd become, as if he'd been holding his breath. His knuckles were often white on the pushchair handles, pre-empting the next abusive comment or dirty look.

And now his sister was part of the problem.

'Sir? Is everything okay for you today?'

Elisaveta, the attentive Ukrainian waitress was at his elbow. She was smiling gently, though concern showed in her eyes behind her big glasses. As a restaurant critic, he always noted the service, and made a point of learning the waiting staff's names. Elisaveta's cheery efficiency was one of the reasons he kept coming back to Stella's Room.

Stuart forced a smile. 'I'm fine, thank you.'

‘Coffee not so good this morning?’

He looked down to see he’d only drunk a third of his latte and eaten even less of his croissant.

‘No, no. Excellent as always. I’m just a little distracted...’

There was nothing wrong with the coffee. Far from it. At the back end of the room, with its navy-painted tongue-and-groove panelling, was a vintage Elektra machine that produced the creamiest cappuccinos in north London. The food, too, was excellent, apart from a couple of blind spots in the chef’s repertoire; a common enough phenomenon, familiar from his day-job visiting restaurants all over the UK. While Stella’s Sunday lunches were the best in Muswell Hill, with a sublime roast lamb and a homemade mint sauce, and their Mediterranean-themed specials a wonder, their full English was a disaster. He’d tried it once on a Sunday morning with the family. It was the sort of greasy-spoon fare he’d long avoided after growing up in the egg-and-chips haven of Broadstairs. Fatty supermarket bacon, a sausage the size of a big toe, two undistinguished eggs in a slick of oil, a soggy portobello mushroom, and, horror of horrors, a fried slice. Efua had gone for the fancy bubble and squeak as her main option and it had been supreme. A circular mound of crispy mashed fried potatoes on a bed of hispi cabbage, topped with a dollop of homemade hollandaise to give it a bit of zing. Perfect. And yet the chef was incompetent at the easy stuff.

‘Just as long as you are happy, sir,’ Elisaveta smiled, a compassionate lilt in her voice.

‘I’m always happy here,’ Stuart lied, forcing himself to smile back.

As he watched her retreat to the counter, he realised his hand had been placed over the offending piece, as if Elisaveta might connect him with his sister after a single glance.

He checked his watch. Ten to ten. Efua had given him half an hour me-time while she went shopping, so he still had a couple of minutes to figure out what he should do about Jessica. And he did feel strongly that something *had to be done* – but what, exactly, he had no

idea. When he first read the piece, he had thought for the briefest moment that it might be a different Jessica Carter involved in the attack. He'd yearned for this to be the case, but the circumstantial evidence soon convinced him otherwise. The location, for a start.

The other detail that convinced Stuart that the Jessica Carter in the piece was none other than his sister was the presence of an EDL member on the train. From the age of eighteen, she had been drawn to far right movements and the sorry thugs who made up their membership. By the time their mother died and the house was sold, she was active within the BNP. It was around this time that Stuart cut all contact with her. Their lives had diverged too dramatically for him to call her his sister. She was out of control; lost to him. The fact that she'd gone back on her word and claimed all the money from the house sale instead of sharing it equally with him just made it easier to cut all ties. Yet while it had been a relief to know he'd never again have to listen to her views on 'bloody immigrants' or how the country was going to the dogs, there was one fact that made cutting his sister out of his life the hardest thing he'd ever done. As far as he knew, she was his only living relative. Their father, a feckless alcoholic wheeler-dealer, had disappeared for good when Stuart was eight. They'd never met his folks up in Pollock near Glasgow, and for a long time he hadn't cared whether he ever saw him again. As an adult, Stuart had made half-hearted attempts to locate him, but had come up with nothing. Both his parents had been only children – a factor in them getting together in the first place, as well as a shared capacity and enthusiasm for booze – so he had no aunts or uncles he could contact. His mother, who had moved from Walworth in South London to Margate in the great exodus to Kent in the 1970s, had no family left alive either. So it was just him and Jess. And this knowledge made what he'd just read in the paper so much harder to bear. Despite his almost visceral aversion to her, he still felt, as an older brother, a strong sense of responsibility. She had to be stopped, and it was his duty to stop her. Should he get on a train to Broadstairs and track her down? Try and shake some sense

into her? Prevent her from ever doing something like this again? The memory of the last time he saw her argued against this. They'd shouted and sworn at each other for a full ten minutes, wished each other dead, and narrowly avoided a physical fight. He didn't want another scene like that. If he was honest with himself, he just wanted the whole business to go away quietly.

But should he tell Efua about his sister's terrible actions? That was a more pressing question. Neither of them had had any time to read the paper in detail since Kwesi was born in February – Stuart's half hour in Stella's Room was a rare holiday from the battering routine of parenting. Their world was now one of bottle sterilisers, nappy changing stations, and nights when they were awake more than they were asleep. Efua was unlikely to encounter a page-eight story about an incident of hate-crime, unless she read it online, which was still a possibility. The only part of the physical paper Efua read with any scrutiny was the weekend book review section. As an English teacher and aspiring novelist, she devoured as much of this as she could. She often read it while feeding Kwesi in the rocking chair they'd bought from Ikea for that very purpose. Stuart didn't want her to come across his sister's name and read about her by accident. Yet he didn't want her to see it unless she had to – they'd be talking of little else for weeks and months. The fact was, Efua had never met his sister and he wanted it to stay that way. No, he told himself, he must keep it to himself and hope for the best. There was no reason he should spoil both their mornings.

He looked at his watch again. Ten on the dot. He was late.

Taking a hasty sip of the stone-cold latte, he stood up, folding the paper carefully so it showed the cover and not the offending piece. Then he slipped it into his battered leather satchel and checked his mobile to see if his wife had called. She hadn't.

As he paid at the counter, he took a look around the café and tried to imagine what Jessica would make of it. She'd scorn it for being a hipster hellhole. A hang-out for overpaid middle-class metropolitans. There was a tasteful chalkboard boasting gluten-free beers;

framed pictures of igneous rocks; little alcoves with hampers and wine bottles. All of it seemed suddenly laughable, or obscene. For some reason, since reading her name in print, he was seeing the world through his sister's eyes.

Taking back his card, all he could do was grunt affirmations as Elisaveta tried to engage him in small talk.

'When am I going to see your gorgeous boy again?'

'Soon.'

'I want to know you'll bring him here on Sunday for lunch.'

'Sure.'

'I'm serious. I invite you personally.'

Stuart smiled. 'I love your roasts, but I think we've got something on.'

'And why do you never write a review of Stella's Room?'

At this he had to laugh. It felt odd to force his face into the contortions of laughter after the morning he'd had. 'Conflict of interest. You're my local, and I never review my local. The fact I keep coming back is the best review.'

He dropped a couple of pound coins into the tips jar and glanced again at his watch.

'Gotta go, Elisaveta.'

She called out after him as he made his way to the door. 'Bring your little boy back. He's got eyelashes to die for!'

And then he was out on the street.

He took a sharp left and headed with purpose for the Broadway. The morning sun was pleasingly warm on his forehead. Gasoline smells and patisserie aromas from Evelina's next door filled his nostrils, and he felt suddenly sorry that he hadn't finished his croissant.

If he was quick, he'd make it to JoJo Maman Bébé in two minutes. He tried to raise his mood and focus on his family. Efua was obviously enjoying shopping for babygros and

knitted knick-knacks if she hadn't called him. She was strict about punctuality – something they both joked about. Her years as a teacher had instilled it, and she was unable to run on what she called 'African time' anymore. African time meant that if a restaurant said it would open at 1pm, it would almost certainly not be open until 1.30 or even 2pm. Or even until the evening. He'd seen this for himself when they'd made a pilgrimage to the Accra Palace in Clapton, which reputedly did the best jollof rice in London. Against Efua's advice, they'd turned up promptly at 1pm, only to see the *closed* sign and the staff behind the window shooting the breeze, hauling the fryers out from the back room. It looked as if they'd be there for some time. He and Efua had gone for coffee next door for a full hour, his stomach rumbling; his wife taunting him: 'I told you so!'

Stuart rounded the corner opposite St James's church and stepped up his pace. The tall spire dominated the sky. Efua's mother, Yoofi, had started worshipping there on a Sunday after abandoning her local church in Wood Green so she could see her grandchild and keep an eye on her daughter. Across the road was the triple frontage of Planet Organic, an example of greedy corporate clustering that Yoofi commented on every time she visited. 'Adeji! Why they need so many!' Stuart had learned many Twi words over the years, and had started using them himself, especially expressions of surprise such as *adeji*. Yoofi was always struck by the difference between Wood Green and Muswell Hill. Her favourite restaurant was the very un-Wood Green Toff's, which Stuart glanced at briefly over the road to check it was still there. A long-standing superior fish and chip restaurant with banquet seating, his mother-in-law loved it precisely for the reason that they didn't think selling kebabs and burgers was a good idea.

As he passed the child-friendly Bob's Café – always packed, always impossible to get a table – he realised he was still looking at the street with his sister's judgemental eyes. Across the road was a branch of the posh Hampstead butcher's, the other being on

Haverstock Hill, which sold twenty-quid chickens and pricey cuts of Iberico ham. There was a Le Creuset kitchenware shop with its sign in the window announcing it was a ‘Proud Supporter of Muswell Hill Mums’, the local parents’ group that Efua had joined with bad grace, though she’d found the discount card useful. Then an outlet of the upmarket Sally Bourne interiors, and, further along, the Crocodile Café and Gift Shop, with its bunting-strewn side-alley leading to the play area. The Crocodile was his second-favourite place to eat after Stella’s Room, but he could hear Jessica’s scorn for its self-conscious seventies leather sofas and smashed-avocado-with-everything menu. Compared to where they’d grown-up, Stuart conceded, Muswell Hill was peak *haute bourgeoisie*. Yet it had always been like this. He’d like to have said the place had changed since he first encountered it twenty years ago, when he was a callow History and Politics student at the LSE. He’d like to have said it had been gentrified beyond recognition, like the Brixton covered market where he and Nadia, his first serious girlfriend, had shopped for harissa paste, date syrup and *ras el hanout*. Or like Shoreditch High Street, or Walthamstow Village, or any number of London locations. But Muswell Hill had never had any betting shops, or estate-serving laundrettes, or flat-roof pubs to erase. A few more pricey delis had sprung up, and a branch of the sportswear chain Sweaty Betty, which he passed on his right, but by and large, with the exception of the Odeon, it had all stayed the same.

Crossing the junction of Princes Road, he sighted JoJo Maman Bébé. His wife wasn’t standing impatiently on the street, which was a good sign. As he closed in on the shop, he heard a burst of seagull-screech overhead, and immediately thought of his sister once more. Their innocent days at the beach. Their childhood growing up by the sea. And now the awful fact of what she’d done.

And then he was inside; the gulls silenced behind the ringing door.

Stuart spotted Efua at once. She was at the rear of the long, grey-painted room, with its rails of tiny gloves and hats and shoes, all ready for winter. A Lilliputian department store, with a strong dinosaur theme.

Efua turned and saw him, her face flowering into a smile. Their son was strapped to her front in a blue sling; his eyes tightly closed in sleep, just his crinkled brow and eyes visible.

‘Hello, darling,’ he said, relieved to see her, as if he’d just found his way back to civilisation. ‘Sorry I’m a bit late.’

He stroked Kwesi’s sleeping head very gently so as not to wake him, then leaned in to kiss his wife. She tasted of cocoa butter and green tea.

‘Take a look at this,’ she said, holding up a knitted green hat with little ears that would make its wearer resemble a tiny diplodocus. ‘Isn’t it the greatest?’

‘It’s – unique.’

‘Do you think we should get it?’

‘Why not.’

Despite being up half the night to answer Kwesi’s cries, his wife had made the effort, as she always did, to look good. Gold hoop earrings. Biker jacket over an orange poloneck, chunky zips open at the cuffs. A stripe of strikingly red lippy, and a thriving seventies afro, which she’d been growing out since the start of the year. She might have been on her way to a fashion shoot for all anyone knew, with their son as de rigueur accessory. By contrast, Stuart’s milk-spattered Harrington and plain white t-shirt signified the uniform of the New Dad. His heavy-framed glasses were the wrong prescription, making him look like a myopic Michael Caine. And his battered boots and regulation black jeans looked tired and uncared for. There was simply never the time, that was the problem.

Efua pulled at the dinosaur ears. ‘Kwes’ would look so cute in it, don’t you think?

When it gets colder.’

‘So let’s get it,’ Stuart said briskly.

‘Hey, what’s up? Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine. Just the usual worries. Print journalism disappearing into the void and all that. Shall we go to the woods?’

Highgate Woods was the number-one destination for Muswell Hill parents, with its endless sylvan paths, its big Pavilion Café, and spacious split-level playground.

‘Sure,’ Efua said uncertainly. ‘I’ll just buy this and we’ll go.’

When they arrived at the wrought-iron gate to the woods ten minutes later, Stuart was sweating. The gentian sky above belonged more to a July morning than a day in September. The elaborate gate, one of many entrances, was formed into animals: a fox, a rabbit, a deer – all of which he looked forward to naming for his son. They threw long blue shadows over the gravel as he and Efua pushed through, leaving the city behind for the magical world within. It was their favourite place to enter the woods, and they’d often taken Kwesi through this gate in his Bugaboo pushchair until they realised the sling was the better option for the uneven paths.

On the way, they’d talked about Yoofi, and how to encourage her to do some actual babysitting rather than just turn up at their flat unbidden, moan for an hour about the state of the world while Efua cooked plantain and rice for her, before disappearing. In the early days, after Kwesi was born, Stuart was shocked at how his wife thought nothing of running around after her mother, while simultaneously dealing with Kwesi. That’s the way things are, she told him. The older generation took precedence. They also talked about the progress of their son’s reflux – a topic of conversation they returned to at least five times a day, though Stuart

was glad of it now, as a distraction from Jessica. Their son had been premature by four weeks, and, after a difficult birth, he'd been unable to sleep for long without making strange convulsion-like movements while soundlessly mouthing the air and pursing his lips. It took a panicky midnight visit to A&E, two weeks in, for a senior paediatrician to confirm that their son didn't have cerebral palsy, but a condition known as silent reflux. Stuart had thought this was something the elderly suffered from after meals, medicated with Gaviscon. Usually, the consultant told them, reflux in babies is accompanied by epic vomiting – it's a symptom of the digestive system not being mature enough to keep anything down. As Kwesi had been born early, this made sense. His stomach didn't have a proper 'stopper' yet. Silent reflux was harder to diagnose as there was no vomiting, just great discomfort for the child, which explained Kwesi's manic writhing. They were given a prescription for ranitidine to counteract the acid in his stomach, and told to expect the condition to last a year. 'A year?' Efua had asked, incredulous. 'So we're going to be up all night for a whole year?' The paediatrician smiled benevolently. 'Your son is a relatively mild case. With standard reflux, some babies can't keep any food down for long enough to put on weight. They end up straight back in hospital with a nose-feeding tube and a glucose drip.'

And so their night vigils began. Efua had experienced trouble breast-feeding – something Yoofo couldn't fathom, since she'd had 'enough milk to feed a village' – and their son had been on formula from the start, mixed with a shot of the dreaded ranitidine. Their kitchen became a bottle-sterilising factory. It wasn't unusual for Kwesi to wake up over ten times a night in discomfort, demanding milk to soothe him back to sleep. Stuart and Efua had fallen into a routine – he did the feeds up until midnight, while Efua took the graveyard shift. Occasionally, Stuart would take over at 6am while his wife grabbed an hour of blessed sleep before their day began. Seven months in, matters had much improved, but still most nights were broken four or five times by their boy's cries. Efua's sorrow over not being able to

breastfeed, and the reflux saga, had slightly derailed the oxytocin train of the first joyous months of parenthood. But the upside was that Stuart had the unbeatably intimate experience of feeding his son from a bottle. This he did on a beanbag in the broom-cupboard-sized room they'd valiantly converted into a nursery. The midnight sessions were his favourite. The Dream Feed, as it was known, since babies were usually asleep throughout. Beforehand, he would make sure that there were enough bottles of fresh formula milk in the cool bag to last Efua through until dawn. Then, when Kwesi awoke, he would take him up from the *SnüzPod* bassinet next to their bed and carry him into the spare room; the dummy still in his son's mouth, his body elongated and writhing. Then he would turn on the soft yellow night light, slump down on the beanbag with the precious bundle in his arms, and feed the boy for up to twenty minutes; monitoring his tightly closed eyes and dimpled brown cheeks. This he did while experiencing all the oceanic emotions of parenthood. How had he and Efua created such a creature together? How did a new life, with its tenuous hold on the world, manage to thrive and grow and reach maturity? Looking down at his son, he could see how Kwesi's face contained all the features of his adult face in miniature. Just to imagine them both kicking a ball around, or going for drink in twenty years' time, filled his heart with hot paternal pride. Such a precious thing he held in his arms! Just the way the boy's tiny hand came out of its sleeve to correct the flow of milk in the bottle broke his heart every time. And how could a human hand be so small? Something told Stuart he would remember these moments forever – the boy in his arms; the play of shadows on the wall from the trees outside on Fortis Green Road; the greedy gurgle his son made when all the milk had gone. Yes, he told himself, he'd never forget this. At forty-one, he'd finally made it to adulthood himself.

And now, in Highgate Woods, with the September sun streaming through the trees, Efua said,

'Can we stop talking about kids for once and talk about my book?'

Stuart came to a halt before the strange obelisk water fountain that marked the place where the paths diverged. A brown-marble Victorian folly, it bore a plaque that announced it was *The Gift of a Few Friends*. Efua stopped next to him. He could see beads of perspiration on her lineless forehead. The Indian summer the country was enjoying seemed at odds with the vicious political climate that had arisen since June.

‘Sure. What’s the latest?’

Efua shook her head, and began walking again, checking that Kwesi was still blissfully asleep against her chest. ‘More depressing news.’

Stuart fell into step beside her. ‘Tell me.’

‘Another rejection for my novel. I don’t even remember sending it to them.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘It came in the post this morning.’

‘What, they sent you an actual letter, not an email?’

‘Yep, the standard *not quite right for our list* brush-off.’

Stuart wiped his brow. ‘I can’t believe they sent an actual letter.’

‘I know. I suppose it’s better than the usual pass when they request the manuscript and then ghost you.’

‘That’s so rude.’

‘Standard practice now, I’m afraid . . .’

Efua had completed her first novel before Kwesi was born, and had diligently sent it out to agents and editors. Several had bitten, but by-and-large she’d been rejected. And then she’d struck gold. Or thought she had. She’d been briefly taken on by an agent who had shopped the novel around the industry, then dropped her when it didn’t sell. However, his wife hadn’t given up hope. When they’d met almost a decade ago, she’d told him how serious she was about writing fiction. She didn’t just want to be another English-teacher-

who-wrote – a walking cliché, she said – but a writer who happened to be a teacher, a job she still loved. Behind many of her rejections there was another agenda going on, she suspected. It wasn't that the writing wasn't up to standard (and he could attest that it *was* of a very high standard, after going through endless drafts of her debut). According to Efua, she had been repeatedly turned down because they expected her fiction to discuss race and prejudice and the 'ethnic experience', specifically that of the 'tragic black woman'; the oppressed, martyred, angry black woman, raging at an unfair society. She'd been furious that she wasn't free to write about what the damn hell she liked, like any white male author. A couple of agents had questioned why her largely magic realist work set in a dystopian Paris (a city in which she'd spent the first ten years of her life with her mother) didn't include any black characters. When she reminded them that in the world of her novel they'd all been wiped out by decades of ethnic cleansing, they said readers wouldn't buy a book by a black woman without any black characters. 'Yet when you pitch them a novel about black experience they say it's very *niche*, it won't sell. So you can't win!'

After Kwesi was born, she'd intended to attempt another book, writing 'in his naps', but this had proved a bitter farce. The intense concentration and time it took to write halfway decent fiction wasn't provided by the two, brief one-hour respites in the middle of the day when she was already sleep-deprived from the night before. Everything she'd started had ground to a halt. But she refused to pack it in. And she saved her fiercest ire for those whose subtext had been 'give up now, love'. Sometimes it seemed the list of people who'd slighted or rejected her out of hand was endless. Stuart was in awe of her elephant's memory when it came to this. There'd been a few newspaper editors he'd pitched to over the years who'd blanked his emails, but he'd brushed it off, concluding they were too grand or just too inordinately busy to respond. Efua seemed to be livid about *everyone* who'd blanked her. Like Samuel Beckett, she kept a fuck-you hate-list of everyone in the business who'd slighted

her. There was the roll call of agents who'd requested her full manuscript and then vanished when she'd made polite enquiries. The editor she'd sat next to at a party who refused to reply to her when she followed up the next day. The male agent who said he liked her book's brave feminist stance, and who'd later been accused of sexual harassment. Even a black professor who'd once interviewed her for a London college – whom she'd made contact with again a decade later, and to whom she'd emailed a note about her novel after a pleasant meeting at a reading of the professor's book – was on her list. 'We chatted for twenty minutes,' she told Stuart, 'and I filled him in on my progress over the years. He seemed gracious, supportive and generous. Then when I email him about my novel – nothing. Not even a two-line reply. Like I was shit he'd found on the heel of his shoe! I didn't even burden him with the manuscript, just a one-page synopsis . . .' But her severest censure was saved for Ulrika Peterson, the agent who had briefly taken her on and then dumped her. This woman was the devil incarnate in her eyes. Ulrika Peterson represented everything that was wrong with present-day publishing. And on and on it went. Stuart had learned to be quietly circumspect whenever the subject of the literary world was brought up. His wife's hopes of literary glory were something, he thought privately, that had a large potential for ending in tears.

'I'm really sorry you're still getting those form letters,' Stuart said. 'It will happen one day. Trust me.'

'Maybe I should just be a hack like you,' she laughed. 'They can't stop offering journalists two-book deals after six-way auctions.'

Stuart knew this to be true because, for a while, Efua had taken out a secret and pricey subscription to *The Bookseller* online where such success stories were continually reported, until a row about their finances had forced her to give it up.

'Funny you should say that, because I was thinking of putting a proposal together.'

'Don't you start!'

‘I’m not joking,’ Stuart said mirthlessly. ‘*Chips with Everything*, I’m going to call it. A working-class odyssey through the cuisine of the British Isles.’

They’d arrived at the Pavilion Café, a taverna-style place that had an open grill in the summer months and shady outdoor seating. Before them was a chalkboard with the kind of message that would appeal to boomers of a certain age: a drawing of Bob Dylan advertising a drinks promotion: *I started out on Burgundy . . . and so can you! With our new grower’s Coulanges-la-Vineuse, only £3.50 a glass.* Stuart could smell the barbecue already, and it wasn’t even eleven in the morning.

‘Shall we get coffee? I know you’ve already had one.’

‘I could go another,’ Stuart said, thinking of his unfinished latte and the shock of seeing his sister’s name in print. ‘Let’s do it.’

Before Efua could reply, a cry came from her chest. Kwesi’s outraged face appeared above the blue folds of the sling.

‘Let’s go and feed him in there,’ she said, unzipping the cool bag in search of a bottle.

They began to walk around to the front entrance; a wooden gate built into a hedgerow looking out over a big, uneven clearing where football was played all year round.

As Efua placed the teat of a fresh bottle of formula between Kwesi’s lips, silencing him, she said, ‘There *is* something wrong, isn’t there?’

Stuart heaved a sigh. ‘I’m fine.’

Would he have to tell her? It seemed suddenly impossible to hide the news about Jessica from Efua. She was bound to find out sooner than later.

‘No, you’re not. I can tell. I’ve known you long enough. Forget about my book – something’s happened.’

With great reluctance, Stuart opened his satchel and produced the paper. They stopped in the entranceway as he folded it over to page eight. He showed her the article.

Efua's deep brown eyes scanned it perfunctorily for a couple of seconds, then made contact with his.

'Is that who I think it is?'

'Yes,' Stuart said, his chest suddenly full of stones. 'It's my sister. It's Jessica.'

When Stuart was twelve years old, his greatest pleasure was to get up before anyone else and take a walk down to Stone Bay; the lengthy stretch of pale sand that sat under high cliffs directly in front of his house. He loved the force of the wind on his face; the flame of early sun on the waves. Often, he'd have the whole sweeping panorama to himself, except for a lone dog-walker, or a couple of morning swimmers braving the shallows. Out at sea, there was sometimes a flotilla of tiny white sails, or, further out, tankers seemingly stationary on the horizon line. Their lonely horns would sound all night, keeping him awake. Behind him stretched a curving promenade of pastel-painted beach huts at the bottom of the cliffs; locked at that hour, and reached by a winding staircase with a gents' convenience half way up. Years later, he would learn that this was Broadstairs' most popular cruising spot. Later still, there would be a windfarm on the horizon, and red flags on the beach, indicating that it was dangerous to swim, though the fierce waves had never deterred the surfers who sometimes joined him.

Kicking up the fine silty sand, with the frenetic, chip-bloated gulls choiring overhead, Stuart would make his way down to the kelpy rock pools revealed at low tide. There he'd fill his pockets with conch shells, or limestone pebbles riddled with tiny holes by the action of the sea. Sometimes he'd find a perfect hag-stone: a pebble with a hole at its centre. These he

would hold up to the sky. He'd read that you could see the future through the aperture – something he was anxious to know about, given what was happening with his family at the time. His father had finally left a couple of years previously – much to everyone's relief – after which his mother had converted their small, sea-facing house into a Bed & Breakfast. And now their home hummed with the noise of people Stuart had grown to despise.

He would never forget his first sight of their old living room, newly converted into a restaurant area, with all the permanent residents eating a Full English together. It was as if he'd gone on holiday in his own house. The gamey smell of rashers, of fried eggs, of burnt toast was constantly in the air from then on. These permanent residents – all men – were the strangest bunch of desperadoes he'd ever seen. Most had done time. A couple, he realised much later, had been convicted paedophiles. That his mother had allowed these men to stay under the same roof as him and his sister made him burn with fury. Then there was the coin-operated shower she had installed on the landing – 20p a go, with the timer set to four minutes exactly. In the mornings, he would be awoken by the muffled swearing of the men as the water cut-out mid-wash. Many of them were seriously scary. The catatonic men; the Care in the Community refugees; the headcases who would smash up their rooms or leave without paying. In the summer, the tourist trade was supposed to displace these crazies, but it never really did. Families would book in for a week, and leave like haggard veterans when their seven days were up. These holidaymakers rarely complained to his mother, so terrifying was she when her temper was high. A squat woman, with a hulking bosom, and an etched frown in the centre of her forehead, his mother Mimi carried with her a constant aura of threat. Stuart knew the length of her fuse to within a millimetre. By the time he'd begun his early morning forays along Stone Bay, it was his sister who clashed with her the most. Seven, going on eight, Jessica like Stuart had inherited their mother's full bottom lip. This would tremble when she was aggrieved or about to throw a tantrum. She had begun to put on weight

and had become a roly-poly girl, with defiance just starting to show in her flinty eyes. He and Jess still shared a cramped bedroom, and when she and his mother were fighting, he would sit on the top bunk of their beds, his headphones on, in an attempt to block them both out. Most days, he left them to it. He'd given up trying to intervene, like the father who wasn't there.

When he wasn't on the sands of Stone Bay, Stuart liked to wander the town on his own. Broadstairs was small, sandwiched between the Victorian seaside resorts of Margate and Ramsgate. It had been a popular destination itself, and the remnants of its grand past were everywhere. Wrought iron railings. A bandstand. A small but noble pier. Elegant bathing huts that had once had wheels. On the hilly road that dropped into town from the landward side was Pierremont Hall – a big stucco pile that doubled as the Broadstairs Town Council offices. On the headland, overlooking Viking Bay was the old Bleak House – once owned by Charles Dickens himself, as visitors were always reminded – dominating the horizon like a cut-price castle. And what a horizon. Stuart would loiter on one of the many seafront benches for hours, just taking it in. His earliest memories were of this clear view of the sea. There it always was, stretching wide across the horizon, from the mouth of the Thames estuary to the straits of Dover. To witness the sun spangling across the green corrugation of the waves was to feel wonder without compare.

Behind this row of benches, below the tirelessly swarming gulls, was Morelli's, a famous authentic Italian ice-cream parlour with a sleek 50s frontage and neon signs advertising *Cappuccino, Ices, Cones*. Inside, were checkerboard tiles and red-leatherette banquettes in booths, where he and Jess had been taken for knickerbocker glories and sundaes as a special treat. Once their father left they couldn't afford to go, though Stuart still day-dreamed about the deep tubs of fresh ice-cream and their exotic-sounding flavours: *Fior di Latte, Cioccolato, Dolce de Leche*. Further along the seafront were the Victoria Gardens and their modest bandstand, where a brass troupe played to seated pensioners on a Saturday.

They always finished with ‘God Save The Queen’, at which point everyone would creak to their feet.

Between Morelli’s and the bandstand was a plaque set on an ugly concrete block commemorating an old blackface entertainer named Uncle Mack. Put up in the early fifties, it was turning steadily black itself from the salt air and the abrasion of the wind. It was his mum who first pointed out the plaque. He’d been eight years old, walking the descending path with his sister towards the lifts that took you down to Viking Bay, when he’d come across it. Small, with a brass frieze of a banjo-playing man, it read simply: *In Memory of Uncle Mack – Who entertained the residents of and visitors to Broadstairs for over 50 years. (1895-1948) He Brought Joy and Laughter to Young and Old.* He’d been fascinated by Uncle Mack’s jovial face, and asked his mum whether she knew about him. ‘He used to black up,’ his mum said, cackling indulgently. ‘That’s all I know.’ Stuart could see a faint attempt had been made to replicate blackface make-up on Uncle Mack’s beaming brass face. For some reason, he didn’t think blacking up was funny, and told his mother so. Instinctively, he found it vaguely offensive. It seemed like an act of theft and ridicule rolled into one. But at that age he had no idea why this might be. He had a faint memory of a TV programme called *The Black and White Minstrel Show* which his parents used to watch, pissed on the sofa together, laughing and singing along. But it wasn’t shown anymore, and he thought it must have gone out of fashion. Uncle Mack certainly looked like a figure who deserved to remain in the past. A man who played the banjo covered in boot polish didn’t seem very entertaining to him. At the time, Stuart’s half of the shared bedroom was covered with posters of The Style Council, XTC, The Fine Young Cannibals. That was music, not this old fart. Yet, as with discovering the Stone Bay gents was a cottaging location, it would be a few years before he could properly articulate why Uncle Mack’s plaque was so troubling. ‘He looks like an idiot,’

Stuart said as they moved off towards the lifts. His mother refused to be drawn, though Jess said: ‘Well, *I* like him. He’s got a friendly smile.’

Their house, number 56 The Esplanade, was originally a salt-corroded, four-bedroom property overlooking the cliffs. When their mother converted it into the *Stone Bay Bed & Breakfast*, she had builders partition three of the bedrooms, with the fourth occupied by Stuart and Jessica. Then she had the loft turned into a cramped bedroom for herself, from which she oversaw the now six-bedroom guest house like a vodka-drinking black widow. It didn’t take long for the place to be rechristened *Stone Beds* by its residents, due to the hardness of the mattresses. Last in the row, before the road curved inland, *Stone Beds* was too far from town to attract any decent holidaymakers, hence the cast of crooks and nutters who eventually became its long-term residents.

One night, lying in their bunkbeds, a few years after their first summer enduring the sudden intrusion of paying guests into their house, Stuart and Jessica had a long conversation about the future. They often talked like this; Stuart on the top bunk, unable to see his sister, though he could clearly hear her voice from below. The only other sounds were the relentless pounding of the sea, interrupted by the rude horns of the tankers. Closer, behind the flimsy walls, they sometimes heard the uninhibited moaning of the men, or their mother’s hacking smoker’s cough from above.

‘Dad would never have let this happen,’ she said, after they’d been chatting for a while.

‘Well he ain’t coming back, so you’d better get used to it.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I just do.’

‘That’s a load of shit.’

‘Don’t swear!’

Just lately, Jess had been swearing for effect, once using the c-word on their mother, for which she had received a smack around the chops.

‘I bet he’s had enough of whatever slag he’s with.’

‘Look. He left because he hated Mum. Why can’t you get it through your head?’

Their parents had met at the Blue Room nightclub in the Hotel International in Margate in the early seventies when they were both new in town. A tawdry dancehall, it had been described to him and Jess as ‘the place where you both began.’ At the time, Mimi had been working as a dinner lady in a Ramsgate school, while charming Duncan Carter seemed to belong to another world. Tall, stringy, slightly dangerous, and very Scottish, he had a spivvy look about him. He didn’t seem to have a proper job, but clearly had lots of money. He was well-dressed in a sharp if seedy suit, like his hero Frank Sinatra. After they started dating, he’d disappear for long stretches of time, returning with rolls of twenties in his pockets. These wads never lasted long – they were wasted on whiskey and the Margate bookies, where their mother often found him if all else failed. Mimi used to call him the ‘Jack-in-a-Box’, as you never knew when he would pop up next. ‘He could charm the birds off the trees,’ she told them after he left for the last time, ‘but you wouldn’t trust ‘im further than you could throw ‘im.’ He also carried an edge of violence, and often lashed out at Stuart and his mother. Never Jessica – she was his ‘little princess’. He’d never hit her, and maybe that was why she yearned for his return. Stuart, however, was glad to see the back of him.

His sister raised her voice suddenly. ‘He’d beat up those blokes and tell em where to go. Especially that dirty old bastard who keeps leering at me.’

‘How can he be leering? You’re twelve years old.’

‘Exactly. It’s disgusting.’

‘Dad doesn’t care what happens to us,’ Stuart said bleakly. ‘That’s why he left.’

‘Well, Mum said he’ll come back. He always does . . .’

There was a pause. From out at sea came the sonorous groan of a foghorn.

‘Anyway, soon as I can, I’m getting out of here.’

‘What? You’re going to run away?’

‘Nah. Get a job or something. Move to London.’

The fact that Stuart hadn’t thought this plan through didn’t deter him. He just knew he couldn’t stay.

‘And leave me here with Mum? Thanks.’

‘If I have to, yeah. You seem to believe every word she says.’

‘You’re just like Dad. A selfish bastard. Only out for yourself...’

His sister’s damning words came back to haunt him many times over the years. Was he only out for himself? Was he a selfish bastard? He certainly felt like a bastard – fatherless and rudderless, with no male role model other than Paul Weller from the Jam to guide him through adolescence and beyond. Before music, his other boyhood crazes had been – in quick succession – boats, sharks, and American movies. But none of those provided any masculine guidance, except for the figure of Brodie, the conscientious Police chief from *Jaws*, who spent the film doing everything in his power to protect his family and a town under threat from a killer Great White shark and an unscrupulous mayor. That was how to conduct yourself as a man, Stuart thought. But Brodie was American and fictional, and Hollywood belonged to another planet.

At the Charles Dickens Secondary School – a failing state comp just outside Broadstairs – Stuart was bullied for having an alcoholic father and mother. Another reason to make plans for leaving as soon as he could. But how could he put this plan into action with no money or contacts? At the time, he wasn’t even aware he was working-class, or how class

operated to keep you from doing anything different from your parents for the rest of your life. It was only when his English teacher, Mr Ford – whom he loved – *told him* he was that he realised. He'd had no idea until then. Mr Ford had been reading from DH Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* one day when he paused and said: 'Of course, most of you are growing up in working-class households and will know about this first-hand.' Stuart hadn't known what he was talking about, because his dad wasn't a miner. In fact, he had no idea *what* his dad was, since he wasn't living with them and had never had a job anyway when he was there. But from that moment on, Stuart became acutely aware of class. There was a smattering of posher pupils at school – though in retrospect he supposed they would just have been average lower-middle-class kids – but they were conspicuous in a Thanet comprehensive. They used odd words, like 'dinner' or even 'supper' for tea, and called their parents by their first names. Stuart and Jess had fish fingers and oven chips for tea, never supper. Or Findus crispy pancakes and frozen peas. With ice cream and chocolate or strawberry sauce for pudding, never dessert. They certainly never called their mum by her first name, though his sister called her 'mardy Mimi' once and received the slapping of her life.

When it came time to take his GCSEs, Mr Ford stepped in and gave Stuart extra free tuition. This seemed extraordinary to Stuart, but perhaps Mr Ford could see how badly he would do given there was no encouragement at home. And it worked – he did do considerably better than expected. But instead of staying on for A-levels, he left school at sixteen, despite heavy petitioning from Mr Ford. Part of the reason was he felt that he should start making a living as soon as possible if he wanted to escape Broadstairs. The other part was Angela.

Angela Reed was a girl from a well-to-do family in Deal whom Stuart had been seeing since he was sixteen. A year older than him, she lived in a Georgian house on Middle Street, and spoke like a TV presenter. Her family took her to Tuscany every year. Stuart had

never been on holiday, not a single one, and whenever he and Jessica complained their mother would yell: ‘You’re in Broadstairs. You’re already on fucking holiday!’ Angela’s life was another world, and he wanted to be part of it. At first, that is. Blonde, small, with playful dimples and a confident strident manner, Angela knew things that Stuart couldn’t possibly begin to know. She knew how to order wine in a restaurant, how to pronounce parmesan, how to speak Spanish. She had her own car and bank account. And her parents, two sweet old lefties who had raised their daughter on a diet of muesli and subtitled films, loved him. It was at Angela’s house, at long dinner parties during which he suffered feelings of acute social diminishment, that he first discovered his love of food and cookery. Angela’s parents would ‘rustle up’ a Boeuf a la Gardiane from one of Elizabeth David’s books on Mediterranean cuisine, followed by a summer pudding with raspberries picked from their garden. Her father thought it particularly important that Stuart know about wine, and pretty soon he was able to distinguish a sangiovese from a cabernet sauvignon. He knew his grapes, if nothing else. And it was at their great oak dining table that he first learned how to eat an artichoke. Watching him gnaw away manfully at the whole plant, Angela discreetly showed him how to take the succulent flesh out with a spoon before discarding the rest. For this he was grateful, as he had had no idea how many artichoke slices he could get through without being sick. It was at Angela’s house, also, that he lost his virginity. In her parents’ colossal double bed, no less, when they were away on a mini break to Riga.

Stuart was dimly aware at the time that he was some kind of working-class mascot or oddity to Angela – and to her parents, too. He sensed their relish in showing him off as a boy from the other side of the tracks at their convivial evenings of Margaux and homemade crème brûlée. The thought troubled him so much that he considered splitting up with her. In the end, he didn’t have to make the decision. Six months after leaving school, while working minimum-wage hours in a garden centre, Angela drove up in her MG and told him she was

seeing someone else. The school's football star, Roy Tennyson, a posh boy and a prick. He'd been heartbroken, but concealed it. He told her, dry-eyed, that she and Roy were a better match anyway, and went back to baling up diamond-mesh fencing.

The split with Angela sent him on a downward plunge. He left *Stone Beds* without telling his mother and sister and went to sleep on a series of friends' sofas. He started drinking in the roughest Broadstairs pubs, such as the Tartar Frigate, where Union Jacks and St George's would flutter outside all year long. With his mate Andy, he started smoking skunk; and, when it was mushroom season, combing the dewy grass of the fields outside Margate for the tell-tale spindly stalks. He let his appearance go, wearing the same checked shirt for weeks, never washing his hair and growing out his stubble. Luckily, it was the early 90s, and the American bands were big. All of them wore plaid and looked similarly dishevelled, so Stuart didn't stand out. After a year, he felt himself spiralling out of control. Lying on Andy's pitching sofa after a night of uncountable pints at the Frigate, he would feel as if he were being sucked into a vortex. And following him down into the void was the figure of his absent father, telling him he was always destined to end up like this – just like him.

The terror of turning into his dad pulled him out of his nosedive. After a year of madness, he found himself enrolling at Canterbury Sixth Form College to take his A-levels. It was a poster at a bus stop that forced his hand. An idealised portrait of happy, smiling, clean, well-dressed students larking about on the concrete steps of the college in the sunshine. Hadn't he always wanted that life for himself? Didn't he want to get an education instead of drinking himself into the ground every night with a bunch of lunatics? He chose English, History and Politics, and it was at Canterbury that he fell in love for the first time. Angela had just been a necessary experiment, he decided, when he first met Nadia Hakim. Nadia was doing the same A-levels, and they were immediately attracted to each other when they first

exchanged glances in the college cafeteria. After five minutes talking to her, he realised she was the first person of colour he'd had a proper conversation with, such was the monoculture of East Kent. He remembered the first time a black kid had walked into the classroom at Charles Dickens School; the collective intake of breath. The weight of resentment had almost been tangible. Nadia was a brilliant talker. Alive, knowledgeable, and playfully pugnacious. She put a lot of people off, but that was part of her attraction, he understood. She looked striking too, with her melting brown eyes, and DMs with purple laces. Her mother was from Lebanon, her father an American – absent, also, and this was certainly a factor in he and Nadia getting together. They quickly made a team and distanced themselves from the other students. It helped that they were both far ahead of everyone else academically. After two years, they were close to being considered star pupils. They would be inseparable for five years.

It was at Canterbury that Stuart's obsession with food really took off, though he was never much of a chef himself. Nadia would cook for them both, introducing him to fiery tagines, and fattoush salads, and incredible hummus that tasted nothing like the fake stuff that came in sad supermarket tubs. And it was at college that he became seriously embarrassed by being working class. More so than with Angela, if that were possible. A lot of this shame revolved around food, he realised, and how to navigate menus. He'd never used a cafetiere until he was eighteen. Obsessed as he was with food, he didn't know how to pronounce half the things he was presented with on the few occasions he and Nadia had the money to eat out. *Pollo alla Cacciatora? Timballo del Gattopardo? Risi e bisi?* Unlike Angela, he'd never been to Tuscany as a kid and learnt the lingo. And when they both finally moved to London to study – Nadia at King's to read English, he at LSE to read History and Politics – his embarrassment at being working class only became more acute. He would never forget the shame of pronouncing 'ciabatta' incorrectly in an Italian restaurant. Stuart had been in his

first year at LSE, when he and a bunch of middle-class students went to a place on Long Acre. They asked Stuart to pick the bread from the menu and he tripped over the word spectacularly. ‘Sigh-of-batter,’ he mumbled, so as no one would hear him properly. The waitress laughed in his face, but his friends were suitably polite and understanding, like the good public-school kids they were. Food was a class fault-line, he realised. What on earth was a rocket salad? What did green leaves have to do with jet propulsion? Or buffalo mozzarella for that matter? He was lost.

Gradually, after some Italian lessons, he became better at negotiating the new world he’d been plunged into. And at disguising his Estuary vowels. Yet the lingering feeling of inferiority never left him. He never quite got over it. And a deficit of confidence. Every middle-class student he met in London during his three years at university was massively, intimidatingly confident. When had they acquired this? How did they seem to know everything at nineteen? Many of them knew how to ski, or mountaineer. They had parents who read the *Guardian* or the *Telegraph* and threw ironic cocktail parties at their second homes in the shires. He never quite felt entitled to the world in the same way they did, yet he never stopped wanting to, either. At the time, it felt necessary to distance himself from his mother and sister. He wanted to get as far away from their world as possible. Jessica had left school at sixteen, and was helping their mum run the B&B, while in her eyes he was ‘swanning around in London’. He’d been back to visit a couple of times, but it hadn’t been a success. The one time they travelled up on the train to see him had been a disaster. They’d taken one look at the colour of Nadia’s skin and decided, he realised, to hate her. He couldn’t pack them off back to Broadstairs fast enough.

Eventually – and maybe inevitably – he and Nadia started to drift apart. Though never really apart physically – their halls of residence were on the same streets – they parted company on the inside. As she became more politicised, Stuart became less so. Initially, he’d

entertained ideas of being a Westminster journalist when he first arrived, but soon gave up when realised just how posh you had to be to walk those corridors of power. And just how knowledgeable and confident. When he and Nadia finally split – not bitterly, but tenderly, vowing always to be friends – he ended up writing for the listings magazines. *Time Out* and *City Limits*, which was still limping on back then. By the time he was twenty-five, he was renting a flat on his own in Tufnell Park, penning the ‘Going Out’ column for the Standard. They paid well back then – he was out five nights a week with press tickets to gigs, plays, movies – restaurants too, which was when he started writing about food. The only good thing in his life was his career. The *Independent* had hired him as a restaurant critic, and for a while his photo and byline were in a national broadsheet every week. It was around this time he met Bernadette. Before there was Efua, there was Bernadette, and looking back he could see how knowing one without first knowing the other was unthinkable. Bernadette paved the way for his wife. She was tall, broad of hip and mind, with meticulously maintained cornrows, and a warm, enticing scent of cocoa butter. A primary school teacher, with Nigerian parents, Stuart met her in a pub while a cheesy band played on stage. She was out with her fellow teachers, and the only black woman in the room. When he found himself standing next to her at the bar, they hit it off immediately. She thought he was vaguely familiar. He took pleasure in telling her he wrote about food for the Indie. ‘I read you every week!’ she yelled over the pub din, almost spilling her pint of London Pride. ‘You know nothing about food.’ At this, Stuart laughed, which was just as well as she invited him over to join her friends.

They went out with each other for over two years. He soon discovered Bernadette was pretty great in bed, too. He remembered how impossibly aroused she became the first time he went down on her. ‘You made me come,’ she said afterwards. ‘And no one makes me come.’ This kind of compliment, whether designed to give a man confidence or not, certainly did the trick. No matter how exhausted they were by their jobs, they made a point of going out every

weekend to bars, movies, the theatre. It was with Bernadette that Stuart really got to know what it was like to be in a mixed-race relationship. Nadia had been comparatively light of skin. But Bernadette was very definitely and proudly a black woman. When they ventured out together they received sneers from white women and comments from black boys. ‘What you doing with him, gal?’ a kid asked Bernadette once on a bus. ‘He da devil.’ ‘I’m wiv’ ‘im cos he got a bigger dick dan you, bwoy,’ was Bernadette’s slashing retort. He’d never heard her do the full Hackney before. Most of the time, he could forget he was a white man going out with a black woman, but at the end of any given evening something always conspired to remind him. Bernadette laughed it off. She’d always gone out with white guys and was used to it. She roped him in to talk about being a journalist at her school, to demonstrate to her Year Fives that anyone from any background could make it if they tried hard enough. She was also showing him off as her partner, implicitly saying it was cool to go out with whomever you wanted when you grew up.

Out of everyone from his twenties, including Nadia, Bernadette was the only woman Stuart stayed in touch with. After they split – more out of boredom than anything else – they became firm friends. Meeting for pints of her favourite London Pride, or going to a movie together, it seemed impossible after a while to think that they’d ever slept with each other. They still received the same static when they stepped out in public, but it didn’t seem to matter now they weren’t going to share a future. Bernadette became a head teacher, of the same Hackney co-ed where he’d gone to speak. He was very proud of her; and it was Bernadette and teaching he spoke about when he first encountered Efua at a party for fellow journalists in one of those colossal, five-storey stucco houses in Belsize Park.

‘I went out with a teacher once,’ Stuart said. ‘She’s a good friend now.’

Efua stood before him on the rattan carpet while intense young men and women necking mohitos worked the dimly-lit room around them. She was gloriously, magnetically

beautiful, and he tried hard to disguise his attraction. She was also sharp as a switchblade, and, he realised, in the two minutes he'd been talking to her since almost spilling soda water down her front at the drinks table, wonderfully funny and opinionated. With her weight canted onto her right hip, her flowing African-print dress almost reaching her trainers, her hair in a kind of quiff that made him think at first (not displeasingly) that she might be queer or bi, she was a supernova; illuminating the whole room. He felt he was leaning towards her somehow, his left hip gravitating towards her right like a minor moon, and he tried helplessly to correct his posture.

‘Really?’ Efua said. ‘I can never be friends with my exes.’

‘Same with most of mine. She’s a headteacher now.’

Efua sneered in a way he would come to love. More a righteous, lopsided smile that held irony and an invitation to contradict her. ‘I can’t see my school making me Head this side of the next millennium. Not a black woman.’

‘My friend’s black, actually.’

Efua took a step back, the ice and lemon jumping in her glass. It was as if she were properly assessing him for the first time. ‘You’re kidding me. Well, *bon chance* is all I can say.’ She had a habit back then of peppering her speech with French, and he discovered later that she’d grown up with her mother in Paris. Her mum had worked as a cleaner, commuting from the banlieues to Saint-Germain every day, but the virulent racism of France had forced them to move to London when Efua was ten. She had an aunt and uncle who lived in Wood Green, and so they started a new life over here. ‘So...’ and she took a long run up, her sudden smile acknowledging she was attracted to him also. ‘What was it like?’

‘What was what like?’

‘You know – being a white bloke going out with a black woman.’

Stuart shrugged. He'd never really seen in it those terms until he'd been forced to, and he refused to do so now. The women of his twenties had just been women to him; though he was only just beginning to realise how *being in the world* might feel for them.

'Fine. In fact, most of my girlfriends have been women of colour.'

Efua laughed and looked at him askance. 'You got a fetish or something? I've met dudes like you.'

'If it is a fetish, it's undiagnosed.' Stuart glanced around the room, his heart sinking slightly to observe the furious networking going on in every corner. Why couldn't they relax? It was a party! 'Thank god you're not a writer. Everyone here's so uptight, so competitive.'

For the first time, Efua appeared unprepared or unsteady. 'I, er, *do* write, actually. For myself. I write for myself. Fiction mainly.'

'So you're a real writer. Not like us idiots.'

'Well, I'm not published yet. I don't think it counts until then.'

'Of course it counts. If you write, then you're a writer. It's *who you are*.'

Years later, Efua admitted it was Stuart's last phrase that made her fall in love with him. Finally, a man who took her seriously. After they'd talked for another ten minutes and exchanged numbers on their phones, they agreed to meet for coffee sometime and chat about writing. Stuart didn't know then that this coffee and chat, in the Wood Green branch of Costas, would eventually lead to them getting married, moving together to a gothic third-floor flat in Muswell Hill, and having a child named Kwesi after Efua's own absent father. He only knew that Efua's eyes were the colour of a spoon of honey in the sunshine, and that for days afterwards he couldn't stop seeing them every time he closed his own.

‘It’s over,’ Stuart cried, draining the last dregs of his soily Sumatran filter coffee. ‘That’s it. We’re witnessing the end of democracy. Civilisation, even! We’re now officially post-truth.’

‘It’s certainly very shit,’ Efua said tentatively, as they both watched Donald Trump’s candyfloss comb-over bouncing on the TV screen. Seconds before, he’d been announced as the 45th president of the USA.

They were both sitting at the small, triangular dining table in their dressing gowns. The TV was in the toy-scattered living room, and they stared at it in dismay from the cramped through-kitchen. It was 6am, and a grey November dawn was showing reluctantly in the square of window behind them. On the mantelpiece, the stationary green light of the baby monitor told them Kwesi was finally, blessedly asleep. That he had, indeed, slept through one of the most terrible events in recent history. Though technically, he’d been up for most of the

night, as had they – or, rather, as had Efua. The fact that Stuart had managed a solid five hours, while Efua had been in and out constantly, was contributing to the atmosphere of simmering resentment between them. At six months, Kwesi had been transferred from the *SnizPod* to a cot, which Stuart had constructed semi-ineptly from a flat-pack. The transition hadn't been smooth to say the least, and, three months later, the inequality in Stuart and Efua's sleep-deprivation carried an almost physical presence in the room. Most mornings, he increasingly felt they were like two children themselves, aggrieved at who'd been handed the biggest bowl of ice-cream.

And now the disaster in the States. A disaster for the world.

In one sense, Stuart was grateful for the distraction – he didn't want another row at that hour in the morning. But he dearly wished things hadn't turned out this way.

'I can only imagine how Hillary's feeling,' he said, shaking his head and scratching the four-days of stubble he'd allowed to grow on his chin. 'Let alone Obama. It must have been rigged. All the state and national polls showed that Clinton would prevail. Something terrible has been done to the democratic process.'

'Make America white again . . .' Efua said ruefully, her eyes glazed with exhaustion.

'Imagine being black or poor or gay or disabled in the USA at this moment.'

'That's what I'm doing.'

'No way would this have happened without Brexit. We're witnessing a paradigm shift, a –' Stuart struggled for the words, 'a victory for the far right, for the forces of darkness. For nationalism, extremism, for... *stupidism*.'

'It's a bit early for paradigm shifts,' Efua muttered, getting up from the table and heading to the sink to wash up a pile of Dr Brown's bottles and dummies, the debris of the night.

‘Do you remember what Trump said in the summer?’ he added over his shoulder. ‘He said the Brexit vote was a great victory. A great fucking victory. Let’s never forget that.’

‘I can’t remember my own name, darling,’ Efua said over noise of the taps. ‘Let alone what that racist fool said in the summer.’

Stuart returned to the TV screen; its sound almost inaudible, as they hadn’t wanted to wake Kwesi. The pictures told their own story. There he was, Trump with his hands raised in a double-fist lock above his head; a bloated man-baby wallowing in his victory, looking both infinitely devious but also slightly surprised at his luck.

Like many of their friends, Stuart and Efua had just imagined Clinton would win; that the baton of the presidency would be passed smoothly from the gracious Obama to the formidable and experienced Hillary. They thought America would see sense at the eleventh hour, and flush the abysmal sixteen-months of Trump’s campaign down the toilet, with its meatheads in red baseball caps chanting Make America Great Again. Just the recent sight of Trump mocking a disabled US reporter at a rally was more than even some hard-right pundits could stand. Who was this corrupt, sick, racist property mogul turned reality-TV star, with his history of sexual assault and dodgy business dealings? How could a majority (slim and immediately contested) of the American people vote in a man who, on record, had boasted of grabbing women ‘by the pussy’? Who could back a candidate with strong links to Steve Bannon, executive chairman of the fascist online scumsheet *Breitbart News*? Who could vote for a man whose wife – soon to be First Lady – was a grinning, perma-tanned, robotic clotheshorse with none of the humanity and warmth and intelligence of the outgoing First Lady, Michelle Obama? It was unthinkable, but the evidence of the TV news told Stuart it had actually happened.

‘So...are you finally going to see your sister now?’ Efua said unexpectedly.

She returned to the table and sat down, drying her hands on a tea towel her mother had brought back from Accra. It depicted an idealised village scene, with a bounteous market of vegetables and elegant, pitcher-bearing women returning from the well. Stuart had always loved it, and told Efua they had to go and explore Ghana. Efua had been coyly reluctant. She had told him that while part of her dearly wanted to visit what she considered her homeland, she was a city girl at heart – worried about insects and the heat.

‘What does my sister have to do with the Moron-in-Chief?’

‘Everything,’ Efua sighed, one eye on the baby-monitor. It still glowed a pacific green.

‘Explain.’

‘Come on, darling,’ Efua said, facing him full on. ‘She and her Nazi chums were emboldened by Brexit. This is going to push them over the brink. They’ll be throwing their hats in the air.’

‘So I’ve got to go and see her, after what – twelve years – and tell her Trump is a bad thing for the world? That’s my responsibility now?’

‘She’s always been your responsibility! At least, that’s what you never stopped saying to me. And now you’ve got the perfect opportunity.’

‘How come?’

‘I think you know what I mean. Where are you going tomorrow again?’

Stuart’s commission that week was to review a chic new restaurant called Speak in Broadstairs. It would be his first return visit for over a decade, and the second Efua heard about it she’d started petitioning him to track his sister down. Indeed, from the moment he showed her the newspaper report of his sister’s offence in Highgate Woods she’d been doing the same. How he regretted telling her now! Yet, she’d have found out inevitably. The story had mushroomed, with reports of the court hearing in all the broadsheets and the BBC news.

Social media was full of outcries about the incident, and how it epitomised the detrimental effect Brexit had had on the UK – how it turned the clock back to the 1970s when racist bootboys ruled the streets. To Stuart’s infinite relief, his sister had only been sentenced to twelve weeks’ community service. Her partners in crime had both got off with a fine for incitement to racial hatred, since only Jessica had made actual physical contact with the two Spanish women. In some quarters, justice was seen to be done – in others, there had been fury at her lenient sentence. The ex-leader of the EDL, Tommy Robinson, had been all over the media after the convictions, defending his sister and her fellow thugs. ‘The indigenous population has a right to expect immigrants learn the ways of the host country,’ he postured, his piggy little-boy eyes pleading for legitimacy. But not the right to pull their hair and spit on them if they didn’t.

It was the appearance of Robinson on Newsnight defending Jessica by name that pushed Efua over the edge. They’d argued about it bitterly for days. And now, at 6am on a gloomy morning in November, it seemed they still were.

‘I’m going to Kent for a professional commitment. I haven’t got time to shake sense into my sister.’

‘Come on! You’re there all day. You could stay overnight.’

‘And leave you here with Kwesi for forty-eight hours?’

‘Why not?!’ Efua said, outraged. ‘I have done some parenting before. It’s not like I’m incapable. And we’ve got my mum.’

Stuart glanced at the TV. Trump was still gloating and sneering. He grabbed the remote and cut the sound.

‘Yeah, like she’s been any help recently.’

‘You can scoff all you want, but who else have we got?’

Efua rarely defended her mother when it came to matters of childcare. She told Stuart that she'd once imagined Yoofi babysitting twice a week so they could go out to the cinema or on date nights. It hadn't quite worked out like that. Kwesi's grandmother had a busy social life within the church and the Ghanaian community in Wood Green, and that came first.

'Well I can't help it that both my parents are dead – or as good as.'

Stuart felt childish before the sentence had left his lips. But their arguments had all felt infantile recently. What good would it do anyone to confront his sister now?

'I didn't mean that . . . I'm just saying, you can't let her get away with this!'

'She just has. All she's doing is collecting broken deckchairs on Viking Bay. She's got off scot free.'

'What if she does something worse?'

This was a constant source of terror for Stuart, but he decided not to admit to it. 'She'll disappear after this, I know it. She hates any attention. This was her one moment of . . . of sick glory.'

'Yeah, but what if she doesn't disappear, Stuart? What then?' Efua was tying and re-tying the belt of her dressing gown obsessively, an action she always performed when at the end of her tether. There was a murmur from the baby monitor; a flash of red. Their voices were waking Kwesi.

'Look – I've got no idea where she lives now. Or where she works. If she even works anywhere. I've got no contacts in Kent.'

'You're a journalist. You're supposed to find stuff out.'

'Not that kind of journalist.'

'It wouldn't be that hard,' Efua persisted. 'She's your responsibility!'

'Not this again.'

'Who else has she got? You told me that yourself.'

This was the truth, and the fact that there was no one else on earth who could make an appeal to Jessica made Stuart squirm every time he thought about it. He had got out of Broadstairs – out of his old life, his old ties – and now she was dragging him back; like debris sucked into a black hole. ‘I don’t know anyone there,’ he said uselessly.

‘What if the story got out that she’s your sister? Eh, what happens then? It would be shameful, disgusting. I couldn’t face my friends.’

By this she didn’t just mean their friends of colour – such as Tia, her filmmaker bestie from uni; or Manish, a journalist and the son of an Indian diplomat – but *all* their friends. The liberal, middle-class network of parents, journalists, writers and teachers who made up their circle. She was right, and he knew it. Many times he’d woken in the night to envisage the awful red-top headline: *Foul-mouthed Sis of Posh Foodie Convicted of Race Attack*.

‘Look – this is impossible,’ he floundered.

‘Our child is *black* for God’s sake. You have to act!’

There was another cry from the baby monitor. Stuart thumped his fist onto the table. Behind his eyes he felt a kind of super-weariness – the type you only experience after driving all night; a sore, red-lidded exhaustion. And he was the one who’d had five hours sleep, as Efua was bound to remind him all day.

‘Okay! Okay...’ he said in defeat, presenting his palms to the air. ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

He remembered nothing about the landscape until his train was past Ebbsfleet and then it all came back. It was quite unexpected – the level of detail; the intensity of the memories. Returning to Kent was like entering a portal into the past.

A bright morning in November, with crisp, cold light in the bare trees. The chaos of St Pancras and its teeming concourse, then the silos and the sudden blackout of the Eurostar tunnel, before emerging at Stratford East into the light again. Rolling stock with dandelion stripes. A high modern concourse with planes of glass, their striations rising in the morning sunshine. The concrete walkways and platforms like a nuclear powerplant, Soviet in their brutality. Then darkness again before reaching the edgelands, with moraines of warehouses, light industry, pylons, wasteground; the sky a pale blue with evenly spaced clouds. A buspark next to the encroaching countryside; estates of bland housing; traffic systems, and elevated sections rising over the rails, before another plunge into darkness. Not a journey intended for aesthetic enjoyment, Stuart reflected, until the train swooped over the Thames estuary; the wide, sallow-brown stretch of river beneath him, the gateway to the ends of the earth. And then the toneless announcement:

Good morning... Next stop is Ebbsfleet... where you can change for shuttle services to the Bluewater shopping centre... Thank you for choosing the South Eastern high-speed service this morning.

And there he was, back in the past.

It was the river that finally did it: the great slithering expanse of water; tea-brown and swirling at close quarters; almost white in the distance. He remembered the river from journeys on the old, slow North Kent line to Rochester as a child – a constant companion as the train drew him away; away from Broadstairs and its end-of-the-land finality. Its prison of days. He remembered the same journey to London for his first term at LSE – terrified, flat broke, with no idea how to negotiate the squatting monster that was the city. There'd been excitement too; the thrill of the unknown, of a future unfolding. It had been late September, very different weather; his train zipping through swathes of lush Kent countryside. Rolling arable land bordered with firs had revealed itself, before being replaced by slopes of sheep.

The grass had been an incredible luminous lime, with splendid splashes of rust anticipating the coming autumn; the trees on the turn; the land still groaning with hops, apples, strawberries. The Garden of England, he had thought to himself, bitterly. Paddocks with stately oaks at their centre had shot past as the train approached Ashford. A last pastoral stretch gave way to flat ploughed fields, racing clouds above, until the great maw of London announced itself with the river.

And now he was heading back in the opposite direction, the landscape raw and dead, with no stomach for the task in hand.

The evening before, Efua had cooked them both an Aboboi bean stew, one of his favourite Ghanaian dishes. She had been almost comically attentive and nice to him once he had finally agreed to confront his sister. Kwesi had been in the kitchen in his bouncy chair as his wife deseeded romano peppers, chopped chillies, tore at branches of thyme. The chair, which held a plastic arch dangling an elephant with huge eyes, kept their son amused as they talked. He was too old for it, really, but they had nothing as effective to replace it with. The boy reminded Stuart so much of the few photographs he had of himself as a boy. The turn of his nose; the way his fingers gripped a favourite toy. His bright, spontaneous look – quickly surveying the freshly minted world. A world made for running in. A world that was still all his for the taking.

They'd chatted about his commission as if they'd never had the row in the morning. He had never wanted to take it in the first place, but they needed the money and he couldn't turn work down. The thought of returning to the place he'd longed to leave for years made him prickle with anxiety. And now the added trauma of his sister's reappearance, something he could badly do without. He'd changed the subject, but not to US politics, which was all social media had obsessed over throughout the day. The subject of Trump was verboten. Stuart had suggested they sell their TV and their phones and disconnect from mainstream

news. He didn't think he could contemplate four years of seeing Trump's inane, sneering, tangerine-painted face and freakishly small right hand, with its raised clerical finger. They'd even talked about the progress Efua had made with selling her book. An agent had requested her first three chapters, and she'd eagerly complied; stepping back onto the exhausting, humiliating rollercoaster of hopes raised and hopes dashed.

But behind every word was his sister. Looking out of the window as the train made its approach to Canterbury West Station, Stuart had no idea where he'd start searching for her. His only clue was the newspaper reports of her conviction. They'd referred to Jessica Carter of Dumpton, Broadstairs. Dumpton was a sprawling suburb that connected Broadstairs with Ramsgate, a place he'd avoided in his youth, with its dead streets of council housing and flat-roof pubs. But at least it was a more specific location than just 'Broadstairs'. For some reason, he'd always thought Jessica would end up there, away from the tourists and deckchairs of the seaside resort in which they'd both grown up. In his leather satchel he'd brought the single photo he had of his sister. Thankfully, her face hadn't appeared in the press. She had managed to get in and out of Margate Magistrate's Court without being photographed. Only Ryan Meades had been snapped on the steps, giving the white supremacist 'okay' gesture after receiving his sentence. The picture he possessed of Jessica was of her at twenty-one, before the B&B was sold and when their mother was terminally ill. She was by their mother's bedside in the loft, her face in shadow from the bad light, leaning over Mimi with a vexed expression. Their mother wasn't in shot, as she'd vetoed it due to how awful she looked. Just her bloated forearm was visible, and above it Jess's face with her prominent lower lip set indignantly; her blonde hair tied tight to her crown giving her a Croydon facelift. It wasn't much to go on, but it was all he had.

And then there was the question of what might happen if he did find her. He imagined a scene of unprecedented ugliness. And what if she had her bootboy thugs with her? Would

he get his head kicked in for his trouble? And yet he couldn't face Efua if he returned empty handed.

He slumped back onto the tartan upholstery as the train slowed down; passing over the level crossing before Canterbury West and the town he'd once seen as his escape route before London claimed him permanently. He tried in vain to clear his mind of the past. Whatever happened, he had a restaurant to review first.

And how the place had changed! And yet not changed at all. From the moment he stepped onto the concrete concourse of Broadstairs station, he felt an overwhelming sense of homecoming. His heart accelerating, his lungs inhaling the fresh salt air, he spent four hours haunting the old town. At every corner he expected to run into his sister, but didn't. He didn't have the courage to ask around. The photo of Jess remained firmly in his satchel along with his notebook and pens.

It was all strangely miniaturised after London – a toy-town, with its odd mix of pensioners and the restless young. Out of season, with a clear blue sky above, and deserted enough to walk the narrow pavements without having to step off the kerb into the road, it felt as if he had the place to himself. The old landmarks were still there. The Dickens house with its silly faux battlements. The Tartar Frigate, with a Union Jack flapping in the breeze stirring queasy feelings of nostalgia. Viking Bay with its pier and beached boats, like a photograph he'd seen a thousand times. Victoria Gardens with its bandstand, benches and sea-facing paths he'd walked endlessly as a teenager. Morelli's still selling its cones and cappuccinos, thank goodness. And the plaque to Uncle Mack, which seemed, if anything, shinier than he remembered. Someone had been maintaining it; had given it a facelift. He thought it might have become blacker and more corroded in the intervening years.

Just down from Mack's concrete plinth, before the bandstand, was an ice-cream and wheelks hut. This was certainly new. It was in obvious competition with Morelli's, which stood reassuringly opposite on the promenade, unchanged in every detail from his youth. About to order a 99 with a flake – the staple-diet of his childhood – Stuart noticed a small, pencil-written notice: *Only English Ice Cream Sold Here*. He took a step back, mildly shocked. So the toxic xenophobia of Brexit had even contaminated the innocent world of childhood treats!

Walking away empty-handed, he began looking for the restaurant. He'd all but given up on his half-hearted search for his sister, and he liked to scope a place out first in the afternoon before he ate there. The post-lunch clientele was different, as was the attitude of the staff. Sometimes, just sitting opposite an establishment and watching its comings and goings – the delivery trucks of produce, the looks on punters' faces as they left – could tell him more about a place than sitting inside for three courses with wine. He reflected, as he always did before reviewing a new restaurant, on the importance of keeping an open mind when evaluating it. Unlike a bad book review, which might put off a few potential buyers, a negative notice in a national newspaper for a fledging, family-run business might close it down for good. Some of his pieces were viewed over twenty thousand times, and shared as many times on social media. The stakes, as ever, were high.

As he made his way to Speak in the late afternoon, along the pavements behind the promenade, he concluded that much really had disappeared in his absence. A lot of this change was the result of rampant gentrification. What had once been a ramshackle run of backstreets, mostly family-run businesses and quaint cafés, was now a warren of thrusting start-ups and boutiques aimed at metropolitan day-trippers with credit cards burning holes in their designer wallets. There were shops that seemed to have nothing to do with the Broadstairs he remembered, but were clearly thriving. One, a kind of hippy children's toy and

gift shop, could never have existed ten years ago. He went in, intending to get something for Kwesi, but left frustrated that there was nothing his son would like. It was all carved wooden dolls and wholesome, educational games. It was run by two impeccably polite, willowy, knowing middle-class girls who certainly hadn't grown up there – more like Notting Hill, he decided as he left the bell tinging behind him. There were still a couple of old-style chippies and tourist tat shops, as well as J.C. Rook and Sons, the pork butchers advertising 'Finest Kentish Meats' that had always been there, but he feared the tide of delis and brewhouses and hipster barbers would see them off in a few years.

Rounding a corner on the steep, rising Ramsgate Road, he discovered Speak. It was closed, and he had an hour to go before his booking. He could see why it had been described in a review for a rival paper as the Smallest Restaurant in the World. Built into a converted Victorian sandwich shop, still a stone's throw from Viking Bay, it was the sort of place you'd miss if you were walking fast. Peering through the window, he could see it was more a supper club, with the tiny tables, lacquered pine floors, and hanging maritime paraphernalia allowing just enough room to swing a ship's cat.

He glanced at his watch again. Half-past four. Then he went across the road to loiter on the corner and check his phone for messages from Efua. She'd been messaging all day, hopeful that he'd made contact with Jessica. The light was failing, but that was all right. He would watch and wait. Maybe if he waited long enough his sister would walk past, just like when he used to encounter her on his long walks around town. But he didn't hold out much hope.

Three hours later, sitting in the back of a lurching cab, rain on the windscreen, Stuart found himself heading out of town for Dumpton. He had just enough time before the train, and it was his last chance to track Jessica down.

Speak had been much as he'd anticipated, and he'd taken enough notes under the tablecloth – his preferred method – to work into a review. As usual, he'd experienced an acute sense of paranoia on entering that the staff would recognise him from his photo-byline, but this hadn't happened, as it rarely did. Maybe he had a forgettable face. The restaurant was a family affair, run by a young, thrusting Kent couple, and the atmosphere of brash conviviality had hit him before the rich barbecue aroma from the open kitchen. The patron was an Ashford boy through and through – tattooed, bearded, swaggering – and had cut his teeth in a world-class, Michelin-starred restaurant in West London. Stuart thought he resembled the archetypal dynamic young chef: an ex-con crossed with the drummer from an indie band. And the menu was good. Unsurprisingly, for such a small establishment, it was a set menu, but with six courses that saw the young couple (essentially the chef, waitress, and maître'd' rolled into one) turning out sixty covers during the evening. Quite an undertaking. And not much fault could be found with any of them. For sixty quid, including wine, it was exemplary.

The first small plate of luxuriously salty mackerel and sweet beetroot had been hard to top. This had been followed by the best duck liver pâté this side of the Crillon. A cube of monkfish – sea-fresh, succulent – in a bird's nest of grated carrot and a delicate coriander dressing was a revelation. As was the venison with buttery mushrooms and celeriac. With this came a glass of Valcombe Cotes du Ventoux rouge – a superb pairing, and, like all the wines, chosen with care for each dish. For dessert, goat's curd with grapes and pistachio nuts that recalled, for once, the Middle East rather than a stale bag from Poundland. Lastly, a straightforward chocolate brownie with the freshest of dates on the side.

Yet the whole experience had left Stuart feeling deeply uncomfortable. Who were Speak's target clientele? A few discreet questions aimed at his fellow diners discovered that many had travelled a fair distance for their startlingly fresh monkfish and glass of Frantz

Saumon Sauvignon Blanc. One old timer revealed he and his wife had made a round trip of 140 miles. The good reviews in rival papers had probably helped, but in terms of local custom? *Nada*. Not a single Broadstairs, Ramsgate or Margate resident was present at his guess. It was an exclusive diner, catering to out-of-towners. And at sixty pounds a pop, who could blame them? How many bacon butties would that have bought on its old premises?

It was now fully dark. Outside, harsh November rain was streaking the cab's windscreen; the sodium lights of the Dumpton estate flashing by. He'd asked for Dumpton Park station, so at least he'd be able to get a connection back to Broadstairs and home to London. There was a pub, whose name escaped him, opposite the station approach that he vaguely remembered. Someone there might know his sister. He felt a strong, almost exhilarating sense of travelling into the unknown.

He still couldn't quite get over how little there was about Jessica on the internet, though he'd read somewhere that it was a tactic of the far right to minimise their searchable profile so they could travel more deeply into the Dark Net. Even so, he thought his sister might have left more of a mark after 38 years of life. She wasn't active on any form of social media as far as he could see. Both he and Efua had Twitter and Facebook accounts. Stuart had a large following due to his broadsheet pieces, but tweeted infrequently, usually with links to his latest review and a self-deprecating caption such as *So I went to Glasgow and was treated to...or Who knew the best turbot in the world would cost less than...* He didn't have the kind of hyperactive, extrovert personality that suited relentless public statements, unlike some of his fellow journalists. Plus, there was always the spin of class-awareness in his tweets. The most successful tweeters, those incontinent yappers who'd posted tens of thousands of times, had probably been in the debating society at Oxford, he decided. Like Gatsby, their online life was an 'unbroken series of successful gestures'. Efua, by contrast, tweeted all the time: about the books she was reading, about feminism or politics. She was

always calling out racism and bigotry, or, just recently, tweeting about being ‘an amateur mother’ in a world of professionals. She just had a gift for the seemingly spontaneous, though highly articulate, formulation. And, unlike Stuart, she had an Instagram account where she posted photos of the Ghanaian feasts cooked up in their kitchen, or Kwesi’s little hand clutching soft toys, always careful never to show his face.

Stuart had Googled Jessica many times since stumbling across the terrible article in September, and come away with nothing. She’d left virtually no footprint – only the recent links to her offence and convictions came up. All he’d unearthed were the hundreds of Jessica Carters who *weren’t* his sister. And what lives they were living! One was a CEO, another an aspiring actor and dancer, another a senior health official. None of them were convicted racists.

And now Stuart was leaning into the cab’s passenger window and paying the driver, the rain pummelling his back. He turned to see the Tudorbethan edifice of the Racing Greyhound pub, under whose awning a gaggle of smokers huddled. They seemed to form a gauntlet he was obliged to run.

Swiftly making his way up the path, past the beer garden with its sodden slatted benches, he didn’t much care for the looks he received as he found the door of the saloon. *Yes, he wanted to say, I’m from out of town, but I grew up here. I’m one of you.*

Inside, it wasn’t much more welcoming. An over-lit snug, with a bank of slots to the left. Thick pub carpet. Heavy dark wood. Cheesy Sixties hits on the jukebox. A raised area for bands to perform. And a brace of middle-aged, overweight locals at the bar who turned to stare as he brushed the rain from his jacket sleeves. A couple of hardmen, furiously pumping the fruit machines, gave him the once-over too. For some reason, he expected Jessica to be sitting in the corner, drinking with her mates, like she used to do in the pubs of Broadstairs and Ramsgate, underage and out of control. But of course, she wasn’t.

He gathered his courage and approached the bar. He felt a sudden sense of claustrophobia as the locals parted to allow him access to the brass rail; the sticky counter bearing place mats showing the Greyhound in all its English glory. It was like returning to the nineteen seventies. He faced down the publican: a rubicund old chancer with a look of blank menace on his face.

‘Half a’ Guinness, please,’ Stuart said, his accent modulating into something approaching faux-cockney. All day he’d found his voice slipping back to its former curt vowels; the voice he once spoke with while growing up. It held the stamp of working-class legitimacy. The same thing happened in London with workmen or cab drivers. He was helpless to change this tendency. He wanted to be accepted, he knew; to signal, as he’d wanted to do with the smokers outside the door: *Look, I started out just like you. You can trust me, okay.*

The landlord gave him a look of stark evaluation before Stuart realised his mistake.

‘Ah, make that a pint, yeah?’

Stuart smiled uneasily and took another glance around as the landlord began drawing the Guinness from the tap. He realised he was looking for an escape route. There was a long, forbidding corridor to the gents, and he didn’t fancy his chances if he was followed down there.

‘Not from round ‘ere?’ the landlord asked flatly.

At once Stuart thought this was a ludicrous question. The pub was a minute’s walk from the station. Surely they must be used to strangers. But then, how much in the way of passing trade did the Racing Greyhound get? It seemed to advertise itself as a strictly local drinker. A closed shop. Quietly menacing to outsiders behind its glazed, leaded windows.

As he tried to formulate the correct response, he was aware that the sixties hits had modulated into the eighties, and that he was sweating despite the November chill in his bones. Whitney Houston. *I Will Always Love You*.

‘Nah... I’m here on business.’

‘At this time of night?’

Stuart straightened up. A couple of the locals were looking in his direction. He realised he was being asked to make a case for himself. ‘I was up in Broadstairs earlier . . .’ he said, his right hand delving into his satchel to retrieve the photograph. ‘Actually, I’m looking for someone who lives around here.’

‘Oh yeah?’ said the landlord. The half-poured pint of Guinness was stubbornly refusing to settle. ‘So business *and* pleasure.’

‘Er, not really. It’s my sister I’m looking for. We fell out of touch a few years back.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘Jessica. Jessica Carter.’

A pause. The man’s features remained impassive, one hand still on the raised pump. ‘Don’t ring a bell.’

‘I’ve got a picture if you want. Might jog the memory.’

Stuart pulled the photo out and handed it to the landlord.

The man squinted over it for a couple of seconds, then shook his head. ‘Can’t say I know her. We don’t get many out-of-towners coming through ‘ere, as you might imagine.’

‘No. She’s not from out of town. She grew up in Broadstairs. We both did.’

The landlord flashed the picture in front of the couple perched on stools next to Stuart. They had the roasted skin of people who lived abroad for six months of the year. Expats back from Spain. They shook their heads too. ‘Not seen her around, ‘fraid to say,’ the woman said. ‘What was her name again?’

‘Jessica. *Jess*. Most people call – used to call her – *Jess*.’

The landlord returned the picture with a look of infinite suspicion on his face. ‘Sorry, mate. Can’t help ya there.’ He finished pulling the pint and passed it across to Stuart.

‘Okay. Thanks, anyway,’ Stuart said, his voice thick in his throat. He sensed the eyes of the whole bar upon him. A moment of horrible poised silence. Were they lying? Was Jessica in there every other night and they were trying to protect her? Her name had been all over the papers only a couple of months ago. He simply couldn’t tell. He fumbled in his pocket for his wallet.

Retreating to the furthest table he could find, he set down his pint, his satchel, and his copy of the *Thanet Advertiser*, and resolved to drink up as quickly as possible and get back to London. On an adjacent table he saw the debris of a curry – the napkins folded into iron balti dishes, a half-finished naan. The chalkboard behind the bar had announced it was curry night. He looked around the pub once more and decided everyone there had voted to leave the EU in the Referendum. Without a doubt, they had strong views on immigration. Not for the first time, he marvelled at the level of cognitive dissonance required to hate all foreigners but still enjoy a chicken korma down the local pub on a Friday night.

But there was no time to ponder such things for long. He needed to drink his pint swiftly and get the hell out of there if he wanted to make the last train. He had no idea what he’d say to Efua. He’d failed in his mission, and now he was out of time, though he’d at least tried. Sitting there dumbly, with his paper flattened out before him, his legs splayed in the macho stance of every man in the saloon bar, his pint at his elbow, he almost laughed. Of course they would view him suspiciously! There he was, striding into a local boozier, wearing his black jeans and Chelsea boots, with his media specs and his battered leather satchel. He stood out like a parrot among ravens. He’d only travelled eighty miles from Broadstairs to London, but the distance from here to there was longer than it looked. The journey was

immense, and it had taken his whole life to make it. No, *he didn't belong here*, he told himself. He didn't belong here, and maybe he never had.

JESSICA

She liked to sit near the driver, right at the front of the bus, so she could look out of the windscreen. She almost thought of it as her own seat, and became annoyed if she found it was taken. Just lately, it always seemed to be occupied.

One morning in early October – two weeks after she'd been to court, with all the shenanigans surrounding it – Jessica was pleased to find her seat empty. The sun was very strong through the windows as she sat down, like it was still summer, and she thought for a moment she might have to move. Usually, she hated the sunshine, despite having grown up by the seaside. It gave her migraines. Same with reading, which she hated anyway, or flicking through her phone. But for some reason, as the bus pulled away from her stop, and she made herself comfortable, she found herself enjoying the light and the warmth.

She'd been doing the same route for years. The ride into work. The red and white Loop bus from Dumpton Park station to Margate Cecil Street. It always took twenty-five minutes, and she could've set her watch by it if she'd been the kind of person to wear a watch. But she didn't like watches, just as she didn't like jewellery of any kind. She didn't like the way it weighed on her. Or the way you had to remember where you'd put it the night before. She couldn't be doing with the fuss.

As they passed the Brown Jug and the Gladstone Road stop – empty of passengers that morning for some reason – she reflected on the past month. It had been quite a whirlwind. They'd allowed her to keep her job at least, which was a relief. For some reason, she thought Community Service meant becoming a street sweeper or something, like Boy George. But she'd read somewhere that he'd only lasted half an hour after the press got hold of it. Greggs had been okay about her sentence – at least at first. Dean, the new manager of the Margate branch, wanted her to work weekends. She'd never done a Saturday in her life and wasn't about to start now. She was in for a scrap later, she could sense it.

For the past week she'd been out every evening with a graffiti-clearing crew on the streets of Cliftonville. High-vis jacket; a bucket of whitewash. She took care that none of her lot's stuff got covered up, though it wasn't easy. Hard to pretend you've missed a swastika or a Star of David. She found it funny that the supervisor thought *9.11* referred to the twin towers, and not the date of Kristallnacht. Most of the others had thieved phones or got caught selling a bit of weed. Like her, it had been their first offence, so they didn't get banged up. Next time, though, most of them said, they'd be going down. Almost like a boast. The thought of ending up in the nick terrified her, though Ryan had actually wanted a sentence. He said he'd be a martyr, just like Tommy. But she thought it was more likely he'd come out with a limp after being bent over in the showers every morning. With his weak, skinny body, and weird manner, she didn't fancy his chances.

The new manager at Greggs was a wanker called Dean. Why his parents had chosen that name out of all the names in the world, she had no idea. It sounded American, like they were trying to make him into something he wasn't. He'd grown up in Kent, like most people she knew. Only he was a lot younger than her, late twenties at most. She loathed taking orders from him, but what could she do? He was a libtard. A cuck. A stupid overgrown snowflake. She hated how he always pretended he wasn't in charge when he was. 'Could you

find your way to cleaning the slicers when you've got a moment?' *Find your way. When you've got a moment.* Like he wasn't giving an order or something. 'Okay, *Deaney*,' she would say, as if she was talking to a child. He didn't seem to mind this, and it made her furious he was so tolerant. At least Tony, her old boss, spoke properly. When he wanted something done he just said it. No messing.

She'd loved Tony. Not like *in love* with him, but she'd really liked him. Looked forward to seeing his face every morning after she'd changed into her uniform and hairnet. When Tony was sacked, they stuck Dean in his place. New blood, apparently. Big mistake. Tony was a Kentish man, through and through – or 'A Man of Kent', as he liked to say. Short and stocky, like he'd been squashed into his clothes, with the face of an old crim. But a charmer nonetheless. Tony was big on history. He knew his stuff. When she started there six years ago, he'd been an education. At the sausage roll and hot-slice counter he used to sharpen her local knowledge. Much of it she vaguely knew already from her childhood visits to Ramsgate Library – she hadn't always hated reading. Those early days were halcyon in her memory: rose-tinted. 'We was all Celtic tribes here until the Romans came over . . .' Tony would say in his hacking voice, his squat figure immovable before the trays of hot pastry. '. . . Then we was Jutes – from Jutland. Near Denmark. We was pure of blood before the bloody frogs came over with William the Conqueror.' He told her the Jutes were known locally as 'Kentings', and eventually 'Men of Kent'. They were awarded special privileges, as were the women, who were known as 'Maids of Kent'. 'So I'm a Maid of Kent, then?' Jessica had asked him one day. 'Nah,' he snorted. 'You're a Geezer Bird! You like your pint and your fags. Hangin' out down the Cutter with the boys.' The Deal Cutter was a pub on King St, behind the Ramsgate seafront. Rough as a bear's arse, but with a good atmosphere. It was in the Cutter that she'd first met Ryan.

Jessica had laughed along with Tony, but all the same, she'd been slightly hurt. Was that how people saw her? As some kind of honorary bloke? Desexualised somehow? He once told her that Men of Kent had always been radicals, had always stood against the elite, just like Nigel Farage did 'in the present era'. 'We've always hated the toffs and the entitled. Wat Tyler came from Kent. The Swing Riots started in Kent . . .'

She prided herself on not having to ask Tony what he was talking about. Maybe she liked being a Geezer Bird after all – equal in knowledge and strength to the men.

Through the bus's windscreen, in the bright light of the autumn morning, she saw they were almost in Broadstairs. She felt suddenly emotional, driving down the steep hill she used to walk up with her mum. On the right they passed the old East Kent College, part of which was now a posh hotel called The Yarrow. The leaves on the trees were just starting to go brown. She'd always liked the colours when this happened. They were amazing – yellow and gold and red. The sight of it made her nostalgic for some reason, but for what she wasn't quite sure – for being a little girl again, or maybe just for England. The England she used to know.

Looking back, her chats with Tony seemed almost quaint now. As if they'd happened in a pre-internet age. Tony would have been proud of what she'd done on the train to the two Spanish slags. Her lawyer had instructed her to say she was sorry in court, but she'd refused. Why should she say she was sorry when she wasn't? She was proud of what she'd done, and, even though it had cost her – in time, in humiliation – she would do it again at the drop of a hat. Yet maybe taking action without thinking about it first had been slightly stupid. They'd got caught for a start. It hadn't been planned. They just saw the opportunity and took it. There the two women were, on the seat next to them, with their suntans and their shades, spouting off and jabbering in that way she hated – in that confident way that made her skin crawl – so

they had it coming, really. Show them what's what. Show them they were only visitors here. Show them whose country it really was.

When she thought about it, patriotism had all gone online in a big way since the early days of Tony. It was Ryan who opened her eyes to this when they first started going out. Ryan worked on the IT desk of one of the local colleges. He was always in the Cutter with a bunch of geeky blokes. 'Gamers' they called themselves. She'd never fancied skinny blokes, but there was a quality to Ryan she was attracted to. It took a few months to realise he reminded her of her dad, something that made her extremely queasy. He had a rakish confidence underneath the mild manner. There he always was at the bar, in his Harrington with his pint of Stella, listening quietly while his mates sounded off. They were all patriots too, but they were way ahead of her.

'So what's your background?' he had asked her when she first joined him and his crew at their table. She was aware she had to give the right answer. His voice had been so quiet that she had to strain to hear him over the noise of the match on the big screen. 'White Celtic,' she said quickly. 'My father was Scottish.' 'A good start,' Ryan said, stroking the little goatee beard he had at the time. When they ended up going out with each other, she insisted he shave it off. 'And your mum?' 'White. South London through and through. They're both dead now.' It was easier to say this than admit her dad had buggered off when she was five. It was a lie she'd told so many times over the years she almost believed it herself. 'I'm sorry, but we have to ask this, I'm afraid,' Ryan began cautiously, 'but are you, or have you ever been, a homosexual or sexual deviant?' Jess had practically choked on her pint. 'A lezzer? You're jokin', int' yer?' The whole table had laughed, joshing each other and nudging Ryan in the ribs. The question had at least broken the ice. And there had definitely been chemistry between her and Ryan, from the very first night.

When she plucked up the courage to go into the chatrooms herself, she was asked the same questions, but more formally. There were administrators who required her to fill out questionnaires, then send a photo of her wrist and timestamp it. On this she had to write MAAtR, which stood for *Men Among the Ruins*. She didn't quite understand what this referred to (Ryan had explained it one night when they were pissed), but it was a way of showing allegiance. Some of the questions she had struggled with. *What is your entire ancestral background? How would you describe your political views?* She also had to come up with a user name. Ryan's mates all had really cool handles, and she struggled to think of one. They were all relevant to the neo-Nazi movement. One called himself Deus Vult, which had been a crusader battle cry. Others gave themselves military ranks, like General Tom, or Colonel Bad. Ryan's chatroom name was Raven, which she thought was stupid at first, and told him so. Her own username had been harder to decide on. In the end she went with one of her old passwords, as it was the only way she'd ever remember it.

And they all had tattoos with secret meanings. Ryan had 4/20 tattooed on his knuckles. This was Hitler's birthday, apparently – she'd had no idea. Another had 88, which was supposed to look like HH, or Heil Hitler, but she really couldn't see it. Quite a few had WP – or White Power. Another simply had the number 14 tattooed on his bicep. This, she was told in reverent tones, referred to the Fourteen Words. *We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children*. Ryan had badgered her to get a tattoo for ages, but she'd refused. Like wristwatches and jewellery, she'd always hated them – hated having anything extra on her body. After a while, he'd shut up about it, though all the other patriot and WP women she'd met over the years were so decorated they looked like sheets of wallpaper.

It had all been a big education, one that was still ongoing. And now, as the bus slowed before the Broadstairs Baptist Church with the mechanical voice announcing *Alight Here for*

the Seafront, she tried to be positive about the fact that she had the support of right-thinking people. The people who valued the country and who actually belonged there. What did it matter if her name had been splashed all over the papers for a few weeks? Or had trended on Twitter for an afternoon? Those journalists in their five-million quid London houses would be sorry when Muslims and blacks took over the world and kicked their kids out of their own schools.

Staring out of the window as the bus gathered speed once more, eavesdropping on the pensioners who'd got on at the last stop, she saw they were passing the War Memorial. A tall stone cross with a plaque at its foot. *For the Fallen of 1914-1918*. It always stirred her to think of those brave boys who fought for king and country. In the autumn sunshine it looked even more poignant and lovely. As if the souls of those young lads were beaming down from heaven. The bright light brought out the grain of the stone; the chiselled names and their sad dates; the sea of poppies at its base. They'd be appalled to see the country they fought for. She felt it was her duty, somehow, to carry their courageous legacy into the twenty-first century and beyond.

'I've forgotten to do me lottery ticket!' a voice announced behind her.

One of the old boys who'd got on a stop back. She'd seen him before – always travelled into Margate with a friend who used a walker. Both of them usually never stopped talking until the bus reached its final destination, and today was no different. She quite liked to listen to them joshing sometimes. They were long-time Dumpton residents, she could tell. The people who belonged here.

'Then you'd better get off at Percy Road and do it there.'

'Nah, I'll wait till Margate.'

The man with the walker laughed – a gurgling, old man's chuckle. 'It's not like you got anything else on, is it? Important meetings and the like.'

‘Watch it, mate. Next time you’ll be on two wheels. And I don’t mean no motorbike...’

Jessica tuned their voices out. She stared at the window again as the bus flew past a row of shops. The New Mala tandoori. A laundrette. Motor spares. Then an old sixties block, Willow Court, where she’d looked at flats after the B&B was sold. Soon they passed the First Steps nursery and a deserted play area, until the road rose and they were onto the higher ground. A cabbage field, with crows in the ploughlines. They were out of Broadstairs now. Somewhere to her right was Stone Bay, and she was grateful, as ever, not to have to see it every morning and be reminded of the past. It was only when the bus swung past the Wheatsheaf pub that she got her first glimpse of the sea. There it suddenly was, through a row of pines, shimmering greenly in the distance, reminding her where she was. She could even see the wind farm they’d put up after she left her mum’s house, the propellers turning relentlessly on the horizon. She’d always loved her mum, in spite of everything. In spite of the way she made her feel like a fat inconvenience. ‘Always under my fucking feet!’ her mum would scream; spittle in the corner of her mouth making her look mad. A large woman, with puffy eyes, and a back as broad as a man’s, she could be really threatening. Jessica always thought she’d inherited the same back, the same rugby player’s arms, and hated her for it. Yet she’d loved her mum, even when she was on the receiving end of a good slapping. Usually when her mum had done most of a bottle of Smirnoff on a Friday night. It was the drink that made her do crazy stuff, she told herself. No daughter starts off hating their mother, and she was no different.

And now they were coming into Margate. The outskirts. Cliftonville, where she’d been only the night before with her bucket of whitewash. This was the poor end of town, where all the immigrants lived, though it had once been fine Victorian housing according to Tony. The foreigners had lowered the tone, as they always did. You saw them sometimes,

leaning out of their windows on a summer's day, or lolling about on their crumbling front steps, half dressed and disgusting. Either that or they were infesting the streets like they owned the place. They had made it dirty, somehow. You didn't want to touch what they had touched. They had colonised the whole area, and she didn't see how the clock could be turned back without some kind of miracle or purge. Through the windscreen of the bus she saw row after row of shops they owned – Halal kebab houses, Polish grocers, Turkish barbers, spelt with an 'e' instead of an 'a'. It was all revolting to her, and she wished the bus would take a different route. She wanted to push it all into the sea.

As the bus dipped to make its final approach to Margate Cecil Square, they passed the Clifton Community Centre, a squat, tatty building she'd spent the last few Saturdays renovating with her crew. This was the other part of her sentence – a programme of re-education supposed to enlighten her. When she wasn't clearing so-called racist graffiti from the streets, she was making the places where immigrants congregated into 'more sustainable environments'. The work there was harder to sabotage than the graffiti. Hard to do anything patriotic about replastering walls and re-glossing woodwork. Ryan had said she should smuggle some asbestos in and put it in the ceiling, but she thought that was the stupidest idea she'd ever heard. For someone so articulate, he could be very thick sometimes. The fact was, it was her Saturday shift at the community centre that had caused all the trouble at Greggs. It clashed with Dean's restructuring of the timetable. He wanted her to cover it, but she had the perfect excuse. And there was little he could do about it, though it didn't stop him trying. As the bus crawled up the incline past the big Morrisons, she felt suddenly depressed that she would probably have to argue it all out with Deane once more. Then again, it passed the time. After six years there she was allowed to have a bit of fun.

'Aren't you supposed to be out back today, Jessica?'

Dean was looming over her, close enough for her to smell the mint mouthwash on his breath. She hated being called Jessica, rather than Jess, but she knew he didn't do it to wind her up. That's what infuriated her about him. He was so *reasonable* all the time.

'I'm on a till Fridays. You know that, *Deaney*.'

'Okay. Okay... If you say so. We need to have another little chat about Saturdays when you've got a moment.'

Another little chat. When you've got a moment. She cringed at the very words.

Dean turned and disappeared through the black, key-pad entry door that led to his office. Even the way he walked seemed reasonable. How she hated the very sight of him! Tall, but not as tall as Ryan, he had a sort of suave and over-confident manner, increased somehow by his thick, black-framed glasses. He reminded her of Clark Kent from the old Superman movies. He had weirdly black hair, like he had Italian or Mexican in him way back. But his skin was pale and pebbled – skin she knew was the result of a lifetime's diet of chips, doughnuts, fried eggs and saturated fat.

They'd clashed from the start. She was good at her job, and she knew this bugged him. Quick, efficient, adaptable, she knew every aspect of her role back to front. She could prep a tray of bacon and cheese melts in her sleep, and often awoke after dreaming of icing cup cakes or dribbling chocolate eyes and buttons onto gingerbread men. Looking across the counter at the empty shop, she thought of Greggs as more her home than her tiny flat in Dumpton. The red bucket seating; the picture of the ocean that took up a whole wall; the view of the paved High Street through the window, with its tatty souvenir shops and slime-green Macdonald's. She liked the fact a certain type of person came to Greggs, even relied on it as an essential service. It was a shop for the working class; people who dressed like she did, with their trackie bottoms and big-collared parkas. Their fleeces and Asda trainers and buggies with smeary-mouthed kids. *Her* people. Many of them verged on the obese, like her,

she supposed. But they didn't have their noses in the air, unlike the summer people. The out-of-towners – or DFLs, the Down From London's – who spunked their money in the fancy cafes and antique shops near the seafront. Or who spent the day wandering around the pointless Turner Gallery. The look on their faces when their kids were forced to make a stop at Greggs was often a delight. Like they'd stumbled into enemy territory.

Dean, of course, had tried his best to attract the custom of these idiots, but it hadn't worked. She could've told him that from the start. There was a move from up high to make Greggs more healthy or PC. There was even a rumour that they were going to introduce a vegan sausage roll, but she couldn't see it somehow. Dean had been all for rolling out protein boxes and Portuguese tarts, and had got his way. But they had all failed in Margate as she knew they would. No one wanted a boiled egg on a bed of spinach and avocado in an overpriced box. What people wanted was hot steak bakes and bacon baps. Onion rings and pastry-heavy chicken slices. They wanted stodge and doughnuts and cream cakes. And the coffee too, which, she'd heard, Greggs sold more of than Starbucks. Didn't surprise her, as there was nothing fancy about it. No mochas or lattes here. Just coffee with either milk or no milk. Simple. Her favourite Greggs product was their Empire biscuits – and not just for their name. Two rounds of shortcake stuck together with strawberry jam. *Heaven.*

Dean had also tried to bring in new initiatives and in-store stunts. The only one that had been popular was a ten per cent profit share for all staff after a year's service. No one could complain about that, although she thought someone like her who'd put in almost seven years should get more. The one thing she conceded she wasn't that good at was customer service. Dean was onto this from the start. She wasn't tolerant, that was the trouble. That's why he always wanted her out back and never on a till. When customers got things wrong she could be rude, especially if they were foreigners. One bloke recently, who looked like he lived in Cliftonville, had asked for a sausage and bacon stick, meaning the Breakfast

baguette. ‘Sticks?’ she’d said. ‘We don’t sell no sticks, ‘fraid. You want to go to a forest if you’re after sticks.’ She’d pretended not to know what he meant for a good two minutes until Dean had spotted her and told her to cut it out. The same had happened with some Polish brickie who asked for a ‘scab’. This was the Sausage, Cheese and Bean Melt, and she’d given him the business too, for a laugh.

‘Well. Did you have another think?’

Dean was at her elbow again. The mouthwash. The over-bearing presence.

On the next till, Tiffany, a bland young blonde of about eighteen, had started serving the first morning customers.

Jessica decided attack was the best form of defence. And she didn’t care if Tiffany overheard them. ‘You’re having a laugh, mate. I’ve never worked a Saturday in my life. It’s a rule I have.’

The reason she never worked Saturdays wasn’t because she was lazy, it was because it was the day she always set aside for her ‘other work’; the secret online world that only she and Ryan and few others knew about. In fact, the whole weekend was sacrosanct now. Community service was just a temporary interruption, and she wasn’t about to let Deaney have his way.

‘It’s the busiest day of the week, Jessica,’ he explained slowly, as if after years of working there, she hadn’t noticed this fact.

‘That’s why I don’t do it. You’ve got Saturday girls for that. Teenagers who’ll slave all day for nothin’.’

‘That’s not my point.’

‘What is your *point*, Deaney? I’ve never managed to get it.’

Tiffany looked over at her, registering the sharp tone, then quickly went back to counting change.

With the patient air that always drove her mad, Dean began: ‘Look. We’re short-staffed on Saturdays and simply need experienced hands. Teenagers stepping in for a few hours at weekends is not good enough.’

‘You’re just thinking about your own promotion. You won’t be here in a year’s time, but I will. You’ll be swanning around at head office or something.’

‘Our performance is down.’

Performance. Who gave a fuck about the shop’s performance? It was only a bun shop in a seaside town. It ticked over. It wasn’t British Airways.

‘You couldn’t perform if your life depended on it.’

Dean straightened up, outgunned. She loved taunting him like this – just to see how far he would go.

She noticed Tiffany was smiling to herself and looking at her shoes.

‘I’ll ignore your innuendo in this instance, Jessica, but I’m serious.’

‘So am I.’

‘I’m asking you, rather than telling you, to work Saturdays. Surely that’s the better option?’

‘Can’t do it. I’ve got other commitments now. For her Majesty the Queen herself. I’m putting back into the community. Serving my time.’

‘I understand that, and we’ve been very accommodating here, but after that’s over – ‘

‘No can do, I’m afraid.’

Dean’s face darkened. ‘I could make things very uncomfortable for you. And not just here.’

Jess turned to look at him full-on. She felt all her mother’s anger rise in her. She could punch him in the face and not regret it.

‘If you don’t toe the line, we might have to let you go.’

‘You mean give me the sack?’

‘Same difference.’

‘Why don’t yer just say it then?’

Dean was still keeping his cool. She wondered what it might take to make him lose it.

‘You’re lucky you still have a job, you know that?’

‘Fucking sack me then. But you won’t, will you?’

‘Try me.’

‘You wouldn’t dare. And you know why? This place would fall apart without me.

I’ve been here longer than anyone else.’

Dean took a long intake of breath. ‘What you *did*, Jessica – what you’re currently paying for with your time – was disgraceful.’ He held up his hands as if in self-defence.

‘Now I don’t agree with your views – in fact I think they’re reprehensible – but I’ll defend to the death your right to hold them.’

‘So what’s your problem then?’

‘The problem is the rota, Jessica.’

At last! A crack in the armour.

‘Okay, I get it. Well, I won’t change my mind, so don’t hold your breath.’

‘You need to get with the programme.’

‘*Get with the programme,*’ she mimicked, shaking her head.

Another snigger from Tiffany. She had him now.

‘You’re on the wrong side of history, Jessica Carter.’

‘What do you know about history?’ she sneered.

‘I’ve only got a bloody degree in it, that’s all.’

‘Then what you doing working ‘ere?!’

They stood facing each other down, as the customers began to congregate in front of her till.

A moment of livid silence. And then he was gone. Turning on his heel and heading for the black, key-pad entry door.

As he stalked off, she formed a gun barrel out of her fingers and mimed blowing him away. *One day*, she said to herself. *One day*.

At the next till, Tiffany giggled shyly, then went back to serving sausage rolls.

When Jessica was ten years old, in Year Six, she had started a school project. Everyone had been set a project, and hers had been The History of Bygone Kent. That was how she'd spent so much time in Ramsgate Library. But it had become more than just a school project for her – by the end, it was a labour of love. She might have even said it changed her life. Most of the other kids had filled half an exercise book with clippings about Hollywood stars, or the Queen Mum, or whoever, but she had crammed a bumper scrapbook with carefully compiled research. Where was that scrapbook now? Lost when she moved from the B&B to Dumpton, most probably. It might have still been in the attic of the old place when it was demolished. She always felt a pang of regret to think she'd let it slip away. A lot of what she'd written there had been the start of everything that followed. The idea of Kent as a pure county, unsullied by mongrel blood. That it was the most beautiful place on earth. She'd loved the phrase 'The Garden of England', and she had once successfully memorised the extract she'd chosen to stick at the start of the scrapbook – a passage from a book called *Great Men of Kent*, published in 1955, in the Men of the Counties Series. *Kent has no high mountains or great rivers, but as a sample of the tranquil English countryside it is unmatched . . .* Unmatched! How she loved that word. She used to say it all the time at home, until her mum

told her to button it . . . *It is a county of wooded valleys nestling between great stretches of wooded downland; its cities have noble cathedrals; its smaller towns are full of winding medieval streets, and its villages have fruit orchards and hop gardens. It is a region of enduring beauty at cherry blossom time . . . But more than all, the people of the county have been splendid Englishmen.* Splendid Englishmen! The book went on to list many of these splendid Englishmen, but their names were hazy now. Sir Sidney someone? Wat Tyler certainly wasn't there. He was Kent's dirty little secret, someone whose life and times she only heard about much later, at her first EDL meeting.

There were other books, too, that made a great impression on her. She would sit at one of the long, polished wooden desks in the Ramsgate Library with a stack of them at her elbow while her mum went shopping. There was *The Heritage of Kent* from the 1960s, and *The Kentish Stour* from earlier, the 50s. Only one of the books was by a woman, and that had come out a couple of years before she started the project. It was called *The Saxon Shore Way*, by Bea Cowan. She didn't think there was anything odd about this fact for a few years. At the time, it was just men who wrote things, she decided. Some of the books were very old indeed – over a hundred years old – and this only increased her sense of deep history; of the rightness of keeping things as they were; of not spoiling or contaminating what was once so beautiful. There was one, a small, palm-sized guidebook with a blue cover that she particularly loved. It was called *The Chambers Guide to the Kent and Sussex Coast in Six Routes or Districts*. The title page told her it was first published in 1863, and it had ads in the back for cough lozenges and insect powder in gothic writing. *A concise description of the chief watering places and other interesting spots on the South East Coast, from the Thames to the borders of Hampshire...* There were suggestions for railway trips and excursions into the 'interior', with the names of tea rooms and what times they opened and closed. It had

been signed by the original owner too: one Arthur Willis, dated 1896. She had been struck by how beautiful his handwriting was, how the ink was still vividly blue on the yellowing paper.

Another guidebook she loved had been *The Chambers Guide to Margate*. She used to marvel at how the seaside tourist town she knew so well hadn't really changed in two hundred years, except that now there were different forms of transportation. *The Margate sailing-hoy, like that of Gravesend, was once the chief means of taking down pleasure-seekers from London. A formidable enterprise it was; for the voyage lasted two or three days, and in stormy weather sometimes a whole week, intensified by the tribulations of seasickness. Steamers were first seen in Margate in 1813... The busiest steamboat year was 1856 when 135,000 persons landed at Margate pier.* How she had loved the phrase *A formidable enterprise!* As with *unmatched and splendid Englishmen*, it had obsessed her for while. It seemed to speak of better times, when people talked properly and respected what had gone before. After a long session at the old heavy-wood desk, her head would be spinning with names and dates; her reverence for the past knowing no limit.

Years later, she thought the memory of her school project was perhaps a romanticised version. It was just a load of stuff from old books and local papers, after all. Her mum hadn't given two shuffs whether she finished it or not, and the teachers didn't seem to encourage her. At school, the other children had always shunned her because she was poor, or smelt, or had no school uniform. She'd wet the bed until she was eleven, and they'd called her 'Pissica' instead of Jessica because of her constant faint smell of pee. She hated the fact she couldn't stop it, even when she went to Big School. Hated the whiff of herself in the morning. It hadn't been poverty, exactly, that made her an outcast – there had been plenty of working-class kids there, most of the intake, in truth – it was the fact that she hadn't been *respectable* poor. The ones whose fathers worked in local light industry, or drove cabs, or spent the summers digging the land. Her mum had had a reputation: as a drinker, a loudmouth – and

worse – though she wouldn't know what 'worse' meant for a number of years. Her father, Duncan, had been a violent drunk who'd never had a proper job in his life. He left the family for good when she was five. Like her older brother, Stuart, her first cot had been a drawer from an old chest in the back bedroom. At the time, her father hadn't been able to afford one. Not even a rubbish one from Argos. They would put her in this drawer, with her meagre collection of supermarket soft toys, night after night. Her father never hit her – she was his 'princess', but he certainly walloped her brother and mum. Her one real memory of her father was of him lowering his great, roasted drinker's face towards her before bedtime and landing a kiss on her forehead. She must have been about five – certainly no more, as he wasn't around after that. 'Ma wee Princess,' he said afterwards in the Scottish accent that he never quite lost. She carried this hot coal of love with her into the future.

She yearned for her father's sporadic visits to the house after he left. He had been absent from their lives for long periods of time beforehand; then simply not there. The unmentionable. Before her father vanished, he must have been supporting the family somehow, as afterwards there was nothing but bread and marge for tea for months, then sometimes nothing at all. She'd idolised her father for a year or so after this, which had infuriated her mother. Then, for a brief period of time, she'd idolised her brother. He seemed to know what to do all the time, like her dad had done. And he never bullied her, unlike other big brothers with their sisters. For a brief while they'd been best friends, taking the train to Herne Bay to go shrimping, or into Margate for ice cream and candyfloss. It was only when he reached his teens that he turned away from her, and she began to hate him. Like her dad, he had abandoned her. That's just what all men did in the end, she decided. They all left. She had no idea what became of her father, or whether he was even alive. Every few years, she Googled his name, but nothing came up.

Not long after he disappeared, her mum cooked up the idea of opening their seafront house as a Bed & Breakfast, despite never having run a business before in her life. Overnight, Jessica found herself sharing a bedroom with her big brother, while the other rooms were redecorated by ‘builders’. She didn’t find out for years that these men were all amateurs, some of whom were receiving sexual favours from her mother. Her mum had been on the game from the start. But, like with the truth about the men who were suddenly everywhere in the house, it was hidden from her. It was only much later, when she left school with one GCSE and no idea what she wanted to do with her life, that she found out what had really been going on.

The best year for Jessica was when she was ten, around the time of the Kent project, just before she was carted off to Charles Dickens School to join her brother, who was three years ahead of her. It was when she felt most free, most herself. She would walk along the cliff tops on her own (couldn’t do that now, of course), picking out the wildflowers which she’d learnt about in a Collins Pocket Guide from the library. Her favourite wasn’t even a flower, it was samphire, which seemed to be growing everywhere behind the new, reinforced railings that ran across the whole cliff overlooking Stone Bay. In summer, the long green knobbly stalks brushed her legs as she walked. There was another variety, her guidebook told her, rock samphire, with little bobbled clusters of flowers that looked like elder at a distance, but she rarely saw any of those. It was always summer in her memory – she didn’t hate the sun back then – and she loved the feeling of warmth on her bare legs; the freshness of the sea air; the racing, honking gulls. Instead of a windfarm on the horizon, there were always hundreds of little sailing boats. She never discovered why there were so many – a competition, maybe – but she found it comforting that they were always there.

If she went further afield, it was often to the Ramsgate Road, and a long wooded alley or cut-through that took her from the technical college to the posh part of Dumpton –

Dumpton Park Drive, with its big sedate houses with proper driveways that all had two cars. It was the 80s, but looking back it was amazing her mum or her brother let her wander off like that, especially down the always-deserted tunnel of trees. She could've been raped or murdered there. The papers were always full of stories about girls like her, nine, ten, eleven, who had wandered off in their innocent summer dresses and white ankle socks, only to be abducted and violated. But it was a different era. Nobody seemed to care that much. She liked to stop halfway down and look in either direction – the same green, enclosed view would greet her, running to a vanishing point at each end. She wanted to see if there was anyone coming, but there never was. She had the pathway to herself, and she would breathe in the scent of the summer trees. It was her secret place, one that years later she would always associate with the lazy, endless days of childhood. When she revisited the alley in her twenties she was shocked to find the debris of drug-taking and teenage drinking everywhere. There were burnt plastic bottles and makeshift pipes, and hollowed-out parts of the hedgerow with evidence of camp fires. This was the work of the immigrants who infested the nearby college, she later learnt – where they came to fuck willing white girls in the bushes and smoke weed. The knowledge of this only increased her hatred of them, her determination to do something about the situation the country was in. They had defiled her secret and sacrosanct childhood place.

‘Our culture is being strangled. I feel like I’m being treated like a second-class citizen in my own country. I feel... I feel like an outsider.’

It was with these words – the first she’d spoken at any BNP meeting – that Jessica first articulated what she felt about the way things were going. She was twenty, and the venue was the top room of the York Arms on King Street, Ramsgate. She’d got to her feet when asked and spoken as simply as possible. ‘Our English way of life is being threatened, and we

shouldn't have to stand for it anymore. If I ever have kids, I don't want them breeding with anyone foreign, no matter who they are...' There'd been yells of agreement from the room – she was the only woman there, and the looks on the faces of the men surrounding her were joyful, eager, protective. The BNP had said they actively wanted to recruit more women, after Le Pen's success in France attracting the votes of war vets, farmers and their wives. So there she was, telling them exactly what she felt. She'd rehearsed what she would say beforehand, but actually saying it out loud was another matter. It was the best feeling in the world. She thought she'd be embarrassed, but the opposite was true. She felt powerful and supported; welcomed into a world of likeminded patriots who, like her, just wanted to preserve something precious. The only thing she hadn't thought through before she stood up was the bit about kids. She hadn't known she was going to say it – and she'd been pretty certain even at that age that she didn't want children – but she'd felt, as the only woman in the room, that she should give the woman's point of view, for what it was worth.

The meeting had been a great success, and she tried to go along every month when caring for her mother didn't stop her. At the time, Nick Griffin had just taken over as party leader, and they were gearing up for parliamentary success. She had vaguely been aware of Griffin in the early 90s because of his eye-patch. Apparently, he'd been making a bonfire when he accidentally threw some shotgun cartridges onto it, blinding him in one eye. This gave him a sinister charm, like a Bond villain. And the fact he owned a shotgun seemed to say he meant business. By the time he visited the York Arms to rally the troops, the eye-patch was gone, but he was still talking the same sense that he always had. Jessica listened enthralled as he calmly told them about the great media conspiracy that everyone had fallen for. According to him, the British media was controlled by a network of Jews who all wanted to promote their own race, as well as multicultural and homosexual views. They were disgusting trash, he told them – *vermin*. And what's more, the Holocaust that you never

stopped hearing about never actually happened. It was all a hoax set in motion by the same Jews who now wanted to take over the world. Then he gave out a pamphlet he'd written called *Who Are the Mind-Benders?* which expanded on these ideas, and listed all the prominent Jews in the public eye.

But his visit didn't come without a warning. If the BNP were going to get anywhere with the British public, it couldn't be seen as a pack of violent thugs, like the old National Front they had replaced. Back in the spring there'd been a number of nail bomb attacks – one on a gay pub in Soho – that had tarred the reputation of the emerging movement. The perpetrators had all been involved in the BNP and it didn't look good. What's more there was another, even more extreme movement called Combat 18, which Jessica had heard of, that was advocating race war. This wasn't the BNP's stance, Griffin told them, pint in hand, like a middle manager speaking to his group at a team building weekend. Everyone needed to use four key words instead: *Freedom, Security, Democracy and Identity*. Freedom from the EU, and being the puppet of American presidents. Security from economic uncertainty caused by the influx of migrants and asylum seekers. Democracy, because the government should listen to 'us' rather than the elite; in other words, the proud working class, genetically white English. And Identity in realising that multiculturalism had failed – that it threatened the survival of nationhood, the traditional cultural and ethnic identity of the native people of the British Isles: 'We must reverse the trend of the last few decades if our people are to have a future in their own lands.' He went on to say he wanted the country to return to being 99 per cent genetically white – a situation it was in before the First World War. By the end, Jessica's head was spinning. Griffin had articulated everything she'd been thinking for years, but couldn't put into words, and she vowed to do everything to help the BNP to power at the next election.

Strangely, it was a woman who became the party's next figurehead – a mother of three from the Midlands called Sharon Edwards. She was everything Jessica wasn't, and it irked her slightly to see her given so much media coverage. She had been filmed for a BNP promo with her husband and kids at their house. Unlike the average BNP supporter, she appeared normal – like any wife and mother concerned about where the country was heading. She even said that women had a 'maternal duty' to care about people's futures, and so represented the 'true spirit of nationalism and patriotism...' 'We just want our way of life back,' she pleaded, reasonably. 'We are being swamped. We want our culture, freedom and traditions to be respected...' Sharon Edwards became a big hit – the poster girl for the party – and Jessica hated her with a passion.

It was around this time – the turn of the Millennium – that she started to have doubts about the BNP. They wanted everyone to dress smartly, like yuppies, and pretend they didn't hate the blacks and Asians who seemed to be taking over the country. The policy of voluntary repatriation, one that she believed in with a passion, had been quietly dropped. Emotive words, Griffin said, had to be avoided, no matter how justified. You couldn't talk about 'aliens' and 'vermin' anymore. If a white rapist was a 'beast' then a black one should just be called a 'criminal'. *It wasn't a question of race, it was a question of space*, as one leaflet summed up their message. That's all they really wanted. Britain had become the biggest soft touch in the world, he urged, and now the borders must be closed. The last straw was when Griffin appointed something called an Ethnic Liaison Committee in order to actively recruit more people from ethnic minorities into the party, including a couple of Jewish candidates; a move which seemed massively hypocritical. What right had they to stand shoulder to shoulder with her? she asked herself, but didn't say out loud. Her visits to the York Arms became more infrequent, and anyway, looking after her mum had become a full-time job.

It was a number of years before she decided to get herself together and apply for the job at Greggs. It was the best decision she ever made. She managed to pull herself out of the mire and regain some degree of self-respect. She'd let herself go; allowed herself to get fat and drift away from normal society, from everything that made life worth living. She loved her job, and threw herself into the work, learning every aspect of the shop under Tony's kind tutelage. He'd been there since the place had opened in the late eighties, apparently. She even got back some kind of social life, spending evenings in the Ramsgate pubs where the EDL had their meetings. It was there, in the Deal Cutter, that she met Ryan. At the time, he was an RO for the EDL. ROs were the regional organisers – fifteen in total, and all appointed by leader Tommy Robinson and his deputy Kevin Carroll. They were handpicked, and Ryan prided himself on the fact that Tommy had personally selected him. The ROs controlled the fifty EDL divisions around the country, though, as Ryan was at pains to point out, they weren't a political party, but a single-issue movement. The issue being the Islamification of the UK. Ryan had been high up in the Kent Patriots for a while, until the lure of a proper nationwide organisation drew him away. It was all part of 'moving on up', as he put it, sitting calmly at a back table of the Cutter with his mates, Wobbler and Sam. His dad had been a serviceman, and the EDL were mainly ex-forces people, along with those in the building trade. It took a while for Jess to realise he was actually seven years younger than her, as he acted so mature. Like her, he'd left school at sixteen, but he'd had the sense to get himself a proper job. He'd apprenticed as a mechanic, and, by the time he joined the Kent Patriots, was managing the New Man tool shop in Newington, a place Jessica knew by the fact its frontage had been missing the letter 'M' of 'Man' for as long as she could remember. Ryan was the opposite of Kris. Softly spoken, tall, very thin, he was committed to ridding the country of the rising tide of immigrants. The way he put it, everything was logical – we were here first, and we had a claim to the land. We were being made to feel like aliens on our own territory.

If there was council housing to be had, you could be sure the migrants got their hands on it first. And now there was the new threat of Islam, with terrorism and grooming gangs and the rest.

When Ryan wasn't in the Cutter he drank at the old British Legion, and Jessica often joined him there, cradling her pint of Stella in a corner booth while listening carefully as he spoke. She quickly found she could confide in Ryan in a way she never had with her exes. He was the first person she confessed to about her mum and how she'd secretly earned a living. She even told him about her school project, the swotty bumper scrapbook on Kent that she was always slightly embarrassed about. She told him how she had loved finding all the books in the library with names like *Byways and Highways of Kent*, or *The Heritage Trail*, with pictures of watermills and odd things like that. And all the people in olden-days costumes. Ryan had smiled at the mention of watermills – his grandfather had worked on one. He said he had a picture of his granddad with a big millwheel in the background, his shirtsleeves rolled up, a waistcoat on – a true Man of Kent.

Ryan moved into Bradstone Court with Jessica, and they found themselves a bitch mastiff that they took turns in walking. For the first time in her life she felt loved and understood. It was the greatest feeling in the world – she realised just how little love there'd been for her when she was growing up. Ryan's new job on the IT desk at Kent Canterbury uni was well paid, and they enjoyed a good quality of life. And he really was an education in the way the far right was mobilising online. Jess had joined the EDL just as they were actively recruiting women – the *EDL Angels* as they were known. The rival football Firms, or hooligan gangs, who made up much of the membership, had started to give the movement a bad name; drinking and causing rucks at demos, or even giving Nazi salutes. The Angels were there to soften the image, though this made Jessica laugh, telling Ryan, 'I doubt I'll soften anyone's image, babe!'

The EDL even had a woman at its very core – Hel Gower, a motherly Dover resident who'd been down to the Cutter a couple of times to see how Ryan did things. She was the EDL's financial manager and publicist – as Ryan told Jess, the EDL was actually registered under her name at Companies House. An old ally of Tommy Robinson's, Hel was a moderate, and strongly anti-fascist. It was Hel who told Tommy to kick out all the so-called extreme splinter groups that had quickly grown up around the EDL. Jess was puzzled as to why there were so many, and she didn't quite see why Tommy hated them so much. She was sympathetic to many of their views. There was the Northwest Infidels and the Northeast Infidels. March for Britain and Blood and Honour. Aryan Strike Force and United British Patriots. The list went on and on. Most of them were led by neo-Nazis. One, Paul Ray, a blogger who Ryan knew well, and who went under the name of 'Lionheart' had attacked Tommy for being Irish by birth. Another, Nazi Nick, as he was known, wanted to start a holy war between Christians and Muslims. And then there was the shady Nemesis, an EDL strategist and online organiser whose real identity was never revealed. Finally, there was Viking, who headed up the EDL's South United Division, based in Reading. Viking had been to the Cutter too, and was matey with Ryan and his cronies. Every two or three months, the EDL had a meet-and-greet to welcome new members and organise demos. On one of these, Viking had been very vocal about the way the party was seen to be getting soft. It was the presidential leadership of Tommy that was the problem, he said. The way Tommy had to be figurehead all the time, on the telly, spouting off. There were even whispers of removing him. In the end, they didn't have to plan a coup – Tommy left of his own accord, apparently because he didn't agree with the white supremacist elements creeping in and all the infighting that followed, but really because he was about to do time for Visa fraud. Once Tommy was gone, eight ROs were replaced and a new boss, Steve Eddowes took charge. Ryan never officially left the EDL, but stepped down as RO for Thanet.

It was the murder of serviceman Lee Rigby the following year that really changed things for Jessica and Ryan. There was to be a big memorial march, from Charlton to Woolwich. The day had a charged atmosphere from the start. They all met in the White Horse in Charlton, and it was obvious the numbers were going to be higher than on any previous EDL demo. There were over 500 from the South East division alone, along with splinter groups like the BPA, the British Patriotic Alliance, and the EVF. In the pub, as Ryan got the drinks in, all anyone could talk was how much they hated Muslims and the vile beliefs that had led to a serving soldier being slaughtered in broad daylight. That the murderer could parade about on telly with his unforgettably gory hands was a new low in the country's history. Something had to be done. The argument in the press had been that the killers were home-grown terrorists, and so immigration wasn't to blame. But as Ryan said when he returned with their pints, it was ingrained into the Muslim religion to turn on us like this. He used a phrase Jess had heard many times before: 'If a dog is brought up in a stable, it's still a dog not a horse.'

It took a while, however, for Jessica to find out that Ryan wasn't as comfortable with his own gentle and reasonable nature as she supposed. When they started living with each other, she became aware that the way they operated as a couple was not to his liking – was somehow at odds with his views. Because it was her flat, she pretty much controlled everything: the rent, the bills, how the place looked, who did the cooking and cleaning, which, she insisted, would be fifty-fifty all the way. Not what Ryan wanted at all, it seemed. After a year, he was on at her every night to give up her job at Greggs and just let him be the breadwinner. 'It's the natural order,' he said. 'My mum never worked – she was a housewife and was happy with that.' But it went deeper than his mum. When she pushed him, it became clear he was being influenced by the Trad Wives movement, which was just getting big in America. A far-right

offshoot group that told women to stay at home and support their husbands like 1950s domestic slaves, the Trad Wives believed feminism had brainwashed a generation. The most shocking thing to Jessica was that so many women supported it. There was a group called the Red Pill Women, an all-female antifeminist movement, who were obsessed with something called SMV. This, Ryan explained, was a woman's Sexual Market Value. First invented by the male supremacist group Men Going Their Own Way, the SMV basically ranked women and pitted them against each other. Your SMV went down if your weight went up. Also if you'd had lots of different partners. 'That's me fucked then!' Jessica had joked. But Ryan – never one with a great sense of humour – had been deadly serious. He wanted her to lose weight, and increase her SMV. He began subtly influencing this by emptying their larder of pasta and doughnuts, and cutting down on the amount of takeaways they ate. At first she thought this was because he was on some bizarre health kick, but no, it was all about her. 'A woman's most important resource is her SMV,' he insisted. 'But why's that matter when we're already together?' she asked. 'I ain't on the market no more!' 'It just does,' he replied, unconvincingly. 'A woman's job or education are irrelevant. It's her health, age and femininity. They're the most important qualities that appeal to men. Me included. Especially when it comes to marriage.'

Marriage. They'd talked about it a few times before the whole Trad Wives thing had come up, but now Jessica started to see his game. He wasn't about to walk her down the aisle looking *like that*, was what he seemed to be saying. But who said she wanted to walk down the aisle with anyone? And children too, he'd hinted at, but she'd said no from the start, so he'd stopped going on about them. Ryan had also begun talking about the *Manosphere*, a secret set of dark-net groups who all wanted to manipulate women and put them in their place. They talked of *feminazis*, and wanted to punish women who stepped out of line. There were Incels too – 'blokes who couldn't get a shag' as Jess termed them. But Ryan thought

they had a God-given right to a shag, for some reason. ‘Feminism is attacking the white male,’ he declared. ‘Men need to stand up for themselves. And women should bloody listen to them for once.’

The trouble was, none of this came naturally to Ryan. He was the least Alpha of any bloke she’d ever been out with. Kris had been different – if she’d given him a bit of lip after they’d disagreed about something, he’d knock her to the back of the room. She couldn’t imagine Ryan hitting anyone. It just wasn’t in his nature. He couldn’t lay down the law if his life depended on it. He might dearly wish to join the Manosphere and turn her into a domestic drudge, but there was no way he could force her. Her mum had never been one, so why should she? It all put a massive strain on their relationship. By the time she and Ryan joined Britain First they were in a bad place. It had all gone wrong somehow. The dream of togetherness had turned sour.

It didn’t help that the sex had turned rubbish too. Maybe it was because she knew Ryan wanted to do things to her in bed that weren’t in his nature. He’d tried slapping her a few times, and called her a bitch and a whore, and at first she’d just laughed. It was so unconvincing. Like a bad porn film. When he kept doing it, she’d told him to cut it out. Only once did he put his hand around her throat, at which point she threw him out of the bed and onto the floor. By the end of their time together, when they did have sex, she thought of Ryan as more like an insect or parasite, feeding on her: like a caterpillar on a strawberry. In bed, he would go at her for what seemed like hours, rutting away while she thought of someone else entirely, or tried in vain to arouse herself. But why go to all that trouble, she thought, when she could bring herself off in a couple of minutes on her own thinking about some footballer or a bloke off the telly. It was all a shambles by the end.

They agreed to split up just after the election where Cameron won his big majority. It seemed like a defeat all-round, with UKIP losing out in South Thanet and the far right

wobbling in the aftermath. The EDL was a lost cause, and Britain First were failing to convince people they were patriots and not Nazis. It was a bittersweet moment for everyone. She and Ryan agreed to go on living together while he sorted himself out. He didn't want to go back and live with his mum, even though he never stopped going on about her.

It was around this time, when they were still living in a state of limbo, that Jessica scored what she thought of as her biggest success as an 'activist', as she liked to call herself. Even sweeter, it was a victory close to home, not something that happened in cyberspace with a bunch of people she'd never meet. It was something weirdly connected with her childhood too; with what she thought of as her true Kentish heritage. In the year before the general election, there'd been a campaign led by local residents and certain members of Thanet District Council to get rid of a plaque on the Broadstairs seafront, which commemorated Uncle Mack, the music hall star of the forties. She would never forget her first sight of his plaque honouring his years entertaining the residents of the town. It was her mum who had showed it to her. She'd been walking along the top path overlooking Viking Bay with her brother, towards the bandstand, when they'd come across it. Small, with a picture of a banjo-playing man in a funny hat. She'd been transfixed by Uncle Mack's jovial face, and asked her mum whether she knew about him. 'He used to black up,' her mum said, laughing her head off. 'That's all I know.' Jessica hadn't known what that meant. At that age, her brother was still quite sweet, before he became covered in acne; before he started trying out the big words and arrogant attitude that would force her to cut him out of her life for good. When her mum explained, Stuart said blacking up wasn't funny, it was 'offensive', but she had thought he was wrong. It *was* funny. Even before he ran away to London, Stuart was long gone up his own arse. As far as she was concerned, Uncle Mack's mockery of blacks was right and proper. England was a country that was never meant for foreigners in such big numbers.

‘We’re an island race – a proud island race, never conquered,’ as Ryan used to say. ‘And we’re going to stay that way’.

For a long time, it looked like the campaign to remove the plaque would be successful. Until she got involved, that is. A big leftie campaign platform, Change.org, had stepped in and were sending out an online petition to a mailing list that ran into the hundreds of thousands. They also had a huge reach on Twitter. Usually concerned with campaigns about NHS funding or national issues, Change.org had now turned their sights closer to home. Jessica had been outraged when she read their email pitch, which was headed with a picture of Uncle Mack’s proudly grinning blackface troupe from back in the day. *Uncle Mack and his band blacked up in a crude and demeaning caricature of African people – a cruel mockery of human beings being reduced to objects of ridicule... He may be too racist for a contemporary audience, but yet not too racist for a memorial on Broadstairs beach.* Her knuckles had turned white as she read on. *Uncle Mack’s plaque is a monument to colonial-era bigotry and racism. It is an ugly reminder of both the horrors of our past and how little we have done to make amends... It was offensive then and it is even worse now.* Whose fucking past were they talking about? *Our past* – just that little phrase represented everything that was wrong with the present situation. She’d wanted to scream. The idea that *everyone* in the UK shared a history, lived the same lives, faced the same struggle. For *her* people, the proud white working-class, Uncle Mack was a figurehead – an entertainer who stood up for the whites, people whose ancestors had lived in Kent for hundreds, even thousands of years. His show was the only way they could forget for a moment their hours of working their fingers to the bone in menial jobs. And offensive to who? Only to posh, protected, silver-spoon liberal pricks who had never lived without a thing for a single day of their lives!

The email had gone even further with its call to direct action. *Uncle Mack’s plaque must be removed. It can be kept in a museum, or replaced with something decided on by the*

public and the relevant authorities – but it cannot remain as it is. A museum where? In London, so the middle-class elite can walk past and ridicule it, along with the working-class people who'd put it up in good faith in the first place. Every year it stands is an insult to every African that helped build our Empire, every Caribbean whose labour swelled White coffers, every forgotten bead of sweat from whipped slave brows. Ridiculous shit! How dare they put it in those terms? He was a just a bloke who played the fucking banjo! Get real. Every day it stands is a stain on the reputation of Broadstairs ... Every second it stands is a slap in the face of every black person who calls Thanet their home, and a mark of shame on those who have let this travesty last as long as it has ... Send Broadstairs Town Council a strong message that enough is enough. We do not ask – but demand – that this aberration be consigned to the pit of history where it belongs.

Below this rousing call to arms was a click point where you could register your name and join the petition. Only a couple of thousand had registered so far, but it was enough for Jessica to see red. Some had even left a 'reason for signing' post, along with their name. *Celebrating minstrel shows is despicable*, one Frederick Ricks had commented. *Broadstairs needs to sort itself out*, said Josh Dineen. *Disgraceful!* According to Tamsin Coates. Well, thought Jessica, the fact that they'd left their full names on the petition meant she could get to work at once. She would begin a doxing campaign on all of them that would make them wish they'd clicked the 'anonymous' box instead. She would post their addresses and phone numbers and social media tags and places of work on every far-right site she could, and then let the massed armies of Europe's patriots get to work! She would fill the comments thread of Change.org's Twitter posts about Uncle Mack with words that would leave them in no doubt as to what the white working class thought of their pissy, misguided campaign. She would be victorious!

And she was.

Within two weeks, the flow of people signing the campaign had slowed to a trickle. In the end, they garnered no more than a few thousand signatures from people who cared about removing some tiny monument in a town they'd probably never visited in their lives. She didn't know whether Thanet Council ever took the campaign seriously, but Uncle Mack's proud plaque stayed where it was. When it was all over, Jessica felt – for the first time ever – that she'd finally achieved something with her life.

‘Go on, you *cunt*, show ‘em what for!’

On the night after Donald Trump became the president of the United States, Jessica found herself standing with Darren Betts at the bar of the Racing Greyhound. Darren’s voice was hugely loud in her ear, and she could smell stale sweat and detergent from his ragged T-shirt. In the corner by the door, the twinkling bank of slots stood unattended. Like everyone else in the pub, she and Darren were staring at the huge plasma on the far wall, watching the scrolling news of the Republican victory, glassy eyed with joy. And something else. A sense of – what? Vindication? Yes, that was the word, Jessica thought. People all over the world were finally leaning their way. Not just the majority of the UK – the 52 per cent who had voted to leave the EU in the summer – but the population of the greatest nation on earth. They had all been *vindicated* at last.

‘You just watch that cunt go,’ Darren went on, flexing his powerful arms. ‘From now on, he’ll be fucking unstoppable!’

‘He’ll send the Mexicans packing,’ said Jessica. ‘Which is something...’

‘You mean the rapists?’

‘Yeah. That’s who I mean.’

Darren smiled at her. More of a leer, she thought. She'd always been slightly wary of Darren Betts. A big bloke: tanned, covered in tats, he worked as a window cleaner in Dover. He was the opposite of Ryan, who was sitting in the raised area at a table with his crew, Wobbler, Sam and Andy Marshall. They too were all staring up at Trump's triumph on the TV. No, Darren was dangerous. And he always, no matter what, tried it on with her.

'Stay 'ere love,' said Darren, as Roger, the dependable landlord, passed him his fifth Carling of the evening. 'I'm just going for a piss. You can hold it for me if ya like.'

'Nah, yer all right,' Jessica winced, amassing four pint glasses together in her hands and heading for Ryan's table.

They didn't usually drink in the Greyhound. Even though it was Jessica's local, they always preferred the Cutter or the York in Ramsgate. The Greyhound was too posh, with too many oldies. But tonight they'd made an exception. It wasn't just that America had voted in Trump, and they wanted to watch his victory on the biggest telly they could find, it was the fact that members of South Thanet Labour party often held meetings in the Greyhound. Sure enough, at the back bar, out of sight of Ryan's mob, there was a table of them; drowning their sorrows most probably, hiding from the TV. And there was a certain woman who Jessica intended to have a word with. The plan was to get a bit oiled first, then go and give 'em some gip. Something to look forward to later.

As she stepped onto the raised dais, the carpet of which bore scars of gaffa tape from the bands that played there every weekend, she realised she still stank from work. Dean had forced her to stay late. She could smell onions on her hands; her hair reeked of fat from the bacon fryers, despite wearing a cap for ten hours. And her fingers were crinkly from the clean-up that always ended the day.

'Sorry,' she said, setting the pints down. 'I stink like a pig.'

'Never put Ryan off,' said Andy Marshall, tonelessly.

Andy was ex-forces, and didn't always hang out with them. Usually quiet and reserved, this was his idea of a joke. Trouble was, he could never make them. He had no talent for jokes. Always killed them dead. No one found them funny, except for one person. Sure enough, next to him, Wobbler – so named because no one had ever seen him throw one – let out a yelp of laughter.

'Who gave you permission to laugh?' Andy barked in his parade-ground voice. He always said this too. And it was always even unfunnier than the original joke.

'Shut it,' said Wobbler, though there was fear in his eyes.

Jessica stood surveying the table of men. All of them were well on the way to getting pissed. 'Shut it – *all of yer.*'

Ryan glanced at Wobbler, forbidding him from making further comment. Wobbler was a wimp and worked with Ryan on the Canterbury uni IT desk. His online name was 'Crusader', something Jessica had always thought quite funny. Ryan was his boss, so Wobbler wasn't going to fuck him about. For some reason, she found Ryan a lot easier to deal with now they'd stopped going out with each other. Now they were just fellow activists – mates, even.

Before sitting down, Jessica looked around nervously for Darren. It was Darren who'd been with them on the train back from Herne Bay when they'd ran into the two Spanish women – the Other Man who the press didn't name, probably because he had his own business and two kids. It was Ryan who had protected her from Darren all day, even though Darren could've probably pisted her ex with a single punch. But Ryan hadn't been about to let him get lairy with her. He was more like a brother now. Not a useless big brother, like Stuart had been, but an equal. A partner in crime. *Literally.*

'Budge up,' Jessica said to Sam, who was sitting at Ryan's other elbow.

She slumped down heavily as the men fell on their pints, like greedy gulls.

Sam was a hacker and a gaming nerd. Long-haired, terminally unemployed, he knew a lot about politics and tech. He'd been lecturing them about how Trump had really won the election before she went to the bar. Five minutes later, he was still going strong, as Trump shook his tiny hands in the air on TV.

'...Like I was saying, it was the ultranationalists that won it, just like they'll win it for us over here. They *memed* him into the fucking White House.

Darren drained his pint and sat back. 'And he's done it all so quickly.'

'How time flies,' Andy said flatly.

'Now he'll kick out all the wops and kikes and towelheads and ni –'

'The point I was making,' Sam interrupted, 'if you'd allowed me to finish – the real point – was that Trump didn't do it all on his own. No way, José. The Republican party didn't even want him to run in the first place. They thought he was a liability. It was only when the alt-right got behind him that it started to happen. All them slogans? *Drain the Swamp? Lock her up?* All of 'em came from the alt-right. They were made popular by Breitbart News and the rest. You see, the mistake the Democrats made was thinking the oxygen of publicity only came from one source – the mainstream news – when most of it came from the internet. Every week, Trump said or did something so fucking outrageous they thought it must be a career-ending gaffe. And every week he remained the front runner. They just couldn't understand it.'

Darren sat back in his chair, dwarfing it. 'They underestimated the power of celebrity, the stupid cunts.'

Ryan stared contemplatively at his pint. 'What's more, Darren, is that they underestimated the power of nativists like us. All that stuff on the internet spoke directly to the rust-belt voters. They wanted an all-white ethnostate, just like we do in Europe. Ignore us at your peril.'

Ethnostate. Jessica smiled at Ryan, proud, as ever, of how he could articulate things so easily. She even felt a twinge of her old feelings for him.

‘Too true,’ Sam said. ‘Plus the new nativists have the power of youth behind ‘em. All them online disruptors and edgelords are poster-boy material. They’re good looking blokes – and I’m not fucking queer, okay. Richard Spencer and Yanis Menopause, however you pronounce him –‘

‘And they had that big-titted blonde,’ Wobbler offered, clicking his fingers. ‘What’s her name? Cassandra Fairburn.’

‘Fairbanks,’ Ryan corrected, ‘like the old movie star.’

‘Yeah. Whatever. She can’t have hurt ‘em. Tits on ‘er! All the lefties had to ogle was old-bag Hilary.’

‘Careful,’ Andy said. ‘Ladies present.’

Jessica laughed. ‘I’m a geezer bird, apparently, so nothing can shock me!’

‘The Crusader strikes again,’ Ryan said drily.

‘Listen, I don’t care,’ Jessica sat forward. ‘Talk about tits all you like, but I’d rather talk about them lot next door.’

‘What about ‘em?’ Sam said. ‘Soft target, don’t you think?’

‘I thought they was the reason we was all here!’

‘I could use a ruck tonight,’ Darren smiled, cracking his knuckles.

‘Not in here though,’ Ryan said, suddenly alarmed.

‘Course not. We go over and have a little chat. Then offer them out. Those of em who don’t pussy out.’

‘Which means none of them,’ Wobbler laughed.

‘I just want a word with one of them,’ Jessica urged. ‘That leftie bitch...’

That leftie bitch. The woman Jessica especially wanted to see squirm was a Labour district councillor for Dover, a posh cow called Yvette Hartford-Jones who lived on the fanciest square in nearby Deal. Blonde, swishy, always well-groomed, and – this was almost a bigger sin than her politics – stunningly beautiful. She had become a hate-figure for Jessica over the last year because, since the collapse of the original campaign to remove Uncle Mack’s plaque from the seafront, Yvette Hartford-Jones had started a second one, along with some Labour members of Thanet District Council. What’s more – post-Brexit vote – it had gained a whole lot more interest from the public than the first effort. If there was anyone who fed her resentment it was Hartford-Jones and her entitled crusade to destroy the monument she deemed ‘outrageous to any right-thinking citizen’. Recently, Jessica had spent her Saturday nights trolling Hartford-Jones’s social media accounts. What had started off as mild abuse had mutated into death threats. She wanted to see Hartford-Jones stabbed or strangled. This was her ‘other work’, one of the reasons – apart from the community service commitments – she wanted to keep her weekends clear. She operated under a number of anonymous Twitter handles, and had been able to fill Hartford-Jones’s timeline with vicious messages before each one was blocked. As always, she found trolling strangely thrilling – not just the freeing anonymity, but the depths of nastiness she discovered in herself. It was as if she’d finally found her true voice after years of being mute. However, to her annoyance, over the past few weeks Hartford-Jones had appeared to thrive on the wave of cyber-attacks. They made her ‘stronger’, she tweeted; more determined to ‘rid a quiet seaside town of an embarrassing reminder of its colonial past’. She was forever grinning from her Twitter profile, saying how she loved Kent, even though she grew up in Chelsea, and how she wouldn’t rest until the plaque was removed.

It was only recently that the idea of really scaring Hartford-Jones had presented itself to Jessica. What if, instead of empty threats, she gave Hartford-Jones something to be

properly afraid of? Something that would wipe the smile off that posh-girl face for good? And now she'd tracked her down to the Racing Greyhound on a Wednesday night in November.

Yet she had to concede Ryan had a point. She didn't want to start a fight in her local boozier. Not after the landlord Roger had been so good in turning reporters away when they all came sniffing around a couple of months back after her conviction. Old red-faced Roger was a mate and an ally to their cause. He wanted his country back just as much as they did. No, the best idea was to go and remind them who had just become the forty-fifth president of the United States. And why the new Uncle Mack campaign wasn't a good idea if Hartford-Jones cared about her health.

Ryan was suddenly on his feet, holding out his hands to calm the table down. 'Jess is right. Let's just invite em over to watch the TV news and see what they say. We don't want a fight in her local.'

'Why not?' Darren grinned, indicating the chalkboard menu facing the bar. 'Tomorrow is curry night. It'll be packed then. We're not going to lose 'em much custom now.'

'I just want a word in that bitch's shell-like, if that's okay with everyone.'

Andy was now on his feet too, towering over the sea of empty pint glasses. Jessica had forgotten how tall he was. He'd been a paratrooper in Afghan, and they all deferred to him in the end, even though he was a bit thick. 'No fighting. We walk tall and carry a big stick. Let Jess have a word with whoever she wants, then we'll have another drink. Tonight is for celebration only.'

'Hear, hear,' said Wobbler, a little too eagerly.

Sam picked up his pint and held it aloft. 'Cheers to the big man!'

'Cheers!'

‘Cheers!’

And with that, Jessica led the way to the snug of the Racing Greyhound to have a little word in Yvette Hartford-Jones’s petite, exquisitely turned ear.

YVETTE

‘Your turn, I believe,’ said Yvette, putting on her best throaty voice, a playful smile on her lips.

Lying very still on her back in their king-size bed, her eyes tightly closed, her forehead already warm from the 6am sunlight flooding the room, she nudged her husband Ollie in the ribs, careful not to wake their three-month-old daughter who had slept soundly next to her all night. Through the open window came a ringing dawn chorus from the trees and tennis courts of Archery Square, and she could detect the sweet scent of lavender from her window boxes. It was early September, her favourite time of the year, with summer still hanging heavy, not quite gone. A moment ago, from across the hallway, the first morning words of their three-year-old, Stan, had volleyed forth. *Mama. Dada. I’m all alone! Please come in! Come now!*

Somehow, Ollie had slept through this compelling call. They didn’t believe in baby monitors, relying instead on keeping the nursery door open, but for a moment she thought a monitor might be a good idea, given how well her husband always slept. How did he manage it? In the early days of Stan’s life, he could snore through a thunderstorm, let alone their son’s pressing cries, without a twitch or a murmur. It had always been this way, even when the boy had slept with them, like Amy was now on Yvette’s left side; her nostrils flaring with each precious breath, her perfect lashes two lustrous crescents under an impossibly smooth brow.

Mama. Dada. Please come and get me...!

Yvette gently pushed Ollie once more in the chest and he roused; his eyes blinking open.

She smiled at her husband, sugaring the pill of the bad news. ‘He’s awake, I’m afraid.’

‘Christ,’ said Ollie, scratching his beard, with the startled look of a man awoken from dreams. ‘So he is.’

Oval-faced, strong and slow, Ollie was her mountain man. He was tall – the king-size bed barely held him – and his hands were permanently calloused from his summers spent picking fruit. She was always surprised at how deep his voice was; its cavernous tones seemed to reverberate around the bedroom. It was part of what had attracted her to him in the first place. There was something infinitely reassuring and true about his voice. Her friends had at first praised and admired her for finding such a rough diamond, only to retract their admiration when she announced she was to marry him. Wasn’t he a bit, well, *working class*? They were right – he was, and it was certainly part of his attraction that he’d grown up in a terraced house on Roper Street, behind Canterbury West station. His father had been a mechanic, his mother a primary school teacher, who ran an unsuccessful ceramics business on the side. His world had been a revelation to her, despite having worked in the charity sector for years.

And now her mountain man was shaking off the covers and falling heavily from the bed, heading for the open doorway and the nursery across the hall. She waited until she heard Stan’s joyous *Dada!* before settling back into the luxurious pillows.

She looked again at her daughter and saw that the commotion had awakened her too. Without thinking, she opened her nightshirt and pulled her baby gently onto her chest, allowing the tiny mouth to latch on. *Amy*, they had named her, after Ollie’s grandmother.

Amy had been their Brexit baby – or BB, as they’d called her for a while – born on the night of the EU referendum, the 23rd of June. Yvette had heard the second child was always a breeze compared to the first, and Amy had proved this to be correct. A champion sleeper, unlike Stan, she was docile and far less needy. And easier on the breast, too. The excruciating mastitis she’d experienced with her firstborn – and which she’d so feared with her second – just hadn’t arrived. Lying there, with sunshine drenching the room, she thought, as she had done many times recently, what a pitch of perfection her life had reached. Dangerous, of course, to entertain such thoughts, as bad things always followed complacency. But it couldn’t be denied.

Usually, when she fed Amy at that hour, she’d check her phone, or pick up a book from the tottering TBR pile by the bed. But today she decided to do nothing, to just be in the moment. She would listen to the birdsong, and to Ollie’s rumbling voice from the nursery as he struggled to get Stan out of his nappy, onto the potty, and into his pants. Such resistance! She couldn’t imagine Amy being such a chore when the time came. Staring ahead, her eyes alighted on the porcelain Japanese vase sitting on a circular walnut table, just to the left of the light-filled window. It had belonged to her maternal grandfather, the historian Stanley Hartford-Jones, who had given his name to their son, but had never got to see him. Indeed, she had loved her grandfather so much, she had insisted at eleven, in a jejune fit of pique, that she use his surname, rather than her own father’s. She wanted to think about Stanley for a moment as Amy pulled at her breast, guzzling contentedly, the heady smell of lavender filling the room. She wanted to wander the corridors of the house near the Albert Bridge where she’d grown up, and which had been full of her grandparents’ things. Stanley’s books, gilt-tooled and elegant on long shelves; their battered luggage still bearing stamps and stickers from exotic locations, Cairo, Istanbul, Bhutan; and her grandmother’s doll’s house, with which she’d played as an only child, longing for a big family of her own to fill the

empty rooms. The doll's house was now in her son's room. She saw no reason why Stan shouldn't play with it, nor why little Amy shouldn't have Ollie's old action men when she grew older. She was sure if her grandfather could see her and her two children in her house by the sea he would smile, tugging his white beard with his right hand with the characteristic gesture she used to love, one he would employ at the dining table on his many visits; a considered, sage, worldly expression on his face.

She'd never wanted her children to grow up in London, and her wish had been granted; though this was more due to Ollie's job rather than the result of any prior planning. She'd met him while working for the NCVO, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, in Islington. Ollie had been a Community Outreach worker for Kent County Council, and a few years younger than her. After their first passionate six weeks together, he'd taken her to Thanet to see 'his places, his people'. When they first drove to Whitstable for an unseasonable weekend away in March, she'd fallen in love with the town. They'd stood on the shallow incline of the pebbled beach, the wind battering the salt-corroded groynes, and stared at the rough, grey immensity of the sea; the surf exploding up the gradient. 'I want to live here one day,' she whispered into Ollie's ear, the hood of her parka up against the cold.

Deal was as close as they'd got to Whitstable, and it suited them both fine. London became the 'other place', the unhealthy alternative, somewhere they commuted to for meetings and to see her parents. Her father, Geoffrey, wrote for the *New Statesman* and elsewhere, and was always thrilled to see her and Ollie at the door; more so now that grandchildren had appeared. Her mother, Flora, was less than thrilled, or so it seemed. Yvette had always said her relationship with her mother could keep a shrink in business for the rest of their life without the need to take on any other clients. In her heyday, Flora had been a debutante, and later a great party planner and social organiser. How a man with such staunch

leftist principles as her father had ended up with Flora, Yvette never knew. They seemed such an odd couple. Her mother was predictably disappointed when she married Ollie, and always slightly chilly about Stan and Amy. As if grandchildren were troublesome, with their sticky toys and endless wailing needs; an intrusion that disrupted her life. Her reaction was wounding, certainly, but Yvette could at last see why her parents had stopped at only one child. And anyway, they had Ollie's mother to compensate, a woman who – unsurprisingly given her job – was warm and wise and brilliant with small children.

London had become her past; somewhere she'd been glad to see the back of. This was the next stage in her life, and it felt right. An influx of new vigour and fresh, salt-tinged air. Of safety and security, though it wasn't as if the streets where she'd grown up were in any way scary or mean. Far from it. A five minute walk in any direction from her old family home would reveal the deep, settled wealth of Chelsea in row after row of stately facades. There were blue plaques galore. Carlyle's and Whistler's were around the corner on Cheyne Walk. Sylvia Pankhurst's too. And yet the urban vibrations made her unwell – something she only realised when she found herself walking on Deal's cambered, shingle beach every morning; the pier a rumour through the mist, the high winds coursing through dunes of marram grass. They had everything they needed here; a network of friends, many with young children; her fellow councillors and their families; a wealth of baby-groups, drop-in-centres, nurseries and excellent schools. Plus a fine local pub, the Stag, and a deli and a wine emporium just around the corner. Archery Square itself was perfect too. Solid and Edwardian, with a white stucco terrace on one side facing the old Walmer Tennis Association Park, it still carried a whiff of bohemia, something she was more than acquainted with from Chelsea. She liked to feel she still kept a toe in her past, and hadn't become completely provincial. Their house, No 30, was called Clarence Villas, and boasted an elegant, black wrought-iron balcony facing the pines and copper beeches surrounding the courts. In

summer, the pleasing thwack of racket against ball would reach her as she took morning tea at the balcony's table, though she couldn't see the players through the foliage. At the end of their row stood a great Dutch-gabled house, with grey French-style windows against white-painted brickwork. A few feet away, a broad alley afforded a view of the sea itself, the sound of which she still found so comforting at night; such a contrast with the relentless wow and flutter of London; the sirens and the night-shrieks, the violence and the poverty. She counted her blessings every morning, and did so now as Amy came to the end of her feed, pulling harder and pounding her little fists into her chest. Yes, Archery Square was as good a place as anywhere on earth to have ended up.

From the kitchen she heard the clatter of pans, as Ollie extracted tea mugs and a clean bottle for Stan from the chaotic drainer. Never enough time to clear up properly the night before. Never enough time to think! Her life had become one long blur of nappy bags and toddler snack pots. Of halved baby tomatoes and rice cakes. Of Gruffalos and Big Bad wolves. Of playdates and tantrums. Of highchairs and stairgates. Of Dream Sheep white-noise machines, and tiny, Velcro-strapped shoes. These were permanently scattered in the hallway, making Ollie's already huge boots look like the footwear of a giant. Her days were organised around her baby's naps, by Amy's relentless demands to which she submitted in a kind of trance. And her nights by the animal comfort of bodies all nesting together; by the boom of the distant waves through the window, her ears alert to the waking calls of children.

She welcomed this life; didn't resent or resist it. The bursting, rich, reciprocal life of children and family. It was what she'd always wanted. The excitement and the exhaustion went hand in hand. Just lately, she'd been constantly teary – she was hormonal she knew, but nothing accounted for the almost hourly breakdowns into tears that always seemed strangely refreshing afterwards. Maybe it was just getting older – she was a couple of years off forty;

her parents were ageing, her Oxford friends had all scattered around the country and around the world. But nothing accounted for the trembly, vulnerable moods she found herself in daily. There was an unnerving euphoria to them; a sense of clairvoyance, even. She'd anticipated post-natal depression with her second child – not an unusual phenomenon – but it had never arrived. Or maybe this was it – the tears were a mild form of PND. She had no idea, and she knew Ollie wasn't the person to discuss it with. She saved those kind of chats for her mum friends, in The Frog and Scot, her favourite bistro on Deal's quaint, meandering High Street. Maybe it was the state of the nation that made her so delicately emotional. The state of the planet, too.

Just the past few months, since Amy was born, had been tumultuous. And she felt there'd been a collective failure on the left to understand any of it, to grasp the apparent will of the people, and why they had spoken as they had. Why they had voted to declare they didn't want anything that she, and nearly everyone she knew, held dear. Tolerance. Open borders. Multiculturalism. Liberal democracy, in short. Her fellow councillors couldn't stop talking about how absurd the situation suddenly seemed. She had to agree. The country was being held to ransom by conniving Tories and fools like Nigel Farage who'd lied their way to victory. Empty promises to fund the NHS to the tune of £350m a week with the money they'd 'save' from leaving the EU. Racist advertising depicting queues of asylum seekers with the words 'Breaking Point'. Petty, Little England nationalism and virulent racism of a type she'd assumed had disappeared with the 1970s. She'd been a member of the Labour party since university, and had never seen times like it. The consensus politics she'd held dear all her life – of liberal globalisation and tolerance for other cultures – the system that seemed to form the bedrock of civilisation since the Second World War, had apparently been rejected by those whose voice, they claimed, had for too long been ignored.

And the Leavers' loathsome twisting of history to suit their ends – their confused nostalgic fantasy – was monstrous. Her grandfather would have ridiculed them in print, had he been alive. The notion that the European Union shared the Nazis' aim of bringing Europe under a single parliament in Brussels was ludicrous. And Johnson and Gove were our supposed rescuers from this fate! The Churchillian rhetoric of the Tory press was laughable. The idiotic idea that the EU was some kind of front for German domination had been bandied about for months. The odious Rees-Mogg had claimed that Brexit was the Magna Carta, the Great Reform Bill, Waterloo, Agincourt and Crecy rolled into one. The only battle he'd left out was Trafalgar. And the Battle of Britain, of course. Stanley would have pointed out that the Reform Bill had ignored the vast majority of the British population, and that Waterloo had been won by the bloody Prussians. She could hear his voice now – never raised, but firm in its knowledge; with an ironic lilt, just enough to emphasise its gravely timbre. 'History should teach us things,' he used to say at her parents' long pine dining table. 'What *really* happened is important. Not the received version of events. To misremember the past is a grave crime.' The fact that the Brexiteers had mangled history to present Britain as a nation entirely separate from Europe was a lie, and a dangerous one at that. The EU had been designed to protect Europe once and for all from fascism. To keep the peace, as it had done, for fifty years. To pretend it was forged for a different purpose was rhetoric only the historically ignorant could believe. Everyone was living in a post-truth age, for sure.

Of course, the referendum result itself had been misleading, though the Tory press would have everyone believe otherwise. It had only been fifty-two per cent of those who turned out to vote on that fateful day in June who formed the so-called Will of the People. But they stuck by the result, and would hold the entire country to account. Accept the democratic process, they whined, or reject forever its principles! An atmosphere of jeering, puerile, petty moralisation had taken over, with a disgruntled underbelly coming out to say

how much they despised elites and experts – and she was well aware that she belonged to such an elite; the metropolitan political class who'd attended Russell Group universities and had been educated privately. She couldn't lie that this accusation hurt the most – that it pierced her very core. She, who'd spent her whole life devoted to the underprivileged and dispossessed in charity work at home, and abroad with VSO, the Voluntary Services Overseas organisation. She who'd always campaigned for a society that valued its key workers – its nurses, teachers, carers, train drivers. Who had fought for people's right to lifelong, dignified, fair-paying jobs and a say in their own future. Many of her colleagues in the Labour Party – those who'd struggled with a state education and had no financial cushion – felt rightly outraged to be tarred with the brush of belonging to any elite. But she felt guilt and shame and fear.

Maybe it was this climate of resentment that was making her so teary and emotional, not babies at all. Since the referendum, the rise in hate speech and hate crime had been shocking, and she had been on the receiving end of a fair amount of it. Not unusual, as everyone told her. To be a visible and vocal – and female – member of the left was to open yourself to abuse. But she had been targeted just recently in the most vicious way by anonymous trolls who had wished vile things on her. At first, she shared these posts with Ollie; the illiterate insults and playground taunts. They would laugh that anyone could stoop so low. The level of imagination to come up with that! The paucity of thought, of anything resembling human empathy. But the tweets and below-the-line comments had become more worrying. How did they know so much about her? How did they find out where she lived? The names of her children? Or the fact that her father, Geoffrey, was the descendent of a line of distinguished French Jewish intellectuals. He'd never written about it, or discussed it publicly. And then the rape threats; the orgies of sexual punishment these men (she assumed it was men) would visit on her. Her indifference had stopped when the first death threat

arrived. She went straight to the police. It was only then she realised how many politicians and figures on the left – especially women – were receiving these. She felt a vague sense of community – it wasn't as if she was alone. But the police had said very firmly they couldn't deal with everyone. Just investigating the threats levelled at Diane Abbot – the first female black MP – was a full-time job. Her best bet was to ignore the abuse, but to document everything in case she needed to prosecute. This ambiguous non-advice had been contentious from the start. 'Don't feed the trolls,' as Ollie had warned her. She'd decided to bite back instead, telling her Twitter followers – of which she had over one hundred thousand – that any abuse only made her stronger, more committed to reversing the suicidal referendum result and continuing to work for a fairer society. It was just another one of those things sent to test her. But she couldn't deny it was wearing on her soul. To be the target of so much poison felt unreal. Some mornings she woke up convinced the past few months had been a sick dream. And then she'd pick up her phone, scroll down Twitter, and feel reality crash back in.

'I've found you!' a voice called from the doorway.

It was Stan, wearing only striped pants. Hoppity, his favourite toy rabbit, was hanging forlornly from his hand. He was being restrained by Ollie, who bore two chunky mugs of tea and a Dr Brown's bottle of milk; a form of nutrition they'd tried and failed to wean him off.

'I'm going to get you, mama!'

'Careful, little fella,' warned Ollie. 'Your sister's in the bed.'

Stan's favourite thing recently was to storm the bed while they were still in it, trampolining and yelling *I'm the king of the castle, you're the dirty rascals!* Yvette looked at him now, his long blonde hair like the bangs of a sixties rock star, his belly proud and prominent; his eyes full of innocent cunning. Her first-born. As beautiful a boy as ever lived,

she thought. Even if they had another five children, she couldn't love them more than Stan; though of course she could never admit this.

'You can only come in if you pay the fee,' Yvette said, mustering her best reasonable voice.

'Aww,' Stan whined. 'I don't have no fee.' He turned to Ollie. 'Dada. Mama says I have to pay a fee. It's so *unfair*.'

Just recently, he'd discovered language – the full potentiality of it – and now he was at the stage where everything had to be described in a kind of running commentary.

'The fee is you go to nursery without complaint.'

'But I want to stay here with you!'

'Non-negotiable, I'm afraid,' Yvette said, smiling at Ollie. She never hesitated to speak to her children as if they were adults, even little Amy. Her parents had done just this, and she was always surprised when she witnessed other parents patronising or baby-talking to their toddlers. Children understood much, much more than they let on.

He stomped about on the spot for a moment. 'But I don't want to pay a fee!'

The fee thing had been Ollie's fault, the result of teaching Stan that everything came at a price, whether it was economic or otherwise. They'd been playing with cars, filling them up with petrol. 'Five pounds, please,' Ollie had demanded when Stan had driven his car out of the Lego garage. He'd only allowed Stan's car to leave once an imaginary fiver had been handed over. The problem was that Stan had turned the rule back on them. He would hand them a single piece of sweetcorn at lunch and demand, 'Five pounds, please.'

'Sorry, little fella.'

And then he changed the subject, in the disarming non-sequitural way of three-year-olds. 'Mama. Dada broke a cup and then he said a rude word.'

Yvette smiled as she moved her milk-drunk daughter further up the pillow, making a space for Stan to climb in. ‘Did he now? I’m sure he didn’t mean to.’

‘I did mean to,’ smiled Ollie, placing the tea on the high mantelpiece, out of the way of little hands, and leading the boy to the bed. ‘Swear, that is.’

‘But I don’t want to pay a fee.’

Too late. Within seconds he was on to her, curling up beside her. Yvette’s heart expanded to feel his soft warmth on one side, her daughter’s on the other.

‘Nursery, and that’s final.’

‘But I *don’t want* to go to nursery. I want to play Lego with you.’

Ollie climbed into the bed, his weight seemingly shifting the room’s centre of gravity.

‘Ooof!’

Just lately, it had become a tiresome trial getting Stan into his socks, shoes and coat for nursery. Even the trick of allowing him to put on his coat himself by laying it on the floor so he could snake his arms in and then flip it over his head, couldn’t entice him. It had been Ollie’s job to persuade him to go there every day after a chaotic breakfast together. Their kitchen was a warzone of forgotten crusts, yoghurt spatters, broken toys and tatty children’s books with tomato-pip and egg-yolk encrusted pages. The walls were covered with their son’s primitive artwork and nursery certificates *awarded to Stanley, for being an excellent helper*. Even the weekly attentions of Magda, their Polish cleaner, couldn’t improve it. They’d agreed early on never to hire a nanny, as Yvette’s memory of a succession of vicious or indifferent au pairs had inoculated her against them for life. Plus, she wanted to be present for these years – the wonder years. She remembered how her father had always been shuttered behind his study door in the morning; her mother recovering from a hangover in bed. She had only seen them for a few minutes in the evenings, and not for much longer at the weekends. No, despite the colossal effort of raising two children while they both held

down a portfolio of demanding jobs, she knew it was the best way. They were getting through it somehow, and, despite the exhaustion, enjoying it. In an hour, after much mayhem, Ollie would strap Stan into the battered Maclaren pushchair (the boy often screaming and remonstrating until a packet of raisins had been placed in his little fist) and head for the Creative Minds nursery. And then she would wrap Amy in the maroon sling and walk to Rhyme Time at Deal's modern, super-clean library near the seafront.

'Are you still going to the Full Council meeting later?' Ollie asked, holding Stan in a kind of benevolent headlock, while he struggled to get free.

'I think I have to, don't you? Sunny's invited me.'

Thanet's Full Council meeting was held eight times a year at their main offices in Cecil Square, Margate. An important event on any committee's calendar, they were long and often boring. Yvette has been invited by Sunny Chakraborty, a councillor for Viking Ward in Broadstairs, to present a petition to persuade other council members of a motion. Ollie knew how important it was to her. Yvette had attended every Full Council meeting in her own district of Dover and Deal since being elected as a councillor five years ago. They began at 7.30 in the evening and often went on for two hours. She usually drove the fifteen-minute journey to Dover, which sometimes meant she was gone for over three hours, although lately she took the train in order to reduce their carbon footprint. Ollie had always looked after Stan while she attended, and now he would be putting two children to bed on his own. Quite a task, though she knew this wasn't why he was asking if she was still planning on speaking in Margate that evening. The reason was because of what she would be discussing there, something that had caused no end of friction between them lately. She would be making her case for the campaign to remove the racist memorial to an old blackface entertainer on Broadstairs' seafront, an initiative begun by Sunny and one that had increased the abuse she received from far right groups three-fold.

‘You don’t have to, really. Viking’s not your ward. There are enough people to raise the issue without you being there. Physically, I mean.’

The issue. They didn’t even have to specify it now, it had caused so much trouble recently. It was at moments like this that she always remembered the four-year age difference between them. Despite being her mountain man, Ollie had always been much more risk-averse than her. Less worldly, somehow, too. It was Ollie who would chase after Stan, making sure he didn’t bash his head on the coffee table, or get the TV cable around his neck, or put a lightbulb in his mouth. It was also Ollie who had been surprised that the people of Kent – his people – had voted for UKIP. It hadn’t surprised her at all.

‘I have to be there to put my case now I’ve applied to speak, you know that.’

‘Haven’t you got enough on in Deal as it is?’

He had a point. She had a lot on at work and at home. It was an unfortunate fact that there was no such thing as maternity leave for district councillors. For the first couple of months of Amy’s life, she’d taken her to the council chamber in the sling and breast-fed her there. And yet she’d always taken on too much and muddled through somehow.

‘Sunny thinks I’m the person most equipped to persuade them.’

‘You could find a proxy. The fact is, you don’t represent a Thanet ward.’

‘I don’t trust them to be as well prepared as me. You only get a few minutes to make your case. I’m committed to this, you know that. I think I can get it done.’

‘I’m not questioning your commitment, honey. I just don’t think it’s a good idea at the moment. Not now we’ve got Amy.’

‘Shall we talk about this later, Ollie?’

‘You know there’s never any later nowadays.’

It was true, there never seemed to be a moment in the day to discuss anything without the children. Though she was on maternity leave from her job at the VSO, and largely

worked from home, attending only crucial council meetings, they barely had the chance to sit down with a glass of wine and talk like they used to. Having two children seemed to quadruple the parenting load, not just double it.

Stan raised himself unsteadily into a standing position; the sunlight making apricot stripes in his hair. ‘You two are too loud now. *Too loud!*’

This was always his way of telling them to stop talking to each other and pay him some attention.

Yvette reached over and grasped Ollie’s hand.

‘You have to trust me on this.’

‘I’m trying to.’

‘*What a racket!*’

‘Everything will be okay.’

‘Will it?’

‘*Too loud!*’

Yvette let go of his hand and pulled Amy onto her chest again. The baby had been rooting, her eyes closed, for the past few minutes. Her daughter often wanted a second feed, straight after the first, like a dessert.

‘Yes,’ she said firmly. ‘It will.’

Nobody cares.

She’d been at this kind of impasse before, and it was of no help to anybody. Someone had interrupted her, and the Chair had stepped in to make a point of order. She was standing before a group of seated men, teetering in her heels, trembling with indignation. A full Chamber of 56 councillors, relevant officials, plus members of the public in the gallery. A moment before, Yvette’s voice had risen to the pitch of what some of her detractors called

‘stridency’. Others, even less kind, had once used the word ‘hysteria’. The intimidating panel of veteran councillors and invested local residents who’d turned out for the meeting stared at her with blank disdain. The public gallery, a tiered seating area, three-rows deep, heaved with those inimical to her cause. Or at least that’s how it felt. The fluorescent lights of the council chamber seemed suddenly too bright; the taupe trouser suit she’d chosen for the occasion, too tight, too formal. She felt like Hillary Clinton before Congress. She knew she only had two minutes left to make her main point, and she was determined to make herself heard.

Before she could speak the Chair – a man in his late sixties, with coke-bottle glasses and thinning hair – addressed her challenger. ‘Proceed with your point.’

‘*Nobody cares, is my point,*’ said in Paul Danvers, a hard-right Tory activist, who’d been against the campaign to get rid of Uncle Mack’s plaque from the start. ‘Nobody reads the Guardian around here anyway. The plaque is part of our heritage. I suggest you park it.’

‘No, I will not *park it*, as you insultingly put it!’ Yvette now felt her voice resembled the ‘Chelsea bugle’ the *Thanet Gazette* had described it as only a month previously. ‘I thought we’d established the plaque is racist and offensive.’

‘We will have order!’ the Chair protested.

Danvers continued, ignoring the injunction. ‘The campaign failed the first time around. And blackface isn’t an offence. It’s not illegal.’

‘I for one consider it an offence!’ erupted Sunny Chakraborty, coming to her aid. ‘An offence against anyone of colour. Just as the many statues of slave traders dotted around this country are offensive.’

Sunny was a portly, good-natured Labour firebrand – an old friend, and a man difficult to oppose. She was relieved at his intervention.

‘I agree,’ Yvette continued, aware, but annoyed, that moderating her tone made people – men, mainly – listen to her more intently. ‘I find the continued existence of the plaque – and any statue that celebrates our colonial past – to be offensive in the extreme.’

‘Hear hear!’ a lone voice called from the public gallery.

She glanced at the Chair. ‘May I continue? I’d like to explain why, in historical terms, blackface is so offensive. I’m sure not everyone is aware of its sinister history.’

‘Go on,’ said the Chair, mechanically.

‘Okay, so in Britain we’re largely ignorant of why blackface is so malign. Many people here will be old enough to have had a golliwog doll while growing up. Or remember the golliwog on the Golden Shred Marmalade jars. Or *The Black and White Minstrel Show* on TV, or even the sitcom *Are you Being Served?*’ For many of a certain generation, blackface was just a bit of fun –

‘What’s *Are You Being Served?* got to do with anything?’ laughed Paul Danvers.

The Chair glared at him.

‘You might not recall, but there was an episode in 1981 – the Christmas Special, in fact – where two of the cast blacked up. Now it seems outrageous, but not back then. My point here is that black minstrelsy in Britain was seen as light entertainment, but it came from America and its roots are in slavery.’ Here she glanced down at her notes. She’d prepared meticulously. ‘The first blackface performers were active in the 1830s in New York. Their aim was to put on boot-polish make up and ridicule the slaves on the plantations with a caricature. And that caricature was of a lazy, devious, sexually voracious male. By the middle of the nineteenth century, minstrelsy had become an industry – even an art form. Their aim was to make black people into objects of scorn, to reinforce white supremacy. I trust everyone here knows about the Jim Crow Laws?’

A murmur of assent from the room. Yvette had their attention now, and she wasn't going to let it slip away again. Her grandfather would have been proud of her.

'Well, many of you might not be aware that Jim Crow was actually one of the most famous blackface characters, performed by a man called Thomas Dartmouth Rice. He performed a song called 'Jump Jim Crow'. And here's a sample of the lyrics: *First on de heel tap, den on the toe. Every time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow.* The act was so successful that the segregation laws were named after him. Now, imagine if Uncle Mack had achieved the same success over here –'

'But he didn't, Yvette,' Danvers added. 'That's the problem.'

The Chair stepped in. 'One more interruption and we'll suspend the meeting.'

'But just imagine if he *had*? The Colour Bar in the pubs of the 50s and 60s might be the Uncle Mack Bar, or something similar. Let me finish if you will. The golliwog doll was actually the invention of an English woman who had spent her childhood in America. Her name was Florence Kate Upton. She wrote a book called *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwog*. This was in 1895. Now, if you read this – and I managed to track a copy down – you will see that the doll is a bogeyman figure, designed to inspire terror. And I quote: *They all look around, as well they may/ To see a horrid sight! The blackest gnome/ Stands there alone/ They scatter in fright.* It's clearly saying that black people are terrifying and shouldn't be trusted. And in the twentieth century, things got a lot worse –'

She looked briefly at Danvers. She knew he was dying to speak, but ignored him; determined to have her say. 'These caricatures became imprinted on the American national consciousness, largely through cinema. There was DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*. These films were full of racist caricatures, depicting black men as idiots, cheats, rapists. A threat to everyone white. And everyone knew their roots lay in slavery. Now, the point I'm making is that the minstrel tradition in Britain never carried the

same weight of insult. How could it? Before Windrush, there weren't many black men or women in this country. We were a far less diverse society. It's incredible to think *The Black and White Minstrel Show* had an audience, at its peak, of 21 million people. That's a third of the population. The sitcom *Are You Being Served?* was repeated over here, yet in the US the blackface section was cut out. It took until the 1980s for there to be a sea change. People called out blackface for the racist rubbish it really was, and *The Black and White Minstrel Show* was cancelled. We no longer tolerate blackface versions of *Othello*. Why should we when we had so many fine British black actors? And Robertson's jam finally stopped putting the Golliwog logo on its marmalade. I just wonder whether anyone here knows when exactly that occurred?'

Silence. Paul Danvers shrugged. His thumbs had been busy with his phone while she'd been speaking. She knew he'd been tweeting about her performance to his right-wing followers.

'1982,' Yvette said triumphantly. 'Just let that sink in for a bit. 1982. It's now 2016. And in 2016 we still have a plaque celebrating a blackface entertainer on Broadstairs seafront. This is not political correctness gone mad, as some here have claimed, this is merely Thanet District Council deciding to come out of the dark ages and into the twenty-first century. So... I'll let you decide. I put it to all assembled here that we remove Uncle Mack's plaque and help end the outrage that is blackface, and the offence it incurs in all right-thinking people.'

The moment she used the phrase 'right-thinking', she knew she'd lost the argument. A barrage of shouts came from the gallery. A coterie of intimidating young men with closely cropped hair – and a single overweight woman in an oatmeal tracksuit whom Yvette vaguely recognised – led the volley of abuse.

Right-thinking bollocks! Leftie bitch! Sack her off!

The Chair stood at once. ‘Okay. This meeting is suspended. We will not tolerate such language. You will be ejected!’

An uneasy silence descended as two well-built officers headed across the room towards the public gallery.

‘I’ve said my piece,’ Yvette stated calmly. ‘Thank you, Sunny, for inviting me to speak. I gather you’ll vote next month once tonight’s minutes have been collated?’

‘That’s correct,’ snapped the Chair before any more dissent could be heard. ‘This meeting is adjourned.’ A hum of chatter rose in the room, defeating the silence. ‘Nine is the quorum for a public vote. If we can make that number by next month, the motion will be ratified. Thank you all.’

An hour later, Yvette was walking in her coat and unseasonal scarf from Deal’s railway station into a brisk sea breeze. The air held needles of salty rain. The peerless morning of sunshine had turned into a wet afternoon and evening. She walked so fast she almost tripped in her heels. There were tears in her eyes. As she’d left the council chamber and made her way down the stairs of the brutalist building, one of the shaven-headed men had hissed ‘*Nigger lover*,’ and made an obscene gesture with his tongue. She’d felt as if excrement had been thrown over her. The insult was so vile, so personally directed, it hurt more than the anonymous trash she received online every day. That another human being could have listened to everything she’d said – all her carefully compiled research – and react only in this way was astonishing. She felt defiled, violated to her core. Nothing in her upbringing had prepared her for a moment like this, and she’d fled down the hill for the great concrete concourse of Margate’s train station, looking over her shoulder every few seconds to make sure she wasn’t being followed.

And now, as her pace finally slowed along Queens Street, she wanted to come back down to earth. She wanted to see the ocean, to cleanse herself. To remember the good things in life. She wiped the tears from her eyes, and looked out to sea; to the indigo-tinged blackness beyond. The endless shingle beach, so melancholy in daylight, was now a mysterious absence. Deal at night had never looked so beautiful. The distant houses under the low vaporous mist of a September evening; the long pools of amber in the dark water, reflected from the lights of the pier. A shame, she thought. Half its residents – like the rabble in the public gallery – didn't deserve it. They should live in Tottenham or Glasgow – then they'd have something to complain about. She tried to forget about the soiling heckles – so personal, so vicious – and the awful thing the man had said to her as she left, and think only positive thoughts. As she walked past the strange bronze sculpture at the pier's entrance of a man wrestling vigorously with three enormous fish, she thought about her home. She imagined Ollie in their warmly lit kitchen, his humorous pinny (a gift from her) still around his waist from cooking the pasta he'd prepared for Stan and himself, a glass of good red by his elbow. Maybe there'd still be some in the pan for her; the kitchen improved by the aroma of basil, of grated parmesan, of fine things. The thought of this scenario calmed her considerably. Soon she would be home, in the bosom of her family, where she at least belonged.

Taking leave of the sea-facing promenade, she cut down a side alley and found herself on Middle Street, a long 18th-century thoroughfare with solid Georgian houses and holiday cottages where out-of-towners came for their two-weeks a year. Long-since gentrified, it had once been the site of stabbings and robberies – it had even boasted its own music hall, The Paragon, where 'negro entertainers' had performed. Passing the blue plaque commemorating Charles Hawtrey's house, the thought of The Paragon made her contemplate the bruising evening afresh. The country was currently irrevocably divided, and only a second referendum

or a miracle election would break the deadlock. The whole toxic language of Brexit had become a poisoned lexicon; a swilling dictionary of hate, with phrases such as *Take Back Control* and *Breaking Point* bandied about daily. She knew most of the residents of Margate and Broadstairs would reject the idea of removing Uncle Mack's plaque for good, but there was still hope in more liberal Deal.

Turning a corner, she took another alley short cut and found herself on the High Street, which ran roughly parallel with Middle Street. There the lights of the bistros and restaurants held a warm promise. She often picked up some wine on the way home, but it was so late she wasn't surprised to see Le Pinardier was closed. Walking as quickly as she could in her heels, the drizzle loosening her hair, she passed the town's new bijoux retail outlets, the owners of which she had canvassed with Sunny's campaign over the previous months. The Frog and Scot, her favourite bistro, and a few doors down, a new French deli unimaginatively called No Name Shop, which sold charcuterie, freshly made baguettes and *fromages*. A retro cookshop stacked with orange Le Creuset pans. A knowing indie bookshop – actually a Waterstones in disguise, which had caused uproar when it was unmasked. Pomegranate, an Eastern Mediterranean shop selling what it termed 'cupboard essentials'. And finally, the Hope and Lane café, where Yvette and her mum friends congregated after Rhyme Time, with Amy in the sling. All of it was comforting and familiar to her, and she sensed herself beginning to stabilise within.

In her pocket, she felt her phone buzz. It was Ollie. A text.

All fine here. Amy asleep. You home soon? X

She replied in the positive, and replaced the phone in her pocket. She picked up her pace again and headed down Victoria Road. Soon she'd be back in her dream house, with her dream man, with her dream family; the soiling evening just another one of those things sent to test her.

When Yvette was eight years old, she liked to walk her long, straight street and imagine the lives of the families behind the grand windows, none of which ever seemed to have curtains. She didn't think of the houses as grand at the time, of course. Oakley Street – which ran from the King's Road at the north end to the Thames at the south – and the surrounding Chelsea squares, were all she'd ever known. But she did find the lack of curtains troubling. In the late afternoons you could see straight into people's living rooms and feast your eyes on beguiling chandeliers and bookshelves that filled whole walls. Or elegant mahogany tallboys and Japanese dressing screens; or heavy oil paintings and gilt-framed mirrors. Sometimes she'd see a man alone at a desk, under the warm glow of a table lamp, pen in hand; or an elegant elbow passing a window, a glass of sherry or champagne flashing past. She often found it strange that her family didn't really know many of the people who lived on their street. There didn't seem to be that many other children either – all her friends lived in neighbouring boroughs, in South Kensington, or further afield. If she wanted to see them, she'd have to be driven there to play with them, or they would visit. There was a quiet, serious, somnambulant feel to the street most of the time, especially on autumn evenings when the golden haze of the

lights in the windows spoke of a cushioned protection against the coming winter; of peace and seclusion from the world, the type that only money buys.

But as for the actual residents of Oakley Street, they remained a mystery to Yvette. Who were these people? Writers? Politicians? Famous actresses? They were bound to be people of note, because everyone in that area was. Indeed, everyone her family knew was someone of note. Her father, Geoffrey (she liked to use his first name, and her mother's, Flora, though this drove her mother mad), was always inviting famous journalists or novelists over for dinner parties. And her mother seemed to know everyone who was anyone in London. Oakley Street had certainly seen some celebrated residents in its time. It never seemed odd that her father read her Oscar Wilde's *The Little Prince* at bedtime, and then, in the morning on the way to school, pointed out the blue plaque at number 87 commemorating Wilde's stay in the 1890s. Or to discover that number 29 had been home to Donald Maclean, the famous Cambridge spy. Or, when she was older, to find thrilling evidence of more bohemian residents. David Bowie had lived at number 89 at the height of his seventies fame with his ultra-cool American wife, Angie. And Bob Marley and his wife Rita had lived at number 42 after fleeing to London from Jamaican gunmen. Later still, when she became properly politicised, the fact that a house a couple of doors down had once been home to suffragettes who refused to sign the 1911 census made her inordinately happy. She remembered wishing she'd been alive at the same time, so she could meet these brave, politically committed women. Everyone she knew at Saint Paul's School for Girls was dreadfully obsessed with boys, hair, and make-up. And money, of course. All the *Paulinas*, as they were known, were in thrall to wealth, though they pretended only to live for the dramatic society or the debating club. They'd been infected by their parents.

Her house, number 97, was close to the Albert Bridge Approach Road; so close it often felt they were living on the river. She could see the Thames from the circular attic

window, and loved to watch the tugboats crawl past. This attic was for many years the home of Mia, their Filipina cook and maid-of-all-work. Unlike her au pairs and nannies, Mia was warm and funny, and Yvette had loved her. Corpulent, very short – short as a child – Mia oversaw the preparation of every meal, as Flora was a hopeless cook. Great pots of aromatic jasmine rice would be on the go for days; white-fish embutidos would appear at dinner time, buried under mounds of delicious fried onions. These were followed by desserts of succulent fruits artfully cut into crescents; kiwis and Filipino mangoes crowned with ice cream. Yvette loved the powerful aroma of Mia's Barako coffee, which was always brewed around eleven in the morning and taken to her father's study in a big bowl-like cup. This was to 'keep him going' when he worked at the typewriter. The noise of this typewriter, an old Remington, whose clattering keys could be heard everywhere you went, was characteristic of the house too. When it was finally replaced by an IBM electric model in the late 80s, her childhood home was never the same. The spirit of the place had flown.

The frontage of all the houses had a continuous balcony running along the first floor, a feature that seemed redundant, as she never once saw anyone use it. Occasionally, she would spot a housekeeper airing linen there, or a cat sitting cheekily watching the BMWs and Jaguars glide past, but never any residents. She certainly never went out on their own balcony; it felt too public to stand there, and besides, the structure didn't look in any way safe. It probably hadn't been used for decades. It was only years later, when she sat on the balcony of her Archery Square house, that she reflected she might be trying to recreate her childhood home, and make use of something neglected. The interior of 97 Oakley Street was, to her eyes, overcrowded with stuff that didn't seem at all necessary. Most of it had been bequeathed by her maternal grandfather, Stanley, who had originally used the house as his London base when not working at his cottage in Turville; a Buckinghamshire village just over the valley from Milton's last abode in Chalfont St Giles.

On first entering number 97, you would almost trip over the grand coat-stand behind the door, or the cumbersome racks of shoes and tennis rackets. Every fraction of wall-space, entrance hall included, was colonised by pictures – framed maps, original oils, sketches, vintage posters from the 20s and 30s. It would often take a new visitor several minutes to traverse from front door to parlour as they examined these, commenting on how fine and well-curated they were. On the ground level was a through living room with dark timber flooring, sombrely furnished, though it was verdant with thriving rubber plants and unnamed tendrils cared for by Mia. Evidence of a keen interest in the past was everywhere. This was Stanley’s legacy. Carved Bengal tigers, looted during the Raj (which her father despised, but tolerated), bid for a visitor’s attention with fine Moroccan rugs hanging over the sofas. There were vitrines of snuff boxes and atlases on lecterns. Weighty glass ashtrays and tasselled cushions impregnated with old smoke. On the upper floors, reached by an uneven staircase, there were rooms no one seemed to visit, though they were dusted weekly by Mia. The polished rail of this staircase took you up, up past four floors of rooms containing busted couches covered in rumpled throws. There were toe-stubbing ottomans and heavy Edwardian dressers which bore intriguing *objets d’art*, all as tastefully curated as the entrance hall.

Her mother and father had separate bedrooms, something Yvette didn’t think strange at the time. She supposed there had been affairs, but if they were, they had been kept secret from her. Her father, an active man with a flushed, open face and a fondness for green corduroy, had given himself to a life behind a desk, and this unused physicality appeared to glow from him. He always seemed ready to leap out of his chair to help or give advice. ‘You might think I’m wrong about everything now, young lady,’ he would say, mock-sternly, ‘and one day you’ll be proved right.’ Her mother had the opposite energy; she was pallid, louche, languorous – the legacy of drink – and her naturally blonde hair, once the envy of her fellow debutantes, was now prematurely grey. ‘Do sit up straight, darling,’ she would drawl through

the fug of her Pall Malls. ‘Men don’t like a sloucher.’ Yvette resolved early on never to emulate her mother in anything, including her posture. Her mother still made an effort to dress elegantly, however, coming down to dinner in heels and a plain backless dress; jolly from her sundowner.

It was her father who encouraged her to read and write and investigate the world – to live the life of the mind. This he’d done largely by example. He was committed to many noble, socialist causes, and would write about them in his weekly column for the *New Statesman*. Yvette loved the cartoon depiction of him above this column. Smiling, with an open collar and a suntan, he looked like an avuncular professor crossed with a TV detective. Everyone seemed to like him. Unlike her mother, he was good company; an easy and sophisticated conversationalist, and one who always made a point of listening to what you had to say. It was only when she was in her early teens that she realised not everyone held her father in the same affection. A girl at school had scoffed that her father was a ‘champagne socialist’. She’d had to look up the meaning of this, and was deeply hurt when she found out. In any case, she had told the girl, her father hated champagne.

Though she was often lonely, Yvette thought of her childhood as magical and unique. Her earliest memories were of her bedroom; looking up from her pillow to see the stars and planets her father had painted on the ceiling. These he would name for her when reading her a story at bedtime. Her room was crammed with books and toys, and a large radiant globe on a stand for her night-light. It was as if the whole universe was in there with her. Central to the room was the colossal – to her eyes – doll’s house. When her grandmother was alive, she would join her in the bedroom and put names to all the odd objects among the teeming doll family. ‘That’s a carpet beater,’ her grandmother would say, pointing out a minute, exquisitely made implement that resembled a frying pan. ‘And that’s a dumb waiter.’ ‘Why is

it dumb, Nana?’ ‘Well, because it brings you the food without comment. Always preferable, in my experience.’

The other vivid memories for her were the long weekend visits to Turville and her grandfather’s cottage. This was after he became a widower. The village was small, but chocolate-box pretty, with an ancient church and a couple of pubs. Some of the houses dated from the twelfth century. Whenever you looked up on the main street you would see a windmill, perched on the valley top, its black and white sails turning majestically. Yvette remembered with a glowing fondness the long rambles in the surrounding countryside; running free along the soaring Chiltern valleys and chalk escarpments, getting lost in the capacious birch woods. There were footpaths bordered by ancient yews, and rowan trees from which Stanley said you could fashion magic wands. And always the windmill as a landmark if you did actually get lost.

Stanley was a respected academic and popular historian. An Oxford don, and a man about town when in London. He was regularly on television, presenting programmes about the history of the British Isles; the kind of alternative history just becoming fashionable back then, one that debunked the idea that Great Britain was ever that great. His big thing was not the tragic mystery of Britain’s decline, but how it had ever come to oversee the world’s largest empire in the first place. ‘We were an artificial world power,’ he would announce at the breakfast table, buttery light on the tablecloth, his kippers before him. ‘How did we ever become so militarily powerful? Our manpower resources came mainly from the colonies, which we didn’t even own, not properly anyway. Look at what happened in India. The reason we wanted to get rid of her was because we had to start paying their bloody army in 1939. And quite right too. Before that they’d virtually been a standing slave army. There was no cost-benefit of keeping them on! Always the money...’ he would sigh, tugging at his white beard. ‘Money, money, money. And racism too, when you boil it down. You know when our

decline really happened? Our loss of world power and respect? Not with Suez, but in the decade before, when we surrendered Singapore in '42. That newsreel footage of British troops surrendering to the Japanese? Did you ever see that? *Watch it*. A pitiful sight. That footage went around the world and smashed our image of racial superiority forever. The fall of Singapore was more significant than Suez, trust me...

Much later, Yvette realised her grandfather's take on history had formed the bedrock of her socialist principles. It was only at Oxford, when she actually read Stanley's books, that she saw everything he'd said around the breakfast table had made it into print, backed up with incontrovertible evidence. His iconoclastic stance on empire was part of the reason he was seen as a traitor to his class, something the papers never failed to point out. The Hartford-Jones were at the tail end of a very long family line, stretching back to the Middle Ages. They'd been landowners in Buckinghamshire since the Reformation. Though Stanley only owned the cottage now, his family had once resided in the manor house and had lorded it over half the county; the peasants bringing them their yearly tithes in an unbroken rhythm that lasted for centuries. For Stanley to become a very public, socialist professor was something for which the press never forgave him. 'Never mind my so-called hypocrisy!' Stanley would say when they were on their long country walks. 'You would think these damn journalists weren't also from grand families, and didn't attend Eton and Oxbridge themselves. Some of the buggers are practically royalty, though they'd never admit it!'

Wealth and celebrity, then, was the water Yvette swam in. It was only later that she formed a better picture of how society was organised. Only when she read her grandfather's books and her father's pieces did she realise the full extent of poverty, inequality and deprivation in the world, much of it on their doorstep, in neighbouring London boroughs; the type she only drove through behind the sleek windows of the family Mercedes. She had begged her father not to send her to a fee-paying school, but her mother insisted she go to St

Paul's, being an *Old Paulina* herself. She never really forgave her father for caving in, but that's just how it was in her family: her mother had the money, and thus all the power. And his liberal politics precluded him from laying down the law in a patriarchal fashion, so that was that.

At first, she'd quite enjoyed St Paul's, against her better instincts: the girls there were all very much like her – bright, well-spoken, eager to learn. It was good to escape Chelsea and visit the wilds of West Kensington every day. The alumnae included some incredible actors and academics. A couple of Richardsons, TV newsreaders, famous scientists. Even the current editor of *Vogue*. It had mostly bred Tory politicians, but the place held the distinction of schooling Shirley Williams and Harriet Harman. Both Labour women were friends of her father, and had been to the house often. And the school's original director of music had been Gustav Holst – he'd even composed *The Planets* while teaching there. For a while, Yvette thought she might take up music. She'd had piano lessons from the age of five when an old upright was wheeled into their living room. Acting, also, was attractive, with St Paul's having a state-of-the-art drama facility named after another *Old Paulina*, the actress Celia Johnson, who had quivered fragrantly through *Brief Encounter*. It seemed St Paul's was a world of opportunity, continually opening up new vistas for her to explore.

But pretty soon she came to despise the place. Everyone was terminally unaware of their privilege. Most of her fellow pupils were horribly competitive and, she saw, destined for careers in the City or law, both of which she had no interest in. The competitive spirit was best illustrated by a shaming episode in the sixth form. She'd taken Russian as one of her A-levels, and, as part of her course she was obliged to participate in a Russian festival the school put on every year, to which they invited girls from other fee-paying London schools. That year they were to sing a traditional Russian children's song called 'Monkey Lost His Glasses' – while dressed in embroidered shawls. After this, they would stage the first act of

The Cherry Orchard – in Russian, of course – in the luxurious Celia Johnson theatre. A few of her fellow linguists had hand-sewn their own corsets, and took it incredibly seriously. Together they prepared, rehearsed and finessed for weeks. It was only when the girls from other schools arrived that she felt embarrassed by St Paul's. 'Look at this fuck-off dressing room!' one of them exclaimed. 'It's like something out of the West End.' It was true, the top-flight facilities wouldn't be out of place in a professional theatre. She hadn't thought that privilege could in any way be relative, that the other public-school girls didn't have similar drama studios. Before they went on stage, one of them asked: 'Why are you all so *blonde and thin?*' causing raucous laughter in the wings.

After the song – during which many pairs of glasses were broken on the boards – the girls from the other schools swept the stage. She cringed through the performance of Chekhov, aware the visiting pupils were laughing at them and their pomposity from the stalls.

The whole episode made a lasting impression on her. She saw that any organised society will always seek to find someone to look down on, even among the relatively privileged. The atmosphere of competition and petty envy was revolting to her. Indeed, the school's logo was a laurel leaf, intended to symbolise the 'competitive spirit'. Yvette thought it amusing when, years later, a High Mistress sought to change this to a rose, to suggest blossoming potential, only for the Old Paulinas to complain so hard it was changed back again. The toxic spirit of the place was one of the reasons she chose to apply for St Anne's College Oxford to read History. St Anne's was the most egalitarian of the colleges in that it had begun as part of the Association of the Education of Women in the nineteenth century before it became part of the university. It stood apart in its aim to educate women from a range of backgrounds, and had a defiantly secular stance. It helped, of course, that it had been her mother's alma mater too.

Many Old Paulinas ended up at Oxford, but the only girl Yvette stayed friends with was Nicola Munro, who went up to read English at Magdalene the same year as her. Nicola was tall, with a direct, Germanic look, reminiscent of the photographer Lee Miller. She had slightly pitiless eyes, and a Sontagian mane of dark hair. At St Paul's, Nicola had provided Yvette with her first romantic – and then sexual – experience. Yvette had developed a crush on Nicola in the fourth form, and they used to walk around holding hands, practising kissing in dark corners. They had graduated to a torrid night in Nicola's parents' house off Sloane Square. They were known as the 'Sapphics' by the other girls, many of whom had boyfriends of an advanced age – twenty-six, or twenty-seven in some cases. Some were even seeing friends of their father's who owned yachts. Yvette didn't find herself a boyfriend until the sixth form, at which point she ended her lesbian experiment and decided she was straight. After dumping Nicola, she somehow managed to stay her friend, and they remained in touch at university, sharing digs for a while on Woodstock Road.

The year Yvette went up to Oxford – 1997 – was a momentous one. That May, Labour had won a landslide after almost two decades of Tory misrule, and the country was high on the victory; on the sense of change and potential. Everywhere she went she saw the grinning face of the impossibly young and handsome Tony Blair, hands clasped together over his head in a triumphant gesture. To be eighteen, and politically committed to the left, was to be in very heaven. Yvette found herself buoyant with this brash energy; with a militant desire to make society fairer, more decent. Yet her commitment to any concrete causes took a while to arrive. Apart from joining the Labour Party, all she could do in her first weeks was walk along St Giles High Street, her arms folded over a stack of books, looking up at the yellowing leaves of the plane trees, inhaling the fresh scent of the coming autumn. She marvelled at her luck in getting out of London. Her mother had pushed for her to stay in the city and study at

LSE or King's. But after St Paul's, Yvette had put her foot down hard. She wanted to discover herself finally, to find her true calling.

Yvette graduated in the first year of the new millennium and the world seemed hers for the taking. Or rather, for the giving. This was her only objective in the beginning. After a lifetime of privilege, she wanted to give back to society in any way she could. She wanted to make a *difference* – it was all she had ever wanted out of life. While most of her contemporaries were powering ahead at the Bar, or in politics or finance, she had an unquenchable thirst to help the underprivileged, the marginalised, the forgotten. Her mother had put a sum of the family money in trust for her until she was twenty-one, and, now she had access to it, funds weren't a problem. She calculated she wouldn't have to work for a decade. She asked a banker friend from Oxford to invest the majority of it, with the rest reserved for a modest yearly income. Instead of moving back into Oakley Street, as her mother demanded, she found a flatshare with three St Anne's graduates in newly trendy East London – on the Kingsland Road – and quickly became involved with the international charities. Almost immediately, Oxfam offered her a year-long voluntary post in Kenya, in a Somali refugee camp. She took it at once. In the future, Yvette would see this as the one crucial event of her life – a turning point. From that moment onwards she never looked back.

The camp was a trial by fire. When she arrived, just twenty-two, it seemed like a vision of hell. Children covered in flies, prostrate on the dirt floors of flimsy shacks, dying of malnutrition before they were a year old. Raging outbreaks of cholera and dysentery. Rape and female genital mutilation. And everywhere the smell of faeces, death, decay. Her job was to help organise the food supply line, which boiled down to sixteen-hour shifts packing trucks with aid supplies, which were then mobbed when they entered the camp. It was heartbreaking to see how so little went so far. She had been used to a life of plenty, of abundance and waste.

Now she was plunged into one of scarcity, one where a single sack of rice had to feed a family for a month. And the people, too, were an extraordinary revelation for her. It occurred to her that she'd never been around people of colour while growing up. Her father had been friends with a couple of well-known black journalists in London, and there'd been a handful of Asian girls at St Paul's with wealthy parents. And the Nigerian prince, of course. But he'd belonged to another world. Even the Kingsland Road, with its vibrant display of East London diversity hadn't prepared her for this. She realised she'd always subconsciously *othered* people of colour. She had also underestimated her white privilege. She was beginning to see how the world was organised for the benefit of people like her. It was a system engineered to favour the white race by reinforcing their unearned advantages, and she realised she was deeply complicit in that system.

After a few weeks in the camp she stopped viewing people of colour as a race apart. They had the same needs, hopes and desires as everyone. She would watch the women walking around the camp in their simple guntiino shawls and headscarves, with their impossible cheekbones and sublimely dark skin, corralling their children, and think how ordinary it all was. They were just trying to survive, like everyone else. She stopped othering them when she began working with them, cooking with them, holding their babies, crying on their shoulders when she missed home. They were not some horde of alien life, as the British press disgracefully depicted Somali immigrants; threatening sacred English culture. When she discussed her 'great revelation' with her Oxfam colleagues they had laughed and joshed her. 'You really are from another planet, 'Vet,' one of them had said. 'I thought your accent was a parody when you first arrived. Now I can see you're not as the rest of us.' She'd been deeply hurt. Her *accent*. What could she do about that? She'd tried to modulate her cut-glass voice when she first joined Oxfam, but gave up after ten minutes. The head of the London office had even told her she sounded like Celia Johnson, something she found deeply ironic,

but didn't say. And now, under the searing African sun, she discovered she didn't belong there either – not to the world of the volunteers, and certainly not to the world of the camp.

Things became better when she returned to London after a year. She realised she had a lot of learning about the world left to do. Without pause, she plunged into the voluntary and community sector, both locally and internationally, working, over the coming years, for Global Justice Now, Victim Support, Christian Aid, and eventually the NCVO – the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. She also became more involved in feminist causes, joining the Fabian Women's Network and the Labour Women's Network, an organisation committed to turning the huge female Labour powerbase into women who could influence policy. At last she felt herself to be surrounded by people who wanted the same things as her. Genuine deep-rooted systemic change. A minimum wage. Equal pay for women. The eradication of institutionalised racism. An end to child poverty and homelessness. And a calling to account of the tax-evading tech companies; bringing them onshore and forcing them to abide by climate regulations.

Only, something was missing. She was in her late twenties, living guiltily in a sleek Islington flat bought with her mother's money, when she realised she'd devoted so much time to her career that she'd neglected her personal life. She was happy enough, but alone. The financial crash had just happened, and it seemed her idealistic goals were further away than ever. The banks had lent unsustainably and precipitated a global meltdown, widening the inequality gap even further. Her idealistic dream of a pluralist, diverse society in which everyone had a stake seemed to be lost irretrievably.

This state of affairs she would discuss with Justin, Piers and Mike on the few occasions she got to see them. She had kept in sporadic touch with all her Oxford friends, and every year they would get together in a rented country house for a long weekend of state-of-the-nation talk, and unreal quantities of red wine. They often met without her, but when she

did join them she began to compare her own life unfavourably with theirs. All three were married (and it was a relief she got on well with their wives), while Mike and his wife Jill had already produced twins. And he wasn't even thirty. Mike had become a Magic Circle barrister, and was well on his way to becoming a QC. Justin and Piers were pushing ahead with their careers too. Justin was a macular consultant at an Edinburgh hospital, while Piers had joined the civil service, and had progressed to the role of junior diplomat, enjoying postings around the world. He and his wife had just spent two years in Uzbekistan. Their weekends away were becoming family-fests, and Yvette had begun to feel left behind by life's great dance; by being 'perma-single' as Mike liked to joke. 'And to think you got off to such a flying start,' he would tease her. 'At Oxford, if I remember correctly, the question was who *hadn't* Yvette slept with, not who she had. What went wrong?' The truth was that men of her class and background were simply not attractive to her anymore. She wanted them as friends, she found their company stimulating, even comforting in its familiarity, but they left her cold both emotionally and physically. Not to mention they were worlds apart, politically. She didn't know whether Mike voted Tory, but it wouldn't have surprised her. He was still like her big brother, but she could see clearly how their lives had diverged dramatically.

It was around this time that she met Ollie. A few weeks before her thirtieth birthday, at a tedious NCVO meeting with members of the Labour Campaign for International Development, she became aware of a tall, stubble-chinned man at the end of the long oval table who for some reason was still wearing his overcoat. Or rather, it was more like a donkey jacket, the type rail-workers used to wear. She looked down quickly at her notes to check his name, in case it would be useful in the future. Oliver Cole. He'd been holding forth persuasively and plainly in the most resonant of voices for ten minutes before her thoughts turned away from politics. She felt a quick flush of arousal – like a tingling spark flashing up her spine – followed by the embarrassing desire to have his children. 'We need to show that

volunteering can empower citizens, not impoverish them,' he insisted, sexily. 'We need to demonstrate that they can share their skills not just in the community, but between countries and continents...' His accent was Estuary-tinged, forthright, unapologetic. She was smitten, and tried hard not to show it by staring at him for the rest of the meeting.

Afterwards, at the table for complementary tea and coffee, she discovered most people knew him as Ollie, and that his real job was in Outreach on the Kent coast. There was a terrific chemistry between them from the start – not just physically, but intellectually too. By the time the room had emptied, and it was just the two of them there, talking about global initiatives and economic justice, she felt they could talk for years. When they noticed they were alone, Ollie had for some reason laughed, and then shrugged. She realised at that moment, for all his easy masculine force, that he was shy. She would have to ask him out if they were ever to meet again. And she did.

They never looked back. When she first proudly introduced Ollie to her parents, and eventually, to her Oxford friends, she was prepared for a bit of mild culture shock –even resistance – but not what she received. Her mother was quietly horrified. 'Why can't you find a man of your own background?' she asked, after her third gin martini, giving the word 'background' maximum spin. 'Oh, he's way out of their class, mummy,' Yvette had said, though with tears beginning in her eyes. Her father, predictably, thought Ollie was amazing, so she at least had one ally there. The Oxford contingent were subtly harder; but this, she quickly realised, was mainly Ollie's doing. When she took him with her on the next country house weekend, she realised Ollie had never met people like Mike and Piers before; men from backgrounds of deep wealth. He was instinctively resistant to them, even standoffish and rude. Though they all had a grand time, drinking single malts into the evening and roaming the woods for wildflowers together in the morning, Ollie just didn't have much in common with them. Only Justin, whose father had been a Cumbrian trade unionist, took

properly to Ollie and told Yvette they had a future together. The others just viewed him as “Vet’s bit of rough.”

Occasionally, over the years, her old friend Nicola Munro would join them on their wild weekends. Nicola had become a well-regarded novelist and had married young, giving birth to two children before she was thirty. But the marriage hadn’t lasted, and now she’d written about her experience of divorce and single-motherhood in an excoriating memoir that had fared better than all her novels put together. She had then turned to auto-fiction, writing thinly veiled accounts of her life on the literary circuit, and about her battles with her ex. Unsurprisingly, whenever Nicola was around, there was a degree of tension in the air – and not just because everyone was afraid they’d end up in her next book. The unexploded bomb of her ménage à trois with Justin and Piers was still ticking. Though Yvette had lost her virginity to Mike – a fact his wife well knew – there was never a scintilla of unease between them. But Nicola was like petrol thrown over a candle – she’d always had this effect, Yvette decided, leaving a trail of destruction in her wake. So it was a relief that Ollie’s presence took the heat out of the Justin and Piers situation. Life became more complicated as you grew older, Yvette reflected, not less so. Tangled and hard to predict. On their weekends away in the country she suddenly saw the bad film they were all living in now was *Peter’s Friends*, a movie they’d cringed through at university. But it helped that Nicola liked Ollie, and supported her in their relationship. ‘He’s the one,’ she would say to her repeatedly. ‘He’s the one.’

When Yvette proposed to Ollie (not the other way around – she would have been waiting until doomsday for that, she later told him) it was on one of their visits to Whitstable. To Ollie’s embarrassment, Yvette had bought him one of the beach huts for his birthday, and they had planned a big weekend of oysters and champagne. ‘Aren’t these places, what, thirty grand?’ Ollie had stammered when she unlocked the pastel-painted door for the first time,

releasing the smell of must and rotting timber. ‘It’s only money, Ollie,’ she cried. ‘Anyway, it’ll be somewhere nice we can bring the kids when we’re married.’ He had stood motionless. ‘You are joking, aren’t you?’ ‘No,’ she had said, blinking back tears. ‘I’m not. Marry me.’

And he had.

It was 2010, the terrible year the Tories won the election following the loss of eighteen Labour seats in Kent’s County Council the year before. Amidst this depressing political climate, they moved to Deal and got married in the local registry office, holding the reception in the café at the end of Deal’s short pier. The wedding breakfast menu was strictly fish and chips. Her mother had been suitably horrified, which had given Yvette deep satisfaction. Everyone had been there – including the Oxford contingent – and it had been a terrific night, with Ollie waltzing his mother on the tables at midnight, and her father dancing with her, telling her how she would always be his special girl.

And then, a few weeks later, her grandfather died. He’d passed away suddenly while at his writing desk in the cottage. Apt, thought Yvette. But she was surprised at how shocked she was. At how deeply she’d loved him, and at how hugely he’d influenced her. He’d been the bedrock of her life, and now he was gone.

It was against the backdrop of this loss, and the dire political situation, that she decided to become a Labour councillor. At the time, she was Head of Volunteering for Development at the VSO. She was also a trustee of the local Citizen’s Advice Bureau. Both roles took up a huge amount of her time and energy, though she could work remotely for the VSO most days, rather than commute into London. What was missing was a sense she was making a real impact on the community, something Ollie was doing every day as an Outreach worker. Though she was desperate to start a family, she raised the idea of contributing more to society with Ollie one summer night on the balcony of Archery Square; glasses of ice-cold rosé in their hands. ‘There’s no time like the present,’ Ollie urged her. ‘Look at the state of

things here. If you went in for Labour in Dover and Deal, you could give them a foothold. It's a Tory-Farage shitshow at the moment.' By the end of the evening, Ollie had convinced her. This was her chance to make a real difference, to fight for the fairer society she'd always revered. 'But what about – 'she didn't need to mention the word 'kids', they'd discussed the subject so often. Ollie looked at her directly, holding both her hands in his. 'There's never a right time for anything – you told me that.'

And so it happened that the week she was accepted as Labour district councillor for Dover and Deal she discovered she was pregnant. She'd been overjoyed, but incredibly scared that she'd over-committed herself. 'What if I mess this up?' she pleaded with Ollie. 'What if this is all wrong?' 'You've got to do everything at once – you told me that too.' She had, she reflected wryly – she hadn't realised she was such a fount of bland homilies. 'What about names?' she asked. Ollie had laughed; the guttural, strange laugh that made his face pleasingly lopsided. She often heard him making this noise when he was working on his laptop downstairs. It was strange, she thought, how we recognised people by their laugh, as much as by their smell, both of which she adored in her husband – the man she'd married; her mountain man. 'I don't mind – you choose,' he said. 'Well, if it's a boy,' she began tentatively, 'I think we should name him Stanley.' 'Okay,' Ollie nodded, smiling. 'Stanley, he is.'

‘Stan! *Stan!* Will you come away from the sea now, please!’

Ollie’s voice was a roar of thwarted power, undercut by the bluster of the wind.

Yvette was walking on Deal’s endless shingle beach on a freezing November morning; Amy asleep on her chest in the sling, warming her sternum. She watched as Ollie chased after Stan, down towards the water’s edge again, something he’d been doing for the past ten minutes. Though she wanted her son to play, she called out:

‘Stanley! *Will you come away now!*’

She always made sure she backed her husband up – rule number one in the parenting handbook.

That morning, they’d awoken to the abysmal news that Donald Trump had been elected as the American president. To say she and Ollie were depressed would have been a colossal understatement. She felt something close to suicidal despair; an emptiness in the pit of her stomach – accompanied by a spiralling panic for what the next four years held for the world. All the liberal victories of the past four decades – especially those of Obama’s administration – seemed on the verge of being wiped out. The freedoms of black and brown Americans, of the LGBTQ community, were under threat, not to mention world peace, now a bullish narcissist and conman was in charge of the nuclear codes. It seemed all was lost, and overnight too.

She came to a halt, her feet sinking into the steeply shelving shingle, and watched as Stan raced the angry surf.

‘Ollie,’ she called out, though not so loudly that it would wake Amy. They were getting too far away, and she didn’t feel like running to catch them up. Her caesarean scar ached ominously at the best of times, and she didn’t want to risk anything. ‘*Oll-eeee!*’

He turned, as if seeing her there for the first time, a big smile on his face. She gestured frantically for his return. They were having fun, and she felt a killjoy for intervening. But the November waves, hurling the shingle up the shore, were too brutal for Stan to paddle in.

At once, Ollie lunged forward and grabbed their squealing son, putting him over his shoulder into a fireman’s lift. Then he ran as quickly as could up the stones to join her.

‘Put me down!’

Ollie let out a kind of caveman’s roar as he approached; Stan’s fists pummelling him ineffectually.

‘I said *put me down!*’

Ollie heaved the protesting boy to the ground, breathing hard.

‘If you go back to the water’s edge again,’ Yvette admonished, ‘you’ll have to go to nursery.’

Stan had put up his usual half hour of resistance to spending a day at Creative Minds, until she and Ollie had given in. On any other morning, they would have persevered, but they didn’t have the stomach for it today.

Yvette’s threat had the effect of quieting the boy at once. He stood there in his peagreen coat looking wistfully at the sea for a moment, then knelt and began to forage for pebbles.

Yvette frowned at Ollie: ‘Fun?’

He nodded, still smiling, zipping the hood of his parka higher. ‘Made me forget the situation for a while... Are you still up for the Black Douglas?’

The Black Douglas Coffee House was on Beach Street, facing the sea – a bijou hipster place, cluttered with ephemera, and their favourite café at the weekends. They’d often lingered in the Douglas over breakfast pancakes or eggs Benedict; Stan in his high-chair, tearing a croissant to pieces, the papers strewn before them.

‘Just for coffee. I’ve got my lunch meeting at Wyatt and Jones later.’

‘Oh yeah,’ Ollie said, his smile falling. ‘I forgot.’

‘Kind of wish I hadn’t, really...’

The meeting at Wyatt and Jones – an upmarket restaurant on Broadstairs seafront – was to discuss the continued campaign for the removal of Uncle Mack’s plaque with fellow Labour anti-racism activists who supported the cause. There was a photo session by the plinth itself scheduled for later, with the national and local press invited.

Ollie gestured to the distant pier. ‘Shall we?’

They began to walk slowly and silently in its direction; Stan following them a few feet behind, occasionally bending to pick up a new stone. The pier was where Ollie went to fish in the summer. Bass, ray, and dogfish were plentiful in July, but he’d told her what he was really after were the mackerel. One memorable night the previous year he’d brought home five of them, gleaming and surreally silver, in a plastic bag. These he’d cooked on the barbeque later. Ollie was an excellent cook – just as well, as she was about as hopeless as her mother. Without him, they’d all undoubtedly starve.

She didn’t want to talk about Trump – it felt like they’d exhausted the subject already – yet she didn’t want to talk about her meeting either. It was the elephant on the beach, so to speak. She looked about her at the desolate dunes, with their hardy tufts of marram grass. She reminded herself that Julius Caesar had landed here, in 55BC, daunted by the White Cliffs of

Dover. The thought of the long perspective lifted her mood for a moment. They were living in history, just like everyone who had ever breathed. The events in America would pass – the world would face new threats. The future would reveal the true reality of their present situation in time. Yet she felt the presence of the Angel of History more insistently now. Its voice seemed more angry and urgent every day.

‘It’s a shame you have to go,’ Ollie said flatly. ‘Might have been nice to spend the day together. As a family, I mean.’

‘Well, since I called the meeting, it’s pretty obvious I have to go.’

Ollie shook his head. ‘You don’t have to do any of this. Not given everything that’s happened.’

In the weeks after the Margate meeting, Yvette had begun receiving death threats every day. This time, the police had become involved. For the first time in years, she’d thought about what it might mean to die – she had properly contemplated it. Not since her time in the Kenyan camp had she thought about death so much. She’d always cast herself as a cheerful, positive, sunny-side-up character, unlike her old friend Nicola, who revealed in the pages of her books that she thought about death pretty much daily. But now she’d been forced to face the black ugly fact of oblivion just when she didn’t want to, with a new baby and her career going so well. Just lately, the stakes seemed so much higher.

‘I’m aware of that, Oll’. But I always finish what I start. You know that.’

‘Of course you do, and you know I want you to stick to your principles – I share them, for God’s sake! – but I don’t want you to become a figurehead for this campaign.’

‘Too late for that. I already am.’

Stan was still walking a couple of paces behind them; throwing the stones he’d gathered at their heels. Soon he’d ask them to be quiet, like he always did when they argued.

‘There are other ways you can be useful, can make a difference.’

She knew Ollie had used the phrase *make a difference* tactically. It had always been her mantra, and now he was taunting her with it.

‘Sure, but doesn’t the fact of what’s just happened in the States make it more vital than ever that we stand up to racism? The right will be emboldened even further now, all around the world. You just wait and see.’

Ollie seemed to shiver at this – either in reaction to the icy wind, which had picked up, or in sheer frustration. ‘That’s what I’m worried about. The more you tie yourself to this campaign, the more you’re in the firing line.’

‘There is no firing line. It’s all a lot of bluster.’

This, they both knew was patently untrue, for the simple fact of what had happened in the summer. If anything stood behind the vociferousness of Ollie’s argument it was the shocking murder of the Labour MP Jo Cox by a deranged far-right activist in June. Not since Airey Neave had been killed by the IRA in the late seventies had a serving MP been murdered. The awful facts of her death had been beamed around the world, and her haunting, smiling, empathetic face had been everywhere for weeks. Yvette had never met Jo, but she knew Labour members who had, and attested to her principled courage, her warmth, her devotion to her young family. It was a terrible tragedy, and had made the police take death threats against politicians a lot more seriously, as she had herself in the past few weeks. She couldn’t deny that Jo Cox’s murder had terrified her too, and that much of her gloomy thinking over the past months had centred around her.

She didn’t want to hear Ollie say her name, but she knew he was about to invoke her.

‘I don’t need to mention Jo –’

‘No, you don’t need to!’ she shouted. For the first time, Yvette felt anger rise inside her. The tumultuous political news of the morning was fuelling it, she knew.

Ollie pressed on, regardless. ‘Yvette, remember what happened on the same day as her murder.’

‘What do you mean?’ She wasn’t looking at him now. They’d covered a lot of ground fast, and she could see the pier straight ahead with its strange, fish-wrestling statue at the entrance. On many days recently, she’d felt like this man – struggling with slippery issues that had no clear resolution.

‘Farage unveiled that poster.’

The poster in question was a huge, mobile image of migrant workers, walking in a long line, with the legend *Breaking Point* next to them. As an extravagant piece of UKIP promotion, it had done the trick. The notorious poster had worked wonders for the party – and had thrown petrol on the flames of the largely racist immigration debate in the aftermath of Jo Cox’s death.

‘What about it?’

‘Doesn’t that prove your own point?’

‘I don’t understand, Ollie. You’ve lost me.’

‘That the right are emboldened – are out of control – in this country already.’

A cry from her chest. Amy had woken up. Soon it would be time to feed her, and she didn’t fancy her chances on a freezing beach.

She came to a halt, forcing Ollie to stop too. Stan went over to him, and placed his arms around his legs. This was something their boy also did when they argued, which they seemed to be doing all the time just recently. If telling them to shut up didn’t work, he’d make a heartbreaking affectionate gesture such as this, halting the row.

Yvette felt ashamed that she’d shouted in front of her son. Even her own parents – at variance at the best of times – had never done this with her.

‘Let’s get to the Douglas. I’ll feed her there.’

‘I’m worried about you.’

‘I know you are.’

For the first time, a look of abject fear appeared in Ollie’s eyes. It unsettled her greatly.

‘So you’re still going to the meeting?’

She shook her head exasperatedly. ‘Yes, Ollie, I’m afraid I am. I have to.’

Wyatt and Jones was the kind of restaurant Yvette liked, despite herself. Her socialist conscience should have been more uncomfortable with the exclusive menu; the sleek grey tongue-and-groove panelling; the self-consciously bare lightbulbs hanging over the polished-wood tables, as if they couldn’t afford lampshades, like some Mexican cabina. This was the fanciest place in Broadstairs, and she imagined the locals didn’t get to visit it often, not with mains starting at twenty pounds. If it wasn’t for the stirring view of Viking Bay, the place might have been in Islington.

She was sitting at a table with four others, and, despite the urgent need for them to talk about the progress of the campaign, they’d spent most of their lunch lamenting the news from America. Their cause seemed suddenly minor in comparison; dwarfed by world events. They’d gone for the small plates, mainly seafood caught freshly that morning, with warm artisan bread rolls. They were on to coffee, and still Trump dominated the conversation. Next to her was her faithful companion in activism, Sunny Chakraborty, telling her more about Russian influence on the election. Across from them, arguing in a lively, but good-natured fashion were the anti-fascist contingent. Tom, up from London, and a major player in Hope Not Hate. Philip from Stand Up to Racism, and David, an avuncular local man in his fifties with an impressive beard who’d been one of the founders of Kent Anti-Racism Net almost a

decade ago. It was David who had instigated the popular beard-shaving fundraiser a few years back. The standing joke was that he never got around to shaving his own.

Listening to Sunny speak, a cup of coffee warming her hands which were still chilled to the bone from the beach, she realised she was the only woman there. Would this look bad for the cause? Would the photo-session later make her look like some strange Joan of Arc figure, battling alone, among an army of men? There were many women she could have asked to come along. One, Rosie Duffield, a rising star in the Labour party, and a member for Canterbury and Whitstable, was energetic, fiercely principled and photogenic. Rosie would have been perfect. Why hadn't she thought of her? Just as she was about to raise this with Sunny, he said, apropos of nothing,

'Of course, the danger is that the right-wing press will accuse you of suffering from white saviour complex.'

'You can't be serious?'

'Look around you. Apart from me, there are no other people of colour at this table. There are plenty of black activists in London we could have called on.'

Yvette had already thought about this. The anti-fascist organisations were largely made up of white men, and it might have been wise to have followed Sunny's suggestion. It was wounding that he'd even made it. She was still smarting from the row with Ollie. They'd gone to the Black Douglas to feed Amy, with him still telling her where she should be focussing her attention if she wanted to make a difference. He'd refused to let it go. There were food banks to organise in Dover, he'd said; lorry bans on the roads; regeneration and green issues. All of these, she'd told him firmly, she addressed at her surgery at Deal's Library, where she met members of the public for an hour on the first Saturday of each month. What more could she do? But he hadn't been satisfied. They'd returned home where Ollie's mother was waiting to look after Amy for the afternoon, while Ollie went off with

Stan to build Lego cities in the warmth of the house. The row had upset her greatly, and now it seemed Sunny was attacking her too.

‘Well, I can’t win there, I’m afraid,’ Yvette said firmly. ‘As a white Labour representative, if I don’t take action in the face of this, I’m seen to be passive and aiding the enemy. White silence, and the rest of it. All it takes for evil to thrive is for good people to do – ‘

‘I know, I know,’ Sunny said quickly. ‘But if you become the figurehead, then people will ask, even subconsciously, why isn’t a black person protesting blackface? Why is a white, well-off, Oxbridge-educated woman leading the charge?’

She had no reply for a couple of moments. She had indeed thought much about this over the past months – more so after the vile comment that had been thrown her way after the scrutiny meeting. For the first time in her life, she had suffered an attack of insecurity about her motives. Was she just an inveterate do-gooder, whose popularity and platform excluded other, more authentic voices? Had she forgotten to check her privilege, as the current saying went? She didn’t need Sunny to tell her she was rich, white and well-educated – she had suffered pangs of guilt over this her whole life. Her rationale for keeping going – for her ardent activism – had always been one of *noblesse oblige*. She’d been given more, so it only made sense to give something back. But Sunny had a point. A form of weaponised identity politics was becoming more fervent by the week. And now, post referendum and Trump, racism had come to be seen as merely a form of white identity politics by certain sectors of the press.

As if reading her mind, Sunny continued: ‘There’s also the problem of liberal bigotry – or the perceived problem, I should say. We’re already seen to be destroying a working-class emblem. It would be different if the working class of the area wanted to see old Mack removed, but, by and large, they don’t.’

‘Many do,’ said Yvette testily. ‘They just haven’t been sufficiently alerted to the cause.’

This wasn’t strictly true, as memories of endlessly canvassing, heavily pregnant with Amy in the spring, came back to her. She’d been insulted on doorsteps, and sent packing on Margate High Street. Sunny had endured racist abuse for his pains, too. It seemed many of the local residents were fiercely proud of Uncle Mack and his legacy.

‘Maybe,’ he said, glancing at Tom, Phil and David, still deep in conversation. ‘But the lack of any working-class voices is still a problem.’

The issue of stigmatising the working class – or liberal bigotry as Sunny had put it – had exercised Yvette as much as white silence and white saviour complex over the past few weeks. Had she subconsciously defined Uncle Mack’s defenders as feckless, poorly educated, racist idiots? As chavs and scroungers? There was a debate in certain sectors of the media about the ‘Somewheres’ and the ‘Anywheres’. The Somewheres had roots, had a community to defend and had largely voted Leave; while the Anywheres were the so-called rootless cosmopolitans who wanted to remain in the EU – and, like, the phrase ‘metropolitan elite’, it was often used as a code for Jews. Her father had told her that discrimination against Jews was invariably the canary in the coalmine when racism was on the rise – they always came for them first. Yvette knew it suited the right-wing press to racialise the white working class, to set them apart from immigrants while ignoring the social policies that kept them in poverty. Their problem was not so much economic, according to the press, more one of attitude. If they weren’t so lazy and thick, they would have made more of themselves. Their failure to succeed was purely their own fault, while society’s successes had achieved everything by sheer genius and strength of character, with no help from inherited wealth or privilege whatsoever. It was an old trope – the lie of meritocracy – and she wasn’t going to fall for it. God knows, someone from her background knew the truth of this – she’d seen all

her old Oxford pals walk into jobs that would be out of reach for just about everyone else in the country, unless they'd been similarly privately schooled, and had money behind them. Whenever she doubted herself, or the purity of her principles, she would think of Ollie – as working-class as they come, and the most progressive-minded person she knew.

The waitress, a young woman barely into her twenties, was suddenly at her elbow with the dessert menus. 'Can I get you anything else?'

Before Yvette could answer, Sunny said: 'I'm tempted by the chocolate brownie, but in this instance I'll have to say no.'

Yvette smiled. Sunny had a famously sweet tooth. She often joked he would skip the main course and just order two desserts if he could get away with it.

She looked at her watch. One o' Clock. The press and photographers would already be descending on Victoria Gardens. 'No, thank you. Just the bill please.'

Then she turned to Sunny. 'To be continued.'

The short walk from the restaurant to the plaque seemed to take a long time. It wasn't just that the weather had turned nasty, it was more that she found herself lost in thought, allowing Sunny and the others to walk the steep promenade path ahead of her. She wanted to reflect on what Sunny had said, but more than that she wanted to think about Uncle Mack himself. The press would require a statement from her, and she'd prepared a short speech. Whether she would be able to make herself heard above the strong headwind – one which carried a whip of rain and spray from the roiling sea – was another matter.

At the start of the campaign she'd done as much as she could to research Uncle Mack, and his motives – though of course, he didn't need a special motive to become a blackface entertainer. At the time there were over three hundred of them in the country. She quickly discovered there was very little written about him, despite his local notoriety. There was

some footage, in the Screen Archive in Brighton, which she hadn't seen, but no books or definitive biographies. Her Google search came up with a single pamphlet, self-published by a local bookseller – one Michael Glover, a historian and blogger who ran Michael's Bookshop in Ramsgate. Rather than order it from Amazon (she'd deleted her account years ago), she visited his shop to track down a copy.

She had already been pregnant with Amy, and the intense morning sickness had made it hard to do much of anything at the time. She'd discovered that Glover's ramshackle shop was an incredible resource for local history, and had bought a number of other books as well as the pamphlet on Uncle Mack. The latter she'd read on the bus ride back to Deal. The publication – generously illustrated and quaintly stapled – was full of reproductions of old sepia postcards, many of which had been on sale in Glover's shop, stacked in overflowing ice cream tubs. She read the history of Uncle Mack with intense interest. His real name was Harry Summerson, and he had been born in the East End in the 1870s. His father had been a music hall artiste, and young Harry had entered the family tradition, calling himself Little Mac. He used to sing 'The Death of Nelson' and took up minstrel work with the Mohawks Company. His stage name came about because of his mentor, Gilbert MacDermott, one of the most famous 'Jingoists' of his time. Yvette had winced at this word – it seemed to have a horrible resonance for the present day. As she read on, a strange thing happened. Despite herself, she began to be more forgiving of Uncle Mack, the man. She'd made up her mind about him long ago, but now saw he was merely entering into the tradition of his working-class parents; taking up their trade as an apprentice, before becoming a practitioner in his own right. What could be more natural and decent? More normal? She discovered that there had been another blackface entertainer in Broadstairs before Harry Summerson had taken up residence – an act led by someone called Uncle Ned. She found there had been a long history

of blackface in the resort towns, along with donkey rides and Victorian bathing huts. She could see it was just a working-class trade, like any other.

Harry had first worked under the name Uncle Mack as a busker in Herne Bay in the 1890s. He was active in Broadstairs as far back as 1895, when he would have been nineteen. He'd become successful very quickly, amassing a six-man troupe of minstrels by the first decade of the twentieth century, with their own stage near Albion Steps down on Viking Bay. The postcards in Glover's book revealed Uncle Mack's name written over the proscenium arch, before which sat an audience in deckchairs. And there was Uncle Mack himself, beaming with a banjo cradled in his huge arms (he was a big man, she could see – easily over six feet tall), his face horribly smeared in black bootpolish, the lips exaggeratedly white. The costumes he and his troupe wore were equally outlandish and horrible. Tunics with prissy lace collars, and straw boaters or mortarboards. Later postcards showed one-piece pyjama suits that had the effect of infantilising these grown men 'impersonating negroes', to use the language of the day. Glover noted that the colour of these pyjama suits changed every year, and that one member of the troupe always took on the stock character 'Bones'. The instruments they played were basic – a violin and a banjo, a clapper and a tambourine. Only later, when Uncle Mack really achieved lasting success, did a piano and drum kit appear. She was surprised to read that just after the Great War, a couple of women had even joined the troupe. They were pictured with Uncle Mack in postcards from the mid-twenties, in which he appeared fat and content. She had paused to figure out his age. He would have been fifty – though Glover had stated that Summerson had done army service only the decade before, and had been called up in 1916.

The troupe had disbanded in the mid-thirties, but the Second World War had given Uncle Mack and his merry band an unexpected, and final, lease of life. They had returned to raise local morale in the depths of the conflict, going on to give a charity performance on VE

day. They had kept going after this, with evening shows on the pier, and had made regular appearances at the Bohemia Theatre in Broadstairs until the late Forties. She had marvelled at Uncle Mack's industry and resourcefulness. He had been the definition of an old trouper – a seasoned showbiz pro; albeit with a reprehensible act. By the end of the pamphlet she couldn't help but admire him for his pluck and his graft – qualities she'd often associated with the British working classes; that mystic race she'd always idolised but never quite understood. She had felt her admiration getting out of control, to the extent she even considered quietly shelving the campaign. This shameful feeling continued until she came across a reproduction of a comic from the 1920s, called *The Golden Penny*. There was Uncle Mack with his troupe, rendered as a grotesque cartoon under title *Uncle Mack and his Merry Band of Nigger Minstrels*. The choice of language had made her shudder and reminded her of the rightness of her cause. The last page of the pamphlet described how the beachfront plaque in his memory had come about. Uncle Mack had died in early 1949 at the age of 73. The plaque had been unveiled almost a decade later in 1956, with an audience of over a thousand present – a number Yvette found quite staggering. He must have been a local hero of unprecedented proportions to draw such a crowd. A weaselly local councillor had apparently said on the day: 'He was a man who darkened his face, but how many lives did he brighten?' This crass comment had doubled her resolve to make the campaign a success. That one of her predecessors had said this was astonishing. Or was it, though? Blackface, as a tradition, was still going strong when he had spoken. A footnote in the pamphlet told her that an Uncle Mack imitator – a certain Uncle Reg – had taken over, but he had died in 1960, at which point 'minstrel entertainment in Broadstairs had died with him'. Quite rightly so, she had breathed to herself, feeling soiled and angry after reading so much about Harry Summerson's life and times.

And now, in Broadstairs, on a filthy afternoon in mid-November, Yvette was about to come face to face with Uncle Mack again. They were almost at the top of the path where it began to dip down to Victoria Gardens, a winding arrangement of lawns, benches and flowerbeds, now barren in the late autumn, before the bandstand beyond. She could see Tom, Phil and David were already at the plaque, greeting the waiting huddle of press photographers and journalists under a clutch of umbrellas. One of these umbrellas, she noted with a quick spike of fear, bore a Union Jack. Was this intentional, or had it been bought impulsively from a tourist shop when the rain started up? She hoped there wouldn't be trouble.

Suddenly, Sunny stopped ahead of her and turned around. He was covering his head with a sodden copy of the Guardian.

'Want to come under my paper?'

Yvette laughed. 'No, thank you! I wish I'd brought an umbrella myself.'

'It will be better if you're windswept and uncovered,' Sunny laughed. 'It will up your commitment quotient.'

'No need for that, I think.'

'Are we still on for a drink later?'

Yvette had momentarily forgotten that they'd all agreed over lunch to go to the Racing Greyhound in the evening and drown their sorrows over Trump. 'Let me check with Ollie. I think he's got things covered...'

In moments they were at the plaque and shaking hands with the press. She took a look at the monument and seemed to see it with fresh eyes. She saw how small and insignificant it really was – you could walk past without noticing it, and many did. There was Harry Summerson's rain-washed face; the brass frieze now turning a gruesome shade of green and black, like a gangrenous wound. And there was his jaunty banjo under his chin. She read the stand-alone line at the bottom of the plaque: *He brought joy and laughter to young and old.*

For a second she felt a rush of her old empathy. She admired his industry, his doggedness, his tenacity. He was just another working-class grafter – the type of person she'd always supported, helped and encouraged all her life. He had entertained the population through two world wars. He'd brought joy to young and old. How could she want to destroy that? She realised he was just symptomatic of his times. He probably didn't know what he was doing was morally wrong, unlike his American blackface counterparts. Though not everyone was anti-Semitic in the 20s and 30s, like anti-Semitism, the minstrel tradition was just part of the furniture of the times . . . And yet, and yet. No, she couldn't rationalise it like that. It was obscene to misread history in that fashion. She thought quickly of her grandfather. Stanley would have denounced Uncle Mack and his merry band, and with all the eloquence at his command. She must do the same.

She turned to face the photographers. Some were already snapping away. They obviously wanted to make quick work of it. A squall of rain hit the side of her face, stinging her cheek. To her right was Sunny, busy organising the others so the plaque could be clearly seen in shot.

Yvette gathered herself, locating the confidence that had always propelled her so successfully through life; the unopposable, cast-iron, utterly convincing confidence that had never failed to open doors for her. She gathered all her natural *joie de vivre*, her persuasive smile, and spoke into the strong wind:

'Gentlemen,' – and it was all men – there didn't appear to be a single woman among the gaggle of anorak-wearing smudges and hacks, 'thank you for all coming along on such a horrible day. My name is Yvette Hartford-Jones, and I'm a district councillor for Dover and Deal, here to support Sunny and his campaign for Viking ward...'

She glanced to her left, beyond the plaque, and out to sea. She saw briefly the great, toiling expanse of ocean; its grey waves forming angry white crests; seagulls swarming

above. She could barely make herself heard above the gale. Below the cliffs was Viking Bay and, unseen, the Albion Steps where Uncle Mack had once performed.

She turned back to face the cameras.

‘Let me begin by saying –‘

But her voice – strong and sure as it had ever been – was taken by the wind.

PART TWO

2018-2019

STUART

Two and a half years after the vote to leave the European Union, the people of Britain were marching, and Stuart was marching with them. They had taken to the streets in vast numbers. They had called their movement the People's Vote, and they demanded a second referendum to demonstrate the real Will of the People. And so, on a pristine October day in 2018, Stuart, Efua and Kwesi – now a thriving almost-three-year-old, with a mini afro to match his mother's – joined their heaving throng.

The day had not begun well. A bitter row over screen time had resulted in Kwesi throwing a half-hour tantrum, until Efua had brutally turned off the Teletubbies and hidden the remote in a drawer. Their son had screamed for a full thirty minutes as if mortally wounded. Stuart was always astonished at young children's easy access to tragic despair. They seemed able to locate it instantly, and then just give in to wave after wave of anguish. When Kwesi realised the TV was never going to be switched back on, he'd begun throwing toys around the small living room; pulling baskets of forgotten robots and plastic diggers from the Ikea units and hurling them at the blank screen, as if this would make the Teletubbies reappear. It was like being trapped with a madman, Stuart thought, as he calmly attempted to clear up the carnage. It was so over the top, he began to laugh, which only drove Kwesi to new heights. He found himself face to face with toys and books he hadn't seen for years; things that had felt so familiar at the time, such as the heavy-paged favourite

Goodnight Moon, with its unsettling tableaux of a sinister sleeping rabbit and a bowl of mush. This he'd read to Kwesi night after night while feeding him with the bottle. Or the polyhued squares of the playmat, which now lay scattered over the sofa. Or the nodding soft-toy dog who barked if you pressed its nose, and whom they'd christened Pepe for some reason. Stuart watched in a kind of trance as his son punished Pepe by smacking his nose repeatedly onto the coffee table in an effort to shut him up. *Yap. Yap. Yap. Yap. Yap. Yap!*

When Kwesi finally cried himself out, they bribed him into the pushchair with an oat bar, and then headed for the bus stop. They took the 134 from Muswell Hill all the way to Trafalgar Square and then footslogged the length of Piccadilly to Park Lane where the first crowds were gathering. And what a crowd. Stuart hadn't seen so many people since the anti-Iraq War protest more than a decade before. And what a day for it. Above them shimmered the azure sky; its Indian summer warmth on their faces; and everywhere the calm solidarity of the massed protestors, with their banners and home-made placards, many bearing the energising deep navy of the EU flag, with its constellation of gold stars.

'I'm amazed there are so many families here,' Efua said as they waited for the march to start. 'I mean young families.'

'I know,' Stuart marvelled, looking about him. 'I knew we wouldn't be the only one, but this is great.' Encouragingly, there were hundreds of pushchairs with children the same age as their boy. Stuart smiled at Efua, who was wearing her big shades and her outsized gold-hoop earrings. While Kwesi was having his tantrum, she'd calmly gone to the bathroom and drawn an EU flag onto her left cheekbone with glitter paint. He smiled at it now in the strong morning sunshine.

They'd discussed the previous evening whether taking Kwesi along would be too dangerous. What if the protest turned violent? Better to leave their son with Yoofi, surely? But the march was all about the young, they agreed. About their future, which suddenly

seemed cancelled by leaving the EU. The banners all around them attested to this. There were hundred of teenagers with placards declaring *Brexit Stole my Future*. Many others carried funny, or satirical messages. *Bollocks to Brexit... Buck Frexit... Pulling Out Never Works... Even Baldrick Had a Plan*.

‘I think we’re moving.’

‘I think you’re right...’

The London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, had just finished addressing the phalanx at the head of the march, and now stewards were readying people to move. There was a big police presence, many on horseback, due to the very real danger that the far right, or Leave activists, would form a counter-protest and turn a day of peaceful demonstration into a violent rout. Stuart had always been afflicted by an unnatural fear of riots; a claustrophobic dread of being stuck in one; of being kettled by the police as chaos unfolded around him. He found he was unusually anxious as the crowd began to move in step, like a great, heavy collective beast. He’d been six when the Brixton Riots happened, and had a dim memory of seeing them on TV. He’d been ten when Broadwater Farm ignited, and he had a definite memory of that, as well as the Poll Tax riots five years later.

‘Look over there, Kwes’,’ Efua said jubilantly, pointing at the mounted police, attempting to make the march seem like something their son should be enjoying. ‘Look at the horsies. Remember we saw some at the farm?’

The farm was in Kentish Town; a half-acre of land discretely hidden among the urban sprawl, on which children could feed pigs and ride ponies around an enclosure.

‘Except they didn’t have cops on them then,’ Stuart added, drily.

Instead of looking at the horses, Kwesi pointed at a row of waiting ambulances.

‘There’s a nee-nah! And another one! And another one!’

Of course, Stuart thought. Their son had been obsessed with anything on wheels for over a year, especially emergency vehicles. Whenever one went past with its siren screaming he would stop whatever he was doing and watch in awe.

‘This is great,’ Stuart smiled weakly at Efua. ‘Now he’s going to see hundreds of them.’

‘We should do this more often!’

Or maybe not, Stuart thought as they began to pick up their pace. Following the column of placard-wavers out onto Hyde Park Corner, he still felt a nagging sense of unease.

On Radio Four that morning there’d been reports that Britain First would make an appearance in an attempt to disrupt the People’s Vote march. Not for the first time in recent weeks, Stuart thought of Jessica. Since his abortive visit to Broadstairs two years ago – in what seemed like another lifetime – he’d made sporadic attempts to track her down. All of these attempts had been online. He hadn’t returned to his home town. He’d realised, as he’d left the Dumpton pub and sprinted in the rain for the last train back to London, that you could return to your roots, but never on the same terms. Not after you’d spent your whole life determinedly trying to escape your cultural beginnings. He had wanted to talk to his fellow drinkers, to say he was one of them, until the stark realisation hit him that he wasn’t anymore. He had nothing in common with the darts-playing, pub-curry-eating men and women of the Racing Greyhound any longer. He didn’t know how to talk to them, or even how they saw the world. If anyone should understand them, it should have been him, but he found it impossible somehow.

His feelings about his sister had become more complicated after his visit. While Efua accepted that the Jessica trail had gone cold, he was still torn up with conflicting emotions. Hate and love in equal measure. Hate for what she’d done, for her views and her stupidity. Love for a sister who was lost to him. Her actions had made him ponder what it meant to be

human – to be connected with human bonds to other members of the species. He'd suffered from a strong urge to save her. And – rather pompously, he admitted to himself – to save the nation from her. If she wasn't his responsibility, whose was she? Mercifully, there had been no more reports in the press about her – she'd gone to ground. Perhaps she'd done her community service and repented her ways. Who knew? Every time he ran a Google search on her nothing came up. But he hadn't given up. What he had done instead was investigate the resurgent far right movement further, and go deep into their activities online, in the hope that he'd find a link to Jessica there. He soon discovered that, post-Trump and the referendum, the global reach of the far right was staggering. Every time he finished an hour of research at his laptop – usually after Efua had put Kwesi to bed – he felt physically ill at the level of hate and anger out there.

Against this backdrop of political turmoil, Stuart and Efua had struggled through two more years of alternately joyous and battering parenthood. Two years of sleepless nights and damp playgrounds. Of new friends and startling new emotions. Of visiting prospective nurseries and soon primary schools. All of Kwesi's landmarks had passed in a blur. His first crawl, his first steps, his first solid food, his first words – all of which Stuart had captured on his phone, which was now so full it had given up accepting new photos or videos. And then the illnesses. A terrifying bout of tonsillitis when they were on a weekend trip to review a restaurant in Yorkshire. A local doctor had given them antibiotics, and they'd nursed their son – hot as something taken from the oven – through an endless night in a hotel room. There had been many trips to A&E, one of which had turned into a hospital stay after Kwesi came down with a mystery virus from drinking water from park fountains. A grisly week of worry, with Efua sharing Kwesi's hospital bed, while he made daily trips back and forth with supplies. Their son had been given a lumbar puncture, and, at one stage, his legs had given way underneath him. Viral meningitis perhaps, they had said, but the diagnosis was

inconclusive. Fortunately, there'd been nothing so serious since. In the summers, there were Saturday mornings at the Park Road Lido, or trips to Highgate Woods; in the winters, many drives to Brent Cross Ikea, largely for the Swedish meatballs, which their son loved.

As the country had become increasingly chaotic and unstable, so it seemed, had their careers. While Efua had returned to teach part time at Fortismere School, Stuart had found work harder to come by. The *Independent* had gone online after its print sales collapsed, and he'd lost his salary. He still wrote restaurant reviews for them and elsewhere, but now he was fully freelance, with all the downsides that came with it. No sick pay, no pension, no paid leave. He was part of the gig-economy now, as he often moaned to Efua – an Uber driver, or a Deliveroo rider, except with a laptop rather than a vehicle. He was only as good as his last five hundred words. To cheer himself up, he'd bought a ukulele – a surprising purchase, but one that seemed in keeping with the times. If he couldn't fiddle while the country burned, he could strum. He argued that he'd only bought it so he could play music to Kwesi, but really, he'd just always wanted to learn. It struck him later that buying the instrument was the most middle-class thing he'd ever done.

Efua would say she had worse things to worry about. And she didn't mean the continued failure of her novel to find an agent or a publisher. Since the referendum, the Home Office had been bombarding UK residents they perceived as having a 'questionable status' with demands, asking them to prove they or their relatives weren't illegal immigrants. At a cost, too – the financial burden had been placed on the person proving their innocence. Efua had received one of these letters during the summer, and she'd spent hours with Yoofi trying to track down the relevant documents. It turned out that many of them had been lost or left behind in Paris years ago when they came to London. It was all a quagmire, something they were still sinking in. It helped that a couple of their NCT friends were also going through the same intrusive and expensive pantomime. This group of sixteen parents all kept

in contact via WhatsApp, something Stuart had ditched the moment his phone started to fill with hourly messages. Efua, by contrast, seemed to love the sense of community, of shared purpose with parents who all had children Kwesi's age. The group met up occasionally, childcare permitting, at the Pizza Express on Colney Hatch Lane to swap war stories from the front-line of parenthood. Many of them, like Stuart and Efua, had started a 'Brexit bunker' of supplies in case the inconceivable hard Brexit happened. Their own was a pile of dried goods, accumulated over the summer, sitting in a cupboard next to the Hoover and mop. They'd built up a fair mountain of wholewheat pasta, UHT milk and packets of ricecakes for Kwesi. Who knew if it would help when the country went over the cliff they were heading for? They were living in tumultuous times, and nobody knew for certain how things would turn out.

And now, as the great procession made its way past Fortnum and Mason and Hatchards, towards the thronged Piccadilly Circus, Stuart saw a familiar face in the crowd.

'Manish!' he yelled. '*Manish!*'

A tall Asian man twenty feet ahead of them turned in their direction. Bearded, and dressed exceedingly well, given he was on a demo, he was unmistakable. He smiled and fought his way back to them, giving Stuart a bear hug and Efua a kiss when he finally arrived.

'Guys,' Manish beamed, gesturing about him. 'Isn't this the most amazing thing? I've never felt a vibe like this!'

Stuart had met Manish at the *Independent* years ago, and they'd become instant friends. In many ways, Manish was the political journalist Stuart had always wanted to be. Though very different from each other – Manish's father had been the Indian ambassador in the eighties, and had sent his son to Winchester – they delighted in each other's company. Sanguine, funny, with mournful eyes and a most impressive black beard, he was also a

merciless commentator on the current political upheaval; someone to whom Stuart looked for the latest, inside-track story.

‘It’s incredible,’ Stuart said, almost yelling above the din of the crowd. ‘This surely has to make a difference now!’

More people had joined the march at every road junction. They were pouring in from every point of the compass. All about them, the young and old were lofting banners, beating saucepans, blowing whistles, whooping, yelling and chatting. All joined in the euphoria of sharing a purpose. All, Stuart sensed, shared a feeling of common destiny; of *acting* for once, rather than just sitting on their sofas, doomscrolling through Twitter, railing at the government, like he’d done passively for so many months.

‘You said you might not make it,’ Manish said, his powerful voice cutting through effortlessly.

Manish had texted the previous night, telling Stuart he would meet them at Piccadilly Tube if they could find childcare and join the march.

‘We just had to be here,’ Efua yelled, trying to navigate the pushchair through the heaving bodies.

‘I’m surprised you’re wearing your best whistle,’ said Stuart.

Manish shrugged and smiled, smoothing the lapels of his fawn three-piece suit.

‘When you come to party as big as this, you want to make the effort.’

‘Cad and the Dandy?’

‘Sure is.’

The Cad and the Dandy was a bespoke gentleman’s outfitters on Savile Row that Manish had once taken Stuart to. It had been another world.

Stuart looked around at the stewards in their high-vis jackets, all of them patiently corralling the new arrivals into orderly lines. His sense of unease from half an hour before had dissipated slightly. ‘I don’t see Jeremy here do you?’

‘He made his views pretty clear at the last PMQs, don’t you think?’

Jeremy, of course, wasn’t a mutual friend, but Jeremy Corbyn, the veteran socialist firebrand who’d won the Labour leadership contest a year ago after Theresa May’s costly and politically disastrous general election. It had been a great dismay to Stuart – and most of the left – that Corbyn’s Eurosceptic stance had prevented him from coming out in favour of a second referendum. He and Manish had discussed this suicidal intractability over pints of Guinness in The John Baird – a mediocre Muswell Hill pub that was nevertheless his preferred local and close enough for him to dash back if Efua needed him. Manish had once been a dedicated Corbyn acolyte until the opposition leader’s stance on Brexit became clear. And with antisemitism rampant in the Labour party, he’d become even more agnostic.

‘It would help slightly,’ Stuart yelled over the noise of the police choppers, ‘if we had a strong opposition. One who could get behind all this.’ He was always eager for political discussion with his friend, though he didn’t think they would get very far with the tumult all around them.

Manish shrugged. ‘It would be fantastic, sure. But the people are taking back control. In small ways as well as big. Did you read about that graffiti in Walthamstow?’

‘No...’

‘Someone spray painted *Speak English* on a fence, the usual racist shit. And then, by the next morning someone changed it to *We Speak English, Urdu, Punjabi, Turkish, Romanian, French, Cockney*. I mean, that’s fucking priceless!’

‘It certainly is,’ Stuart said, though the graffiti reminded him uncomfortably of Jessica. With the optimism and euphoria of the day, he’d managed to forget about her for a

few hours. It was a phenomenon he'd often pondered: if you cut someone out of your life, you end up thinking about them more, not less. 'But maybe no swearing in front of the boy, eh?'

'Sorry!' Manish grimaced. 'I always forget.'

Manish was single and without children. He had all this in front of him, Stuart thought warmly.

All of sudden, Efua cried out: 'Hey, there's Tia!'

As they reached the bottom of Lower Regent Street, she began waving frantically to a face in the crowd. Efua had made vague plans to see her best friend on the march. They'd been texting all morning, and had finally managed to locate each other.

'Let me push for a while,' Stuart said, taking the buggy from Efua.

In seconds, his wife was embracing her friend, a diminutive mixed-race woman in a denim jacket.

'Look at you with the flag on your face, sister!'

'Do you like it?' Efua gasped. 'I don't think I got the right number of stars.'

Tia Brown was Efua's best friend from uni, and a ball of nervous energy. Wiry, slightly androgynous, with a penchant for headscarves, she was enormously charismatic and entertaining. Stuart had always liked her – just as well, since Tia wasn't going anywhere. She and Efua had met on their first day at UCL. They were both reading English, and had bonded over being among the few black faces there. Tia was from Camberwell, and unlike Efua had many brothers and sisters. She'd become a documentary film-maker, and had lived a much riskier life than Efua; staying in squats and surviving hand to mouth for most of her twenties.

Tia looked about her with a kind of theatrical awe. 'So... We're gonna storm the barricades, yeah?'

'Not with Kwesi here, we're not.'

‘Ahh, how is the little man?’

Tia leaned into the pushchair and did that thing only women can do with their faces when it comes to children; a gurning pantomime to make them giggle. All without any loss of self-respect.

Then she turned to Manish: ‘Who’s the dude?’

Stuart realised that Manish hadn’t said a word since Tia joined them. Strangely, the two had never met over the years; though perhaps there was a reason for this. Two such forceful personalities were maybe too much for each other. ‘I don’t think you’ve been introduced.’

‘No,’ said Manish, with his slightly patrician look he’d inherited from his father.

Stuart stepped in before his friend became too imperious: ‘Tia, meet Manish. Manish, Tia.’

They leant over and shook hands, causing Stuart and Efua to exchange a quick glance. Like Manish, Tia was single, but it was quickly apparent that any attempt at matchmaking wasn’t going to be successful.

‘Nice to meetcha,’ said Tia, withdrawing her hand swiftly.

As Tia and Manish reluctantly got to know each other, and the police choppers droned above, Stuart began to relax and enjoy the day. Pushing his son in the buggy, he tuned out the clamour and enjoyed the warmth of the sun on his face. There they were, in the greatest city on earth, the sky an impossible blue above them, the massed ranks of like-minded people about them. There was a power here, he decided; an almost volcanic force; something bubbling under the tarmac of the streets that wouldn’t be held back.

And now, as the crowd lumbered around Trafalgar Square with old Nelson above them, the sunlight glancing off the lions and the fountains, he glimpsed for the first time the locus of everything that opposed that power. Whitehall and Downing Street. And, beyond

that, their ultimate destination, Parliament Square. If they could avoid a riot, he thought, then for the first time in his life he might be a part of history. His actions might have some kind of consequence in the real world. And for that he was briefly happy.

There hadn't been a riot. But not much had changed either. The march had arrived peacefully at Parliament Square where Labour backbenchers and various popstars had made speeches. And then they'd all drifted home – a laborious process that seemed to take forever and about five busses – and watched themselves on TV.

The following month, after the supreme high of the march, Stuart found himself back in the gutter. Though he and the whole country had, in all reality, been in the gutter on that tumultuous day of sunshine and hope, he'd at least been looking at the stars. Now, as he opened his laptop on a Friday evening in November, the rain gently trying the living room window, a glass of red at his elbow, he felt revolted anew at the state the world had descended into. For the past few weeks, he'd been making a concerted effort to track his sister down on a number of encrypted far right chatrooms. When this became overwhelming – like swimming through a sewer and drinking the water at the same time – he would switch to general research about the resurgence of the far right, and their obsession with conspiracy theories, as well as their interference in elections and the referendum. Some of the virtual rabbit holes he tumbled down were terrifying. They would occupy him for hours; the reassuring rasp of Kwesi's breathing from the monitor, the bottle of red diminishing until it was almost finished.

One of his major discoveries was something called QAnon. Over the past year, it had become clear to Stuart that the electoral success of right-wing populist leaders such as Trump had been aided and abetted by the conspiracy theories promoted by this American network of flatearthers and climate change deniers. It had evolved from US chat forums such as 8Chan,

and mushroomed into a monster, with millions buying into its woolly mesh of lies and batshit crazy ideas. Not just the usual suspects – Kennedy, 9/11, Princess Diana – but truly disturbing stuff, such as the notion that half of Hollywood and the Democrats were involved in a vast, satanic paedophile ring intent on abusing and cannibalising children. There were hundreds of QAnon videos on YouTube that Stuart had spent an unhealthy amount of time watching. These, he could see, had been viewed by hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions of people. There were white supremacists talking about The Great Awakening. This was when the white people of the world would supposedly wake up to see that multiculturalism had been a con to enable The Great Replacement – a global ethnic takeover. They spoke of The Storm – something that Donald Trump would launch in retaliation; locking up Clinton, Obama and anyone black or Hispanic who opposed them. They believed in the Global Cabal of the New World Order – the NWO. This was the absurd theory that the world was secretly controlled by three families: The House of Saud, the Rothschilds and George Soros. Stuart had laughed out loud at this – of course, one Arab family, one Jewish family and a Jewish businessman. How convenient! Then there were even wilder claims. That Sweden was secretly controlled by Sharia Law. That vaccinating your kids was a plot to turn the world autistic. That Michelle Obama was in actual fact a man. But there wasn't much laughter to be had elsewhere. The deadly intent of the white supremacists was clear: if you weren't like them, they wanted to kill you. According to them, the world was running to a different script to the one you'd always believed – it was all Fake News. Wake up to it now, or we will force you to, with guns, knives and bombs.

Stuart had always thought conspiracy theories were something stupid people used to make themselves feel intelligent, and his investigations into QAnon hadn't dissuaded him of this. What he found equally absurd and chilling was the British offshoot of QAnon, a movement called QBritannica. This, he discovered, had been instrumental in campaigning for

Brexit. When he read the administrator's message, he'd felt angry and sick at the same time: 'QBritannica seeks to give the people of the UK somewhere to network, archive, and find ways to take back our country'. *Take back our country*. The same words the official Leave campaign had used. As far as Stuart could see, their aim was to show up so-called corruption and spread conspiracy theory guff. But by doing so, they had reinforced the Brexit campaign. They had originated Twitter hashtags such as #BrexitBetrayal and #StandUp4Brexit, and had spread rumours that British left wing politicians were involved in Satanism and paedophile networks. One post claimed a Labour peer only wanted open EU borders for the continued trafficking of children.

Stuart had never entered into any of these discussions on his evening vigils – he'd never actually registered and gone into a chatroom, merely hung around the virtual entrance hall, observing the participants. And he never told Efua about what he'd seen and read. It would upset her too much, he knew. But part of him was fatally drawn to the extremity of these sites. He often asked himself why. How could these lowlifes – and by extension, his sister, his own flesh and blood – believe in such absurd, evil things? His hope had always been that he'd see evidence of Jessica there, and he often scrolled down the comments thread under a QBritannica video to see if her name came up. But it never did. Just the ludicrous usernames alluding to Nordic Gods, or famous fascists of the past. And anyway, the point was that people posted anonymously. He hardly expected to see her real name. Yet he kept up his search. If Jessica was as involved in the British far right as he believed, she would be aware of these sites.

It was on a similar rainy night a few weeks previously that Stuart felt he'd had something of a breakthrough. Or maybe it had merely been a red herring. Just about to abandon a comments thread under a video that debated whether Tommy Robinson was related to royalty, he saw a line that caught his eye. *Tommy's a sell-out. Join Britain First*. It

wasn't so much the comment, as the username. It had been left by someone called *Stone J*. Stuart's heart had leapt. Instead of Stone J, he had immediately heard *Stone Bay*, so familiar was the name of his old hometown beach. Could it possibly be her?

Now, under the pallid lamplight, the wine making him fuzzy, he sat at the cyber entrance hall of another site where he'd seen evidence of Stone J's activities. For two weeks, he'd monitored the log-ins and publicly accessible discourse of a certain British-based radical-right chatroom called Patriot Patrol. Affiliated to National Action, a banned neo-Nazi organisation, Patriot Patrol was a discussion group that focussed, according to its home page, on 'race, traditionalism, and white rights'. Stuart had watched newcomers access the members-only channels, on which Stone J was a regular participant, and now he was going in himself. For this he had had to write the acronym MAtr – Men Among the Ruins – on his wrist, and then photograph it along with his username. It had taken him weeks to come up with the latter – one that was innocuous enough that didn't give him away, but also something he could stomach typing. He'd settled on Oswald, as he'd always thought the British fascist an ineffectual buffoon, a man who had imagined himself to be caught up in history when he was only tangled in his own narcissism and intellectual limitations. It would make him smile to type the name Oswald in, something he badly needed to do to alleviate his nerves. And there was no question he was nervous. The whole enterprise felt crazy; supremely dangerous. What if he was rumbled at once? What would be the consequences? He had a wife and child now – he was putting their safety at risk too.

But he knew he just had to go in. Once he'd filled in the short questionnaire, answering enquires about his ancestral background, age, religion and sexuality, he submitted his j-peg to the recruitment hub and sat back to wait, his fingers trembling over the keys.

Just as he was contemplating opening another bottle of red, there was a soft ping, and a blue light from his laptop. The administrator, Eldritch, had written back.

‘Sorry for the delay, Oswald,’ Eldritch began. ‘But are you on any watch-lists?’

Stuart swallowed hard. He was knocked off balance by the question. Well would he be if he was a committed fascist? Get this wrong, and he would never gain access. He thought intently for a moment, then recklessly typed,

‘Yes. A few. But not with this name.’

‘Great! Just checking. It would surprise me if you weren’t. Most of our members are.’

The appearance of an exclamation mark calmed Stuart down at once. He took a large slug of red and, aiming for a familiar tone, wrote. ‘Occupational hazard I guess.’

‘Too true. Can I just ask a couple more questions about your background?’

‘Sure,’ Stuart typed, feeling a cold hand on his spine again. This wasn’t going to be easy, he saw.

‘You say your mother’s dead and your father has disappeared. Do you know any more about your mother’s background?’

Stuart hesitated, and typed: ‘White. South East London... She wanted to take our country back as much as me.’

A silence. Had he said the wrong thing?

‘Did you run a genetic test on yourself?’

He struggled for a moment to remember the names of the most popular bloodline-search services. He had never gone in for one, though Efua had once, and discovered she had traces of Dutch and French blood in her too. But which site had she used?

Suddenly, it came to him. ‘23andMe. All fine... Bit of Scottish and Danish in there too.’

He wondered whether Danish was pushing it a bit. He didn’t want to come across as a cartoon Aryan. Just a person who, like them, wanted to reclaim the land they believed was theirs. He tried to imagine what this Eldritch looked like. Was he young or old? Where was

he sitting at that moment? Did he have a job? A wife and family? Did they know he spent his evenings discussing Hitler and eugenics and the so-called Zionist Occupied Government?

There was no reply for a full two minutes, which made him feel he'd failed. He'd have to go in harder. Hold his nose if he had to. Speedily, he typed. 'I believe our cultural and genetic heritage is undermined by Muslims and Jews. I'm terrified that my children will grow up surrounded by alien values and peoples.' Then, with an ironic flourish. 'I'm worried that my son will marry a black woman and have a half-caste child.'

Thirty seconds elapsed. Then a soft ping.

'Wonderful. Oswald, you are fully vetted. Please enjoy your time here. I hope you make many friends!'

'Thank you,' Stuart wrote plainly, before breathing out and taking another glug of wine. 'I'm sure I will.'

For the next half an hour, he endured excruciating exchanges with up to twenty or more raging racists. It was just as he'd expected. The main chat hall was an open sewer; an enemy army, but one that came at you with a friendly smile. At moments, it felt like he was on a neo-Nazi dating site. People were meeting and talking about their backgrounds, joshing and cracking insider jokes. They weren't just talking about their right to the English soil. When there was serious discussion, it was often over his head. There was an obsession with genetics, much of which resembled pseudo-scientific bullshit. No one sounded like an archetypal thug. A few sounded highly educated and articulate.

Just as he was about to leave the site, relieved that he'd been given a free pass, aiming to jump in again the following night, he saw a new user appear in a corner of the screen.

Stone J.

His heart leapt in his chest.

‘Sorry I’m late guys. Few things to take care of on the home front. Anyone up for a chinwag?’

He moved with lightning speed, and clicked on the name.

He had no idea if Stone J wasn’t a beardy bloke from Sunderland who spent his weekends at classic car rallies. Most far-right sites seemed to be all-male spaces. There was simply no way of telling from what he’d seen so far.

‘Hi, I’m Oswald. I’m new here...’

A pause. Then a line of type: ‘Hello Oswald. Funny old name you got their. But hi anyway.’

‘Mosley?’ he typed.

Another pause. Then a thumbs-up emoji appeared, big and yellow with an outsized thumb.

He’d never used an emoji in his life and wasn’t about to start now. The spelling mistake in her message made him ravenous for more detail. Could it be her? He didn’t want to ask a dumb outright question about how she – and he told himself not to be convinced about her gender – happened upon her username.

Cautiously he typed. ‘A lot of people seem to be here for fun and friendship. It’s nothing like I imagined.’

‘Your not wrong!’

A second error. He had to have an answer. Slowly, he typed: ‘Are you a girl?’

A second, two seconds, then three passed by.

Finally: ‘How did you guess?’

‘It’s gonna end in tears!’

‘Aw, let him play.’

‘Trust me, it always does.’

The question, Stuart reminded himself, as he watched Kwesi barricade himself inside the Crocodile Café’s wendy house for the tenth time that morning, was not when the tears would come, but for what reason. Would it be his tiny hand getting crushed in the hinge? Or a splinter from all the unvarnished wood? Or a push and a thump from one of the bigger children?

‘Shall I go and grab him?’ Efua asked, her voice drained of all inflection.

She’d been up half the night responding to their boy’s cries for her. Kwesi was going through an extended mummy-phase, something Stuart secretly rejoiced in, since it had afforded him a month of blissfully uninterrupted sleep. It was the first Saturday in December, and the plan had been to get brunch at the Croc first, then head to Little Dinosaurs, the soft play area up at Alexandra Palace. He didn’t think Efua was up to it. She’d much rather be in bed, reading the books sections of the Saturday broadsheets. Still, he thought, she had offered

to fetch Kwesi, and he didn't feel like getting up again. With the mercenary zeal of a parent who'd changed the last nappy, he smiled:

'Your turn, I think.'

Efua raised herself wearily from her chair; her hands gripping the distinctive red, polka-dot oilcloth.

'*Kwes*!' Efua yelled, heading for the wendy house, which contained at least five other children, most of them too old for their son to play with. 'I'm coming in...'

Every table in the covered area bore one of these vivid oilcloths. They offset the creaking brown deep-leather sofas. Scattered about them was the type of Muswell Hill bric-a-brac that the Crocodile Café knew would amuse its liberal, quietly wealthy clientele and their kids. The children's area was reached via an alley under a rain-leaky canopy of faux-taverna vines, bordered by tables with colourful mosaic-patterned cloths. The alley opened out into a bijou space, festooned with bunting, plastic ivy and paper-honeycomb ice-cream cones. Plastic flamingos stood in plant pots. A rusting yellow tandem leant against a wall. A bright red coat-and-umbrella tree dominated the entranceway. It was all in keeping with the Pesto Triangle – that area of north London whose three points were Crouch End, Highgate and Muswell Hill.

While Efua went to persuade Kwesi to come out, Stuart ruminated on the last few weeks. He hadn't told his wife about his breakthrough with Jessica – if that's what it was. Instead, he'd gone back every night and tried to engage further with Stone J. He realised he might have to flirt with this woman if he was going to get anywhere; a truly uncomfortable feeling if it was in actual fact his sister. Then, for a full fortnight, Stone J disappeared. He'd signed into Patriot Patrol for as long as he could endure before logging off for good. The noise of hate was too loud. He wanted some peace of mind for a while. He'd go back again when he could stomach it.

And now, on a chilly Saturday morning, with kids vaulting the sofas and running riot over the sticky decking, he just wanted to enjoy the day and not think about the state of the country. The Croc was the sort of place he rarely visited at the weekend if he wanted to work, or read the paper calmly over a flat white. The food was nothing special – standard hipster fare, though the owners seemed to think otherwise. *The Best Breakfasts in Muswell Hill* claimed the laminate menu. He'd gone for the smashed avocado on toast, while Efua had opted for the posh mushrooms. It had done the job, but he couldn't bring himself to pitch the place for review. Besides, he liked slipping away here to file his copy during naptime in the week, and didn't want to feel uncomfortable if he was forced to be negative. They'd just ordered Kwesi a *babyccino* – a faux cappuccino; essentially warm milk into which kids could spoon mini-marshmallows – and this would hopefully lure their son out of the wendy house and get him to sit still for five blessed minutes.

'Here he is!' Efua said, hauling Kwesi into the highchair opposite Stuart. 'Back from the jungle.'

Mercifully, the waitress appeared seconds later bearing the *babyccino*, which she set down in front of the boy.

'I doon like it,' Kwesi said cheerfully, using one of his most common sentences. His stock response to any foodstuff or drink set before him.

'You don't know until you try it, sweetheart,' Efua soothed. 'Here. Why don't you use the spoon...?'

'But I *doon like it*.'

Stuart saw that he might have to use the moment to put his case in the argument he and Efua had been having on-and-off since the boy woke them at ten-past five. Whether to send Kwesi in for another day a week at the pricey 345Nursery, or to continue with their current arrangements. When their son was born, Efua had taken eighteen months maternity

leave from Fortismere School, after which she'd gone part-time three days a week. Kwesi was in nursery on those three days, but now Efua was going back full-time in the New Year, it would mean Stuart would be looking after the boy solo on Mondays and Tuesdays, something he couldn't see working. Now he was a freelancer, he always marvelled at how people – even his own wife – saw his time as fair game. With no ring-fenced hours in his working life, nothing was sacred.

‘How about he does just one more nursery day, say the Tuesday?’

‘Still too expensive,’ Efua said, as she spooned the hot froth into Kwesi's willing mouth. ‘Just doesn't stack up, I'm afraid.’

For once, Efua hadn't bothered to put on lippy or anything special. Her Nike tracksuit was fiercely at odds with the yummy mummies and latte papas in the covered area. She was the only black parent in the Crocodile Café, a fact that wouldn't have bothered Stuart three years ago when the political climate was different. Now, he was super-alert for derogatory looks, or micro-aggressions, to use a phrase Efua had been using long before it became fashionable.

‘I'll pitch a column somewhere.’

‘You tried that before. They don't want you writing about politics, just food.’

‘They barely want me to write about that nowadays,’ said Stuart with one eye on Kwesi, who was now happily rolling mini-marshmallows around with the back of his spoon. His son reminded him less and less of himself now. His agile brown eyes were framed in a face that increasingly resembled Efua's, with its proud tilted chin and high cheekbones.

‘You're their working-class foodie mascot and they ain't gonna let you switch, no way.’

‘Look, I'm serious. I'll get more work somehow. I don't think I can handle doing everything for two full days after the weekend.’

‘Your problem is that you never went to any of the baby groups. So you have this fear of being excluded.’

‘What, like the breastfeeding group?’

‘There was a man there, believe it or not!’ Efua bellowed. Stuart had always loved her resonant voice. He savoured it when she sang in the shower, or to their son. It was rich and raspy, with a bottomless lower register.

‘I went to loads of baby groups.’

‘Name one.’

Through his fug of tiredness, Stuart couldn’t think of a single example. So he made one up.

‘Baby Zap. I went to that.’

‘There was no such group.’

‘There was! It was – it was in Crouch End. Somewhere . . . Anyway – listen. We can work something out. You know I want you to go back. Not many husbands would say that.’

‘Loads would!’

‘Not many would mean it.’

Stuart leant over and took her hand.

Efua smiled, something she hadn’t done for a while. ‘Are you making an affectionate gesture?’

‘I am.’

‘Parents don’t do those.’

‘We still do, don’t we?’

‘Well, we’re the freaks.’

Stuart grinned. ‘We certainly are.’

‘At least that’s how this country makes me feel most days.’

At that moment, Kwesi broke free of his high chair, stepped down and ran joyously back to the wendy house.

Stuart and Efua looked at each other.

‘How’d he do that?’

‘I dunno. Did you strap him in?’

‘Of course!’ Efua erupted.

‘He’s just getting bigger, I suppose.’

Instead of going to fetch him again, they both kept a weary eye on the house’s front door, and then settled back to finish their coffees. They agreed to park the discussion about nursery, which pleased Stuart. But this only allowed Efua to hold forth on her favourite subject: the publishing industry and her own woes. At times like this, when she was tired and cranky, she liked to verbally gun down the whole self-satisfied business, with its gatekeepers hellbent on shutting her out. The longer she went unpublished, she claimed, or without another agent, the harder it would be. Her present rejections seemed to validate her earlier ones in people’s eyes. She had the loser dust on her shoulders. The subtext, she said, was, ‘You’ve had a go, darling, now fuck off’. For a long five minutes she railed against the grand ‘business-by-non-response’ agents who’d asked for her book and then ghosted her. The sycophants and no-talents who slurped warm white wine at book launches. The even grander broadsheet literary editors who dealt in tokenism, reviewing ‘One black or Asian author per month, no more. They’ve got their quota. And not too many women either.’ The alcoholic editor married to an uber-agent who was a maestro of celebrity publishing, though he purportedly ran a literary imprint, one that had turned her down. The slob blogger who gave black authors a kicking and made sure his posts always came up in Google searches, holding up their book covers and pulling stupid faces. And then there were the authors whose success seemed to threaten her personally. The raven-haired YA temptress who had started as a

school teacher at Fortismere and was now a bestselling author – ‘You should have seen the ambition dripping off her – like wax from a candle!’ The Booker-shortlisted female author who’d written a thousand-page novel in a single sentence and become famous overnight. ‘Tired old modernist shit! All her previous books were conventional, and then she sees experimentation is trending so she tries it herself. Plus she always reviews women authors in a totally unsisterly way. *And* one of the bloody Booker judges used to be her old editor!’ Then there was the writer of pedestrian thrillers masquerading as literary fiction, who seemed to be everywhere – on every prize-shortlist and book cover, giving gushing endorsements. This writer – John McManus – had been renamed John McMediocre by Efua. Stuart secretly enjoyed her destruction jobs on John, and had even gone so far as to read some of his work to see if his mediocrity was all in her mind. It wasn’t, he was pleased to tell her. It was John McMediocre she railed against now, and he brightened at the mention of his name. Usually, he sympathised volubly when she lamented her publishing trials, but here he decided to play devil’s advocate instead.

‘Come on, Efua,’ he said. ‘Have you ever read him?’

Efua glanced over to the wendy house, where Kwesi was gurning at them from the upper window.

‘I don’t need to,’ she said testily, waving at their son. ‘I just know he’s mediocre from what he’s said in the press and the rubbish he writes on other people’s novels, and all the writers who think he’s some kind of minor god.’

‘They can’t all be wrong.’

‘They are! They’re just his mates. They all did the same creative writing MA.’ Efua was proud that she’d never been taught writing, which, she insisted, couldn’t be taught anyway. ‘The funny thing is, he keeps getting long and shortlisted for prizes, but he never wins them. I bet he’s bitter!’

‘But what about that reviewer – the one who said he was one of the most exciting voices of his generation?’

‘Him! He’s such a hypocrite. Just cos he’s Asian he gets to be the go-to reviewer for every novelist of colour. He’s got his own book deal now.’

‘I don’t know why I’m standing up for old John. I think he’s crap too.’

‘Well then!’

Stuart drained the last of his coffee. His behind had gone numb from sitting so long, and for once he relished the thought of moving on to the mayhem of Little Dinosaurs, a place he’d always found simultaneously boring and dangerous. It hadn’t taken long for race to enter into her rants about publishing – but then diversity, and the industry’s lack of it, had rightly been called out recently. Stuart had once made the mistake of suggesting she seek out a black agent, only to be told: ‘There aren’t any!’

Efua sat back shaking her head. ‘You know what really bugged me about Ulrika?’

Ah, Ulrika. It didn’t take long either for Efua to get onto the subject of Ulrika Peterson, the agent who’d dumped her. It was inevitable – a scab she couldn’t stop scratching. At first, she’d tried to be sanguine about it – had even bumped into Ulrika at a book event, where’d they’d been falsely friendly. But very quickly her resentment had ossified into hate. How dare Ulrika take her book around the industry and then give up after a few months? You only got one shot with a book, and now that book was dead to editors everywhere. And to drop her when she was at the most vulnerable stage of her career – a second career that had failed to materialise thus far.

‘No idea,’ Stuart said, fearing another broadside. ‘Was it the time she took you out to dinner?’

Efua's first meeting with Ulrika had been in the candlelit media trough, Andrew Edmonds. She'd told him she hadn't wanted to go in the first place, and had come home saying she'd felt totally out of place as the only black face there, apart from the waiting staff.

'She had no other black or Asian authors on her list. Not a single one – out of almost sixty writers. How can you get away with that? And the worst irony?'

'I think I know.'

'She had a black assistant.'

Stuart had heard about this assistant – she'd come in for almost as much flak as the agent.

'Ulrika was so proud of having a black assistant, I can't tell you – she kept going on about how rare it was to find BAME people in *her* industry. She was probably the only black person she knew, apart from me! And you know what? This assistant was completely talentless. She gave me notes on my book, and I tell you, my GCSE students could have written them better and with more insight. Ulrika thought this woman had some great future in publishing. I checked her out on Twitter recently and she was like some events organiser for a catering company. *Quelle surprise!*'

'So publishing wasn't for her.'

'No – writing wasn't for her. There's a difference. You have to know about writing to work in publishing. People forget that it's not just a media job. There are more failed actors and used-car salesmen in publishing than you'd think. What's their damn qualification?'

'Look, just because Ulrika didn't read Philip Roth doesn't make her useless. She's a deal maker. That's an agent's job – '

Suddenly, Kwesi was before them, jumping up and down excitedly, stopping the conversation in its tracks.

'*Mama, Mama!* Go can go balls now? Can we go balls?'

Balls meant the Little Dinosaurs soft-play area, their inevitable fate on a Saturday morning. For once he was relieved they were going.

Efua turned to him. ‘To be continued.’

Ten minutes later they were inside the nondescript shack that was Little Dinosaurs. Standing in the grand shadow of Alexandra Palace’s ornate cornices and planes of glass, the soft-play centre resembled a series of Portakabin toilets from outside. Inside, it was an aviary of screaming toddlers, with mothers and fathers patiently taking their charges up and down the padded slides.

Stuart’s favourite place to hang out was the café counter, and he bagged a rare table as soon as he walked in. From this vantage point he sat down to watch Efua and Kwesi negotiate the netting tunnels and their chaos of coloured balls. Such teeming life and force! Such laughter and tears. The kids unstoppably happy; so in the moment. So heedless, violent and tender. He tried to imagine his life – his forties – without children and found it utterly impossible.

Seconds later, Efua was back, sitting down heavily opposite him. ‘I’m too knackered for this!’

‘Where is he?’

Stuart looked into the tunnels and, for a worrying moment, discovered he couldn’t see his son. Then he caught sight of the little afro bobbing up and down.

‘He’ll be okay for a bit. He’s found a little friend. They’re having a bromance.’

A propos of nothing, she said. ‘You know, she really hadn’t read Philip Roth as a matter of fact.’

Stuart didn’t think Efua was serious about continuing her rant, but he saw she was. Right there and then. He looked over her shoulder, to keep an eye on their son.

‘I am listening. Just looking out for Kwes’.

‘It’s like every literary party I’ve ever been to. Someone staring past you to look for someone more important.’

Stuart laughed. He loved Efua’s sense of humour. It seasoned her vitriol when it came to her writing ambitions. ‘It’s how we met, remember?’

‘That was hardly a literary party.’

‘Okay. Just a bunch of hacks. And me.’

‘Why does every journalist feel they have a novel in them?’

‘I don’t. But let’s not start.’

‘Amen to that.’

Stuart now caught sight of Kwesi’s little friend. A milk-cheeked blond boy of about the same age. The thing that really bugged him about Little Dinosaurs was that it was so middle-class, so entitled, so white. None of the parents there would take their charges to the rough and ready Michael Sobell Centre in Finsbury Park, which housed a similar soft-play area. Too gritty and urban, too – whisper it – *ethnic*. They’d come from far and wide for a Saturday here instead. He looked around and saw all the Pesto Triangle tribes were accounted for. The groomed Yummyistas of Muswell Hill and Crouch End. The Tufnell Parkas of Tufnell Park. The Mocha Papas of Hampstead. Even a few Alpha Papas from Islington.

Efua shook her head. ‘Seriously, how can you claim to be a literary agent and not have read Roth?’

As well as having the expected influences – Octavia E. Butler, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston – Efua had surprised Stuart early on by coming out as a devotee of Philip Roth.

‘Thinking about it won’t make you happier.’

‘I mean, I’ve got no truck with Roth’s misogynist shit about Monica Lewinsky and that French academic woman he took off in – I forget which book.’

‘*The Human Stain.*’

‘Sure. But you have to know the territory. You have to know your writers. He was probably too ethnic for her. Too Jewish.’

Part of Efua’s resentment of Ulrika was that she was super-Aryan. Stuart had once seen a picture of her – tall, beautiful, with long blonde hair and a well-preserved complexion. She might have made it as a model in her younger years.

‘Let’s not make it personal.’

‘It already is. She made a big feminist stance of not going near a single page of his fiction. I think what pissed Ulrika off about Roth was his masculine force. Essentially, his penis. His thrust. His Jewish cock.’

A passing parent looked askance at Efua.

‘Keep your voice down –’

‘Plus, she just wanted to be liked, you know? But nobody did. Everyone I talked to in publishing went on about how great her taste was, and how hard a bargain she struck for her authors, but I couldn’t find a single person who said they actually liked her. Not one.’

‘I’m sure her children and husband do.’

‘Funnily enough, she once admitted her children hate her sometimes.’

‘I can’t believe that.’

‘But seriously, anti-Semitism was in the mix, for sure. There was real distaste for Roth there,’ Efua wrinkled her nose, ‘when I brought up his name. That same sniffy disrespect I get in the queue at Morrisons when they look at me with our little cappuccino younga. It was a micro-aggression. Her saying she didn’t like Roth was a micro-aggression against me as far as I’m concerned.’

‘Okay, maybe it was. But ultimately she couldn’t sell your book. Nobody saw it as commercial. That doesn’t make her a Nazi.’

‘I bet her grandparents were!’

Ulrika had dumped Efua via a long email explaining why her work would never be an easy sell – what with being black and not writing about her direct experience, which was all the agent saw of value in her. Efua had complained that all she was guilty of was ‘writing while black’. Stuart was sorry he’d alluded to this kiss-off email now.

‘Darling, she’s Norwegian. Her grandparents might have been shot by Nazis for all you know.’

‘And that whole commercial thing... You’d have thought my book might get more attention now racism is the subject of the day. But no – even now, nobody’s interested in a dystopian novel in which Paris – France, in fact – becomes a white ethnostate. Its time should have come, but people don’t want to engage with issues in fiction, just the same tired rubbish where a body turns up on the first page. Big deal!’

Stuart knew very well that what happened with Ulrika *was* personal for Efua, and now just let her riff away. It was too late for it not to be. She felt she’d trusted Ulrika with the most precious part of her – her creative expression, her soul, even – and that it had been thrown away. The rejection had really hit her inner core; her inner conception of herself and her sense of worth. She once told him that agents and editors forget that writers also have families and friends, all expectant and hopeful for them. It was devastating when these people asked about her book and she had to admit she no longer had representation, which was hard enough to find in the first place. It had smashed her confidence as a writer. She feared the industry now saw her as a loser, a has-been, an also-ran – or worse, a never-was.

‘Can I just ask something?’

‘What’s that?’ Efua said, craning her head around to check Kwesi was still occupied.

‘Has she emailed you again?’

‘God no...’

Two years after she’d been dropped, Efua had received an email from Ulrika out of the blue. Another writer had been asking after her, and obviously googled her contact details and came up with her old agent. The mail had been short, but friendly. It had ended with the line ‘I hope you’re thriving.’ Whether a guilty admission, or a mealy mouthed sentiment, Ulrika’s words had given Efua false hope. It had been just before Kwesi was born, and she’d written back at once, saying that while her literary career wasn’t exactly thriving, she had got married and was expecting a baby. To Efua’s great distress, she hadn’t received an email back. It had wounded her all over again. She had opened up, and Ulrika had ghosted her.

Without prompting, Efua continued: ‘You know, I actually believe that ghosting is emotional abuse. Only in certain circumstances, granted. Not when you get unwanted crap online, or when you’re trying to protect your boundaries. But when you’ve entered into a reciprocal conversation with someone and they cut you off – *that* is very definitely abuse. They’re messing with your head – and they know they’re doing it. All Ulrika had to do was send a one-liner: *Congratulations*. It’s not that hard. I mean, isn’t that the human response when someone tells you you’ve got married and you’re pregnant?’

Stuart looked over Efua’s shoulder again and saw that Kwesi was heading back in their direction. The bromance must have ended.

Then he turned back to her. There were tears in her eyes. He placed his hands gently over hers. ‘Darling, darling... Can we let this go now? I believe in you, and that’s all that matters.’

She drew a hand across her face, wiping away her tears. ‘Thank you. That’s all I wanted to hear.’

From certain angles, or light conditions, Stuart often thought the sea resembled an oil painting of itself. He'd always loved the sea, and felt anxious when he was separated from it for any period of time. He felt an almost physical yearning for it. Not the jade Med, with its piercing Aegean light, but an English sea. Constable's pewter and pea-green bays; or Turner's roiling estuaries, with every shade of sunset reflected in the waves. It was Constable's sea that Stuart stared at now through the trees of a windy, parky expanse that held, of all ludicrous things, a full-scale Viking longboat.

A week after their morning at Little Dinosaurs Stuart had been given another commission on the Kent coast – his first in two years. The *Independent* wanted to run a series about chain eateries, and had asked him to review the Broadstairs branch of Nando's. The week previously, they'd asked him to cover the flagship Pret on Hanover Square, which he'd done with relish, as he'd always loved their parmesan and prosciutto baguettes, and their chicken and broccoli broths. For a while, he'd lived off their protein boxes, favouring the salmon, avocado and boiled egg combo. But Nando's? Despite having a kid, they'd never visited Nando's together, not even the Edmonton branch that Yoofi swore by. Stuart had suggested he review that one instead, but they insisted it had to be Broadstairs. He knew the territory, they said, and wanted him to comment on the clientele as much as the food – how white the place was; how monocultural compared to the one in Tottenham. That was the angle.

Once he told Efua about his mission, she was adamant she had to come too. Despite it being December, she said, they could badly use a trip out of town. Once Kwesi started cooing 'Nadoos, take me to *Nadoos!*' it was a done deal.

Stuart had dreaded going back to Broadstairs for the first time in two years, especially with Efua and their boy. The thought of bumping into Jessica with his wife and son didn't bear thinking about. So instead, he began looking around for an alternative place to stay. He'd

always wanted to visit Pegwell Bay as a boy, an old smuggler's cove just down the coast from Ramsgate. When he first came to London and found his way to Tate Britain he'd been struck by William Dyce's painting, *Memory of Oct 5th 1858, Pegwell Bay*. A mysterious, Pre-Raphaelite masterpiece, it depicted a craggy, cliff-hung shore at sunset, with a family in nineteenth-century dress; a boy with a stick in the foreground staring straight at the viewer. It was the striking sunset light, and the detail lavished on the rocks behind them, that was so memorable. He'd always wanted to visit the exact same spot. And so they'd decided to make a weekend of it in Pegwell Bay, and booked three nights at the Seaview Hotel, the only place to stay except for a couple of crummy B&Bs, and he shivered at the prospect of those.

The Seaview was a big, crumbling pile overlooking the crook of the bay, with an old red phonebox in front of it. Empty and out-of-season, its restaurant area was reached by a curious tunnel under the road. The moment they arrived mid-afternoon on the Friday – the light failing, just as in Dyce's painting – they'd wanted to take Kwesi down to the sands. Stuart yearned to take him mudlarking among the rocks. But the bored receptionist told them the only access was via a steep cliff path, and besides, it was getting dark. Instead, they'd allowed their son to let off steam on the restaurant's decking area, while gazing out at the uneven, landfill beach at low tide, with its sad-crying curlews and oystercatchers. It was recognisably the same place as the painting, but what was the point when you couldn't reach it from the only hotel? He immediately felt they'd made a mistake in coming. They'd even been forced to ask for milk for Kwesi from the restaurant's fridge, as the nearest shop was twenty-five minutes away on foot.

The restaurant itself, they discovered, served the greasiest pub fare – scampi and onion rings. There was a ten-quid steak and wine night, but luckily they wouldn't be there when it happened. 'You should review this place instead,' Efua laughed, balancing their son on her knee to feed him from the bottle. They'd both gone for the indigestible 'Turkish

platter’, and Stuart felt vaguely angry and cheated, as he always did after bad food. ‘I wish I could,’ he sighed. ‘I’d have given em both barrels.’ Efua leant forward out of earshot of the waitresses: ‘It’s probably a while since they’ve seen a black person too.’ These waitresses, all teenagers buzzing with attitude and provincial naivety, were the kind of girls that he’d fancied but never got anywhere with at their age. His only consolation was that they would probably all be married to coppers or plumbers in the next couple of years, with kids before they were twenty-five.

Now, in the chill air of Saturday morning, they found themselves staring at a yellow painted prow in the shape of an eagle.

‘I think it’s rather magnificent,’ Efua said, as they watched Kwesi charge down the grassy slope towards the towering, dry-docked ship. ‘Don’t you?’

With the bay a no-go, they’d decided to visit Pegwell Bay’s only other attraction before the drive to Broadstairs and the warm embrace of Nando’s.

Stuart craned his neck to read the weather-worn brass plaque. The replica Danish Viking ship had actually sailed into Broadstairs in the forties, and had been presented to the council to commemorate the real ship’s original landing. This had occurred in AD 448, when Hengist and Horsa had undoubtedly raped and pillaged to their heart’s content before heading back across the waters.

‘I think it sends the locals the wrong message,’ Stuart said, straightening up. ‘They probably think they’re all direct descendants of old Hengist. Pure in blood. Warrior caste, and all that shit.’

On their drive in the night before, Stuart had been startled to see a much smaller version of this ship in the middle of a roundabout. It was on the edge of a retail park – the same retail park they’d be visiting later to dine on chicken and coleslaw with peri peri sauce – and it had looked patently ridiculous. Suddenly, out of the endless sprawl of dual

carriageways and the distant peaks of a Primark and a Toby Carvery had come this monstrosity. It made Stuart remember why he'd longed to leave Kent in the first place.

'I don't like to think of it in that way. Kwes' loves it though...'

They began to walk down the gradient towards their boy. The day was biting cold, and they were all in padded anoraks and mittens, their breath preceding them in curlicues of steam. For a moment, Stuart caught a glimpse of the sea again, pale and green through the tall trees at the edge of the park, and he felt something long-forgotten stir inside.

'You know Tia and Manish have had a couple of drinks together since they met on the march.'

Stuart turned to Efua. 'You're joking. I thought they hated each other.'

Efua laughed. 'Beatrice and Benedick, apparently. Tia says he's a terrible old mansplainer, but she can't take her eyes off him.'

'Good for them. I mean, Manish can be tricky. But he scrubs up well. I think he's mainly dated white women.'

'Oh, yes,' Efua said. 'Tia said the same. They've had *that* conversation already. She's been educating him. Or rather, asking him *why?*'

'What did he say?'

'At first he tried to blame it on his father.'

'I can't believe that.' Manish had told Stuart that his father didn't care who he married, as long as he actually did. His deceased mother would have been distraught to think he would end his days single.

'Then he realised he had, how shall we say, unexamined notions of female beauty.'

'We all have those... What did she tell him?'

'Well, for a start, it turns out she's making a documentary about dating. The big question it asks is why do white women date black men, but not the other way around? Is it a

fetish thing, or what? A challenge? She's going to talk about enslaved women and how black women are seen as sexually voracious and all the rest.'

Stuart had had this conversation with Efua many times, especially after they'd met. He realised he'd had a few unexamined notions of his own. Why *had* he only really gone out with black women? Were there subconscious forces acting on him? He hadn't come up with firm conclusions. All he knew was that he loved Efua, and she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

'I think Manish probably won't need the history lesson,' Stuart said carefully. 'I mean, he's written longreads on the post-imperial legacy for the *Guardian*.'

'Oh, fuck off!' Efua said, making sure their son was out of earshot. 'Tia tells me your friend has been listening very carefully. He's only ever had one Asian girlfriend, and that was before university.'

'Nelima. Yeah, he's told me about her.'

'But none after that, apparently. Just white women – most of whom worked in the City. Tia asked him to think whether he'd internalised notions of beauty. Did he think black women were wicked or perverse? Then she asked whether he had an online dating profile. What did it say about the type of woman he was after? Was there a racist subtext?'

In the near distance, Kwesi was running in circles on a patch of grass untouched by the mower. Stuart badly hoped it wasn't a favourite spot for the local dogs.

'He's on a number of dating sites. He's told me already.'

'Yes. And when Tia asked him to show her, she found he was subtly screening out black and Asian women. Culturally and ethnically, he wanted someone non-black or brown. Apparently, when you examine dating profiles, only seven per cent of men – black or white – are prepared to go out with a black woman. Isn't that crazy? But the other way round is a different story.'

‘Is that in the documentary?’

‘Sure is. Put simply, this creates a man shortage for black women.’

‘Is that why you’re with me?’

‘I’m afraid so, darling.’

From the bottom of the slope came a piping voice. ‘*Nadoos*. I want to go to *Nadoos*!’

They both stopped under the shadow of the ship, holding hands for warmth.

‘Come on,’ Stuart said. ‘Let’s find the car.’

On the circuitous drive to Westwood retail park, Stuart saw that the sat nav would take them through Dumpton. As they continued their conversation about Tia and Manish, Stuart meditated grimly on his sister, while the grey parades of shops passed by. Chun Chun’s Chinese takeaway. Lady and the Tramp dog grooming parlour. The Hare and Hound pub. And more than one St George’s flag draped defiantly across a pebbledash frontage. He was glad of the protection the car afforded. In the back, Efua sat next to Kwesi in his Maxi-Cosi chair, occasionally singing him songs or playing I-spy when he became frustrated. He was glad of this too – he wouldn’t have to make eye-contact while he thought, with deep shame, about Jessica. If it was really her he’d spoken to in the white supremacist chatroom, then she was in deeper than he ever imagined.

When they finally parked up and made their way on foot through Westwood’s relentless concrete walkways, Stuart felt a sense of relief. The Saturday shopping crowds were out in full; pulsing around them, with fathers clutching plastic Christmas trees and kids screaming for unsuitable toys. Admittedly, he felt self-conscious – an obvious out-of-towner wearing turned-up Levis and media specs, with his Afro-sporting son and Ghanaian wife – but he had a job to do, and his reviewer’s eye was alert to everything around him. Westwood was the kind of TK Maxx and Poundland hell he’d long avoided. Yet to give the place its

due, it did have a branch of Waterstones and a thriving M&S. He was aware they were walking through the UKIP heartlands – it felt as if they were behind enemy lines. Men with rope chains and women with more tattoos than skin prowled the concrete precincts. As with the Viking longboat, it reminded him why he had fled such an inflexible and threatening monoculture in the first place. Islington it wasn't.

It was his fault, he decided, that he'd been sent there in the first place. He'd long been in the habit, when reviewing a pompous over-priced restaurant, of ending the piece by mentioning the unpretentious place in which he'd rather be dining. So the Indie had sent him to one. London was in the process of being overtaken by sleek restaurants designed to cater for Non Doms with too much money to burn. An entire luxury industry had been invented to pamper them, and these exclusive eateries were at the forefront, with their six-hundred quid bottles of house wine and over-the-top service. The other hard-to-ignore phenomenon was street food that had been zhuzhed up for the rich. The Dirty Food revolution was in full swing in restaurant kitchens that had no better idea how to make a pho bun than an authentic kebab. In a way, it made his job easier. He'd always loved street food, and could be critical of the bandwagon jumpers to his heart's content. The gourmands of yore had been obsessed with France and Italy, which had always been too middle-class for him. He didn't have the deep knowledge conferred by childhood trips to the continent to back him up. The new breed of foodies, however, were all entranced by the Middle East, with its 'peasant flavours'. No epicure, boulangerie, or patisserie worship for them. He had become a semi-expert on Lebanese cooking during his time with Nadia – although the peasant flavour he most adored, if he were honest, was salad cream. It had deep nostalgia value for him. When he was a kid, salad cream seemed to come with everything. He continued to love it. It was his comfort food, and he hoped it would be on offer at Nando's.

When they eventually arrived, he found there wasn't much to complain about. Situated on a strip of chain restaurants next to the Vue multiplex, Nando's was easily the classiest joint in Westwood. On entering – Kwesi almost bolting through the door with eagerness – he noticed that the décor and ambience were surprisingly boutique in character. There was a central aisle of banquettes; unexpectedly cool jumbo terracotta pots with ceiling-high wicker brooms; and quartz chandeliers, no less. There was also a display of exceptionally good original art and bricolage occupying an entire wall. The only bum notes were two huge mounted tusks in the middle of the room, horribly reminiscent of Saddam's regal gateway.

Once they had been seated quickly and efficiently by friendly staff – a highchair found with a smile, not a sneer – he found he'd forgotten what unpretentious service felt like. Making quick notes under the table, as was his habit, his phone at the ready to take photos as an aide-memoire, he started to wonder why the waitress hadn't been back to take their order.

'They're taking their time.'

'You've got to go up, darling.' Efua said, as Kwesi drew with the crayons that had been provided without asking. 'Look behind you.'

He craned his neck and saw the thriving counter, with its queues of fathers clutching laminate menus.

'Of course I do!'

It was a measure of how infrequently he'd been to places like Nando's that he'd forgotten about this. Also, that you had do the same for drinks and cutlery. He'd been sitting there with an empty glass wondering why nobody had brought him anything until he spotted the Ikea-style pump station near the kitchens.

'Have you decided?'

He always tried to order at least one vegetarian item when reviewing, and he was relieved that Efua had opted for the sweet-potato burger. He, meanwhile, was suddenly ravenous for chicken after their morning running around a longboat. ‘Yup. Can you watch my phone?’

He went up to join the queue of dads, taking a surreptitious look around at the clientele. There was once a time, when he started out reviewing restaurants, that he didn’t take much notice of his fellow diners or the décor. Now he knew it was essential. Most people didn’t go to restaurants solely for the food. It was for the whole experience – the service especially. Who you were eating with – and where – was just as important. The London fashion for stone floors had rendered conversation next to impossible in many places which otherwise served impeccable dishes. The ambient racket would spoil any evening.

As expected, the clientele of Nando’s Broadstairs was white, white, white. He and Efua were the only mixed-race couple there, and, unlike his experience at the Edmonton branch, more than a few heads had turned when they had walked in. But he was determined not to let it spoil either his food or his review. For a couple of horrible moments, he had feared Jessica might be there too, but a quick glance around him told him she wasn’t.

Ten minutes later, it was clear to him that they’d ordered too fast – as parents with children under three always do. It had only taken a few bites to realise his off-the-bone chicken butterfly was a mistake. While the chicken itself was halfway decent: succulent and flavourful (they at least did their USP right), the skin was as wrinkled as a lizard’s, and about as tasty. The side order of corn-on-the-cob was equally wrinkled, and resembled a fat yellow finger left in the bath too long.

He shook his head at Efua: ‘It’s not going well. How about you?’

His wife shrugged. ‘It’ll pass.’

He'd taken a bite of Efua's sweet potato and butternut squash burger when it arrived and it wasn't much better than the chicken skin. Hardly a burger at all, he thought, more an arid nut cutlet with a limp flannel of lettuce between white bread stale enough to feed to the birds. This observation he had quickly scribbled in his notepad before ploughing on with his obdurate butterfly.

'Do you want some of this?' he asked, indicating his side of grains and greens. After sampling a spoonful he couldn't take any more. An undistinguished saucer of hard pearl barley and soy beans with a nasty sugary salsa poured over it, the dish was nigh on inedible. And the peri-peri sauce that he had so looked forward to was also high on sugar. He wished vigorously for salad cream. He had also made the mistake of ordering a full-strength coke to drink, so he was high as kite by the time he put his fork down. He looked at his watch. Kwesi had started to fling his mini corn-on-the-cobs from the table. The irony that it was only the middle-class customers who were throwing their food around wasn't lost on him.

Just as he was about to suggest this to Efua, his phone flashed with a message. He'd forgotten that he'd put his notifications back on. During his late-night laptop vigils he hadn't wanted his wife to accidentally see evidence of his communications with racist websites. And now he saw to his horror that it was indeed a notification from one of these that had ambushed them.

'*Patriot Patrol?* Efua asked, glancing at his mobile and screwing up her nose. 'What the hell's that?'

As she said this, another corn on the cob went flying from the table.

It was definitely time to go.

'I'll get the pushchair,' he said, pocketing his phone swiftly. He looked around and saw the place had filled up considerably. Two lads in matching Dsquared2 baseball hats had

just given his wife the evil eye, making him even more anxious to leave. 'I think we need to talk about my sister.'

The Christmas tree, in its squat silver bucket, with its lights glittering in the low glow of the living room, was perhaps the most beautiful sight Stuart had ever seen. Although, the half bottle of Prosecco he had put away before lunch – and the many glasses of Château de Sainte Gemme he had downed during it – was possibly influencing this impression. Nothing made a man more proud, he decided, than physically dragging a real fir tree back through wintry streets, and then decorating it, with the help of his son, with all the tinsel and baubles Ikea had to offer.

It was Christmas day, and the aroma of the epic feast Yoofi had cooked infused the room. She had laboured nearly all the previous day over myriad dishes – groundnut soup, pork ribs, roast jollof chicken, lamb on the bone, as well as pounding out cassava and green plantain flour for fufu. Stuart's favourite side, or 'swallow foods' as they were known, had been the Waakye rice and beans; heavy on the pepper and flavoured deliciously with beef skin. He could barely move, he had eaten so much. And now they were all lolling about in the

blank interregnum between the Queen's Speech and the start of the Bond film. All except Stuart, who had elected to clear the mountain of dishes from the table.

As he made the many trips to the through-kitchen, complimenting Yoofi on each dish as it disappeared, he watched his son play with his digger set. On the rug in front of the wall-mounted TV, Kwesi appeared to be engulfed by his new toys and wrapping paper; a mess which Efua was attempting to scrunch into the recycling bag. The rug itself was criss-crossed with the road tape they'd bought him, along with the diggers and die-cast cars. His current obsession was with anything on wheels, though his taste was refined – they never knew when he might reject a gift they thought of as sure-fire. The big plastic tractor (which came with its own plastic power tool to dismantle its wheels) had lain unloved for months, while the cheap set of little racing cars Stuart had bought on a whim at a service station had obsessed Kwesi day and night. For many weeks the living room had been a car park of police vehicles, Duplo trucks, and Kwesi's absolute favourite: a rubbish truck replete with toy refuse bins that he whizzed across the parquet flooring. On many a morning had Stuart stubbed his toe on the errant bins, which seemed to be everywhere at once.

As he returned to the table for the jollof dish, a platter the size of a car tyre, Yoofi turned to her daughter, her arm outstretched. She was sitting resplendent at the head of the table in a Kente wrapper of explosive yellow, indigo and orange. Efua wore a similar print dress – they'd both shopped for them the week before at a specialist place on Spitalfields Market, after deciding to make an effort for Christmas, something they hadn't done since Kwesi was born. Yoofi's hair was up in a colourful scarf, while Efua had allowed her own *duku* to drop among the wrapping paper.

'Efie. Why you no help your husband? You make your man into a servant of the house.'

Stuart knew to stay out of these confrontations between mother and daughter. He had sensed it was coming, it was just a matter of when. Even so, he found himself saying: 'It's no trouble, honestly...'

Efua looked up from the rug. 'You hear that? He doesn't mind.'

Her tone was sharp, but he knew attack was the best form of defence with Yoofi.

'I feel so ashamed...' Yoofi shook her head. She was a big woman, and owned her space magnificently. She had authority. Over the years Stuart had known his mother-in-law, her face had deepened in character, with faint lines only recently appearing on her forehead and around her mouth.

'No need for shame, mum. It's Christmas, and you've done us proud.'

'*Wa Te!* You have made him into a servant of the house. Why he provide kitchen service all of sudden? He should be sit and enjoy his comfort. Truly. One day of the year at least. *Adeji!*'

Efua took a deep breath. 'Mum, things aren't like that anymore.'

'Oh, so you proud to take on English ways now? Is lovely to see.'

'They're not English, Mum, they're just... sane. If he wants to clear up, let him.'

'*Hwe!* You understanding nothing what I say, girl. You storing up big trouble for y'self.'

'Mum, Stuart isn't my father.'

Stuart knew the mention of Efua's father was inevitable too. The mother and daughter always ended up arguing about him, sooner or later; often in Twi, so he couldn't understand what they were saying. But he gathered much from their tone. Efua's father had been an abusive patriarch, and part of the reason Yoofi had fled Accra for Paris was that she had been stuck in a violent marriage. Yoofi had left in the middle of the night, pregnant with her

daughter, and never looked back. When, years later, Efua had named her own son after her absent father, Yoofi had barely been able to forgive her.

Efua had told Stuart early on that her mother was a feminist migrant as much as an economic one. It was more common than you'd think, she'd said, especially among Ghanaian women. Yoofi had refused to submit to her husband's dominance, and so he had enforced it with his fists. This was the 'trouble' she was referring to. Though Efua was no doormat, Yoofi was always urging her daughter to be more deferential towards Stuart, just in case he 'turned'.

'I no saying he's your father. But just watch out. All I sayin''

'Anyway, why are we talking about him on Christmas Day? I've never met him.'

'You did not want to, believe me.'

'That's where you'd be wrong.'

'*Abeg!* Stu is the man of the house, so don't you take no chances.'

Efua was angry now, and he saw Yoofi retreat slightly, adjusting her headscarf as if the argument had knocked it out of place. He'd always loved it when Yoofi called him Stu – only Efua's mother addressed him so – but he was slightly unnerved that they were talking about him as if he wasn't in the room. And it was true that Efua had never met her father, though Stuart knew she wanted to make contact. He'd turned up once in Chateau Rouge, the largely West African suburb of Paris where Yoofi had brought up her daughter. He'd been sent away with a torrent of Twi. The fact that both Stuart and Efua had vanished fathers was still a strong bond between them.

Through gritted teeth, Efua said: 'Don't we have more important things to talk about?'

At that moment, Kwesi yelled: 'Look Mama! The teeny pig is in the digger!'

The teeny pig was their son's way of saying Guinea pig. He was referring to a soft toy with caught-in-the-headlight eyes that they'd also picked up at a service station. They all looked to see that Kwesi had indeed put this small animal in his new digger and was giving it a ride.

Before they could comment on this amazing phenomenon, Kwesi shot to his feet and said. 'I need a wee.'

'Okay, shall I help with your trousers?'

They'd started potty training a few months back, but now worried they'd begun too early. There'd been many accidents, and Stuart had been thankful they had a wooden floor and not a carpet. Kwesi still needed help getting his trousers up and down. If he attempted it himself, they would need changing.

Before they could stop him, he bolted to the side of the room, pulled his pants down himself and sat on the plastic throne.

They all looked at each other in astonishment.

'He's done it!'

'Good boy,' Stuart said, then turned back to Efua. 'He's turned a corner.'

Their son often sat on his potty contemplatively for many minutes, and this he did now, watching the silent images on the TV screen as they talked on. The more important thing Efua referred to was the ongoing quagmire of her and Yoofi's settled status in the UK. The week before, a letter had arrived granting her 'Pre-settled status', an inferior and insecure position that the Home Office tried to pass off as 'success'. Yoofi had received the same letter. It stated said that both mother and daughter had 'declined to offer evidence' in their claim. Yet how could they, Efua protested, when the documents had been left behind in Chateau Rouge more than two decades ago? The spectre of a no-deal Brexit might turn a pre-

settled status into a deportation order, as it had with the victims of the Windrush scandal earlier in the year. This was what really worried everyone.

‘Tia received the same letter,’ Efua said to her mother. ‘Did you know that?’

Yoofi shook her head. She told Stuart sadly that she blamed herself for the lost documents. The Byzantine form she’d had to fill in had been immensely stressful for her, given she’d worked largely in the black economy as a cleaner after arriving in England. Efua could at least supply tax documents, and had the added advantage that she’d stayed in the same job for over a decade.

Stuart now sat at the table next to Yoofi. He’d decided to suspend his clearing up operation for the moment. ‘Should Tia be worried, though?’

‘Oh yeah. She spent her twenties living in squats. Hardly paid any tax in her life.’

They’d been out with Tia and Manish for a pre-Christmas drink in The John Baird a few nights before while Yoofi babysat. The two were quite the couple now, but still crossed swords frequently. That was the spark, no doubt. Manish had told him that a couple of his friends with Irish ancestry had gone through the tortuous process of applying for Irish citizenship – or a ‘Brexit passport’, as they called it. They had thought ahead, something Efua said she hadn’t.

‘You’ll just have to reapply next year.’

Efua glanced bleakly at Kwesi, who didn’t look like he wanted to move from the potty any time soon. ‘I’ve lived and worked here for years. Paid all my taxes and now this. There’s no guarantee we’ll get an upgrade.’

Yoofi saw her moment and pounced, ‘We could always return home.’

This was another itch that Yoofi couldn’t stop scratching, along with mention of Efua’s father. Increasingly, she’d encouraged her daughter to consider returning to Ghana, an idea his wife thought absurd as she’d never been there in the first place. Her life had been

entirely in Europe. She was a proud ‘Afropean’, she told her mother, and would always remain one. Yet now, after the last two years of political chaos, with foreign nationals leaving the UK in large numbers, and with the climate so toxic, she admitted that she’d begun to consider it.

‘You know, Mum, if that wasn’t such a silly idea I’d say yes immediately.’ She shook her head. ‘Sometimes living in this country is just too hard...’

Stuart took up his glass, which still held a little of the excellent Château de Sainte Gemme. ‘I’ll drink to that.’

Yoofi leant over, a great smile on her face, and laid a warm hand on his arm. ‘You have had enough for one day, young man!’

Efua laughed too. ‘Hey, I thought he was the boss around here.’

The New Year arrived, and with it a single day of snow. Stuart took pleasure in holding Kwesi up to the window to marvel at the gently falling columns as they descended onto the Fortis Green Road outside. Cars and trees had received a light dusting overnight, and soon sat humped and heaped in the morning glow. Only when a gritting vehicle ground past with its amber lights flashing did Kwesi’s attention waver.

The pristine day had felt like a brief hiatus in the ongoing drama of Brexit and their own lives. Stuart had lost the childcare argument, and Efua had gone back to work full-time, while he took up the slack for the two days their son wasn’t in nursery. Never had the oft-used-phrase about parenting seemed so true: *The days are long, but the weeks are short.* Stuart amended weeks to ‘years’ in his own mind. When Kwesi’s third birthday arrived at the start of February, he couldn’t quite believe that time had moved so fast. Had three years really elapsed since the day when the little man arrived in their lives? It was a blur of nappies and formula milk; of despair and joy.

Meanwhile, the country hurtled towards its date with destiny, set for end of March, when it would leave the EU for good. Another People's Vote march had been planned for the week before, with this one promising to be mightier than the first. The marchers were still demanding a second referendum to decide on Britain's future, and it seemed they might be victorious this time. Two years after the vote, even many hardline Brexiteers could see the damage to the economy that leaving the EU would inflict.

In the evenings, he returned to his late-night vigils at the laptop. After their curtailed lunch at Nando's, he had told Efua about his soiling investigations into neo-Nazi subculture, and his possible breakthrough in tracking down Jessica. She hadn't been as upset as he'd anticipated. Instead, she'd encouraged him to keep going, even saying he should try to meet the mysterious Stone J. 'You'll never know until you meet her whether it's her or not,' she'd urged. 'If it's her, you need to talk to her properly. She could still be very dangerous.' The thought of doing this made Stuart's stomach lurch. 'You mean we should meet on some sort of weird white supremacist date? Compare Nazi tattoos? You might have noticed I don't have any.' Efua had laughed. 'No, just ask if she's up for a coffee. You'll know the minute she walks in the door.' 'Exactly. If Stone J is not Jessica, I'll have to endure an hour of racist shit. And look at me! Do I resemble an archetypal far-fright thug? My cover would be blown.' 'Then dress for the occasion. It's the only way...'

The idea of luring Stone J to meet for a cappuccino, and dressing up accordingly, was patently ridiculous. But it must have stuck in his mind, as he dutifully logged back on to Patriot Patrol during the dead months of January and February. There he continued with the pretence he wanted to reclaim his country from the scourge of immigrants. He began to become increasingly aware of just how fashion conscious these nipsters – Nazi hipsters, as they called themselves – really were. During at least a couple of exchanges, he heard the phrase New Balance. Thinking this might be some obscure far right splinter group, he

googled it and discovered New Balance was in fact a well-known US clothing brand. Apparently, their shoes had become the footwear of choice for neo-Nazis. The reason being was that the shoes were made using all-American labour and materials – they didn't outsource, unlike virtually every US clothing manufacturer. They'd become known as 'The Official Shoes of White People'. This was the reason why anti-Trump supporters would burn New Balance shoes in videos he watched with amazement on YouTube. That political conflict had come to burning footwear in public was quite unbelievable.

He also discovered that US nipsters had a look – a high, tightly buzzed haircut like the posturing young fascist Richard Spencer, with sports casual wear, mostly clean-shaven. And New Balance shoes, of course. A super-Aryan look that Stuart found quite chilling in its blandness. They even had image consultants to prevent them from resembling archetypal neo-Nazis. Some of the niche fashion brands that served them were legally dodgy too, using channels that couldn't easily connect buyer and vendor. If he wanted to dress like them, he'd have to buy his shirts using a crypto-currency, and he had no idea of how to go about that. In Europe, the Identitarian look was grungier. There were neo-Nazi rock festivals in Germany, which drew fans of hardcore death metal from all over the world. Members of prohibited UK groups such as Blood and Honour and Combat 18 – those maniacs who threw nail bombs at migrants, and kept kill lists – were often present. What if Stone J invited him to one of those? He'd have to decline and say white-power rock wasn't his thing.

The other phenomenon he became aware of among this new breed of far-right lunatics was the prevalence of live-streaming. From the Arab Spring onwards, social media had driven reactions to news stories. The only way coordinated protests arose was through live-streamed content spread on Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, or – in the case of white supremacists – on encrypted, underground channels like the one he was using every night. If something was kicking off anywhere in the world, then there was a way of joining it in real

time. Of course, it could be a force for good, Stuart saw, as with the rallying around the *Je Suis Charlie* banner in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre. Or with various climate change mobilisations. But he was also beginning to understand that the tech-savvy nipsters were using it for evil ends. The more hours he endured on Patriot Patrol, he could see how alt-right trolls and influencers were jumping on any global incident and attempting to co-opt anger to far-right causes. There were a couple of actors on there who, he gathered, had been key to twisting the *Gilets Jaunes* protests in Paris into a far-right movement. What had begun as a demonstration against unfair taxation by the French president Macron had been poisoned by racist discourse. One had even boasted that he'd organised banners that proclaimed Macron to be 'The Jews' Bitch'. Social media had helped to reinvigorate Marine Le Pen's Front National to make it part of their cause. Night after night, Stuart read the gloating posts of this man, proud that he'd helped twist what was essentially a class issue into a racial one. As soon as live-streams of the Paris protests were posted on YouTube, it would serve as a signal for far-right agitators to join them and start a riot; burning cars, denouncing migrants, and throwing Haussmann's cobbles down the elegant boulevards.

An even more sinister use of live-streaming would occur in the second week of March. Stone J had popped up again on Patriot Patrol, and Stuart set about the onerous task of flirting with her; gently teasing her out until he could propose a meeting. But something seemed to have changed with her over Christmas. Whenever she joined the chatroom, always late at night, often as Stuart was about to log-off in despair, she would be overwhelmingly negative. Gone was her sly, albeit rather basic humour of the previous December. Stuart detected depression, anxiety, anger, throttled needs; a sense of being wronged by the world. He wondered if she – if Jess – might be bipolar. He hadn't known her for enough of her adult life to call it. Well, had she been? It might explain a lot. At one point, Stone J admitted to having turned forty the year before, and he felt his heart leap in his chest again. The right

age! His sister would've hit the big four-o last November. At times, her posts appeared to verge on mania. Everything made her see red, it seemed. And then something happened that made Stuart see red too. Literally, as he sat at breakfast scrolling through his Twitter feed.

That morning, news of a massacre in a mosque in New Zealand had spread rapidly around the world, and, before the authorities could suppress it, live-streamed footage had been posted on social media. Stuart could barely believe the evidence of his eyes when he stumbled on the film of this incident. He felt viscerally ill as he saw men in kurtas and prayer caps collapsing before a hail of bullets, as if they were toy soldiers pushed over by a child's hand. But they weren't soldiers. They were the innocent faithful, gathered peacefully for Friday prayers.

It soon became clear that the attack had been carefully premeditated. Its perpetrator, one Brenton Tarrant, a personal trainer in his late twenties, had been active in far-right chatrooms for years. A self-declared ethno-nationalist, he'd donated money to Identitarian groups in Europe, and even visited the Christchurch mosque in disguise three times where he pretended to pray. He knew the place 'better than his own house', he said in a statement found later. He'd shitposted about taking direct action on 8chan and YouTube and Twitter, before amassing an armoury of weapons – two shotguns, two semi-automatics and a handgun – and then posted an online manifesto, which he named *The Great Replacement* moments before the attack. Stuart had felt ice down his spine at this phrase – it was one he heard nightly on Patriot Patrol. Tarrant's meandering dirge of hate had begun with the repeated words: *It's the birtherates*, and went on to detail how he would massacre the 'invaders' of New Zealand and Australia. He'd emailed the document to thirty people before the attack, including New Zealand's prime minister. He'd also tweeted pictures of his guns a few days before, though these had avoided detection as he'd left out any text. These guns were decorated with extraordinary code, familiar to anyone, like Stuart, who'd spent any time with

the alt-right. There were the Fourteen Words, a Celtic cross, a Slavic Swastika, and dates of historical conflicts between Christians and Muslims. Some phrases were easier to read – the name of Norwegian killer Breivik, and the words *Remove Kebab*, a reference to the anti-Muslim Serbian propaganda song that had since become an alt-right meme. Indeed, it was one of the first phrases that had caught Stuart’s eye while hanging around the entrance hall of Patriot Patrol. As a food writer, he was always alert to any mention of his stock in trade, and he’d been shocked and revolted that a whole people had been reified into a single dish.

At the same time as tweeting his armoury, Tarrant had posted on message boards with cheery statements of intent: *Well, lads, it’s time to stop shitposting and make a real life effort.* Nobody had taken him seriously, until his Facebook page began to livestream the barrel of one of his guns heading for the door of the mosque, filmed on a headcam. The first man he’d seen had greeted him with a friendly ‘Hello, brother,’ before he was shot dead. Then, once inside, Tarrant had played military music – including *Remove Kebab* – as he went into the prayer hall and systematically gunned down as many of the faithful as he could find. These included women, old men, and, Stuart learned with tears in his eyes as he thought of Kwesi, a child of three. Tarrant had attached a strobe to the end of one of the weapons to better disorientate the worshippers. This, for Stuart, was one of the most distressing details. The killer was playing games with his victims, enjoying watching their confusion in the seconds before they died. Indeed, Stuart later found out that alt-right gamers had turned the livestream into a sick video game, with on-screen scores appearing, detailing kills and ammunition levels.

The sight of so many victims on the floor in blood-soaked kurtas was seared into Stuart’s memory forever. This, he decided, was the logical end-point of the toxic discourse he sat through on Patriot Patrol every night. First the Pittsburgh Synagogue massacre, and now

this. It was where The Great Replacement non-theory was always heading. It had only been a matter of time.

That evening, with a heavy heart, he logged onto the chatroom, hoping desperately that Stone J would be there. He didn't know how much more racist sewage he could wade through. He'd drunk two-thirds of a bottle of Château Barreyres, and felt suitably fortified with Dutch courage. To his surprise, the first conversation he joined was dominated by someone who was as disgusted as him at what had occurred in New Zealand. A woman who Stuart was vaguely familiar with, who called herself Discord, was having none of it.

'... So you think dead bodies are something to laugh about? You're fucking sick mate.'

'He's a saint,' someone hit back at once. 'Tarrant is the Invader Crusader!'

Stuart decided to hold back from contributing, and just see how it played out.

'He's a sick fuck!' Discord went on unstopably. 'You think it's right to gun down women and children? You lot just sit in your armchairs typing rubbish all night, but this shit just got real...'

'It was always real.'

'So you think shooting people is the answer?'

'Brenton has lit a fire around the world. It won't be put out now. That video was uploaded a million and a half times today. Imagine if every one of them took action!'

'He's a cunt!...'

Stuart sat through ten more minutes of this exchange; shaking his head, half asleep from the wine and the tough day he'd had with Kwesi, before a blue light in the corner of his screen told him another user had logged on.

He was jolted awake to see it was Stone J.

Her first words were: 'Well I think he did a good thing for the world...'

Before Stuart could make himself known, Discord jumped in: ‘Well you would. You’re a fucking mentalist.’

‘No point insulting people is there?’ Stone J said. ‘I just think what’s the point of talk if you don’t take action –‘

‘You just don’t get it, do you bitch. This is people DYING. Before our eyes.’

A pause, then: ‘It was extreme, yeah. But he did what he had to do. Maybe they’ll all fuck off back to Pakistan now.’

‘Most of em grew up there.’

‘You sounding like a libtard now, girl.’

A row of dots showed that Discord was typing furiously. ‘So you’d do something similar would ya? You a big brave hero now?’

Another pause, before Stone J wrote: ‘I’m thinking of it, yeah, if you must know. Got big plans of my own.’

Stuart felt his heart almost stop beating. He dithered for a moment before typing automatically. ‘I know how you feel.’

Stone J came right back at him. ‘Alright Oswald. How you doing?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘So what do you think about the Invader Crusader?’

Taking a deep breath, his fingers hovering over the keyboard, he hesitated. He would have to do it now, whether Stone J was his sister or not. He must take action. It was now or never. With every fibre of his being rebelling, he typed: ‘Tarrant did a good thing today... Listen, why don’t we meet up and talk about it some more?’

JESSICA

The bottle, as it travelled gracefully towards Jessica's head, was full of an orange liquid that she thought for a hopeful, time-stopped moment might be orange squash. It was only when it hit her squarely in the face that she realised it was piss. Warm piss, too, drenching her Harrington and sluicing down the back of her neck as she howled; a hand to her forehead where the heavy plastic container had struck.

Then she was running.

Running, running, running.

Sprinting up Whitehall with Ryan close behind her, blood now pouring from her wound. All around were mounted police, coppers with riot shields and batons, anti-fascists in masks; the air full of cries.

It felt as if she'd been running all day.

Ryan and Darren had come up on the early train with her – 'The Dream Team', as Darren said, referring to the last time they'd been on a train together and all ended up in Margate Magistrates Court. Wobbler and Andy Marshall had arrived at the People's Vote march mid-afternoon, when it was in full effect, and met them by Churchill's statue on Parliament Square. The Police had instantly moved them on, forcing them to flee up

Northumberland Avenue, until they'd hit a steel-barrier cordon. Then they were forced to sprint back the other way.

Jess hadn't exerted herself like that for years. She was wheezing and complaining, begging the others to stop by the time they regrouped. The weight she'd packed on over Christmas didn't help either. She'd gained almost a stone, eating alone in her flat; her mental health deteriorating by the day. That morning, she'd broken the zip on her favourite pair of jeans trying to get them on, and had burst into tears; an unstoppable flood that hadn't let up for ten minutes. She'd felt like throwing herself under a bus. Only the thought of the march had kept her going.

When they made it back to the bottom of Whitehall, it was only Andy who asked how she was. Ever the gentleman, he'd listened patiently, then given her a piggyback up the road. He was wearing his regimental beret and his green Army pullover, and commanded respect from the others. Jess knew a lot of other vets were there too, but they didn't want to be so easily identified. Some wore masks, or hoodies with Union Jack T-shirts underneath; anonymous behind shades. Most of them were on watch-lists already, so there were bound to be arrests. She knew there was a high chance of spending the night in a cell. But she wanted to do some damage first.

And now they were running again, blood soaking into Jessica's white shirt under her jacket.

As they streaked past the Cenotaph, Ryan called out from behind: 'We've lost Wobbler!'

'The cunt's fucking scarpered!' Darren shot back.

It didn't surprise her that Wobbler had run when the real trouble kicked off. But he was the least of her worries. There was a metallic tang of blood in her mouth, and she didn't know how much further she could go before collapsing.

The march proper was over now, and they were in the middle of a pitched battle between her lot and the cops. The hardcore left had finally shown up for a ruck, as they always did. It was one of these idiots who'd hurled the bottle at her head.

With her last strength she picked up speed. The air around her was a scream of whistles and yells; sirens somewhere in the distance. Underfoot were hundreds of abandoned placards; the blue of the EU flag among piles of driftwood.

'Over here, love!' a voice called.

Ahead of them, Jess saw a small flank of men in football shirts and baseball caps. The hardcore EDL. They were holding a firm line against the police.

With her vision blurring, she made her way towards them. In seconds she had joined their ranks, swallowed up by the column of men.

She fell to the ground next to a wall, her hands over her face in the brace-position.

Ryan and Darren were suddenly towering over her, trying to haul her up; blocking out the light.

'Leave it!'

Ryan pulled a pack of tissues from his pocket.

'Like that's going to fucking help!'

'It's just a flesh wound,' Ryan urged. 'Here. Take it!'

She snatched the tissues and held the whole pack to her forehead; her breath harsh in her throat. She felt for a moment she might black out or be sick. Then she sat herself up properly; supporting her back against the cold Whitehall stone; sweat dripping into her eyes.

'Let's be 'aving yer,' one of the men yelled, as a hail of stones went over their heads.

Another was making monkey noises at some black protesters, jumping around in a taunting ape-dance; his hands under his armpits.

Jessica looked down at her T-shirt. It was dark brown with blood. She kept the tissues to her head and surveyed the carnage around her. A few of the EDL were preparing to surge forward in a counterattack. She felt safe against the wall, and decided she would let the others do all the work now. She could see Darren a few yards away, rolling up his sleeves, jumping from foot to foot; eager to get stuck in. ‘Come on, you *cunts!*’

Part of what had kept her going all the day was the thought she might see Yvette Hartford-Jones. The councillor had announced on Twitter that she’d be there. But she wouldn’t be among the masked anarchists who were throwing placards at them. The posh bitch had probably run back home to sleepy Deal by now. Something very primitive in Jessica wanted to do the Yvette damage. In the two long years since her slanging match with Hartford-Jones in the Racing Greyhound, Jessica had upped her online war against her. And the councillor had put equal energy into trying to get Uncle Mack’s plaque removed. It made Jessica smile to think the campaign had failed so far. Broadstairs wouldn’t be pushed around so easily. There were proper people there – real people whose ancestors had lived there for centuries – not out-of-town phonies like Barbie Doll Hartford-Jones.

But she hadn’t encountered her, despite keeping tabs on the councillor’s social media all day. There was photo after photo of all the placards and the idiots marching. Hartford-Jones’s own banners too. Was a cartoon of Theresa May with a big Pinocchio nose the best she and her family could do? She’d made sure the faces of her kids were obscured behind parka hoods; though she included a few of her husband, a big bloke whose name Jessica knew was Oliver, and who looked like he might be useful in a ruck.

Jessica felt her anger flare again. The day had been a failure. The TV news later was bound to be all about the victorious protesters and not about the other side of the argument. What was she playing at, cowering against a wall, covered in blood?

Without knowing what she was doing she struggled to her feet.

‘Where you going?’ Ryan asked, placing a restraining arm on her shoulder.

Nothing could stop her now.

She spotted a posse of photographers and a news crew just to the left of the Police line. The blood on her shirt and face would look great on TV and the front pages later. She saw Darren and a bunch of EDL were preparing to storm forward, into a hail of riot batons and shields, and she wanted to be there with them.

‘I’m going in, Ryan...’

There were no pictures of her in the papers in the end. The cover of the Sunday Times was dominated by images of the Remoaners, with their stupid blue flags, placards and banners. On the second page there was a picture of Darren, looking demented, charging the cops. *The far right shows its teeth – and it’s ugly*, the caption said. The same picture appeared again on page seven of the Evening Standard the following Monday. She must have been just to the left of Darren, but they hadn’t considered her worthy of inclusion in the picture. Maybe they just thought *she* was too ugly.

Self-hating thoughts such as these had plagued her since Christmas. Since her fortieth birthday, in fact. That evening, she’d gone to the Cutter to meet Ryan and his crew, hoping to celebrate, and not a single one of them had remembered. She’d only told Ryan it was her birthday at the end of the evening, but he’d been too pissed to even apologise. She’d gone home to her flat on her own, planning to kill herself. Instead, she’d drunk herself into a blackout on a bottle of Smirnoff she’d bought earlier, when she had thought they might all go back to hers.

In the morning, she felt as if she’d spent the night in a wheelie bin. She didn’t need reminding that this was how her mother used to wake up, 365 days a year. Taking a long look at herself in the small bedroom mirror, the one that didn’t let you see the top of your head

unless you bent your knees and stooped, she was disgusted by what she saw. Opening her bathrobe, her head pounding, her stomach churning, she surveyed the rolls of flab. They seemed to plummet from her, like a waterfall of flesh. In her hair were streaks of grey. Her roots were showing, like the first signs of mould on a piece of fruit. She wanted to throw up. She wanted to cry like a child.

For weeks after this, she'd had terrible dreams about her mother. About the old house and the blokes who stayed there. The chaos and sense of impending violence. The stink of fags and stale booze and bacon fat. She'd spent Christmas day alone, another bottle of vodka at her side, surrounded by her favourite food to cheer her up. But it hadn't had that effect. She'd eaten a whole pack of Morrison's marshmallows, followed by an entire Battenberg cake, after which she'd run to the toilet and puked it all up. The rest of the day was a blur of booze and self-pity.

In January, she'd gone to her GP, thinking she might have throat cancer. She'd never smoked herself, but had read about people who'd developed it after growing up in smoky environments. Her mother had never been without a fag in her hand, and all the men who stayed at Stone Beds were chronic smokers. All that passive must have had an effect. Her throat hurt constantly and she had difficulty swallowing. Every day, while slaving at Greggs, she'd put a hand to her neck and be sure she felt the stone pip of a tumour.

Her doctor had told her with certainty that she didn't have throat cancer, but had asked her about her drinking and diet. With a worried look, the woman had told her to cut down on all fronts. Then she'd asked if she was depressed. Jess had laughed. 'Of course I'm bloody depressed! Wouldn't you be if you'd just turned forty and weighed seventeen stone?' The GP had given her the name of a CBT counsellor and urged her to go along. This would help with her 'poor impulse control' apparently, a phrase that made her sound like a toddler.

She'd been reluctant to go for counselling at first, but it was free, and most days she was so down she felt like throwing herself into the sea, so what did she have to lose? The woman, an annoying school-teacher type in her fifties, kept telling her to 'work on herself' and to make lists. Jess had wanted to talk about her past – that was what she thought therapy was all about. But no, apparently CBT was all about finding 'strategies' for 'modifying behaviours'.

She'd stopped going after a few weeks. But the fact she'd admitted to herself that she wanted to investigate the past made her think it might do her good. She rarely looked back, hardly ever wallowed in memories, so perhaps she needed to do it more. Perhaps she'd remembered everything wrongly, and that was at the root of all her problems. The therapist had told her that turning forty was often a time for 'reviewing' your life, for taking stock of 'where you'd got to'. Well, maybe that's just what she needed to do.

And so, in April, a month after the People's Vote march, with the wound on her forehead just a faint scar, she went back to London, but on a very different mission. A visit to the Walworth Road, her mother's old manor. A homecoming of sorts. Going back to her roots, or that's how she liked to think of it.

Once she exited Elephant and Castle Tube she saw to her dismay that it was raining. She didn't want her day spoilt by the weather, but she'd brought no umbrella and realised it might be. Swearing at the skies, she made her way through the concrete parades and underpasses of the shopping centre until she hit the main drag. She'd only walked down Walworth Road once before, on the single visit she'd made to London with her mum to see her brother. Before they went home, she'd had the full guided tour. But it had all been meaningless at that age and she'd ached with boredom. It was just a dirty overcrowded road. Her mum had shown her East Street market, where she'd been sent as a girl to buy fish and spuds – the cheapest scraps: costermonger fish, the offcuts that no one wanted; spuds with

‘more eyes than a sea-monster’ as her mum used to say. There’d been stalls selling quack cures; remedies that everybody swore by. As she walked past the old market now, she felt oddly moved by the sight of it. Apparently, they’d filmed *Only Fools and Horses* there. This was where her mum had grown up. She tried to imagine her walking among the stalls, picture what she’d been wearing, what she’d felt. There had only been a couple of photos of Mimi as a girl, playing on dirty street corners, with old-style buses in the background, ads for Bovril on their side. These pictures had probably been lost along with her Kent scrapbook in the loft of Stone Beds. She certainly didn’t have them now. With affection, she thought of all the superstitions her mum had held, which she’d told her had originated right there on the Walworth Road. They’d been passed down for generations. *Never leave a newborn baby in front of a mirror... Never whistle indoors... Never start a journey on a Friday... If a picture falls from a wall, it means somebody’s going to die.* That one always made her shiver.

As she made her way south, past the tatty grocers and kebab shops and bookies, she was surprised at how black the place was. Every second face seemed to be black. She shivered inwardly. Had it been a mistake to come here? She didn’t remember the road like this at all. London was being engulfed by people who didn’t belong there. The reality of it was shocking. It was like Cliftonville, only ten times worse.

Passing a blue plaque high up on a wall, she was reminded that Walworth Road was once home to the white working class. Charlie Chaplin and Michael Caine had grown up around there, had played where her mum had played, visited the same shops, used the same words. Some of these words had been invented in the area, or so she was told. She remembered her mum often yelled ‘Stop your bloody mafficking!’ when she and Stuart were fighting. It was only years later she discovered what the word meant. It had come about when the British army had won the battle of Mafeking during the Boer war. Afterwards, there’d been people singing and waving union jacks on the streets of Walworth. They were having a

‘Maffick’ – a riotous party. Another word her mum used was even odder, as it was a bloke’s name. When the Stone Beds men were in each other’s rooms, drinking and shouting, her mum would say ‘They’re having a right old Steve. Just listen to ‘em.’ A Steve turned out to be the name for a party people had at home after they were turfed out of the pubs; with everyone singing around the living room piano, pissed and happy. Jess had used the word on Ryan and his mates once at last orders in the Cutter. They’d all laughed at her when she’d told them what it meant.

As the road widened on both sides, she caught sight of grander buildings. There was the Walworth Town Hall, and further on, a big, forbidding church set back from the road, with a spire that looked like a dagger. With the nasty rain in her eyes and hair, she looked up at the red brick tower of the old swimming baths. None of it was of much interest. The place she really wanted to find was Arments Pie and Mash shop. Her mum had told her she’d gone there all the time as a kid – Arments had been selling eels and liquor since the First World War. She’d planned to have lunch there, but hadn’t passed it so far. She knew that Walworth Road was all fields until a few hundred years ago. It was where people had once tilled the land and come to buy vegetables. It made her heart swell to think that the name Walworth came from an Old English word meaning ‘British Farm’. There were real roots here, under the wet concrete paving stones. English roots.

As she tramped along, she passed more fine houses set back from the street. One, apparently, had once been the HQ of the Labour Party. Well they can fuck off! She thought to herself. Funny they should have the best house on the street. They’d set up shop in Westminster when Blair got in. Labour had never been the party of the People, as far as she was concerned. Her mum had never voted, but in the one conversation they’d had about politics, she’d told her that everyone round her way had been a Tory. People from Walworth wanted to get out and better themselves – they didn’t want to stay in the slums, especially

once all the outsiders came in. Mimi told her Southwark had been invaded by Jews and Chinamen in the Twenties. Then the blacks and Asians had moved in. Before the war, a black face had been rare. Her mum used to say you'd touch a black man for luck. The West Indians called the white people *Jumbles*, which was their way of saying John Bulls, apparently. 'Michael Caine got the hell out of here,' her mum had said, 'and he was a Tory.'

Stopping to look at her phone, Jess realised she'd walked past the Surrey Gardens Estate where her mum had grown up. She'd always reminded Jess how lucky she was to live in her own house facing the sea. Mimi had lived in two cramped rooms on the ground floor, with an outside loo. Her parents, David and Essie, had been a lot older than most mums and dads, and had died before Mimi was twenty. She'd had a little sister called Sarah, who had died young – only ten. Jess often thought about this sister – had she lived, she might have had an aunt. As it was, she had no one in the world she could call flesh and blood, apart from her useless brother. Her mum had worked on the Elephant market, and used the money to go clubbing up West when she should have been helping the family survive. She did well to get out, Jess thought. The whole place was a shithole now.

Another reason why Jessica wanted to find the Surrey Gardens Estate was that it had once been the site of the Surrey Gardens Music Hall. Just recently, when she wasn't on the YouTube channel *The Iconoclast* – which she was addicted to, along with *Millennial Woes* – she'd plunged into investigating the history of Music Hall. Maybe the love of research that she'd had as a little girl in the Ramsgate Library had never left her. It seemed like an obvious thing to do, after she'd made such a stand about Uncle Mack's plaque, to learn more about it. After all, Mack had started as a Music Hall artiste and ended up performing on a beach. She'd even managed to track down some film of his act. When Hartford-Jones's campaign had kicked off, she'd Googled Uncle Mack and found nothing. But just recently, someone

had posted something on You Tube. Ten minutes of silent film from the 1920s, dug up from some archive or other.

She'd watched it with fascination. There was the big man himself, on a rickety white stage in front of an audience lolling in deckchairs. Though grainy and jumpy, she could see the pleasure on Uncle Mack's face as he got a laugh from the crowd. He was dressed in what looked like a big pyjama suit – harem pants, she supposed – with a sort of ruff and a college-style hat on his head. His face was very dark; his lips moving like the white lips of a gormless fish at feeding time in an aquarium. The film jumped jaggedly to show him joined by another man in identical clothes, larking about together. They seemed to be performing some sort of twins act – like a blacked-up Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Another jump in time revealed the other minstrels behind them: a piano player, a fiddler, and a couple of banjo players on white chairs to match the stage. Then suddenly Uncle Mack himself was playing the banjo, gurning and gooning to the crowd as he strummed. Jess smiled to see him having so much fun. It was a shame there was no sound, as she'd have loved to hear what he was singing or saying. Another jump, and there he was, on his feet again, tap dancing. The routine seemed to change every few minutes. Some bits looked like comedy sketches; like the old *Morecombe and Wise* shows she remembered her mum cackling at. There were pratfalls and chairs pulled out from under bums. There was Uncle Mack doing ape-arms, swinging like he was in the jungle, followed by high-kicks; his hat at a jaunty angle. Towards the end, a character who was obviously supposed to be a ghost came on dressed in a sheet; his face black as a coalhole, as her mum used to say. He had huge staring eyes, and he grabbed Uncle Mack from behind, who pretended to be scared. Finally, three women minstrels came on, pretending to be beggar women, doing a little dance, before Uncle Mack returned and bows were made to silent applause.

She had watched it again and again, outraged that something so innocent should cause people such anger in the present day. It was just a bit of harmless fun. Sure, Uncle Mack's act might have worked fine if they hadn't been blacked up, but it would have lost the vital element of taking the piss. That's all they'd been doing after all: taking the piss out of black people. Wasn't that allowed? What race was so high and mighty they couldn't have the piss taken out of them? Everyone from royalty to the working-class had the piss taken out of them from time to time. It was the British way. So what made them so different?

Her reading about music hall made her head swim with nostalgia, just like it had when she was doing her Kent project as a girl. Music Hall was really just street music, given a venue. It has started with boys and girls playing accordions and whistles on street corners, and doing little dances and singing cheeky songs for pennies. It was a working-class tradition, through and through – something the nobs had no control over. It might have been a little crude and sugary sometimes, but it made ordinary people forget their troubles and laugh at their daily lives. She could see how it explained their lives back to them. It spoke of their fears and joys, their sorrows and hopes. Where could you go for that now? A music hall had been everything at once – a theatre, a pub, a comedy venue, even a betting shop, all under the same roof. And what's more, music hall was always patriotic – it got behind all the British wars. She discovered the word 'jingoistic' had even come from a music hall tune called 'By Jingo'. Unlike today's comedians, the performers stood up for their country, even while taking the piss out of the Prime Minister or King. When one of the artistes got rich, he'd joked: 'I make the same money as the Prime Minister but I'm only half as dangerous.' She could see how that would have 'em rolling in the aisles. She could smell the sweat and the sawdust and the stale beer. The fresh winkles and cheap champagne.

What she loved more than anything was reading the words to the old songs and looking at the faded pictures of the performers. Even though she didn't particularly like

music – or even consider herself to have much of a sense of humour – the titles of these songs always made her smile, made her feel gooey inside. *Pack up Your Troubles in your Old Kit Bag*. Her mum had sung that to her when she was upset as a little girl. She hadn't known a kit bag had anything to do with the army. *Down at the Old Bull and Bush... Any Old Iron... I'm Henry the Eighth, I Am... Boiled Beef and Cabbage*. Her favourite was *Lily of Laguna*. It had once been the best known song in England, she'd read with fascination. A ditty about 'the passion of a negro for a negress'. It was often sung by men in blackface, the 'Coon acts' who were popular at the time. She'd bet Uncle Mack had sung *Lily of Laguna* more than once – maybe he was even singing it in the film.

She also got to know the names and personalities of the famous performers. Marie Lloyd – the tart with a heart and a dirty tongue. Dan Leno, with his checked trousers and funny walks. Vesta Tilley, who dressed like a bloke in top hat and tails. Gertie Gitana, Fred Karno and Nosmo King. The list went on and on. Sometimes, she'd stare at the faded sepia photographs of the stars and think she could see the faces of modern-day people in them – blokes she'd seen in the pub, or people she'd served in Greggs. Dan Leno looked like the landlord of the Cutter; while Marie Lloyd resembled the regular who always came in with her baby in the buggy and asked for a chicken slice. They were all so alive and vivid to her: more so than her own life.

And now, in the pissing rain on the Walworth Road, Jessica came to a stop. She was at some sort of crossroads. Her phone had died, and she was lost. She'd no idea how to get to the Surrey Gardens Estate and the site of the old music hall.

The memory of the woman with the buggy had made her suddenly depressed. All around her, it seemed, were families and young children struggling through the rain. The thought that she was forty and might never have children hit her with fresh power. She'd decided early on that she didn't want them, but now that it was pretty clear she might have

left it too late, she was sad. She'd always wanted to have the capacity – just to know it was there. But she wasn't with anyone, and the IVF route was too expensive, so what were the chances? Knowing she might never have kids had been a major part of her depression since Christmas. It was only when you're single, she thought, that you noticed them: the families. They were everywhere when you looked. Those units of three, four, sometimes five. Or the single mum or dad with a pushchair. A unit of two. All off to Ikea or the playground or places where she wasn't welcome and would never go. How did they manage it? All that love and care and devotion. Whenever she saw them she felt doomed to be on her own for the rest of her life. An outsider. A loner. A loser.

Standing there soaked, with her useless phone in her hand, she realised she had no idea where she was. She would have to ask someone, and she always hated doing that. Waiting at the crossroads, looking around in all directions, she'd never felt more lost in her life.

Last orders, pur-lease, ladies and germs!

‘Hear that?’ said Wobbler, nudging Jessica in the ribs with his skinny elbow, laughing like a fool. ‘He called you a lady.’

‘Fuck off, I’m not in the mood.’

‘It must be you – you’re the only bird ‘ere!’

They were all sitting at their usual table at the back of the Cutter; under the low black beams, next to the fireplace that always had logs burning in the winter. The sports trophies on its mantelpiece glowed in the dim light. A sweltering Friday night in early June. The whole crew was present, pissed and raucous: Ryan to her left, Wobbler and Sam on her right; with Darren and Andy squatting hugely on stools at the front of the table, as if guarding it. She looked down at her empty pint glass and realised, for the first time, she hated being there. Hated everyone around the table too.

‘You ‘aving another?’ asked Andy.

‘Nah, I’m alright,’ she said, pushing her glass into the centre to join the forest of empties.

It was true, she thought. Now it was closing time, she was the only woman in there, though they’d been a few earlier, like the weasely bitch who always came in to sell draw. But

she'd left hours ago. With the doors of the pub open to the summer night, the stink of weed seemed to come from everywhere; from the pavement outside, and from the dripping corridor to the bogs. The place hadn't improved, she thought. The toilets were the usual warzone at eleven on a Saturday night. But Tav, the landlord, seemed to wear the pub's dodgy reputation as a badge of honour. He'd even put up their worst TripAdvisor review in the window: *The Deal Cutter needs closing down!* She hoped they would – then she'd never have to go there again.

Ding Ding! The bell, followed Tav's barking voice: *Last orders, folks! Let's be 'aving yer!*

She looked across at his him. Yeah, definitely Dan Leno. The same drawn face, with scar-like dimples pulling the flesh down; the same cheeky soulful eyes.

While Andy got to his feet and headed for the bar, Sam continued with the lecture he'd been giving them for the past twenty minutes, every word of which Jess disagreed with. There was an atmosphere of violence in the room – not around their table, but with the other punters clamouring for service, swearing and falling over onto the sticky floor.

'... See, the thing is, we've got to band together more than ever at times like this. People like the Iconoclast – whoever he is – are just in it for themselves.'

'I won't hear a bad word about him,' Jessica said, defending her favourite YouTube channel.

'He's just an influencer. He's fashionable, that's all.'

'But the shit he posts goes around the world. It's the way things are going, Sam. Lone wolves, or whatever you call them. Nobody wants to be part of a gang anymore. Look at Tommy. He's got more done since he left the EDL than when he was with 'em.'

'I'm too pissed to see your point, I'm afraid. Are you saying I should get out more, or stay in like those twats who do Infowars, or whatever?'

Despite being their ‘intellectual’, and a well-know hater of direct action, Sam had been shamed for not turning up at the People’s Vote in March. More so than Wobbler, who’d made himself scarce when things hotted up. Only Darren and Andy had acquitted themselves well. Darren was still basking in his fifteen minutes of fame from being on the front page of the Sunday Times. He thought at first it would end his window cleaning business overnight, but he’d been surprised when he received the hero treatment from his regulars. Most of them thought he was bang to rights.

‘You should open your mouth less and do more.’

‘I’m always *doing*,’ protested Sam, ‘I’m doing things all the fucking time!’

‘If that’s the case,’ Ryan slurred, masking the eight pints he’d put away since they arrived at seven o’ clock, ‘if that’s the case, mate, why are you never there? I mean, you’re like Zorro or whoever. Turn around and you’ve vanished.’

‘Okay,’ Sam held up his hands. ‘I get claustrophobic, I grant you that. I can’t do crowds. But we get further if we organise and mobilise.’

‘Except for the fact that you never show up.’

‘Do I ever say I will?’

Ryan nodded. ‘Fair dos, mate. You never promise to come, but it fucks up your argument though, don’t it?’

‘Maybe he’s just a coward!’ Wobbler yelled.

Jess could tell Wobbler was as pissed as Ryan. She knew how things would go. He’d say increasingly stupid things until Darren pushed him off his stool or punched him in the face.

‘Like you’re not, you cunt!’ Darren hit back. ‘Where was you when we charged the cops? Having a fucking Maccy Dees and a coke by the looks of it.’

‘No I weren’t... It was a KFC.’

‘Shut it, you cunt,’

‘Words not deeds,’ Ryan taunted. ‘That’s you all over!’

‘And you,’ Jess cut in.

Ryan turned to her, affronted. ‘*Me?*’

‘Yeah, you. You’re always banging on about direct action, but it never changes nothing.’

‘Wasn’t I with Wobbler when we did the college?’

Back in November, Ryan and Wobbler had spray painted swastikas and KKK in red over one of the Canterbury University blocks. Working in the dead of night, they had access to the buildings because of their IT helpdesk jobs, and the perfect excuse if they were stopped: they could claim they’d just discovered the graffiti and were about to report it. Timed to coincide with Remembrance Day, their handiwork had made the front pages of the local and college papers, and even been reported nationally. Jessica was annoyed it had had more impact than what she’d done. She’d sent false Anthrax powder to the University’s mosque on Giles Lane, along with letters asking people to join in with *Punch a Muslim Day*, where people could score points for how many people they smacked.

‘Okay, fair enough,’ said Jessica, ‘but that was just window dressing. What I did was asking for *action*, Ryan. Real things in the real world.’

‘But it got nowhere, didn’t it? How many people punched a Muslim?’

‘Not enough!’ yelled Wobbler.

At that moment, Andy lumbered back to the table, his hands around a cluster of pints.

Drink up now, people, it’s time!

Taking his pint as Andy sat down, Sam said calmly: ‘So what are you saying we should do now, Jess? In practical terms?’

She turned to face him. Just his patronising tone made her want to upend the beer over his face. She felt suddenly very sober. What was she doing with these idiots? Why had it taken her so long to hate them? They were just a bunch of gaming nerds and wankers.

‘I’m saying we should take a leaf out of Tarrant’s book and do something that counts.’

Ryan groaned. ‘Not Tarrant again, please. He’s a fucking nutter.’

‘Nah, mate. He’s a saint,’ Darren added.

‘They should take his video down off BitChute,’ Sam said. ‘We’ve all seen it now. It’s just a big ego trip for him, watching himself mow down a bunch of ragheads.’

‘Yeah,’ chipped in Wobbler. ‘And where we gonna get guns from anyway? Different society over there, ennet?’

Sam shook his head, foam on his upper lip. ‘Like you’d know what to do with a gun if you had one.’

‘I was in the TA,’ Wobbler protested. ‘Youth Division. So fuck right off!’

‘So you want to go down for the rest of your life?’ Ryan demanded, staring Jessica in the face. At that moment, she realised that she’d never liked Ryan’s eyes. There was something shifty or sly about them. How had she gone out with him for five long years? What had she been thinking?

‘Or get your ‘ead blown off by the cops, more likely,’ Darren said, after draining his pint in a single epic gulp.

Jessica shrugged. ‘Like I said, real things in the real world. What have I got to lose, anyway?’

‘Oh, don’t bring out the fucking tiny violins now!’ Ryan said. ‘Poor Jessica and her shit life! You could improve it if you put your mind to it.’

‘You sound like my therapist.’

‘You’ve got a therapist?’ Ryan asked, startled.

‘What’s the big surprise? Plenty of people ‘ave ‘em.’

‘Yeah, but I just thought you’d never go there. All those talks we used to have. You told me –‘

‘Fuck off with what I told you, Ryan. We’re talking about something else now.’

‘What’s that again?’ Wobbler asked. ‘I’ve forgotten. How me and Sam are yellow belly cunts, is that it?’

‘Shut up, you prick,’ Jessica yelled, red in the face.

The whole table seemed to draw back.

‘Woah, time of the month, is it, babes?’

‘Don’t call me babes, you prick.’

Time, ladies and gents, pur-lease! Do yer talkin’ while yer walkin’! Don’t make me kick you out!

‘So what you gonna do then?’

‘I’m going to take some action, just like I said.’

‘You haven’t got the balls.’

‘Course she ain’t,’ Darren laughed. ‘She’s a bird, ennet!’

‘Geezer birds have balls,’ Andy said flatly; the first words he’d spoken for an hour.

Ryan cut in calmly. ‘So what you gonna do then?’

‘I’m going to fuck someone up. Bad.’

‘Who?’

‘I’m not telling *you*, am I?’

‘She’s full of shit,’ Wobbler said.

‘Just watch me.’

Time and a half you lot! OUT!

Jess felt the anger rising from the pit of her stomach. A volcanic force – her mother’s anger, unstoppable and ugly. She got to her feet.

‘I said just *watch me.*’

‘We are love!’ Darren chuckled. ‘And it ain’t a pretty sight.’

‘Oh, I’ve fucking ‘ad enough! You understand? *Enough!*’

And with that, she swept the constellation of empty glasses onto the floor with a great thrilling crash.

And then she was out of there; pushing past an open-mouthed Ryan and the rest of them; past the astonished face of Tav, out of the door, and into the warm, sweet-smelling night.

‘Believe it or not,’ announced Dean in his most earnest voice, ‘this business started before the war, with a man named John Robson Gregg, peddling his bicycle around Newcastle, selling eggs and yeast door to door...’

Saturday morning. Ten to nine.

Dean had called a team meeting, and Jessica and the others were standing in front of the counter where the customers usually stood; the front doors locked.

To say her hangover was bad wouldn’t come close to describing it. After walking out of the Cutter, she’d gone home, smashed up most of her kitchen and drank two thirds of a bottle of vodka. She’d woken up on the sofa in her clothes, still pissed; the toxic booze hot and fiery in her system. Standing under the shower, she’d turned the dial to cold and endured the jet of water until the top of her head had felt like a block of ice. Then she’d wearily got into her Greggs uniform and taken the Loop bus into Margate; her cranium exploding; every bump in the road unstopping the vomit that kept appearing at the back of her throat. The only thing she knew was that she never wanted to see Ryan and his crew of pricks again.

And now Dean was lecturing them all about the history of the shop, and productivity, and the future, or some such crap. It was all she could do to stand up. On her left were Tiffany and Louise, the two teenagers who always came in on a Saturday. On her right were two older women, Ali and Marge, who'd been there since 5am, baking and prepping wraps and sandwiches. She hoped one of them would catch her if she fell over.

'...You might be surprised to learn that the first Greggs opened in 1951, and now we've got two thousand stores, with over twenty thousand employees...'

We. How she'd always hated that – as if he was married to the fucking shop. As if his whole identity relied on it. And *stores*? What was he, American now? She looked at him, tall and posturing with his silly bootblack hair; enjoying mansplaining to five women. She'd long ago lost the battle to avoid working Saturdays. She told herself it didn't matter so much, since she was online and in the chatrooms most nights of the week now. But it was still a victory for Dean, and she hated him for it. More than anything, she was surprised he was still working there. She'd thought he'd have buggered off to the Newcastle head office years ago.

'... The food-to-go market is going to grow by two billion pounds over the coming three years, and we aim to be right at the centre of it. We've just got the figures for our pre-tax profits up to June, and they stand at forty point six million, up twenty-five million from the same period last year –'

'Wish I could get my hands on some of that!' interrupted Ali.

Ali was a widow who'd lost her husband a couple of years back, so she didn't mind getting up at half three to come and start the ovens. Jessica liked her attitude – she was funny and she stood up to Dean.

'Yeah, Deaney,' Jessica sneered, the very act of speaking making her temples throb. 'Where's all our money?'

Dean grinned his ingratiating grin. How she hated it.

‘As you know, the ten-per-cent profit-share scheme has been very successful over the past years, so rest assured you’ve all benefited and will benefit again in the future. When you think how far we’ve come since 2013, it’s incredible. That was our worst year on record. We were losing market share. We were competing with supermarkets for bakery bread, and with Costa, Pret and Subway on coffee. They were booming while we were drowning.’

‘So what went right?’ Ali asked. ‘I always thought Greggs had stayed the same. Like Eastenders.’

Laughter from the teenagers.

‘Ah, now that’s where you’d be wrong. And an awareness of this is all part of the reason why I’ve called this team meeting –‘

‘Hurry up, then,’ Jessica put in. ‘The doors’ll be opening soon.’

‘As I was saying, the reason why we’ve done so well is that we stopped competing on three separate fronts. Like the German army, you can’t fight the Russians and the allies in Europe and Africa at the same time –‘

‘I knew it wouldn’t be long before we got some history.’

‘We’re not a coffee shop and we’re not a Tesco Express or an M&S Simply Food. We’re a food-to-go counter that sells unmatched products – no one can match us on freshness and price. I mean, where else can you get a bacon bap and a straightforward coffee for one pounds eighty in this day and age? Where?’

‘You got me stumped, Deaney.’

Ignoring Jessica, he ploughed on. ‘But that’s only half of the story. Our big secret is that we’ve moved with the times. It’s all about changing perceptions. In 2013, the majority of the people in the UK thought we were only about stodgy, greasy food for people on the go – a certain type of person, too, and I’ll come back to that in a moment –‘

Jessica caught a blast of Dean's mint mouthwash and felt her gorge rise. 'Just get on with it.'

'What our surveys turned up – our USP, if you will – was that people liked the freshness of our products. So while the supermarkets offer a wider selection of sandwiches – as you all know they keep them for up to three days in factories, turning brown around the edges – we, of course, make everything fresh on the day.'

'Don't I know it,' groaned Marge. More timid than Ali, Marge had a sense of right and wrong that Jessica liked.

'Our average store offers around a hundred and fifty food products. What we started doing was inventing more. And by more, I mean fifty a year. New flavours of doughnuts, cookies, wraps and bakes. We looked at our demographic and saw we could cater to the upmarket people as well. Why not do a chicken caesar wrap? Why not offer Portuguese tarts or a crayfish baguette?'

'Cos they're crap!' said Jessica.

'I think you'll find all three have been very successful. Okay, so the protein pots didn't work. That was a bridge too far, but, and I'm sure you'll agree on the one big success we've had this year. Can anyone think of what I'm talking about?'

Tiffany put up a timid hand. 'The vegan sausage roll?'

'Correctamundo!' barked Dean, stupidly. 'Thank you, Tiffany. The vegan sausage roll. A prime example of how we've not only moved with the times but *defined* the times. Two years ago, you might have said no one was waiting for a vegan sausage roll. That it was PC gone mad. And then what happens? We roll out the new product in January and the press goes nuts. The public goes nuts too – in its favour. Suddenly, people are coming into the store who've never come in before just to sample the delights of this outlandish thing, a sausage roll without any sausage meat. And you know what? Our surveys show that twenty-three per

cent of the customers buying it were new customers. Let that sink in for a while. They'd never been through our doors before, for whatever reason. Snobbery, vegetarianism, you name it. And all of those customers, our survey revealed, couldn't help buying other things once they were inside.'

'So we corrupted 'em,' cackled Ali.

'No, we *enlightened* them. We showed them that our coffee is the best on the High Street. That we offer unlimited value for money. That our rewards cards will buy you more products than those of Nero's and Pret put together. That we're friendly and clean and superb value for money. And...' here Dean turned to look at the small queue of people that had formed outside the door. 'And, let me remind you, the logistics of making a vegan product were not simple. No way. We tried a vegetarian sausage roll once and it bombed. But we persevered because vegan is the big thing of the moment –'

'Not in my house it ain't,' Ali said.

More laughter from the teenagers.

'Just the supply chain was a nightmare. Everything has to be vegan. Plus transportation and storage. It can't be contaminated by meat or dairy. So we started working with Quorn on a secret recipe. And bingo! We fill a gap in the market that no one knew existed. We provide a hot snacking product that's second to none and knocks our competitors out of the park.'

'Dean,' Jessica said. 'There's a queue.'

'I know there's a queue, Jessica. It's not time yet. They'll have to wait.'

'What's your point then?'

'My point is this. It's how we go forward from here. Because it's not all about food. It's about presentation. It's about who comes into the store and, as I said before, changing perceptions. You remember when Aldi and Lidl appeared on the High Street? Well, people

said the Waitrose regulars would never set foot in there unless they had a gun to their head. Well, you know what? Once they tried those chains, they realised the products were just as good, only far, far cheaper. It became a kind of middle-class game, so I'm told, to boast to dinner party guests: where do you think this smoked salmon came from? And then see the look of surprise when they told them it was Aldi. Or this Dolce Latte cheese they were enjoying from the cheese board. It was from Lidl. Now, we want the same effect with our stores. We want the middle-classes to tell their friends: I had the best cream and honeycomb cookie the other day, can you guess where it came from? And they'll answer *Fortnum's? Harrods food hall*. No. *Greggs*, that's where! I want to attract the out-of-towners who go the Turner Gallery. I want the hipsters and the arty types who go to the cafés and bookshops and antique shops in Margate Old Town. I want them all to come through these doors you see behind me and sample the delights of our vegan sausage roll!

Jessica shifted her weight from foot to foot. She felt like she might collapse. 'Dean, you're doing my fucking head in.'

Suddenly stern, he pointed a long forefinger at her. 'Swearing, Jessica will not be tolerated in-store. I've told you before.'

'You told me lots of things but I've never listened.'

'Which brings me on to the final reason I've gathered you here this morning. It's not all about food, it's about the customer. In the end, the customer is king. Now, some of you might say the stunts were a step too far. The Valentine's Day promotion, for instance...'

Jessica remembered this with a sick shiver. On Valentine's Day, Greggs had employed actors to play waiters in dickie bows, handing out cookies and doughnuts with a chocolate dipping sauce on silver platters. They'd offered 'fine dining' when there were only three chairs in the place.

‘... But our ethos remains the same. We want people to leave the shop with a smile on their face. And this is where you come in. We want a bit of bantz from the staff. We want you to recognise the locals before they’ve got through the door. If appropriate, we want you to make up their regular orders before they even open their mouths. I can see this might mean a bit of extra work on your behalf – if your memory isn’t strong you might have to write things down – but they need to feel they’re being taken care of. Names, too. Names are important. If they’ve got a kid in a buggy, ask his or her name. Make a fuss of them. Get to know the names of the customers, but don’t be intrusive. Girls – ’ And here Dean indicated Tiffany and Louise. ‘Flutter your eyelashes. It sounds basic, but it gets results.’

‘Oh, fuck off, Deaney.’

The finger again. ‘You’ve been warned, Jessica. In fact, this is your last warning.’

This was not correct, as both of them knew. Her last warning had been given back in March when he’d seen the picture of Jess at the People’s Vote march in the *Evening Standard*, blood all over her face and shirt. Looking him straight in the eye, she didn’t know how much longer she could stand there with her pumping head and lurching stomach.

‘Why don’t we open the doors? They’ll bugger off to Pret if we leave it any longer.’

Drawing himself up to his full height, Dean took a deep breath. There was a look of zeal in his eyes. For a moment, Jessica thought he looked like a religious maniac. She was trapped inside a bun shop with a crazy man.

‘...I want to finish with a story, if I may. One you might have heard before. We do engagement surveys with our customers – rigorous ones – and they come back with many interesting facts and figures. One of our big strengths is that we have a product for every person. For the office worker, it might be our creamy porridge in the morning. For the builder working around the corner, it might be our bacon baguette. For the Gen-Z-er, it might be our trusty vegan sausage roll. For the single mum craving pastry, it’s our hot steak slice. But the

main thing is that we make converts. They come back. This is what our surveys show. And if they don't buy their comfort-product that day – because, say they already had a caesar wrap that week – they'll select another. And this is why we're opening a hundred and fifty stores a year while other chains are closing the same number. Okay, so here's the story. This is why people love Greggs. The *real* reason. Remember when we had all that snow last year? February, even March, I think. Well, there was a Greggs delivery driver whose lorry got stuck in a snowdrift on the M11. Now, you can guess how damaging that might be for the many stores who rely on that driver. They would have empty shelves the next day. They'd have to apologise to their regulars – the very people staff like yourselves have worked so long and hard to cultivate. They would have to say: *Sorry, Terry, but the bacon baps are off this morning! Lorry got stuck in the snow!* They would have to apologise. But they didn't have to apologise. You know why? Because the story that hit the national newspapers was this. Instead of just sitting there in the cold – and you can imagine how cold it must have been, sitting in that cab in a blizzard, the traffic backed up behind it for miles, emergency vehicles not able to get through – the driver took it upon himself to open his lorry. And you know what he did? Without checking for permission first, he opened his lorry and distributed his entire stock of goods, *free*, to those freezing passengers in the cars stuck behind his lorry. And did Greggs sack him? No! They gave him a pay-rise and a promotion. That, dear ladies, is what being part of the Greggs happy family is all about –

‘Open the doors.’

Dean looked back at Jessica, a flicker of fear in his eyes.

‘I said open the fucking doors! Now!’

‘I'm not going to say it again, Jess –’

Jessica advanced on him, ripping off her hair net, unzipping her uniform.

Dean visibly flinched. Behind her, she was aware all the others were staring at her in astonishment.

‘I said open the doors now or I’ll fucking kill you!’

Without hesitation, Dean went over to the front doors, smiling at the big queue of customers, and took a key from the chain hanging from his hip. As he hurriedly unlocked the door, she let her blue smock fall to the ground.

Jessica looked him in the eye for what she knew would be the last time.

‘You can stick your vegan sausage roll where the fucking sun don’t shine.’

And then she was gone.

Summer, just like she always remembered it. A Broadstairs summer day; the June sunshine warming the crescent of sand below the bay; the gulls honking and crying above; the sea glittering forever, stretching beyond the horizon.

She had returned to Uncle Mack's plaque. She stood looking at it now, the sea-breeze on her face, sweat pooling in parts of her body she didn't like to contemplate; anger expanding inside her.

She'd walked all the way from Dumpton to see it; down the long shaded path that connected the Ramsgate Road to Dumpton Drive – the one she used to love as a child – and then descended the giddy slope into town, cursing the holidaymakers under her breath; those happy families she so hated, with their buckets and spades and smiles.

Only, once she arrived at Victoria Gardens, she saw that someone had done a terrible thing to the plaque. Someone had thrown a half-eaten kebab at it, and no one had attempted to clear up the mess. She was outraged. There was Uncle Mack's jolly face and banjo spattered with red shredded cabbage, garlic sauce, and slices of greying meat. An orange polystyrene box sat at the base of the plinth, next to a couple of crushed cans of Stella, the

grass scattered with green chillies. Without pause, she set about clearing up the desecration with what she had to hand. A pack of tissues, and a plastic bag used for her sunblock. After a few minutes, she managed to bin the debris and wipe the corroded brass clean. *He brought joy and laughter to young and old.* There. She had restored him. She felt like standing guard over him – indefinitely if she had to – to prevent any more disgraceful attacks.

Worse had happened in the past. She remembered when the campaign to get rid of the plaque had started, a bunch of idiots claiming to be Rastafarians – though half of them looked white – had performed a silly ritual over the plinth before throwing black paint all over it. She'd watched the film of it on YouTube. They'd been babbling in some foreign language, taking it all very seriously, until the bucket of paint had appeared. The following day, the council had cleaned it off. *You silly boys*, she'd written on the comments thread, choosing a Union Jack for her username picture. They were lucky she hadn't gone to town on them, she thought now. It was Hartford-Jones who posed the greatest threat. It was a huge relief to have decided she was actually going to do something about her now, not just talk about it endlessly. Everyone else, she knew now, was all mouth and no trousers. No, when she put her plan into action, then they'd know she'd meant business all along. It would wipe the grin off their stupid faces.

What did she have to lose anyway? She'd thrown in her job; told Ryan and his mates to fuck off. She'd had enough of slaving at Greggs for chump change. Of course, she hadn't been able to save any money while working there, so telling Deaney where to shove it had felt like cutting off her nose to spite her face. She'd signed on the next day. She would be very poor now, she realised. If the housing benefit came through in time, she might just hold on to her flat. Otherwise, where would she go? The streets? She had nowhere and no one to go to now. That would be just her luck, she thought, to end up a bag lady. The idea made her shiver despite the keen heat of the day.

Looking down at the sands, she saw the summer season was well underway. With the tide out, the beach was packed with shrieking children, dogs, parents struggling under towels. Directly below the cliffs, where Uncle Mack used to perform, was the funfair, with its roundabout carrying mini fire engines and tractors for the kiddies. There were swings too, and a big red helter skelter slide. She didn't remember any of it from her childhood. She and her brother had had to make their own fun with their shrimping nets, heading off to Joss Bay, or further up the coast to Botany. She had good memories of those times. The excited anticipation of sitting over a rock pool for an hour, drinking down lungfuls of salty air; prising limpets from the kelpy stones. The strange movements of crabs had fascinated her; their watchful eyes and scuttling retreats. She would slowly fill her bucket with the smallest ones, taking them from the water, inhaling their fishy smell, their claws clacking. Then she'd go after the shrimps, grey and hard to see at first; some of them transparent against the rocks. She would take the heavy bucket home for her mother to throw in a pan and cook, the shrimps turning a delicious pink in seconds.

Thinking of all this, of those forgotten days, she went to push her hair from her face and realised it wasn't there. She'd cut most of it off herself with a pair of inadequate scissors the night before. She'd been pleased with her handiwork for about ten minutes – it made her look younger – and then realised how stupid she appeared, like a convict or an addict. She thought people might be staring at her now; avoiding her for looking half mad. A few minutes ago, an old couple had complimented her for clearing up the plaque, but they'd given her a wide berth. What she actually looked like, she knew, was her mother. With short hair, she'd never resembled Mimi more. Her mother's ghost had loomed up in the mirror after she'd finished with the scissors. With her short, reddish hair – that often looked dyed but wasn't – her mum had always had a distinctive look. The weight that Jessica had packed on since Christmas helped complete the picture. A few weeks ago, her GP had diagnosed her as

‘morbidly obese’. She had no idea what that meant, but knew it was bad. Her doctor had ordered her to change her diet and cut down on drinking or risk serious consequences. Her diabetes, under control over the past few years, might result in losing a limb to amputation further down the line. And there was a real risk of a heart attack or stroke. Maybe she’d die young like her mum, she’d told the GP, laughing at the irony. The only thing in her favour was that she didn’t smoke. When she’d looked at herself in the mirror, she’d even checked her fingers to see if they were yellow. She’d always remembered her mother for this – a permanent ochre stain on the first and second fingers of her right hand, like they were jaundiced and about to drop off.

Deciding she had to move, she wiped the sweat from her face with her upper arm. She wanted to leave the plaque now and go back to the site of the old house. All the memories of her mother, of the old days, seemed to call her there, like the cries of the gulls overhead.

With a heavy heart she made her way along Victoria Gardens, enjoying the sight of the pier at low tide. She wanted to stay in the present, but memories of her mother kept appearing from nowhere. Since she’d made the trip back to Walworth, she’d dreamed about her at least once a week. Now, as she trod the path they used to walk together, with the bunting strung between the old-style lampposts, she thought, for some reason, of her mum’s funeral. There’d been hardly anyone there. Just her and her brother and a bunch of blokes from Stone Beds. How had her mum made so few friends over the course of fifty-three years? Jessica had organised the whole thing herself; down to the flowers on the sad, cheap coffin. At the crematorium, she had got to her feet to say a few words, trembling, unable to get them past her lips. Then the longest-standing resident of the B&B had spoken of how Mimi was the life and soul of the party, and that every night at Stone Beds had in fact been a party. This had raised a feeble laugh. Her brother had said nothing, claiming he didn’t have the right to, as it had been so long since he had last seen her. He said he didn’t even know her. She’d

hated him for this – it had been part of the reason why she hadn't shared the money from the house. If he didn't know her, then he wouldn't be wanting her money, would he? They'd both watched the great door swallow the coffin as the tinny music started up. The thought of fire consuming the body had made Jessica feel physically sick. There was the terror, too, that her mum wasn't actually dead; that she would wake up just as the gas jets came on and be burnt alive. She'd read stories of this before. She couldn't decide what was worse – to find yourself alive in a coffin about to go up in flames, or to be six feet underground in the dark. She'd read about coffins that had been exhumed to find their lids had been scratched to pieces by the fingernails of the people who'd woken up. It was terrible to think these things of her own mother. She'd never been to a funeral before, and realised she never wanted to go to one again.

Turning a corner onto Alexandra Road, with its stone arch and narrow pavement, she tried to banish the memories from her mind. It seemed sad and unhealthy to think about such things when the sun was shining and life was going on busily all around her. She headed down the steep descending street, past the posh restaurant that she'd seen Hartford-Jones tweet about many times, and towards the harbour, where she picked up her pace. Before her was the reassuring sight of the Tartar Frigate, with the outdoor drinkers basking in the sun; the flag of St George flying proudly outside. Most of the tourists were too scared to go in, but even the Frigate had got hoity toity over the past few years, offering a tasting menu and cocktails. It seemed mad to spoil a traditional pub like this, but they were moving with the times, apparently.

She followed the road around, and climbed up the steep path past the old Bleak House; lording it over the bay. She didn't think she'd ever been inside. Incredible, in all the years of living there, that her mum had never once taken her or her brother to the town's main attraction.

Wiping the sweat from her eyes, she decided she needed a cold drink, and headed up past the old church and so out onto the main road. Nelson Place, with its car park, and fags and mags shop opposite. She went in and bought herself a can of full-strength coke from the fridge, cracking it before she was even out of the door. Outside, she stood for a while, slaking her thirst. She glanced at the local papers on a rack: the Thanet Extra, the East Kent Mercury, the Thanet Gazette. There were the other papers too, with the big news of the day. Theresa May had just resigned as PM, apparently, and there she was on every cover, in her red dress and heels, outside Number Ten, weeping. She'd gone on about not being able to deliver Brexit and all the rest of it. Well, let someone else take over then, Jessica thought: someone who can give the people what they voted for!

Standing there, she remembered that there had once been a shop next door that sold junk and antiques, with ice cream tubs of old postcards on trestle tables outside. She had a sudden, vivid memory of being a young girl on a similar sunny day, raking through these old black and white postcards of Broadstairs pier and various bays, everyone in old-style costumes, her head spinning with history.

Heading back towards the sea, down Rectory Road with its flinty houses, she felt the cool rush of ocean air on her face again; so pleasing, so familiar. In moments she was back on their old road, the Eastern Esplanade. How long had it been since she'd been back? She couldn't remember. After all, there was no need to revisit it. The old house had been bulldozed and replaced by a new build years ago. Nothing remained of the past. Following the curve of the road, past a posh B&B called the Bay Tree Inn, she caught her first glimpse of the Stone Bay sands. It never failed to take her breath away. So much bigger, wilder, more beautiful than Viking Bay, with its tourist hordes. It seemed to go on forever, curving around the headland, the sails of the windfarm distantly turning. The sun on the waves was almost too intense to look at. So many memories here too. Of going down the steep ramp and

running down to the water's edge at low tide; the rock pools with their mounds of black and green seaweed exposed.

She picked up her pace, following the grey iron fencing with its bursts of shrubs poking through. And yes, there was still samphire growing there, reaching through on its long thin stalks. Her favourite plant from childhood. It amazed her more to think she once owned books on shrubs and trees, when she had no interest in them now. It made her feel very old – her full forty years – to think this. She felt suddenly very distant from herself. Most days, she realised, she had no idea who she'd grown up to be.

And now, as the road straightened to head inland, she came upon the last row where the old house had stood. Stone Bay B&B. 56 Eastern Esplanade. She stopped in front of the ugly facade that had replaced it. It looked like they were still in the process of building it. There was a skip outside, with scaffolding up the left side of the house. A new conservatory or something was underway. But no workmen around. The place was deserted. A shell. It gripped her from within to see no trace of her past there. It was all in her head now. The only remnants of those days were in her mind, and she struggled to recall as much of it as she could. Some things were more vivid than others. She tried to remember the day her father left. But there had been no exact day – he'd just drifted away: coming back every now and then and making a fuss of her, until one day he was never around anymore. What she remembered most was her mum. Her mum's last illness, and the ranks of pills and big bottles of Lucozade by her bedside in the attic. And before that, all the times she was zonked out on the couch, pissed. The times when Jessica would have to explain to people that they couldn't see her mum because she 'had the flu'. Or the times she was sent to the corner shop to get fags and booze. To the off licence on Nelson Place at first, because her mum was embarrassed about going so often, and then to the Tesco's that replaced it. Where the building work was now there'd once been a side-alley that was continually blocked by a sea of

empties. Her mum would blame the endless bottles on her guests, but that was just a lie she expected everyone to go along with. All of it a pack of lies.

Standing there, with the sun burning the back of her neck, another memory grabbed her, like a hand twisting from within. A horrifying memory, one she'd tried, and failed, her whole life never to revisit. A man, one of the guests, a tall man with a sly leer, had pinned her against the wall one afternoon when she'd just got back from school. She had only been fifteen, and he had pulled up her denim miniskirt and shoved his fingers roughly inside her. It had seemed to go on forever, but it can only have lasted a few seconds. Then the man had pulled out his cock and, with a few quick jerks, had come over her bare legs. She remembered the horrible smell of it, mingled with the aftershave on his collar; his gem-hard eyes boring into hers. He'd told her if she breathed a word of it to her mum, he would kill her. He'd killed a man before, he boasted, and done fifteen years inside for it. She'd been so terrified that she'd done nothing. Even though she was far from innocent back then, this was different; this was nothing to do with sex and everything to do with power. She'd kept the whole thing to herself for years. Even when she was with Ryan, when she'd been tempted to tell him everything, she'd held back. Why? Because it was the most shameful and degrading thing that had ever happened to her. At the time, she'd been shaken to her core. She thought the years would heal the wound. But weirdly, the reality of what had happened became worse, not better, as she grew older. It seemed to have damaged her somewhere crucially, somewhere deep within. Spoiled her for good. From that moment onwards, she'd felt like a spoiled piece of fruit; bruised and no good to anyone.

Standing motionless, feeling sunstruck and ill, she realised she was crying. Great runnels of tears were streaming down her face; her chest heaving. She tried to pull herself together, looking around to see if anyone was watching. But no one was ever watching at the

end of the Eastern Esplanade. It was where the town ran out. Where the tourists never went. It was why no one except the scum of the earth – like her old abuser – ever went there.

She tried to shake off the memory, but long experience had told her that was never possible. It was inside her forever, doing its damage; silently, daily. The only thing she could do to get back on an even keel was think about what was coming up next; in the next few hours. To think deeply about the past was to admit to herself that all the devils were there.

At once, she remembered that she'd agreed to meet one of the blokes from Patriot Patrol that very evening. She'd been putting it off for months, and had finally given in. She'd said yes before she'd jacked in her job and cut off all her hair. Unless she cancelled on him, she would have to go back home and start getting ready. It felt like a date, and she was in no state to go on one of those. But maybe when he saw her – and found out he didn't fancy her – he could help her with what she had to do. They'd talked about Christchurch in the chatroom – he was almost the only one there who said Tarrant had done the right thing. That he was a hero and a saint. When they'd agreed to meet, he'd signed off with a single line: *Let's get this party started*. They both knew he was quoting the words Tarrant had used when he'd gone into the mosque. Yes, she would try and forget about her past for once, and go and meet this Oswald, whoever he was. She would see if he could finally help her get the party started.

She'd chosen The Racing Greyhound as it was somewhere she was sure she wouldn't find Ryan and his crew. Oswald had said he didn't know the pub, even though he'd admitted early on in their online exchanges that he was from Thanet like her. For twenty minutes, she'd sat in the front bar with a vodka and tonic, watching the regulars on their barstools, nervously scanning the main door. She'd been propositioned twice ('Been stood up have yer, love?'), until she'd been forced to go up to Roger behind the bar and ask him to chuck the offenders

out if they got lairy. She'd been drinking steadily since late afternoon, and was already half-cut.

At eight o' clock, the heat of the day was still in the air, and she found she was sweating her foundation off. She'd drawn the line at wearing lippy. She didn't want to lead him on, whoever he was. She had business she wanted to discuss.

Then, at a few minutes past the hour, just when she was thinking she really had been stood up, a man walked through the door.

His face was so familiar that for a few suspended moments she thought it was one of Ryan's mates. Black-rimmed glasses. Average height. One of the other IT nerds, perhaps? He was wearing a Harrington and scuffed boots, a satchel over his shoulder. No, it couldn't be one of Ryan's mob. They'd never wear a satchel in a million years.

The man's eyes found hers, and he advanced quickly towards her table. As he came nearer, she felt her stomach convulse and her heart begin to hammer as she realised who it was.

It *wasn't* him, was it? It couldn't be... It *was*.

'It's you,' she said, almost unable to get the words out.

'Yes, Jessica,' her brother said calmly. 'It's me...'

They couldn't stay in the pub.

No way could they stay in the pub and have the conversation she knew they were about to have. With her heart still galloping, feeling cornered, feeling she'd been cheated and exposed – and by her own flesh and blood too – she told him they'd have to go back to her flat.

They walked the short distance in total silence; the sky still light. It was almost midsummer and she knew it would be light for hours. For a split second, she considered

bolting. But what good would that have done her? If he'd gone to such lengths to track her down, he was bound to sprint after her; to say what he had to say.

In moments they were in her cramped front room, the nets drawn against the sick yellow of the June evening; the debris of her life all around them.

'Drink?' she offered, feeling she should; opening a bottle of Smirnoff and pouring herself a neat shot.

'Nah,' he said, looking steadily around the room. 'You're all right.'

She sat down on the arm of her sofa, while Stuart stood before her. She didn't want him towering over her.

'Aren't you going to sit down?'

'Nope.'

'What the fuck is this all about, then?'

'What do you mean, what's this all about? I'm your *brother*, Jess.'

'I thought you was Oswald.'

'Listen. Let me –'

'I don't care if you're my brother. We don't talk no more. We both know that.'

'And with good reason.'

'I dunno what yer on about.'

'You know what I mean, Jess.'

Keeping a lid on her fury, she asked: 'How did you get into the chatroom?'

'Patriot Patrol?'

She laughed at his cheek. But then he always was a cheeky bastard. 'What d'you fucking think? How many chatrooms are you in?'

'I lied.'

She shook her head in amazement. She still couldn't get her head around the reality of seeing Stuart in front of her – in her own flat – twelve years since they'd last met. He'd filled out a bit; his face looked greyer, more tired; with stubble that was almost a beard. She could tell he was very angry with her – impatient to say and do things – but she knew her own anger was greater. It always had been. She was on her own turf too, so she had the edge. She knew she might have to throw him out eventually. She just wanted to hear his excuse for coming all this way; for lying and going to all this trouble. And she knew by the way he was standing that he wanted to have his say in full. She remembered that stance all too well.

'What? So you bullshitted that you liked killing Pakis just so you could find out where I lived?'

'Jess –'

'Please! Don't Jess me. I want you out of here, understand? I just want you to explain what your fucking game is first.'

'There is no game.'

Her hand trembled as it took the drink to her lips. 'Yes there is! There's a big bloody game and you're not telling me what it is.'

Stuart shook his head. 'How d'you end up living like this?'

'Like what?'

He gestured around the room. 'Like this. Look at it. It's squalid. It's a hovel.'

'Don't start using your fancy fucking words on me now.'

'You know what I thought when I first walked into the pub? You know who I thought you were?'

'Who?'

'I thought you were mum.'

Jessica took another slug, the aftertaste making her wince. That was the thing with vodka. It started tasting shit after the first few mouthfuls, but by then you just couldn't stop.

'I thought I'd seen a ghost.'

'Maybe you did.'

'You look just like mum when she got older – maybe it's the hair.'

'Why's that so fucking surprising, Stuart?'

'You're going to end up like her if you keep going like this.'

'Like you fucking care!'

'I care more than you think.'

'Well you got a funny fucking way of showing it.'

He pointed to a picture of their mother on the mantelpiece. It was of her in her last days.

'I've got the exact same photo. It's the only one I have of her.'

'You haven't come here to talk about her, have you?'

'No, Jess, I haven't.'

'What's so amazing about your life that you can come down here and start saying mine's so shit?'

'I didn't say it was amazing. You know nothing about my life.'

'I don't fucking want to.'

'No? Aren't you going to ask me what I'm doing? Who I'm with?'

'I'm not interested.'

'Yes you are. Ask me where I live.'

Jess wanted to tear his stupid, smug head from his shoulders. This was just like the rows they used to have in the bunkbeds all those years ago. He was using his big brother

status to put her down, to control her, to belittle her. She decided to play along – either that, or she was liable to smash the almost-empty vodka bottle in his face.

‘Okay, Stu-ey, where do you live?’

‘You don’t have to put on that voice. We’re not children anymore.’

‘You’re treating me like a fucking child!’

‘I live in north London.’

She snorted. ‘You would do.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘It’s where you was destined to end up from the start.’

‘I worked very hard to achieve the life I have. I started with fuck all, just like you.’

It was the first time he’d sworn all evening. This was more like it, she thought. This was the old Stuart coming out. His veneer was chipping off.

‘So you fuck off to the smoke, and leave all your people behind. Good move.’

‘Why are they – why are *you* – suddenly my people?’

‘Because you grew up with people like me, Stuart. And look at what you’ve become. Just take a look at yourself in the mirror! You’re a walking fucking cliché with your stupid satchel and your big leather boots.’

‘I made something of my life, Jess. You could’ve have done the same. You still could.’

‘No, you *left us*, Stuart. Just like dad left us. You buggered off so you wouldn’t have to look after mum for years. You don’t know the half of it. Where’s your sense of responsibility?’

‘I’m married with a kid. They’re my responsibility now.’

‘Yeah, but they weren’t around back then, were they?! You could’ve helped us out. Just like dad could have helped.’

‘This is getting us nowhere, talking about the past.’

‘Well who brought up mum in the first place? *You* did, Stuart! You did. Next you’ll be wanting the money back from the house.’

‘Don’t be stupid.’

‘You wanted it enough at the time! I never heard the fucking last of it.’

‘That’s not why I’m here.’

‘It’s why we stopped talking to each other, though, ain’t it?’

‘Actually, Jess, it’s not. It’s the things you believe in that made me cut you off. The shit you spouted in chatrooms like Patriot Patrol. The thing you did on the Margate train that got you arrested. Do you think I could talk to you while you still held those views? You think I had an ounce of anything in common with a convicted racist? You think I could –‘

‘*Convicted racist*. Just listen to yourself. You’re talking like a newsreader. It might surprise you that round ‘ere no one thinks of me like that. Most people think I did a good thing. I was standing up for their rights because no one else had the balls to. Their right not to live in a country where every other person talks foreign, or fucks little white girls, or trains to be a terrorist. Is that the country you want to live in, Stuart? It’s not where I want to live, I can tell you.’

‘I think that’s pretty obvious you think like that. The fact is, I and millions of others don’t see things that way. That’s why I had nothing to say to you, not because you sold the house and took all the money.’

‘See?’ she said, looking around for another bottle. ‘You’re still angry about it. You can’t hide it.’

‘Not as angry as I am about what you did, Jess.’

Before she could stop him, he started to walk about the room, inspecting the dim corners as he went.

‘Stop doing that.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Snooping about like that.’

‘You invited me back here. I’m just taking a look around.’

‘Well don’t.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s making me ill, that’s why!’

Her brother circled the sofa where she was still perched, sitting uncomfortably on the arm. The fact that he was even there – after all these years – was surreal to her.

‘You expect me to read about you in a national paper and not come after you, is that what you’re saying?’

‘What’s it got to do with you?’

‘What’s it got to do with me? That’s exactly where you’re wrong. And that’s why we’re different, Jess. You have no idea how much it *is* to do with me. How shameful it is to my family to read in a newspaper that my own sister is attacking women on the train for no other reason than they speak a different language. How shameful it is to see a known racist thug defend her on Newsnight. Do you have any idea how awful that is to me? To see my sister sink so low?’

‘So it’s all about you now is it? Why don’t you just fuck off back to London on the next train. Go and fuck your wife, and enjoy your big happy life, and stop telling me how to live mine.’

‘I wish I could, Jess. I really wish I could, but we’re not finished here.’

‘Yes we are. And stop fucking walking around! It’s doing my head in.’

He came to a halt, and stood in the same place where he’d begun.

‘It wasn’t that hard in the end.’

‘What wasn’t?’

‘To find you.’

‘You got lucky, that’s all.’

‘*Stone J.* That’s pretty obvious isn’t it?’

‘If you say so.’

‘I wasn’t sure it was you at first. But it was the little things gave you away. The little details only you and I would know.’

‘And now you’re here, and I feel like a mug. Big deal.’

‘You’ve got some nerve.’

‘So have you, Stuart, so have you.’

‘Do you like humiliating yourself?’

‘What you mean?’

‘Did you like doing community service? How did it feel, knowing the whole town was looking at you? Despising you?’

‘It felt all right, actually.’

‘How would you have felt if they’d banged you up? Because that’s what’s going to happen. That’s where all this is heading.’

‘Just get out, Stuart. Go –’

‘I’m afraid I can’t.’

‘Stop fucking saying that!’

‘The reason I can’t is because of what you said in the chatroom.’

‘What I said? I said loads of things. Why don’t you just come out with it?’

‘Because of what you said, Jess, about *doing something* – about doing someone real harm. That’s why I can’t just walk away from you and that shitty sewer you spend your nights swimming in.’

She shrugged, tired of it all now. If she was honest, she was tired and pissed enough to fall asleep. The room was spinning and her head felt as if it was about to fall from her shoulders.

‘I don’t want your pity.’

‘Too late for that, I’m afraid.’

‘You always was a cunt, Stuart. Nobody ever tell you that?’

She saw he was struggling to keep his cool. He always kept his cool in their old rows. It was always her who lost it. He used to drive her mad, just like he was now.

‘I’m afraid it’s my duty to come after you if you say you’re going to commit a criminal act.’

‘So it’s your duty now, is it?’

‘Yes, it damn well is. And I’m not leaving until you tell me what you’re planning to do.’

‘I don’t ‘ave to tell you nothing.’

He took a step towards her. ‘Yes, you do, Jess. I recorded our last conversation. I took screen grabs of the last things you said.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘Try me. I might be lying, but then would I come all this way if I was?’

‘You’re stupid enough, yeah.’

‘Who is *she*, Jess?’

‘Who’s who?’

‘The woman you talked about. The woman who you said you were going to do in?’

‘Why’s it so important to you?’

‘Are you out of your fucking mind? If you’re going to harm another human being, of course it’s important to me. It’s my duty to stop you!’

‘What – you’re going to go to the police and tell on me?’

‘If I have to.’

‘Won’t do yer no good. It’s just talk. Just *intention*. They don’t lift a finger unless you do something. You forget I was in court, Stuart. I had a lawyer tell me things.’

‘You’re forcing me to do this.’

‘No I ain’t... So you’re really going to shop your own sister?’

‘Not if you say now that you’re not going to do anything. That you swear on our mother’s life that you’re going to drop this stupid plan and try and make things better for yourself.’

‘Why would I do that?’

‘Because I’m your brother, Jess!’ he yelled. ‘I’m all you have in the world!’

‘Not going to happen, *I’m afraid*.’

‘Yes it is!’

He took another step towards her, so close she could see the lines on his face where long ago there had been none. She thought fleetingly of the days when they used to go shrimping together; their clear skin, eyes, voices; their excited cries. All those years ago. All gone now.

‘You’re having a fucking laugh.’

‘Do you see me laughing? This is deadly serious, Jess. If you don’t promise to forget all about it, I’ll have no option but to tell the police.’

‘Get out! Get out of my fucking flat. NOW!’

With a quick movement, he grabbed her – snatched around the shoulders and started shaking her. It was what he’d wanted to do from the start, she knew. To impose his power over her. The power he’d always had.

‘Promise me!’

‘Fuck off, Stuart!’

‘Who is she?’

‘Get the fuck off me!’

She felt her vision go blurry, as if she was about to pass out. He was shaking her like a doll; all seventeen stone of her. She never remembered him being that strong. How had he got so strong?

‘Who *is she?*’

She felt for a terrible moment that he might kill her. There was only one thing that would make him stop.

‘*Jones,*’ she managed to cry in a strangulated voice. ‘Her name’s Hartford-Jones. *Yvette Hartford-Jones!*’

And then, in the space of a second, the lights went out.

YVETTE

She was pregnant again.

They'd talked about the possibility of having a new baby for months beforehand, weighing up the pros and cons, until they finally decided to go for it. Things had been different with Stan and Amy. There'd been no hand-wringing or discussion. But other things pertained this time. She would be forty at the end of the year, and the risks were higher. Ollie had been resistant at first. It wasn't the money, or the environmental impact – the usual reasons most of their friends gave for stopping at two. It was the sheer workload of having three children when both of them were still growing their careers. Ollie had found himself a new job with the Labour Campaign for International Development and was working crazy hours; while her commitments at the VSO and Dover Council were as pressing as ever. But something had happened to her emotionally earlier in the year that she hadn't been prepared for. Quite unexpectedly, when Amy was coming up for her second birthday, she'd found herself yearning for another baby. Physically yearning – like a fresh visitation of broodiness. The thought that it was all over – that she would be saying goodbye to the profoundly magical days of early childhood forever, when she still had the capacity to try for another – was suddenly terrible. A third child would complete their family, she'd argued. They would have the large, riotous brood that neither of them had been blessed with themselves, and

which they'd always envied others for. They had the money, they were still young and vigorous, they still had their sense of humour, just about. They would regret it forever if they didn't go for it.

And yet, three long years after Amy came along, the pregnancy had proved a slog. Over the summer, she'd experienced the same morning sickness that she'd had with her other children, but for some reason she resented it now. And it seemed to be worse. She feared she might end up hospitalised with hyperemesis gravidarum, the same condition that had done for her childhood literary heroine, Charlotte Brontë. She just wanted it to be over. By early September, she was still crouched over the toilet in their tiled downstairs bathroom at Archery Square, wretched most mornings. It all seemed harder to handle with a rampaging five-year-old boy and a loquacious three-year-old girl who would hammer at the bathroom door, demanding to know when she was coming out so they could continue watching Peppa Pig together. Ollie had suggested they keep the new baby's gender unknown so it would be a surprise. But even this seemed like a bad idea. By the end of the first trimester, she experienced a fierce desire to know who was growing inside her; to know who was making her sick. She secretly wished for another girl. Boys were supposed to be easier, but the thought of another Stan charging around with an armoury of plastic swords and weaponised dinosaurs made her dizzy with exhaustion.

At least she and Ollie were still having sex. Unlike some of her friends who were married with young children, they'd never lost the thread of desire for each other, though it had been next to impossible in the days when Stan or Amy were still sharing their bed. Now they settled for quick couplings over the kitchen table while the children were at nursery; or furtive lovemaking in the dead of night, ears alert for the sounds of waking cries from across the hallway; their eyes locked as they reached climax together. She'd compared notes with her mum friends in the Hope and Lane café on Deal's High Street, and had come away

feeling privileged and lucky. The record for one mother was three years in the sex desert. But then she'd said her husband had been banished to another bedroom for most of it. A combination of tearing from the birth, his snoring and habit of wearing his socks in bed, had killed any desire in her. Yvette had never stopped fancying her husband, and he was still ardent for her. At least she hoped he was. 'Will you still lust after me even when I'm over the hill and forty?' she'd asked him one night on their Archery Square balcony, a glass of alcohol-free white wine in her hand. They'd just discovered she was pregnant again and she was feeling weepy and vulnerable. 'Of course,' he'd rumbled. 'Even more so.' 'But what about all those svelte young things at the Development Campaign? I've seen how they look at you.' 'It's because I'm not available, that's why they look. Take that factor away and they wouldn't give me a second glance.' 'Hard disagree, Oll'. It's because you're still hot, is why they look!' 'I'm an old man as far as they're concerned.' 'But seriously. When I'm a clapped-out mother of three, promise me your eyes won't wander.' He'd leant over and kissed her belly, which wasn't showing back then. 'Promise.'

But now, halfway through her second trimester, she was definitely beginning to show, and she felt impatient and resentful. She was back in the pregnancy clothes; the billowy gowns and ill-fitting jeans with stretchable waistbands. Her sleep had been disturbed too. Apart from the nightly wakings of Stan and Amy, when she did manage to get a good stretch of shuteye (as Ollie called it), she'd been visited by dreams full of people and situations from the past. One night, she'd had an intense dream of the Kenyan refugee camp – or rather, a specific woman from the camp: Esi, a mother of five, two of whom had died during Yvette's time there. She had taken to Esi from the start – there was something stoic and indomitable about her; she was the eternal mother. Esi's grief over her two lost children had been terrible, but necessarily quick: the demands of the living had been too pressing. At twenty-two, Yvette had marvelled at the woman's fortitude. It was the way of nature, Esi had told her. This, Esi

explained, was why women like her had so many children. Because not all of them would make it. The dream had hit Yvette with the force of prophecy: she'd awoken still in the camp, with its stinks of refuse, of stale cooking oil, of death. It seemed to contain a message for her: to explain why she was going through with having another baby. It was because there was strength and hope in numbers. The future could only be guaranteed by fecundity.

She'd dreamt of other situations from the past, but never quite so intensely. One night, she'd found herself back at St Paul's school, terminally late for an exam; sitting in the grand hall with no clothes on, all the other girls laughing at her. Another night, it was her first term at Oxford; the magical autumnal skies the colour of bruised aubergine at dawn, vermillion at sunset. A sense of the future held in store like some giant gift wrapped in an extravagant bow. A sense of immense promise. Her friends Mike and Piers and Justin had appeared too; confident and fresh as she'd known them then, not as the battered parents of forty they were now. Indeed, Justin had recently been diagnosed with MS, and this had cast a shadow over their ebullient country house weekends. Time was taking its toll on them all. She'd even had an erotic dream about Nicola, which had startled her. She hadn't felt that way about her old friend since they were teenagers, but now she questioned whether she'd buried these feelings for the good of them both. The memory of Nicola's velvety dream kisses had stayed with her for days, embarrassing her at work with their power to arouse.

She'd also dreamt of her deep childhood. Of her grandfather, and the halcyon days spent walking in the Chiltern Hills. Stanley's cottage had been such a refuge; an intensely vivid place for her. More so than her family house on Oakley Street. She dreamt of that too, but those dreams left her feeling anxious and empty in the morning, whereas the nights she revisited Turville, with its slow-turning windmill, were tinged with magic.

Not long after this, Yvette and Ollie found themselves at Oakley Street with Stan and Amy, talking to her father about the state of the nation. A Saturday, with the September

sunshine as hot as August on the pavements outside; streaming in through the front windows and gilding the scuffed timber floorboards.

They'd brought Stan's tepee with them, as he'd wanted to camp in his grandparents' living room. This was inspired by his favourite TV show, the adventures of an animated bunny with huge eyes called *Bing*. In one episode, Bing and his pals had gone camping in the back garden so they could see the 'billion, million stars' at night. Only Bing had got scared of a shadow outside – 'a monster?' – and they'd brought the tent indoors. This scenario Stan wanted to recreate in a Chelsea drawing room.

'It just seems like things are at a tipping point now,' Yvette said, feeling bilious as she always did in the early afternoon. She was keeping one eye on Stan as he dragged Amy into the lair of his tepee; both children squealing joyously. The children had bashed their heads on the old upright piano a couple of times, and she'd given up telling them to be careful.

'It does rather, doesn't it.'

Her father was standing in a pool of light from the window to the street, a mug of coffee in his hand. She and Ollie were both perched on the scuffed couch, the same one she remembered Mia lovingly covering with a newly washed throw every week, tucking its corners back fastidiously. With no Mia, the fabric was exposed; worn to nothing in places.

'All-out war. Global war. Progressives versus conservatives.'

'I've always hated the term progressives,' Ollie said; oatbar in his hand ready for when Stan became bored with his tent.

Her father laughed. He was as rubicund as ever – from rosacea, not heavy drinking, as everyone presumed. All that champagne, the Tory papers sniggered. 'I hate it too, but it's just another Americanism. What can we do? They've gotten away with it.'

‘Isn’t it strange though,’ Yvette continued earnestly, raising her voice over the yells of Stan and Amy, ‘that the coalitions are the same all over the world? On one side you have all the graduates, the working class, ethnic minorities, liberals and the young –‘

‘And on the other, you have nationalists without degrees,’ her father interrupted impatiently, ‘and the old. And those who think, like Thatcher, there’s no such thing as society. It’s a stuck record. But you have to remember those divisions were always there. What’s happened over the last couple of years has just brought them to the surface.’

Her father had recently written a long cover-story piece in the *New Statesman* on just this subject.

‘Thank God for Corbyn,’ Yvette said, knowing full well this wouldn’t be happily received. The current Labour leader was too socialist, even for her father. There were other factors there, she knew, in his dislike of the man. The anti-Semitism that Corbyn had allowed to run out of control within the party, with the pro-Palestine lobby using their hatred of Zionism to mask the oldest racism. It didn’t help that Corbyn had allowed himself to be photographed next to grinning Hamas terrorists, men who thirsted to throw Jews into the sea.

‘He hasn’t got a hope in hell. Not against the Johnson juggernaut.’

‘I knew men like Johnson at Oxford,’ Yvette said quickly. ‘He’s a bluffer. He’ll be found out soon. You just wait – if there’s an election, he’ll fall hard. You can’t tell me the country won’t see sense and vote for a fairer society. Their concerns are public services, the NHS and reversing a decade of austerity.’

Her father finished his coffee, placing the cup carefully on one of Stanley’s walnut occasional tables. He shook his head at what Yvette knew he considered her political naivety. ‘You forget that I actually worked with Johnson when he was a so-called journalist in the nineties. He’s a much nastier piece of work than the amiable Latin-quoting front suggests.’

There's no real charm or charisma, just a black hole. He's lazy and loyal to no one but himself and his own ambitions. If there is an election – and let's hope to God there is to get Brexit off the table – then he'll do everything in his power to game it his way. He'll convince the country they want an old Etonian at the helm.'

'He already is,' Ollie cut in. 'Gaming it, that is. What's the latest on the legality of the parliament situation?'

'The prorogation? It's almost certainly illegal. And he almost certainly lied to the Queen. And the House too. Times were when lying to the House was a resigning offence. Not anymore.'

'What's the likely outcome?'

'He'll be told to cease and desist by the courts.'

Ollie looked over to the tepee, where Stan had begun to pull his sister's hair. 'Corbyn will go to town on him at PMQ's.'

'The trouble with Corbyn's Labour party,' her father began, 'is that they don't know whether they want to trash capitalism completely, or just reform it –'

At that moment, Yvette's mother came in, a glass of something in her hand; elegant as ever in a Liberty dress and pearls. Over the past couple of years her hair had turned from dove grey to an Arctic white.

'A bit early for a sundowner, mother?' Yvette said pointedly.

Her mother smiled. 'The nights are drawing in, my dear. Haven't you noticed? Now –' she looked across to the tepee and the ongoing anarchy inside it. 'What's all this dreadful racket? I was trying to rest and I all can hear are the shrieks of children.'

'That's what you sign up for with children, I'm afraid,' Yvette said, feeling suddenly very sick indeed. 'Noise and energy and life.'

‘Well you never shrieked like that. Not as far as I can remember. If that’s what you call life, count me out.’

Ollie glanced at Yvette. *Well, how would she know?* They’d had this conversation many times. While Ollie’s mum had been present through every day of his childhood, Yvette’s had hardly been there for hers at all.

Her mother went and settled herself in a Queen Anne chair, shading her eyes from the intense sunlight still penetrating the room. Yvette always imagined she seated herself as far away from Ollie as she could, as if she might catch something. ‘Are you staying for dinner, darling?’

‘Ah, we have that thing, don’t we?’ Ollie chipped in. There was the usual terror in his eyes of spending too much time with her parents.

‘The thing? Oh, yeah,’ Yvette turned. ‘The *thing*. We have to get back for the evening, I’m afraid.’

‘If you wish,’ her mother said, disgruntled. ‘I had Mel order in some Dover sole from Harrods. Super-fresh. It seems a shame to put it in the freezer.’

Mel was Melike, the housekeeper, and Mia’s replacement; a Turkish woman in her fifties, but nowhere near as efficient or likeable.

‘That’s very kind of you, but I don’t think Dover sole with butter and chives is what three and five-year-olds eat, do you?’

‘Well *you* certainly did at that age! I’m sure of it. Please stay.’

As if to prove Yvette right, Stan poked his head from the tepee’s flaps and said excitedly: ‘Mum, mum. Can we have star-sandwiches now? With peanut butter?’

In the *Bing* episode he loved, they’d all eaten sandwiches in the shape of a star for supper. Behind him came the sound of Amy wailing. His hair pulling had had the inevitable effect.

She glanced briskly at Ollie. Time to go.

‘Thank you, mother, but I don’t think it’s the best plan at the moment.’ She got to her feet, clutching her swollen belly. ‘And feeling like I do, I can’t see myself eating anything at all. In fact, if no one minds, I’m just off to be sick.’

Two weeks later, in the low glow of the Archery Square kitchen, Yvette sat around the big, battered pine table with Ollie and Sunny Chakraborty. Her father’s prediction had been proved correct: the suspension of Parliament had been pronounced illegal by the Supreme Court, and the formidable Lady Hale had told the country, in a televised hearing, why it amounted to an unconstitutional coup.

Yvette had thrown a dinner party to celebrate, and an hour earlier the kitchen had been packed with all their friends – or at least those who could get a babysitter – while their own children slumbered upstairs. By ten pm, it was just the three of them left; the table a chaos of wine bottles, flickering candles, and the remains of Ollie’s fennel and aubergine paella, a dinner-party favourite that never let them down. The aroma of deep-roasted vegetables still filled the room.

‘That spider brooch, though,’ Sunny said, lifting a glass of Ollie’s finest malt to his lips. ‘Unbelievable. Simple, but so, so effective.’

To Yvette’s delight, Lady Hale had delivered her verdict with an outrageously large tarantula brooch pinned to her formal court gown, adding to the impression that she was an avenging arachnoid, striking terror into the hearts of those who imagined they were above democratic law.

‘I’ve added a spider to my Twitter profile,’ Yvette said, a smile of satisfaction on her face. ‘It’s the latest thing, don’t you know.’ She felt physically well for the first time in weeks. Perhaps the Supreme Court’s ruling had something to do with it, she didn’t know. Her

last scan had been exemplary – despite her morning sickness, the baby was developing fine. She'd half wanted them to tell her she had to spend some time in hospital, just to get away from the daily mayhem of juggling two young children and a full-time job.

‘And so eloquent.’ Sunny continued. ‘The suspension was unlawful because – and I quote – *it frustrated and prevented the ability of parliament to carry out its constitutional functions without reasonable justification*. What could be clearer than that?’

‘My favourite part,’ Ollie said, ‘was when she told old Boris that his advice to the Queen was void and of no effect. I bet that shrivelled his Etonian nuts.’

‘Lying to your Queen,’ Sunny shook his head. ‘Imagine your youthful ambitions for power coming to that. From lying to your parents to lying to your monarch. It’s just a game to him, politics. That’s the difference. There are no real people to him, just pawns in a big chess match. He has no idea of the reality of life lived in Wigan, Humberside, Glasgow.’

Yvette jumped in, warming to the theme. She even imagined the bottle of alcohol-free white wine she’d demolished at dinner had made her drunk. ‘He’s got to resign now. Everyone’s calling for it. Not just Corbyn but the Lib Dems too.’

‘What scares me is how someone so openly racist could get elected.’

‘That’s the point,’ Ollie cut in, ‘he wasn’t.’

‘You see?’ mused Sunny. ‘I forget so quickly! And that’s what they want, of course. One outrage after another, so we become forgetful, too weak to resist. It’s blitzkrieg tactics.’

‘It’s the public who amaze me more,’ Yvette went on. ‘How they think he’s so cuddly and lovable smart and all the rest. How could they like anyone who called black people wide-grinning piccaninnies. Or hijab-wearing Muslim women letterboxes?’

‘Because we live in a racist country,’ Sunny declared. ‘We always did. It’s only now that people’s true colours are beginning to show.’

He finished his whiskey in a single gulp, prompting Ollie to offer the bottle again. He put his hand over the glass. 'You know, I really shouldn't.'

Since Sunny's divorce had been finalised he'd taken up drinking; quite a step, Yvette thought, for a man who'd never touched a drop in his life. His tippie was whiskey, and he'd ignored the wine all evening, until the bottle of malt had made its appearance.

'Are you sure?' Ollie said. 'This is our night. It belongs to us. It might be the only victory we get.'

'Don't say that!' Yvette cried, clutching her stomach. In the past few days it seemed she'd very definitely turned from a woman who might be getting fat into a pregnant woman.

'No, I really should be going soon. Though, if there's any of your excellent chocolate cake left, I'll have a slice.'

Yvette laughed. 'Of course. You know I didn't make it, don't you?'

'I know you can't boil an egg, Vet,' chuckled Sunny. 'You don't need to tell me that.'

'Thanks. I can do toast, though.'

Ollie stared at Sunny. 'Don't believe her, my friend. She can burn any bread to cinders just by looking at it.'

She leant over the table and cut Sunny a slice of Ollie's rich, mountainous cake. 'How are your two doing?'

The subject of Sunny's two children was delicate since he'd separated from his wife a year ago. Although, as he always told her, they were old enough to handle it. He'd had kids at the correct age. His offspring were almost grown up, with one about to leave for university, the other about to graduate.

'They're fine,' he managed to say, his cheeks hamster-like with cake.

'I'm glad to hear it!'

‘Children of divorce are never fine,’ Ollie said. ‘No matter what their age. I should know.’

‘But your case was different,’ Yvette said gently. ‘Your dad ran off with a younger woman. Sunny’s committed no such crime.’

Sunny finished his mouthful. ‘They’ll get over me and their mother behaving like infants soon enough, painful though it is. They’ve been the mature ones in all this. In some ways, it feels more like they’re our parents than the other way around.’ He gestured towards the whiskey bottle and said, ‘Go on then.’

Ollie refilled his glass; the liquid a pristine apricot colour in the candlelight.

‘I can’t imagine Stan and Amy ever becoming our parents.’

‘Well don’t get divorced! Then you’ll never have to find out.’

‘But seriously,’ Ollie said, pouring another measure for himself. ‘We have to consolidate this victory. Push for an election. There’s only a month before we crash out without a deal. Utterly unbelievable.’

Sunny sat back contemplatively. ‘It is, it is... We’re in the endgame now. Something’s got to give. A year ago it seemed like there were five options for the country. A no-deal Brexit, a soft Brexit, a hard Brexit with a hard northern Irish border, a second referendum, or an election. Now the only option appears to be the first – the suicidal one.’

‘How did we get to this?’ Yvette shook her head, listening for the stirrings of Stan or Amy from the floor above. ‘From the Olympics ceremony seven years ago. That joyous celebration of diversity! That was this country’s real achievement.’

‘When I think back three years, the one image I see is of that flotilla of ships.’ Sunny continued. ‘Do you remember that? A few days before the referendum. Farage and his mob taking those dinghies up the Thames, with his megaphone and damn Union Jack. That struck the note we’re still hearing. The ludicrous idea that it’s the little people like him against the

elites. It was the imagery that did it. The little ships against the big enemy. Dunkirk. The Armada. D-Day. He wanted to evoke England's Imperial past. Victory in the face of impossible odds.'

'And now it's come down to reclaiming our old blue passports,' said Ollie. 'What a shitshow.'

'Yes,' said Sunny, warming to his theme; the whiskey working on him. 'That's part of it too. The crucial symbolism. The irony is that it was the UK who voted for the damn purple passports in the first place. Just about everything they blamed on the EU was in fact down to a decision taken by the UK. You name it. Unlimited immigration? Our fault it happened. We fucked up our own country without the help of Europe. Was it their decision to let wages stagnate, to decimate the industrial heartlands of the north? To give CEOs massive bonuses after the banks had failed? To smash the health service? Close down police stations, libraries and schools? None of that was the EUs decision, but they'll have you believe it was.'

'Well it's the oldest trick in the book,' Yvette said, thinking, as she often did recently, of Stanley and his books. 'Blame everything on a monster outside the door. Look at Soviet Russia and how they demonised capitalism and freedom. Or the US with the Middle East, and so on.'

'The ironies are never-ending!' Sunny almost shouted. 'The wrongness of it all! The fact that hedge-funders and millionaire owners of newspapers define themselves as somehow enemies of the elite. How did that come about? Astonishing. Just as with telling us suspending parliament had nothing to do with the Brexit debate. They expect us to fall for a new pack of lies each day, like we're children. And you know what, they know *we know* they're lying, but they don't care. It's just the way political discourse has gone over the last three years. Bullshit is the new normal.'

‘It’s more dangerous than that,’ Ollie said. ‘There’s the whole blood and soil thing on the rise. The nostalgia for empire. Death threats against black and Asian MPs.’

Yvette looked nervously over to her husband. She hoped very much they weren’t about to have that argument again.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Sunny impatiently. ‘But we must never forget this didn’t have to happen. The referendum was funded with dodgy loot. The Russians were involved. The campaign was run on lies. How did a first-past-the-post vote settle the future of a nation? Our *children’s* futures, more importantly. The referendum was only ever advisory. How the hell did advisory come to mean *binding*? Even the Tories can’t tell us that Brexit will benefit the economy. And look what we’ve got now – a nation more divided than at any time I can remember. We used to be a tolerant and peaceful nation – racism notwithstanding – but now everyone’s against everyone else. Young versus old. Graduates versus those without degrees. The metropolitans versus the good old country folk. The somewheres versus the anywheres. Now we have far-right thugs around every corner. And you know what? We’re losing this battle because we turned the other cheek. We appeased fascism again. We never lifted a finger against them.’

‘Apart from a couple of well-aimed milkshakes.’

Sunny laughed. ‘Yes, okay. The sight of Tommy Robinson covered in gloop has certainly delighted me. But the point I’m making is that the enemy is a much nastier, tougher beast than we’ve been prepared for. They are sharks to our minnows.’

‘We might still get another referendum,’ Yvette offered hopefully.

‘There will be another People’s March, that’s for sure,’ said Sunny, ‘Before the October deadline. But really – if two have failed already, what are the chances?’

‘Hope dies last,’ said Ollie, stroking his beard, the candlelight dancing in his eyes.

‘Well it’s their worst fear, that’s for sure. Because they know voters have changed their minds! What was the latest poll? Two-to-one for remaining. But no, they say – we have to honour the will of the damn people. We’re throwing away a hard-won European peace, trading benefits, open borders, prosperity all for a stupid stunt – one, if you remember, that only happened in order to shore up a Tory leader against his own party’s dissenters.’

Ever the pragmatist, Ollie said: ‘But what can we really do now – in practical terms?’

Before Sunny could answer, Yvette jumped in, ‘Keep doing what we’re doing. Never let up the pressure. Nationalism has never ended well, historically speaking. They’re on the wrong side of history.’

‘I’m glad you’re so certain,’ Sunny said despondently. ‘You know, I was going to suggest earlier that we give up on the campaign.’

Yvette was stunned by this remark. The drive to remove Uncle Mack’s grinning blacked-up face from the seafront had become a sore point between her and Sunny recently. The campaign had stalled over the past two years, and seemed mired in too much bureaucracy to ever be successful. But abandon it totally?

‘I can’t believe you really want to wind it up!’

‘We’ve expended too much effort on it already. Do you really think it will make a difference?’

‘If we get rid of it? Yes, I do, as a matter of fact!’

Ollie watched the two of them carefully. ‘Let’s keep our voices down a little.’

In a quieter tone, Sunny said: ‘It just feels tired. Worn out. We would have won by now if we were ever going to win. We should direct our energies elsewhere.’

Yvette was incensed, and she struggled to keep her voice down. For the first time, she felt the baby give a very definite kick from within. ‘Sunny, I’m never going to give up. I’m

not going to stop until that damn plaque is broken into small pieces, along with all the other monuments to racism, empire and slavery.'

'I'll drink to that,' said Ollie, raising his glass.

'So would I,' Yvette laughed throatily, deflating the tension rising in the room. 'If only I bloody well could.'

It was the air she remembered the most. The freshness of the morning country air, especially in autumn, when breathing in would pinch your nostril hairs and make you slightly dizzy. Like inhaling a draught of life itself.

She was back walking the hills of her childhood and it was glorious. The Chilterns, just above Turville, where her grandfather had lived in his cottage. An unmatched Sunday morning in early October. At the last moment, she'd booked a house for a weekend so she could bring her Oxford friends together after almost two years apart. They were with her now, their collective children stumbling or running down the gradient of dead wood and fallen leaves; the birches soaring above in all their autumn grandeur.

How she had missed this! How she needed it; needed it vitally, for her soul to feel alive. She'd missed the squelch and crackle of dead leaves underfoot. The frost on berries she couldn't name. The yews rearing from ditches, ancient and rotund. And the colours: a symphony in mustard, amber, russet, mauve and brown.

There were fourteen of them in total, including their kids. It was as if they were some kind of bizarre search party, though all they were in search of was the invigorating air after the usual Dionysian night before. Behind her were Ollie with Stan and Amy. Ahead were

Piers with his wife in her orange Hunter wellies, and their two charging boys of eight and ten. Further ahead still – down on the valley floor, just dots in the distance – were Nicola and Justin; the glint of his silver-topped cane visible in the early sunshine. His MS had become more severe, and he'd arrived on the Friday night without his wife, full of woes. He'd told them he might have to give up his consultant practice in Edinburgh, depending on which way his illness went. He was a medic, he'd insisted, and knew full well what was in store for him. He didn't have children, and his wife often stayed away from their weekends, finding it all too painful. Nicola, by contrast, was thriving. She'd somehow become the *bête noire* of English letters, and divided her time between New York and Dublin ('Anywhere but London with all those phoney pricks!'). Her children were teenagers now, and she relished her life as a *femme libre*; having many affairs, all of which would end up in her next book, she promised them with a wicked laugh.

Walking steadily next to Yvette was Mike, her oldest confidante and ex-lover. His wife Jill and their twin girls – now twelve – were lingering behind to identify wildflowers and mushrooms, and he was talking to her about how amazing it was they'd all managed to find a window in their busy schedules to meet.

'I can't believe Nicola made it over here. Incredible. It's so great to see she's finally making a living at something she loves.'

'Why is it so incredible?' Yvette nudged him good-naturedly. 'She's always made some kind of living from her writing. She already had an agent at Oxford if you remember.'

'Yes. Jammy cow. I keep meaning to show her my novel.'

'Don't tell me you've written one too?'

'Hasn't everyone?'

'I haven't! As if I had the time.'

Mike was wearing a green Barbour jacket; the type, she shuddered to admit, favoured by Farage and his country crew. He'd been made a Silk the year before, and had drifted even further to the right, though they made it a rule never to discuss politics. She imagined he'd gained in gravitas now he was a QC. It was hard to think of him as the milk-cheeked student of their first term together; harder still to think she had lost her virginity to him. Yet there was never a scintilla of embarrassment between them – although there was plenty between Justin, Piers and Nicola, who'd once been in a tortured ménage à trois that seemed almost comical now. She knew she was among her oldest friends; the people she felt most relaxed around. It was why she'd booked the house in the first place; not just to revisit her childhood haunts. It was so important, she'd told them at dinner, that they all stay in touch as life flung them in different directions.

'What I meant was,' Mike back-pedalled, 'Nicola's famous now. She doesn't have to hang out with the likes of us.'

Yvette smiled. 'I think the reason she came in the end was the house.'

The country pile Yvette had rented was a kitsch monster. Booked at the last moment for a knock-down-price after a cancellation, it came replete with ten bedrooms, a medieval dining hall, a cinema in the basement, poker tables and a grand piano. Its centrepiece – the pinnacle of *mauvais goût* – was a coffee table of majestic length, whose plane of smoked glass sat upon the limbs of a luscious reclining Venus.

'It's Justin I really worry about,' Mike went on. 'He seems so ... defeated.'

'We're all worried about him, Mike. But what can we do? Except be there for him.'

'Maybe Nicola will cheer him up...Maybe they'll even get back together.'

'That won't cheer him, trust me. And anyway, he's married.'

'But how happily?'

A branch snapped pleasingly underfoot as she stepped on it. ‘How happy is any marriage?’

‘You guys seem to be doing okay.’

‘We are. We are... Though just lately things have been immensely stressful.’

‘The baby?’

‘Yes. And the rest.’

‘The rest?’

Yvette had told Mike before about the anonymous death and rape threats she’d received as a vocal Labour councillor. She’d thought that as a barrister he might be able to advise her. She’d come away with the impression that he rather felt she’d brought it all on herself by being so outspoken. But since the summer, the threats had got worse: more personal, more definite, more damaging to her mental health. She’d didn’t want to spoil the pristine morning, but felt compelled to confide in Mike.

‘I think I’ve got a stalker.’

‘You’re joking. Who? An old flame?’

‘Mike. This is serious.’

He was listening to her with his full attention now; in the pose of the prosecuting counsel; his head canted at a slight angle.

‘Have they approached you? Physically, I mean?’

‘No. Up until now, it’s just been anonymous trolling – online rape and death threats, the usual horror show. But letters started turning up –’

‘What kind of letters?’

‘Anonymous letters full of hate with terrible pictures. There was one with a bottle of acid, and a note saying they were going to ruin my face for life. Another with a machete

saying I was going to get it like Jo Cox, and another saying they were going to kill me with a handkerchief of Novichok. There was even one with a picture of a dead foetus.'

Mike flinched. 'My God, why was that?'

Yvette realised she'd unconsciously began to hold her stomach with her right hand, protecting the growing life inside her. 'Because I campaigned for abortion rights in Ireland recently. This time the note said they were going to harm my baby.'

'That's appalling... So they know you're pregnant.'

'They know I'm pregnant, yes. So somebody's watching me, as I haven't put anything up on social media yet.'

'Have you gone to the police?'

They'd talked about the inefficiency of the police before when it came to threats against politicians and councillors, and she'd always felt as if Mike was defending them rather than taking her side. Perhaps it was a default stance; given his job, she didn't know. 'Yes, of course. I've handed over everything. And they've given me the usual line that they're at full stretch and can't do anything until something happens. I mean, how much worse does it have to get before they step in?'

'Legally, they can't act unless they can identify the individual sending you stuff. Then he can be jailed under the Malicious Communications Act. The threat to kill carries ten years. But it's notoriously difficult to prove in court.'

'Yes, yes, I know that, but it gets worse.'

'How so?'

'There's been a few times when I've felt like I've been followed. On the way to nursery with Stan in the morning, or walking home from the station. Or that the house is being watched. Some nights we're sitting there on the sofa, completely flaked, telly on, and I'm convinced I've seen someone at the window.'

The fear that someone was watching the house was more disturbing than the letters, Yvette had realised. They'd stopped sitting on the balcony since the night in early summer when she'd told Ollie not to desert her after she became a harassed mother of three.

'What does Ollie think about it?'

Yvette laughed, 'Oh, Christ, he wants me to convert his study into a panic room and have panic buttons all over the house. You know what he's like. The only thing we've done is put another bolt on the front door.'

'So you haven't changed your behaviour patterns, not substantially?'

Yvette was about to agree with him, but found she couldn't. 'Actually, yes. Whenever I go into London, I wear flat shoes now, just in case I have to run from an attacker on the way home. Or if I'm on a tube platform, I stand well back from the edge, just in case someone pushes me over. And I've been asking either Ollie or a male colleague to come along to my monthly surgeries.'

Ollie had been only too happy to oblige, but Sunny had made a big fuss, saying she was betraying her feminist principles.

'It's just become so much worse this year, now that the country is hellbent on committing this absurd act of self-harm.'

'You mean Brexit?' Mike asked defensively.

She realised she'd broken their rule of talking politics and swiftly changed tack. 'It's starting to make me ill, Mike. My eczema is back. I mean, I haven't got time to be depressed, but it's taking its toll. The worst thing is that Stan is old enough now to know something's wrong. He got really upset when he saw us fitting the extra lock, asking why we needed it. He keeps picking up my phone and trying to scroll through my Twitter feed. I really don't want him to see any of that.'

Yvette looked around to see that Ollie and their children were now with Mike's twins, charging up the gradient as the valley floor rose again. Somewhere hidden, a wood pigeon called – four times, equal in length, immensely soothing. The sound of her childhood. It seemed almost sacrilegious to be discussing her recent trials in such a place.

'I don't know how you live with all this, Yvette,' Mike said, waving to his wife who was almost at the top of the slope. 'You're braver than all of us.'

'Not braver than Justin, that's for sure.'

'I think this stalker will make themselves known to you sooner or later. Then you can have him arrested.'

'Thanks, that's just what I'm worried about.'

'You know what I mean. I'm afraid that's the way the law works. It helps nobody.'

Yvette was feeling the strain as they walked up the hill. The familiar sensation of carrying another body inside her own; the extra weight somehow different from lugging heavy shopping bags. It was integrated with you. The baby was an extra you, growing until you could sustain the state of two-in-oneness no longer.

'It just feels we're going back into the dark ages. Twenty years ago politicians might have received a few sexist comments in the Commons, but nothing worse. Every woman I've spoken to in politics feels incredibly vulnerable right now. It's the misogyny that's in the mix – just revolting stuff you'd wouldn't believe –'

'I can believe it, trust me. There was a case a few years back where I had to go through reams of it.'

She felt the ghost of Stanley very close and present. His way of putting everything in the long perspective. 'I mean, the first female MP Nancy Astor was jeered when she took up her place in the chamber. She had to literally push past her male colleagues when she took up her seat. Then there was a period of liberal tolerance –'

‘Blair’s Babes, yeah I remember.’

‘No, Mike, that wasn’t tolerance. That was the opposite.’

‘I was joking. Sort of.’

‘But my point is that things have gone backwards now. The worst that can happen is that no women will enter politics at all in the future. That we’re all too scared. That we feel it’s too dangerous, too much of a struggle. We could go into industry and get paid twice as much for half the grief.’

‘But you’re an example, don’t you see?’

‘How am I an example?’

‘By sticking it out. By being a woman in politics who’s not scared. By not being cowed.’

They were nearing the top of the hill now; the others waiting for them twenty feet ahead. Looking up, she saw for the first time the high sails of the windmill. Black close up, they always looked lighter in the distance. They were turning stoically behind a stand of birches. The sight of it eased her heart. Such a familiar, comforting landmark. She’d felt they were getting a little lost earlier, and now she knew where she was at last.

‘Thanks, Mike. I didn’t say I wasn’t scared, but I’ll remember you said that.’

She was walking again, but this time amongst crowds and tumult. Amidst the massed ranks of the faithful; her ears sore from the bells, whistles and clanking saucepans in the air around her. The People’s Vote Movement had mobilised for the third time – a last desperate stand to call for a second referendum before the Halloween deadline. They were a million strong. And this time there’d been no downsizing of the numbers by the Met or Tory trolls. As Yvette and her companions reached the bottom of Whitehall, she looked around in awe. There might be two million on the streets for all she knew. Five. Ten, even. She didn’t know what such

numbers looked like. It was an incredible turnout, and she was euphoric to be among them again.

She'd brought Sunny with her from Kent, and they'd hooked up with Tom from Hope not Hate and Phil from Stand up to Racism in Hyde Park. She'd left Ollie and the children at home. Too dangerous to bring them, he'd said, and for once she agreed. He'd argued she should stay home too. Perhaps mindful of not coming on like some controlling husband, he'd been subtle in his persuasiveness. Sure, she should be free to move around the world as a pregnant woman and work up until her due date, he'd argued, but the march might put an intolerable strain on her and the baby. Plus there might be violence again. He'd even tried telling her that the weather forecast threatened rain. And it was true she'd seriously considered staying in Kent. Apart from the threats to her life, over the past weeks she'd become weary of Brexit and the great national convulsion the country was having. Most people had wearied of it after a few months, but she seemed to have an unnatural tolerance for the Brexit drama. For three years, the news had been like an addiction; one she'd have to feed by scrolling through Twitter every five minutes and making sure she never missed Newsnight. But just lately she'd become jaded. The same thwarted negotiations; the same questions and answers; the same hatreds and poisonous debates. She realised the whole carnival of fools was making her feel powerless, anxious and angry. She'd become sick of the same faces; the Tories and their advisors, the Edwardian anachronism of Rees-Mogg, and his horrible complacent certainty that leaving the EU would somehow benefit the country. Just lately, instead of listening to Brexit commentary on Radio 4 she'd turned the dial to R3 and basked in music instead. Johnson had put forward a last-minute withdrawal bill, and she felt no urge to find out how it might all end. The country felt doomed anyway. Then something turned in her. The catalyst was a Remain protester, seen by accident on a news report she was just about to turn off, explaining to his young son that democracy doesn't just happen, *you*

have to fight for it. She thought immediately of her grandfather, who had said the exact same words to her when she was a child. Then she thought of that other Stan, her son, and the world they had brought him into. And of Amy, also, and her unborn child. When she boiled everything down, the vote to remain in the EU had really been a fight against the notion that certain people were more grounded in the country's blood and soil than others. When she remembered this crucial fact, she knew she had to go. She'd been on the other two marches and nothing would stop her joining the third.

Which didn't mean she wasn't scared. As the crowd bottomed out into the great arena of Parliament Square, she suddenly felt immensely exposed and vulnerable.

'This is just incredible!' Sunny yelled, turning to her excitedly.

'The best ever,' she hollered back, attempting to disguise the uncertainty in her voice.

'They can't ignore us now!'

If she could have held Sunny's hand without embarrassment, she would have done. Instead, her right hand was placed firmly over her stomach as she was jostled sideways. They had momentarily lost Tom and Phil in the throng, and were now surging forward towards the familiar platform where speakers would lament and lambaste the crowd.

'Are you okay?' Sunny asked, readying his umbrella. Ollie had been right. She'd felt the first spots of rain on her forehead a moment ago.

'I'm fine,' she managed, feeling quickly nauseous.

She looked up, a tactic that sometimes helped with the sickness.

Helicopters were overhead, undoubtedly filming them, and she wondered how they'd look from the air. It had become a familiar sight after the previous marches, the great avenues of SW1, with their lead roofs you rarely see; the streets below bursting with ant-like dots; a great procession covering every metre of concrete and stone; a human bolus squeezing down the intestines of power.

Another factor had forced her hand in coming along. The withdrawal bill Johnson had put forward – one that deliberately stated that the country would crash out of the EU if no agreement had been reached by Brussels – had been challenged in Parliament. Yvette had watched the bullish PM saying he'd rather be 'dead in a ditch' than not get Brexit done by October the 31st. But the democratic process was doing what it did best – imposing checks and balances on tyrants who wanted to get their way, regardless of what the people or parliament said. For the first time in forty years, since the Falklands War in fact, Parliament was sitting on a Saturday to settle the challenge. Before that, it had only sat on a Saturday in 1939, and again during Suez. This, of course, had fed Johnson's Churchillian delusions. Today had been dubbed Super Saturday, and the bill was being decided just minutes away from where they were being buffeted by the chanting crowd. An old Tory backbencher, Oliver Letwin, had made an amendment to the bill, one that would challenge the legality of leaving the EU with the current exit strategy. The PM had used the threat of a no-deal crash-out to blackmail MPs into supporting his deal. He had talked, incomprehensibly, about 'pitch-forking the incubus off our back'. The bill had felt like a coup – as had his illegal suspension of the Commons – and indeed, all around her, among the blue and gold-starred flags were passionate banners stating: *Stop the Coup. Stop the Coup. Together for a Final Say!* If Parliament voted in favour to withhold approval of the exit deal, they would have to apply for another extension, which might just prolong the agony. But with an extension came hope, and for that she was truly grateful.

'What's the time?' asked Yvette.

'Almost three. The votes will have been counted now.'

'Then tension's killing me.'

'And me.'

'Is there anything on Twitter?'

Sunny nodded to the stage. ‘They’re going to announce the result live.’

‘Where’s Phil?’

‘I don’t know. Down the front where the action is, no doubt.’

It seemed the momentum of the crowd was finally abating. They were in front of an open stage now, the rain falling hard. In a chivalrous gesture, Sunny had placed the umbrella squarely over her, allowing himself to get wet.

‘You don’t have to do that.’

‘Yes I do!’

‘Which way do you think it will go?’

She found she didn’t have to shout now. A serious, anticipatory murmur had begun among the protesters nearest to them. Young and old, black and white, everyone seemed to be represented. People had come from all over the UK to make a stand. And European nationals living in Britain too, whose status was about to be threatened. One French woman had told her earlier: ‘I came to this country on a set of rules I thought would last. And now I have been made a foreigner again!’

Yvette felt suddenly very tense as well as sick. There was a real chance the Letwin amendment wouldn’t get through parliament, which would make the march next to futile. Any chance of a second referendum would be immediately doomed if that was the announcement they were about to hear from the stage. The march would turn from a jubilant celebration to a wake in seconds. And there might be a real danger of violence. She felt hemmed in, trapped, for the first time that day. She turned around to see that a float bearing a great, floppy papier-mâché head of Dominic Cummings had arrived. The words *Demonic Cummings* was daubed under it in dripping red paint. It seemed like a bad omen.

‘The Irish will swing it,’ Sunny said, ‘you just watch.’

Yvette dearly hoped so. The Northern Irish DUP party were still in coalition with the Tories. From the start they'd been nervous that Brexit would mean a hard border with the UK, undoing years of work following the Good Friday Agreement. There was just a chance that their vote would defeat the bill.

'I wish they'd get on with it –'

'Wait,' urged Sunny. 'They're about to say something.'

A crackly voice came over the Tannoy. A direct feed to the Houses of Parliament. Yvette looked about her nervously. It felt like judgement day, with grey rain punishing the embattled faces. Three years. Three years just to get this. The fate of the country decided by a few votes.

'The Ayes to the right three-hundred-and-twenty-two ...'

'I can't bear the tension!'

'Shhh!'

'The Noes to the left... Three hundred-and-six.'

A huge roar came from the crowd. It was as if the ground had erupted beneath her. People were throwing hats and banners and umbrellas into the air.

'We did it!' Sunny yelled, turning to embrace her. 'We only went and did it! They lost and we won.'

'For once...' Yvette said, tears now running down her face. As Sunny let her go, she felt the baby kick once, twice inside her.

A chant began to arise. *People's Vote! People's Vote! Peoples Vote!*

Whistles and klaxons were being let off. She immediately had a memory of the one football match Ollie had taken her to. The sense that a crowd – an aspiration for victory – could become unstoppable once it was unleashed.

Sunny beamed at her, rain matting his hair, pouring in runnels down his face.

‘It really is Super Saturday!’

She’d never seen him so happy. Nor could she remember, over the recent tortuous months, when she’d felt so jubilant herself.

The stars were out.

A million, billion points of light reflected over the black bulge of the sea; visible from every window of Jasin's, the café at the end of the pier. These stars, Yvette liked to imagine, were the only thing making her feel less tired. The constellations had always given her a strange energy. And on a clear night like this one, there was nowhere better to go for stargazing than Jasin's.

It was six o' clock. December the eleventh; their tenth anniversary. A whole decade since she'd first heard Ollie speak in his magnetically deep voice at the interminable NCVO meeting. Where had the years gone? They'd evaporated into children, work, holidays, change.

And in the morning, the country would go to the polls.

Initially, they'd planned to get a babysitter and go somewhere swish. But neither Ollie's mother, nor the sullen teenage girl they usually used, were available. So they'd decided to take Stan and Amy to their favourite café in Deal, where they'd celebrated their wedding, and where she knew the children wouldn't complain; where they'd be satisfied with

the simple fare, halloumi wraps and pasta covered in glutinous tomato sauce. And now the four of them were sitting on the orange bucket chairs at the end of the long, timbered canteen-style room; feeling the chill of the December night, waiting for their food to arrive.

It had certainly been a tough three weeks.

There hadn't been a second referendum, and Yvette had felt this defeat like a physical blow to the body. Instead, the PM, sensing victory like a dumb hound after blood, had called a snap election. A date was set for December the twelfth. Not an unpredictable move, she knew, but one that had thrust the country unwillingly into polling-booth mode when all everyone wanted to do was go Christmas shopping, or carol singing, and sink into the familiar end-of-the-year oblivion of comfort and joy. Indeed, the strangeness of a pre-Christmas election was something that she couldn't quite get over. When had it last happened? Stanley would have known. Or her father. 'It feels like we're rehearsing a panto,' she'd told Ollie, 'when the whole country is at stake.' And it truly was. The future of the NHS, the Union with Scotland and Wales, the environment, were all on the table. Not to mention Brexit. Over the last three weeks of canvassing for Labour while heavily pregnant, she'd experienced highs and lows the like of which she couldn't remember. *That* hadn't felt like rehearsing a panto. She'd been out in the wind and rain with Sunny and the others virtually every night. Ollie had begged her not to go, but this was too important, she'd told him.

It hadn't helped that the threats against her had increased. Anonymous Twitter bots were sending her up to a thousand abusive tweets a day. The letter campaign had become a daily fact of life, with messages telling she was a traitor, and would die for betraying her country. The CPS had become involved in early November, and she'd been forced to install a panic button in the house and fix a device to the letterbox that caught the mail in explosive bags. She'd been contacted by the FTAC – the Fixated Threat Assessment Centre: an

organisation she'd previously never heard of, set up to monitor individuals who harass, stalk or threaten public figures. By the beginning of December, she felt worn down with fatigue and fury at it all. And the experience of campaigning for Corbyn had only fed her paranoia.

The single thing that had got her through was the opposition's noble cause. The cause she'd always fought for since joining the Labour Party as an ingenuous Oxford undergraduate. *For the Many not the Few* was Labour's choice campaign slogan, and she couldn't think of a better one, with its echo of Shelley's poem and its straightforward signalling. And Corbyn had set forth a radically socialist manifesto. It had surprised even her when it was announced. The scrapping of all the privatised utility companies. The binning of tuition fees. The promise to plant two billion trees by 2040. How could the country resist? Even sweeteners like the promise of free Wi-Fi or discounted rail travel were guaranteed to go down well on the doorstep. While the new PM had fought a dirty campaign, expelling journalists from the press pack, refusing scrutiny from the BBC, and at one point ('the nadir of British politics,' as Sunny had groaned) hiding in an industrial fridge to avoid questioning, Corbyn had cut a selfless, even saintly figure. Yvette had always felt his shrewd eyes and scratchy white beard were the perfect foil for the galumphing buffoon he sought to depose. Johnson had deliberately allowed the language of the far right to poison mainstream debate and now it was impossible to avoid. She knew from her own Twitter feed that the toxic soundbites he spewed in the morning would be tweeted back at her by neo-Nazi trolls the same afternoon. It had been a calculated Tory strategy, she knew, to create chaos so they could get their divisive policies through. These soundbites were intended to incite violence and hatred, and she was at the sharp end of it. To cap it all, the PM was busy gaslighting the nation. Propaganda had won over fact. Impunity over accountability. The liars and the manipulators were winning, and it all made her very tired. Even hardened journalists were

taking every line the Tories spun as gospel, pumping it back out into the news cycle, only for it to be proved a lie too late when everyone had swallowed it and moved on.

And when she had gone door to door, an extraordinary thing had happened. Far from getting the welcome she had imagined from the austerity-weary working classes, she'd had doors shut in her face. They *hated* Corbyn, they told her; despised him without reservation. Even though Johnson was a liar and a cheat and poshboy, they would still vote for him. And this from people who professed to have voted Labour their whole lives. She just couldn't understand it. Was it Johnson's flamboyant haircut; his cheeky bad boy image? Or was it the Latin-quoting in the House that got them going? The faux aura of efficiency that was merely bluster and waffle? She concluded that if you delivered something in a fruity voice with enough confidence then the masses would believe you. *Every time*. The people were being conned, and she told them so on doorstep after rainy doorstep, varying her route each time as the police had instructed, and always accompanied by at least one male chaperone.

'Fish and chips?'

The waitress was standing before them, bearing a tray overloaded with plates.

'Yay,' Amy yelped from her high chair. She was too big for one now, but it was the only way to keep her from wandering.

'No, you've got the wrap, darling.' Yvette soothed. 'The one you ordered.'

'Aw, but I wanted *fish and chips*.'

'You can have some of mine,' Ollie said, taking a plate for himself and passing the other to Yvette.

'Why are girls so *fussy*?' Stan chipped in.

'I'm not fussy!' Amy remonstrated, banging her fists down. 'I just want my fish and chips.'

The waitress smiled in strained sympathy at Yvette, placing the wrap before Amy.

‘You have two lovely girls.’

With Stan’s long hair – hair they’d barely cut since he was born – he was still being mistaken for a girl at five. Only recently had it begun to annoy him.

‘I’m not a girl,’ he yelled, squirming on his chair. ‘And where’s my pasta?!’

‘I’m sorry,’ the waitress said. ‘This must be yours.’

She set down the mini-plate before Stan, with its plastic knife and fork in a serviette.

‘Can I get you anything else?’

Before she could reply, Amy sang: ‘Ketchup! Ketchup!’

‘Ketchup, *please*,’ Ollie nudged her.

‘Can I have some ketchup *please*?’

‘Perfect.’

The waitress smiled and walked off as the children set about their food like wild animals.

‘Wow,’ Yvette said, ‘they were hungry.’

‘Or *hangry*,’ said Ollie.

‘That’s because you made us wait,’ Stan said, his mouth full of red pasta sauce. ‘And made us listen to boring talk.’

‘Hey,’ said Ollie. ‘It’s a big day for everyone tomorrow. For the country.’

‘*Boring*.’

He turned to Yvette, unwrapping his knife and fork from its napkin. ‘As I was saying, we never choose the policies, just the politicians...’

They’d discussed the in and outs of tactical voting, and which way the country would swing, for ten minutes while their children coloured in pictures of dinosaurs with crayons.

The subject seemed exhausted. As exhausted as she was. She looked around at the almost-

empty Jasin's. Just a couple of other families like theirs, toiling with children; anxious, as they were, to get them to bed without too much sugar and too many tears. The strange timber flying buttresses of the café were visible outside in the exterior lighting. Beyond that, nothing but blackness. And the infinite stars.

‘Well, I can't remember an election when the policies were so clear cut, actually. When the public had such a stark choice.’

The waitress was with them again, setting down a silver bucket of condiments on the table. As she retreated, Yvette looked down to see Ollie had already set about his fish. She was surprised to see he'd demolished almost half of it while she'd picked at a few chips. Her reliable pregnancy hunger had deserted her tonight. Probably just nerves for the following day. It hadn't escaped her attention that the day after the election would be Friday the thirteenth. The thought of five more years of Tory rule made her shiver.

‘But don't forget, Boris has taken on the role of the working man,’ Ollie said in his ironic tone. ‘I haven't seen Jeremy do that once during his campaign.’

Yvette laughed. ‘I think Jeremy's above that, darling. Thank God.’

It was true, the PM had indulged his silly dressing up habit without restraint. Over the past few weeks he'd appeared on television as a fisherman, a builder, a baker and a milkman; the last incarnation being particularly absurd.

‘Why be put on the spot by uncomfortable questions when you can dress up as a brickie and shout Get Brexit Done?!’

Stan looked up from his plate. He'd abandoned cutlery and now his fingers were Macbeth-red from the sauce. ‘This is boring, Daddy.’

‘I know it's boring. It's bored the pants off me for the last three years.’

‘Daddy said pants,’ Amy piped up.

‘Yes, but I'm sure he didn't mean it,’ Yvette smiled.

‘I did.’

‘Look,’ Amy said holding up her half-finished wrap. ‘I’ve *bited* it.’

‘Very good,’ Yvette said. ‘Keep doing that and you’ll have a full tummy.’

‘The thing is,’ Ollie continued, returning to more serious matters. ‘I’m really worried the people just want to throw in the towel. All they want is closure now.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘They just want an end to the three-year nervous breakdown Boris and May have put us through. They just want to get it done, as he keeps saying.’

‘Which is of course not what’s going to happen.’

‘Of course. But Boris has made them think leaving will be as easy as ordering an Uber.’

‘Sure, but Jeremy’s offered them an alternative.’

Ollie shook his head, his fork suspended in mid-air. ‘Has he though?’

‘Of course,’ Yvette said, mildly outraged.

‘But that’s been my point all evening. He’s only said he’ll remain neutral in any future referendum. That’s no promise at all. That’s fence-sitting *par excellence*.’

Over the years, Ollie had adopted phrases like *par excellence* from her. He’d never have uttered such words when they met.

‘So you think he’s messed it up then?’

‘Yes, I do,’ Ollie said, his eyes suddenly betraying fear. ‘I think people just want to get the whole panto over with.’

‘Daddy?’ Amy looked up. ‘What’s for pudding?’

‘We’ll have some at home. It’s very late now.’

In unison, the children sang: ‘*Awww!*’

Ollie turned to her swiftly. ‘Hey. I got you a present.’

She'd almost forgotten it was their anniversary. They only ever marked the day they first met, not their actual wedding. In fact, she'd forgotten that she'd also bought Ollie a present, something she hoped he would find funny after a conversation they'd had the previous week. They'd agreed that the Tories' policies were like a tin of baked beans, only without the beans, just the sugary sauce. Given that a tenth anniversary was all about durability and flexibility – according to the internet – and that the gifts should be either aluminium or tin, she'd carefully wrapped a tin of Heinz beans and sausages earlier.

'So did I,' she said, reaching into her bag.

Ollie took the strangely shaped gift and tore the paper off. He let out a strangled laugh. 'With mini-sausages too! That's made my night.'

'What is *that*?' asked Stan, pointing a sticky finger at the tin.

'That's a symbol of love, darling.'

He screwed up his nose. 'Ew.'

Ollie passed her his own present, and she began unwrapping it. 'I have no idea what this is.'

To her dismay, she saw it was an aluminium baking dish in the shape of a heart.

'Oh, come on! What are you trying to say, Ol'?''

'I thought it might inspire you.'

You know it's too late for me to start cooking now.'

'Look!' Amy said, tipping up her empty plate proudly. 'I've *eaten* it.'

She had indeed cleared her plate.

'Good work!'

They were all smiling now, talking over each other.

Yvette sat back, the fish and chips cold on her plate. She felt a sudden swell of warmth inside. What better feeling than this, to be surrounded by family and love on a bitter

night in December? She decided to forget all about the election, and the precipice the country found itself teetering on, and just enjoy the rest of the evening. *Que sera, sera.*

‘Is this us?’ she asked Ollie, surveying the wrapping paper and the two presents.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, is this really us?’

He smiled his big ironic smile she loved so much, even after ten years. ‘I’m afraid it is.’

‘In that case, I’m glad.’

‘So am I. Happy anniversary.’

‘You’re both mad,’ Stan said, with the certainty of a five-year-old.

‘Hey,’ said Yvette. ‘You’ll do well to be as mad as us when you get to our age. Why don’t you name some of the stars for us? Remember when Bing named the stars when he went camping?’

‘Bing is very clever,’ declared Amy.

‘And he’s only an animated bunny,’ smiled Ollie, pushing his plate into the centre of the table.

Stan turned around on his chair to face the vast starscape. Then he started pointing out the configurations he knew. ‘There’s the plough, and there’s, and there’s...’

She stared at the stars herself now, drawing down their energy. For a moment, she remembered her childhood bedroom and the constellations her father had painted there. She wondered how everything would turn out for them. All at once, she felt her family to be very small and vulnerable in the half-empty café at the end of the pier. It felt as if they were in a boat, adrift on the North Sea. Tiny specks afloat on the great endless sea of the universe; travelling who knew where.

The following morning it was raining.

At ten to nine, she set out alone for the polling station, closing the front door quietly behind her so the children wouldn't become upset that she'd gone. The plan was for Ollie to walk Stan to school – the Parochial C of E Primary, or *Proke* as they called it – and then take Amy to the Creative Minds nursery. He would vote later, while she would write her cross in the box marked Labour, then head to Deal's station and meet her chaperone, where they'd both travel together to Dover's council offices for what she expected to be a tense day monitoring the exit polls. Although she felt keenly anxious, she identified a strange confidence at her core; a warmth, as if she'd just downed a shot of whiskey. The country couldn't let her down now, could it?

Her nearest place to vote was only two minutes away, the Walmer Parish Hall on Dover Road. It was raining harder than she'd anticipated, and her first thought was that the weather would severely impact on turnout. The clear skies of the night before had been replaced by a bank of lowering grey cloud. She was glad she'd brought her umbrella as well as the crimson beret that Ollie said made her look like Che Guevara. She was wearing three layers too: her maternity dress, a padded fleece and her black duffel coat, so she felt very warm and insulated; her baby protected from the icy December air.

As she crossed the road to the pavement that ran beside the central square, she decided impulsively to go into the park for a few minutes and gather her thoughts. She had time, after all, and she wanted to centre herself for what would undoubtedly be a tough and stressful day ahead.

Once inside the heavy rain-wet gates, she felt immediately calmer. Before her were the empty courts of the Walmer Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, surrounded by the tall spires

of the evergreens. In a far corner, a man in a high-vis jacket was sweeping the black leaf mulch from the paths. She liked to think he was one of the council workers whose job and wages she'd fought so hard to protect over the past year. Maybe she had made a difference after all.

Heading towards the courts, she saw the surrounding benches were too wet to sit on, so she went and stood by the green, diamond-mesh fencing. Everything seemed to be dripping and crouched, with a low mist from the sea covering the courts; the vapour-heavy air snail-grey above her. A deep December hush was all around; the bronze handles of the locked doors glistening dully. The grass – neatly mown all year round – was soused and bare in places where the players had worn it away. She looked across to her own house, Clarence Villas, clearly visible now the copper birches had shed their leaves. She saw the balcony where they used to sit in the summer, hearing the comforting thwack of tennis ball against racket; the excited cries of children. Maybe they'd never sit there again, she thought gloomily. The idea depressed her for a moment, before she told herself, as she had done so many times recently, to be thankful for what she had. In just under eight weeks they would have a new baby. It would be a new decade too, and she allowed herself to wonder, with her umbrella up against the steady hammer of the rain, what the next ten years would hold. She hoped they would bring marvellous things. She hoped for new friends, new horizons, with the rich unfolding of family life as the children grew up around them, like saplings into trees. The baby's due date was actually the last day of January; the very day the UK was scheduled to leave the EU for good. Deeply ironic, she thought, for Amy to come along on the day of the Brexit referendum and for her third to arrive when the whole hateful process might be completed. She hoped desperately that the British public would see sense at the last moment and vote for a fairer future.

Moving off towards the park's exit, checking her watch, she wondered whether Ollie would have his usual trouble fixing the rain cover over the pushchair. She hoped her daughter wouldn't get a soaking. It had been an average morning, she reflected – or *the usual carnage* as Ollie liked to say. Another phrase adopted from her. Yvette had been awoken by Amy's voice at ten to six. The girl was standing next to the bed, holding out her mother's phone, telling her she had messages. She'd taken it, saying she'd rather not look. 'But you've got messages!' Amy insisted. Yes, she'd probably received the usual thousand notifications overnight, but she wasn't about to spoil her day before she'd had a cup of coffee. Someone sane might have switched their account to private, but she stubbornly refused to. Then she saw that all her bookmarks had been taken out of her TBR pile and thrown onto the floor. 'Oh, Amy,' she'd scalded gently, 'if you do that, darling, I'll never find my place again.' Amy had been doing this for months and thought it mighty funny. While she took her daughter off to the potty and to clean her own teeth, she heard the boom of Ollie's voice from downstairs reading a story to Stan in the kitchen; the good smell of buttered toast rising to the top landing. There had been the usual struggle to get Amy into her clothes and then away from her iPad. It hadn't helped that Stan still insisted on watching half an hour of TV in the morning, demonstrating to Amy that screens before nine am were somehow legitimate. A screaming match between the two children had been in progress as she'd put on her duffle coat, and so she hadn't been able to hug them goodbye. 'Just the usual carnage,' Ollie had said, as he always did, kissing her farewell, followed by a meaningful 'Good luck. I love you...' It had been a relief to get out of the house, if she was honest.

And now she was leaving the park by the far exit, the one that tipped you onto the busy Dover Road. It always comforted her vaguely to know that if she kept walking long enough in the right direction along that road she'd reach the White Cliffs. It was like having a secret escape route. She tried to focus on politics but found it next to impossible for some

reason. So much was at stake, it felt unreal. What the opposition had to do at all costs was hold onto the Red Wall – the barrier of traditionally Labour-held seats that began in north Wales and stretched all the way across the Midlands to the north East of England. Though many of these wards were Leave-voting heartlands, she was confident that they would never opt for an old Etonian when it came to the crunch, especially one who had made them materially worse off for the past decade. They would be crazy to do so, no matter how much they resented immigration. Inwardly, she cursed the madness of her species; of humankind, and its incessant striving for power; the stupid male urge of so-called strongmen such as Johnson and Trump to control the world. Labour’s election promises all spoke of credible change, while the Tories were essentially offering more of the same: *we get richer while you get poorer*, and then make you thank us for it into the bargain. Surely the people would see that. Of course, she knew there would be Labour losses as well as gains. Dover and Deal were expected to stay blue, but you could never tell. Maybe they were as sick of the pantomime as the rest of the nation. Only Canterbury, out of all Kent, was predicted to hold onto its Labour seat.

Waiting at the pelican crossing, she saw a small queue of umbrella-carrying people on the other side of the road. So turnout wasn’t too bad. At least for the pre-work voters. She waited for the bleeps before stepping onto the zebra and making her way to the driveway that led to the Walmer Parish Hall. Set back from the road, it was an odd-looking building; like a rural village hall, with its faux Tudor beams and deep triangular roof. As she joined the back of the queue, she saw its distinctive blue garage-style doors were thrown open, with officials briskly checking names on the electoral register. They were making quick work of the rain-sodden line of voters, and she was soon she inside, glad to be out of the wet, shaking her umbrella next to a tall, elaborately decorated Christmas tree.

She'd been inside the hall many times. When Stan was young, it had hosted mornings of Messy Play, and she smiled at the memory of the two of them flinging paint around the floor. Its long curtains were drawn now, with the fluorescent lights high in the arched ceiling throwing a clinical white glare on the faces in the queue. Ahead of her were a bank of polling booths, as well as the familiar trestle tables with the patient officials marking off names, making sure ballot papers were given out and returned to their black bins; the contents of which would determine the fate of the nation. There were two queues now, she saw, the voters split by surname: A-K, L-Z. As she joined the line on the left, she imagined she felt the baby kick; once, twice, with a renewed energy. She smiled to herself. *Not long now.*

Before she'd had chance to think any more about the baby, she became aware of a figure who didn't seem to be in either of the queues, staring at her intently. An overweight woman with short cropped hair who was now advancing quickly towards her, wearing an oatmeal hooded top. There was something about her that seemed fleetingly familiar, and she thought for a split second that it might be one of the mothers from Amy's nursery – it was so hard to keep track of them. The woman was almost on top of her now, moving quickly into her personal space. She realised at once she *had* seen this woman before, and many times. At numerous council meetings in Margate, and on the street too, loitering with a group of men usually, or sometimes on her own with a preoccupied look on her face.

'Hello,' Yvette said, 'Do I know you?'

In a split second, Yvette saw that the woman was carrying something. It took her a beat to realise the object the woman bore was a knife, held low and flat against her body, flashing in the harsh light from above. For a moment, she didn't think this was odd, as if the woman might after all be a dinner lady, or someone coming from the kitchens; the tools of her trade in her hand. Then she remembered she was in a parish hall and not a school. And

then she realised. *The pub*. It was *her*. She was the woman from the pub the night Trump won; the woman who'd whispered terrible things in her ear.

Before she could say anything further, the woman's big face was in hers, hissing two words which sounded at once like a threat and a bland statement.

'Britain First!'

And then the woman's right arm lunged out and punched her in the side.

Or at least it felt like a punch. The force of it was such that Yvette found herself reeling back and collapsing onto the sticky floor of the hall, her arm instinctively across her stomach in an act of protection.

As swiftly as the woman had appeared she was gone. And now Yvette lay on her back, winded, with a horrible, disorientating feeling of panic rising in her.

It felt as if she'd fallen a long way, even though she knew she was only on the floor. She felt as if she'd been pushed down a steep flight of stairs. There was a strange sensation that she was now in a different room – a smaller room. The sounds were different. The hum of the queue seemed amplified, like buzzing flies in her ears. Then all at once, they were muted and she was in another room again.

There were people trying to help her stand up; faces staring down at her. These faces would appear and disappear in her field of vision. Someone was asking her name over and over again, but she couldn't remember it, or couldn't say it, she didn't know which. Time was playing tricks too. Had she been on the floor for only a few seconds, or ten minutes? And why wasn't the baby kicking? She'd felt it kick a few moments ago when she was on her feet, but it had stopped. It really should be kicking. She was aware her eyes felt like stones, ponderous and heavy in her eye sockets, and she struggled to keep them open. She must keep them open, she told herself, for the baby's sake.

And when she did manage to keep her eyelids open, she saw that the polling booth to her right had become an old man who was trying to help her up. But the man was too weak, and he became a polling booth again. There was a strange numbness in her side where the woman had punched her, a sensation that couldn't decide whether it was pain or not. Everything appeared to be very far away. The proportions of her body seemed wrong; wholly incorrect. Every time she went to reach out for something – something very near – she found to her annoyance it was very far away. And why was she still on her back after so much time? Surely she should have got up by now? She craned her neck to see the distant children's paintings on the wall, the colourful daubs of dinosaurs and jungles and volcanoes, and they comforted her for a second. And why was she lying on a spreading carpet that felt warm to the touch, when a second ago she had been standing on cold linoleum? She craned her neck around again to see this carpet was in fact a deep red colour, almost black and widening around her by the second. It was only the effort of moving her neck that caused the pain to come – an instant, slicing, breathtaking pain worse than any she'd ever experienced. Worse, almost, than childbirth. It wasn't localised but all-consuming, like being ripped apart.

Then she was aware of making a noise, a shrill sound – very loud. And she really hadn't wanted to call out and trouble people. It was this sound that made more faces appear; gathering above her with their stark looks of shock; some with their hands over their mouths. And something funny was happening to time again; what a moment ago seemed like a slow-motion film, now raced like a DVD on fast forward. She was bombarded with images; some, weirdly enough, from her childhood. She saw with piercing clarity her old doll's house with its strange frying pan carpet beater. Then the steaming bowls of rice Mia used to make, sitting in a row on their big pine dining table, waiting to be eaten. The fluffiest, softest rice in the world. How did she get rice that fluffy? And underneath this zoetrope of the past, a single pressing anxiety. *The baby. The baby. The baby.* She had to take care of the baby. This was

coupled by the banal thought that if she stayed on the floor any longer she wouldn't get to exercise her democratic right to vote. Someone get her up so she could at least do that!

But no one was able to get her up. No one, it seemed, had the strength to pull her from the black abyss into which she was steadily sinking. Like a pool of black tar, it was sucking her under with inhuman force. A whirlpool taking her down, down, down with an irresistible pull.

Then, just at the point when she felt she could battle its centrifuge no longer, she saw a searing flash of white light, as if a car's headlights had been turned on in her face. All was white. A snowfield filling her vision; snatching away the pain for a blissful couple of seconds until it consumed her utterly.

PART THREE

2020

STUART

Why hadn't he contacted her directly?

Why, oh why, had he put his trust solely in the police, when he'd had days, weeks – whole months – to contact this woman? Half a year to avert a tragedy in which he knew now he'd unequivocally played a significant part.

This question – so insoluble, so relentless – was unbearable to him. The question of why he'd done one thing when he could so easily have done another was so crushing that Stuart felt, in the last weeks of December, and the frigid, dead days of early January, that for the first time in his life he might suffer a complete nervous breakdown.

The sense of guilt was so strong he'd felt like flagellating himself physically. Is that what drove the penitents, he'd asked? Drove them to whip themselves or wear a hairshirt? To remind themselves of their sin continually? Over that awful Christmas week, he'd gone over the events of the summer so frequently that he felt like he was going mad. He replayed the confrontation with his sister in the squalid room so many times he thought he might have imagined it all. No, it had really happened. There was evidence. There were screen grabs of their online conversations. There were his train tickets to show he'd really travelled to Broadstairs that suffocating day in June. There was the name that Jessica had uttered, and

which he'd scrawled in his notebook; the name that had become inescapable on the front pages in the days after the dismal Tory election victory in December. The only thing that didn't exist was a crime number, because, at that stage, no crime had been committed. The crime was waiting to happen, like the day of one's own death; hidden on a calendar, devilishly patient until it makes itself known.

And the night itself? The night of his showdown with his sister? That seemed demonic in the memory too; tinged with darkness, even though night had never properly fallen; the sky a nauseous yellow, almost until the early hours. After Jessica had blurted out the name of her intended victim she'd blacked out, and he'd stood there for a long time, breathing hard; watching her prone body on the sofa. He'd even taken a sip of her vodka to calm his nerves. He wondered for a moment whether she might have had a heart attack and went to check, feeling ashamed at how he'd violently shaken the truth out of her only moments before. He felt immense pity for her in that moment, seeing her there, bloated and beached among the wreckage of her life; the tawdry room with its unwashed plates and discarded clothes; its damp corners full of fearful things. How had she sunk so low? And the words they'd said to each other were vile. They'd let each other have it, both barrels blazing. Before he'd arrived, he'd entertained the notion that they might have some grand rapprochement; that he might be able to point out the error of her ways and pull her back from the brink. He'd fully intended to show her a picture of his wife and son – indeed, he'd had it ready on his phone – but something about the spitting dynamo of hate that he found himself up against advised against it. To reveal he had a black wife and mixed-race child? After everything Jessica had said and was now planning to do? He must have been out of his mind. He'd waited for a very long time, watching her there, checking his phone to see if Efu had called and that he still had time to make the last train home. He'd even thought about calling the police there and then and making sure she was arrested, something he beat himself

up for not doing afterwards. How could he have let her get away? How he could have been so stupid?

In the end, he'd gone to her bedroom and dragged a duvet off her bed, shaking off the empty hot-cross bun packets and chocolate wrappers, and taken it to the sofa where he'd draped it over her. The sight of her under the cover almost broke his heart. It was the sight he had been greeted with every morning when they were growing up; stepping down the ladder from the top bunk of the beds to see her bulky form fast asleep under her Superheroes duvet. It took his breath away to think it had come to this. That she'd fallen so far. And the thought that he had no power over her now – had forfeited his big-brother right to influence her life, as protector or advisor – broke his heart too.

As he sadly flicked the light switch and let himself out of the flat, making his way down the dank staircase, he knew he'd have to do something that his whole body rebelled against. He'd have to go to the police and name his own sister as someone who had professed intent to murder; to perhaps be the facilitator of a prison sentence that would put her away for many years.

And yet... And yet... When he boarded the train at Dumpton Park he didn't call the police. The first thing he did was google the name Yvette Hartford-Jones. He'd never heard of her. She sounded like the editor of *Tatler*; one of those double-barrelled names he'd become so used to hearing while working in journalism that they didn't register anymore. Those names of editors and freelancers who'd never set foot on a council estate, or knew the relentless grind of working just to pay the rent but never being able to afford the gas bill. Those Sloaney good-time girls with a sliver of linguistic flair who'd made a little go a long way. Yet the moment her profile appeared on his phone, he revised his preconceptions. It transpired that Yvette Hartford-Jones was a committed Labour activist; a local councillor and a mother of two, who'd been instrumental in making life fairer for the people of her ward

over many years. It turned out she lived just down the road from Jessica in Deal. And he couldn't help but notice that she was very pretty too; blonde, with a prominent nose, and the groomed look of a newsreader. What beef Jessica had with her, he had no idea, but he was shocked that she wanted to do such an energetic, principled, well-meaning figure any damage.

When he'd arrived home, he'd awoken Kwesi by accident and had to stay in the boy's room for much of the night; calming him and trying to get him back to sleep with milk from the bottle, the only thing that would comfort him. He'd watched the first stirrings of dawn in the window from the floor; on the beanbags where he used to sit with Kwesi when his boy was a baby, curled in the crook of his arm, observing the dancing shadows of the trees outside on the wall. He'd wanted to remind himself of all that was precious in his life; all that he possessed and his sister lacked.

And then, in the morning, he'd done a terrible thing.

Or rather, it was what he hadn't done that was terrible. He hadn't told Efua what had happened and he hadn't gone to the police. Instead, he'd done further research into Yvette Hartford-Jones. He'd read everything that had been written about her and the pieces she'd written herself in various papers over the years. He'd checked out her social media accounts, her Twitter and Facebook feeds with their Corbyn-committed posts. Even her Instagram page to see pictures of her with her perfect family. He'd felt like her stalker himself. He'd wanted to get to the core of why Jessica loathed her so much; why she was planning to do her harm. It was only when he stumbled upon Hartford-Jones's involvement in the campaign to remove Uncle Mack's plaque in Broadstairs that it clicked. *That* was what had riled Jessica so. There were many anti-racist Labour activists, either MPs or councillors – many more visible than Hartford-Jones – that she could have gone after. But the plaque made it personal. He knew Jessica well enough to know that any campaign to remove the monument from the seafront of

their childhood would be a personal affront to her. Especially one driven by someone she would see as socially alien – a moneyed Oxbridge graduate who had moved to Jessica’s beloved Kent coast and sought to change or remove what was rightfully hers to celebrate and maintain.

And still, after a week, he did nothing.

What was stopping him? Didn’t he believe Jessica was in earnest? He’d caught her red-handed in that abysmal chatroom talking about killing; endorsing the actions of racist mass murderers from around the globe... Yet still he’d been gripped by a form of Hamlet-style procrastination. Or was it just denial? Denial that his own sister could ever think such thoughts, plan such actions? Was he in mourning for their childhood, those innocent days; that innocent girl? Perhaps it was all talk. He couldn’t imagine his little sister as a murderer any more than he could imagine her presenting Newsnight. He’d begun a long email to her that ran to several pages before remembering he didn’t have her address. He’d followed Yvette Hartford-Jones on Twitter hoping to Direct Message her and warn her, but had given up when she hadn’t followed him back. He’d sought out the number of her local surgery in Deal, intending to phone her. He’d done everything but go to the police, like he should. He’d done almost everything wrong.

And then, ten full days after his trip to Broadstairs, torn up with indecision, he’d told Efua.

Predictably, she’d gone nuclear. She’d yelled at him on the street for over five minutes, before Kwesi had begun to cry in his pushchair. They’d been heading to Highgate Woods on another fine day in late June. He had to go to the police *at once*, she ordered, or they would get divorced, so help her God. And so finally he did. But it had been a much more complicated and protracted process than snitching on a shoplifter. After phoning Muswell Hill Police station, he’d been immediately put in touch with a counter-terrorism officer.

They'd interviewed him in the flat, and asked for every detail about his sister, from her address to her past history to her mental health status. They also wanted his passwords for Patriot Patrol and a full account of his dealings with neo-Nazi organisations. In truth, he had very little to impart, and had told them so. All he wanted them to do was intervene. Either to warn Jessica or to lock her up, whichever course of action they thought best. He didn't know her, he'd told them repeatedly; hadn't spoken to her for years until that single meeting. She was dead to him. They'd left him with a number to call if Jessica ever got in contact, and advised him to leave the rest to them.

And, like a fool, he had.

Every week he would scour the papers for news of Jessica's arrest. Every day he'd check Hartford-Jones's Twitter account to see what she had to say – though, if he'd been honest with his deepest fears, it was to see if she was still alive. And then, as the months went past, as the country found itself convulsed by the chicanery of a new Prime Minister, with further Brexit withdrawal bills, missed deadlines and a looming general election, he'd been lulled into a false sense of security. Nothing had happened. His sister was most probably only one of many big-mouthed actors in far-right organisations who boasted of direct action when in reality they were merely armchair warriors. He was relieved on two fronts. That no harm had come to Hartford-Jones, and that his sister, for better or worse, was still living her tawdry life down in Broadstairs and not in a high-security prison.

And then it had happened.

The news of the attack on Hartford-Jones was everywhere the day after the Tory election victory. It was almost bigger news, with the Left using it as an emblem for everything that was rotten in the country; a grisly culmination of three years of hate and division. An example of a world gone mad, in which values were inverted and news was faked so many times that morality itself had become meaningless. First Jo Cox, now Yvette

Hartford-Jones. The councillor's plaintive face, with its halo of glowing blonde hair, was on every front-page, every TV news report. And the fact that she had been eight months pregnant was almost bigger news than anything.

Stuart could barely bring himself to read about it. He felt like the attacker himself.

The details were terrifying. The Labour district councillor for Dover and Deal had been stabbed a single time in the chest as she'd queued to vote. When attempts to resuscitate her at the scene by paramedics had failed, she'd been airlifted by helicopter to QEQM Hospital Margate. The perpetrator, the reports confirmed, was one Jessica Carter of Broadstairs, Kent, who'd handed herself in at Deal police station and had immediately been remanded in custody. Those who'd witnessed the attack, including many children who'd been with their parents as they voted, had been offered trauma counselling, so disturbing were the scenes in Walmer Parish Hall that morning. Hartford-Jones' husband, Oliver Cole, had made an impassioned plea for the violence to stop; for there to be an end once and for all to attacks on politicians and activists of every stripe. The devastation to the families of those individuals, he'd said, clearly in tears, was 'unbelievable'. He'd cut a noble figure; the diametric opposite of the despicable coward and fool Stuart now considered himself to be.

The following weeks had been a sick blur, and he could barely remember them. Christmas had been cancelled in their household, and life was on hold for the foreseeable future.

There had only been a single sliver of hope. And that was the following fact – a fact that Stuart held onto in his darkest moments of self-castigation.

She hadn't died.

Miraculously, Yvette Hartford-Jones had survived the attempt on her life on the day the country went to the polls. And – even more miraculously – so had her baby.

‘So it was actually *the fact* she was pregnant,’ Manish began, taking a sip of his cappuccino, ‘that saved her? Unbelievable.’

Stuart was back in Stella’s Room. The very last day of January. The day the United Kingdom would leave the European Union for good.

‘Yes...That and the fact she was wearing three layers of clothing. The blade had much further to travel before it did any damage. Before it... I’m sorry –‘

Here Stuart found he’d been forced to put his head momentarily in his hands. He hoped very much he wasn’t going to cry in front of his old friend. Tears had been his companion so frequently over the past weeks, he’d forgotten that no one other than his wife had seen him weep.

‘Are you okay, brother?’

Brother. Manish had never called him that before. It was this touching address that made him get a grip on himself and pull his head up straight. He had a sudden flashback to the awful Christchurch massacre video in which the first to die had addressed his killer with the same friendly word.

‘I’m fine... It’s just still so – so shocking. Continually shocking. Apparently, the blade missed the baby’s head by a couple of centimetres.’

‘And so no vital organs were affected.’

‘No. The extra padding of pregnancy saw to that.’

‘And the coma?’

‘They roused her from that on Christmas Day, or so I gather. But she spent three weeks in intensive care. It was touch and go for much of that. For both of them, apparently...’

Stuart had read that Hartford-Jones had been put into a medically induced coma on admission to hospital, to stabilise the baby. The fact that they hadn’t had to operate probably

saved the unborn child in the end. Instead, she was given a series of major blood transfusions over a number of days. The surgeon had said the chances for survival for both were very slim at the beginning – that he'd never heard of a pregnant woman being stabbed without either the mother or the baby, or both, dying. The papers had called it a Christmas miracle. And to Stuart, it really was. The baby had been born by a carefully planned caesarean section four weeks before its due date, and, if the reports were to be believed, was happily thriving.

He glanced around the deserted Stella's Room. He realised he was sitting in the same spot where, four years ago, his sister's name had jumped out from the pages of the *Guardian*. The thought that it had come to this brought on a fresh wave of despair. Through the window, in the thin January light, the world was going about its business as usual, while so much had changed inside him. He noticed, with a kind of fatigue, that the gold stars in Stella's window resembled the stars of the EU flag. The place was still full of noise from the kitchen; the same jazz playing low from speakers mounted high on the walls. He thought also of Elisaveta, his favourite waitress. She had left long ago, moving back to the Ukraine, and he didn't blame her.

He took a sip of his Americano. They'd been talking for so long, it was cold.

'I thought you kept abreast of all the news, anyhow.'

Manish sat back, his big beard more impressive than ever. He was dressed immaculately as always. A flamingo-pink tie teamed with a funereal charcoal suit. Apt, given what the country was about to enact later that day.

'I lost track of the Hartford-Jones story a while back. The fact that the mother and baby survived was enough for me. You must have been relieved.'

Stuart could think of no emotion further from the ones he had felt over the past month and a half. The fact that he could've have prevented the attack in the first place was continually awful to him. This, he knew, was at the core of how he'd changed. His lifelong

habit of passivity had almost cost someone their life – *two people* their lives. It had always been the way with him – to wait and watch instead of acting at once. He should have gone to the police about his sister from the moment he saw her name in the paper four years ago, just like Efua had urged him to. He should have taken responsibility.

‘I feel abysmal, if you must know. I could have stopped her, I could’ve – ‘

‘We’re all wiser after the event, my friend. Politics teaches us that.’

‘I wish I did feel wiser. I’ve never felt stupider.’

‘You shouldn’t beat yourself up.’

‘Yes, I *should*. That’s exactly what I need to do. I fully intend to see her. To apologise for what I could’ve done but didn’t.’

‘Really?’ Manish raised both eyebrows at once, a disarming habit of his. ‘Is that wise?’

‘I don’t know... But I’ve got to do it.’

Manish paused carefully, as if about to broach a delicate matter. ‘And what about your sister?’

‘What about her?’

Stuart felt the tears gathering in the corner of his eyes again, and he forced himself to remain steady.

‘Where is she?’

‘She’s inside, thank God. They took her straight into custody and she pleaded guilty at the hearing.’

‘When was that?’

‘Day after Boxing Day. She refused counsel, and the judge sentenced her straight away.’

‘And what was she given?’

‘She got life,’ Stuart breathed out, the air gravid in his lungs. ‘Just as it should be. Life for attempted murder. My own sister. I still can’t quite comprehend she did it.’

‘Let’s be thankful the outcome wasn’t worse. Do they think life will mean life?’

‘I hope so. There was no bail granted after her plea. And the judge demanded a thorough psychiatric examination.’

‘So where is she held?’

‘Bronzefield in Ashford.’

‘Kent?’

‘No, Middlesex. It’s the women’s prison that took over from Holloway. So she’ll be sharing space with Rosemary West.’

Manish shook his head elegantly. His vintage suit, in the hipster ambience of Stella’s, was quaintly anachronistic. Stuart wouldn’t have been surprised if his friend had produced a gold pocket watch on a chain, given his get-up.

‘I’m sorry this has happened to your family. These are dark times.’

‘Yes, indeed. So...’ Stuart cleared his throat. ‘Was it all a dream, after all?’

He was eager to leave the subject of his sister and her heinous act, and talk about politics. If anyone could take the temperature of the times it was Manish. His friend had just written a long piece for the *Guardian* with that exact headline. *It Was All a Dream*.

‘You mean staying in the Union?’

‘Yes. Were we naïve to think the referendum could be reversed?’

‘Reversed, maybe. But not that there could have been a second referendum. It’s been such an improbable journey to get to this moment.’

‘More nightmare than dream, then?’

Manish sat back in his chair. He seemed to be considering something deeply.

‘For me, the worst thing is that the normal functioning of politics has been derailed by this damn drama for four years. The things that needed to be addressed – austerity, inequality, climate change – were put on hold while the agony played out. Not to mention the cost.’

‘Two hundred billion?’

‘Ultimately, yes.’

‘I just feel like I’m in mourning, somehow.’

‘As do many, my friend. But you know who I feel pity for?’

‘Farage and his crew?’

‘No, no, no. For the teenagers who voted for the first time last December. All they’ve ever known of British politics is this sorry charade, with its anger and chaos. Of hopes raised and then smashed. Of fake news and vaulting ambition.’

Stuart smiled. ‘I recognise those lines from your piece.’

‘Ha! Yes. I thought I’d get *Macbeth* in there. Perhaps that’s the play Johnson and his cronies need to read. Beware of getting what you want.’

‘Maybe Julius Caesar is better.’

‘Maybe. But my point was that youngsters have only been exposed to this shitshow. They’re our future politicians. What’s Westminster going to be like in ten, twenty years, if this is the example we give them?’

‘And the Brexit that’s been imposed on them won’t be the one their parents voted for.’

‘Exactly. Their parents were sold a lie, and they’ll live to regret it now. It’s the biggest change to happen to the nation since we joined the Common Market in ‘73, perhaps even since ‘45. They don’t know what’s coming for them. Scotland will no doubt push for independence. The Irish border situation is a fiasco. The only good thing is that the Tories have lost their scapegoat. They won’t be able to blame everything on Brussels now.’

Stuart looked at his watch. He would soon have to go and pick Kwesi up from nursery. On Fridays, his son did a half day, finishing at lunchtime. He was looking forward to an hour or so of innocent mayhem in the playground. Just lately, it had been the only thing with the power to make him forget about the situation.

‘But surely the other thing is that Johnson has the best of both worlds? When we leave the EU tonight, nothing will have materially changed, right?’

‘Not until the end of the year, no.’

‘So he’ll have all the benefits of getting it done, to use the hateful lingo, while still remaining in the EU.’

‘Exactly. All gain and no pain. He’s got a majority of eighty. The opposition is on its knees. He’s just enjoyed a landslide victory. But you just wait until the end of the year. See how many Union Jacks are waving in Parliament Square when people’s jobs are erased, or they can’t get medicine, or enough food for their children.’

‘Do you think we’ll ever get back in?’

‘Labour?’

‘No! I mean *the country*. Back into the EU.’

Manish regained his considered pose for a moment. ‘It’s not inconceivable. But it won’t be for decades, by which time the damage will be done.’

‘It’s still something to hope for, no?’

His friend laughed. ‘Don’t hold your breath. But Brussels said they’d leave the light on and the door open.’

‘They did indeed. That’s good news.’

Manish paused again, even more significantly this time. ‘Hey, talking of good news, I may as well tell you, Tia and I got engaged.’

Stuart sat upright in the uncomfortable cane chair, smiling for what seemed like the first time in weeks. ‘You’re kidding?’

‘Nope. I gave her every opportunity to say no, but she said yes.’

‘Congratulations! Wait till I tell Efua.’

‘She probably already knows. We made a plan to go public on the same day.’

Stuart nodded appreciatively. For once he felt he’d done something right in introducing them. ‘When did you propose?’

‘On Christmas Day, when she was drunk enough. She even likes my father, can you believe that? And no one likes my father.’

‘Hey,’ Stuart held up his hand for a high five.

Manish looked askance. ‘You never give high-fives, it’s not your style.’

‘It is now, Manish. Can’t a person change?’

The Highgate Woods, in the sombre light of February the first, bore an almost otherworldly ambience. A Saturday morning, with the mist streaking the mysterious paths; ice in the puddles, and frost on patches of ground that would soon bear celandines, snowdrops.

Stuart and Efua were walking slowly, under the bare canopy of winter trees, enjoying the emptiness of the place. Even Kwesi in his pushchair had stopped talking, reacting perhaps to the scared silence of the woods. It felt as if they were walking in a cathedral.

Good news has arrived in the morning's post. Efua's settled status had finally been confirmed. A quick phone call told them it was the same case for Yoofi. It was terrific news, but not without complex implications. When they'd exhausted the subject of Manish and Tia's wholly unexpected engagement, they'd talked for a long time about what it might entail for all of them.

'Just because we're not going to be deported anytime soon doesn't mean I'm dancing on the rooftops.'

Efua was wearing her black biker's jacket with a voluminous purple knitted scarf draped around her neck in the Parisian style. She'd applied a rich strip of crimson lipstick and

put much thought into her earrings. Stuart, as ever, had thrown on whatever was to hand, and felt like a homeless person walking next to her.

‘Sure, but it’s one worry gone from our shoulders. And your mum’s, no?’

‘After last night? I’m not so sure.’

He and Efua had stayed up to watch Newsnight, which had been live from Parliament Square, to observe the moment the country left the EU for good. A grand farewell to Europe. The place had been full of gloating Leave voters with Union Jacks and T-shirts boasting the slogan: *Job Done*. It was crushingly depressing to watch. Apparently, the PM had celebrated inside Number Ten with an almost absurdly British dinner of roast beef, Yorkshires and Shropshire blue cheese. There had been a couple of optimistic moments. The European parliament had spontaneously got to its feet and sang Auld Lang Syne as Britain left the Union; and someone had beamed a single gold star onto the White Cliff of Dover with the message: *This is our star. Please look after it for us*. At least Farage had been told to put his Union Jack away when he’d started waving it in parliament, since it contravened MEPs’ rules. Nevertheless, it had been a desperately sad occasion, and one Efua said she felt in a most personal way, given the way Brexit had emancipated racists of all stripes over the past four years. The morning’s papers had been full of valedictory pieces that neither of them had had the stomach to read.

‘It’s about to get a whole lot worse, trust me,’ Efua said, ramping the pushchair over a difficult stretch of tree roots. ‘If you’re a person of colour in this country, watch out, is all I can say.’

‘I know, I know,’ Stuart said. ‘And I thought it was bad before.’

They’d talked about the irony of being granted settled status on the very day things changed for ever in the country. The question of emigrating had even come up, and now his wife was intent on discussing it again.

‘Perhaps now’s the time...’

‘Are you really saying you want to move? To Ghana?’

Efua laughed. ‘Nah, you’re joking aren’t you? But I’ve been dreaming of Paris recently. Of the bars, the markets, the river at night. And you’d love the restaurants, of course. I just feel more European than British, that’s all.’

‘I can understand that.’

‘I mean, do you think Kwesi wants to grow up in this country with these values? I think he’d like being one, you know.’

‘Being one what?’

‘Being a European.’

Stuart shot her a glance. ‘Are you really serious?’

‘Damn right I’m serious. There’s still time before he starts primary school. After that, it might be harder.’

‘I’m sorry... But this is all too much to take in at the moment. So much has happened recently that –’

‘I know, I know...’

Over the past tumultuous weeks and months, Efua, to her credit, had been gently solicitous with him. She hadn’t blamed him for anything, something for which he was grateful. God knows, he’d done enough of that himself. She’d been there for him, he could see now. There to listen when he was in the pits of despair, and wise enough to stay out of his way when she knew it was the right thing to do.

‘But look...’ Stuart said quickly. ‘After last night, let’s just say I’m open to ideas. We’d be stupid not to be.’

‘That makes me feel much better. To know we’re on the same page... Half the time I think the only thing keeping me here is the book.’

‘Ah, of course... The book.’

Efua had given up on finding a new agent, and had instead sent her book straight to editors who she thought might be receptive. She’d emailed her first three chapters to a black editor who headed up a list that was affiliated to one of the major publishers, and had been asked to supply the whole novel. She’d heard positive things back, and was now just waiting for the final verdict on the whole manuscript.

‘The tension is killing me.’

‘And me,’ Stuart laughed. ‘But I don’t see why you can’t write from Paris – from anywhere in the world, as a matter of fact.’

‘Maybe I could. But London is where the action is. Where everyone comes to make deals and fraternise and be seen to exist. You know that. I’d feel out of it if I were stuck in Iceland or somewhere.’

‘Let’s not move to Iceland, darling.’

Efua was suddenly serious. ‘This is the closest I’ve got. For years. A black editor wants to read more of my work. I just don’t want to blow it.’

‘I know you don’t. I’m keeping everything crossed, as they say.’

‘I’ve never understood that phrase.’

‘No, me neither. It’s stupid. As well as anatomically unfeasible.’

As they reached the top of the shallow gradient, Stuart sighted the pale white finger of the Obelisk. It was a landmark that often stopped them getting lost. Before they could say anything further, Kwesi’s head appeared from under the pushchair cover.

‘Look, Mama! It’s the obilix, the *obilix*!’

‘Yes it is, Kwes. Which means we’re closer to a cup of coffee and you’re closer to a croissant.’

They came to stop before the monument. The Obelisk had always vaguely moved him, he had no idea why. Maybe it was the inscription. *The Gift of a Few Friends*. It got him every time. He thought at once of his country's friends in the EU, and how terribly wrong it was to cut them off now.

Taking a look around, he decided he had to tell Efua something he'd been meaning to say for a while, but had never found the right moment. Now, in the calm of the frosty morning, it seemed as good a time as any to come out with it. For weeks he'd wrestled with a single idea, dismissing it as terrible, then returning to it obsessively. But it appeared to be the only thing that might set his heart at ease; that might offer him some form of resolution, of closure, to the whole sorry episode.

Turning to his wife, the mist rising from the undergrowth all around them, he said simply: 'I want to go and see her.'

'So you said before,' Efua nodded.

He saw at once that she'd misunderstood. 'No, I don't mean Yvette Hartford-Jones. I mean Jessica.'

She seemed to recoil at the very notion. 'You can't be serious.'

'I am. It's got to be done.'

It hadn't been easy.

For a start, the security process was tortuous. He'd been forced to travel to the prison itself to make an application, losing a day when he should have been writing a review and picking up Kwesi from nursery. They'd told him the application would be assessed over the coming days, though it might take weeks to get a slot if approved. As the days had dragged on, he'd got cold feet and decided he would turn it down if he was accepted. What chance did he have anyway? He was only her brother, not her husband or partner, and he knew they had

visiting priority. Plus she had been convicted of attempted murder. Short of manslaughter or actual murder, one of the most heinous crimes there was. She was serving life, with little chance of parole. He'd had no idea what the psychiatric report had come up with either. He'd imagined his sister might be bipolar from their chatroom interactions, but did she have more serious mental health problems? Borderline personality disorder? Schizophrenia? Or was she just a racist? There was a simple test for that.

Yet, when his application was finally approved in the last week of February, he knew he had to go. It might be his only visit. They'd given him a morning slot, and sent him a long list of items he couldn't bring into prison, with a threat of arrest if he did.

And once he was within the prison gates, it hadn't been easy either. A squat collection of ugly buildings resembling the science blocks of a secondary school, HMP Bronzefield had none of the imposing grandeur of Holloway. He'd produced his passport and proof of address at the Visitor's Centre and waited until it was processed. Then he'd been taken by a guard to the main prison building where he'd been asked to leave his phone, keys, wallet and belt in a locker. He'd been put through a biometric assessment which included fingerprinting and photographing for facial recognition. Then he'd had a Level 'A' pat down. Since he had no previous convictions, he'd been spared a Level 'B', which, he'd read, sometimes included an anal inspection. Then he'd gone through a metal detector and finally through an airlock door into the main visiting hall.

Maybe it was because it was a women's prison, but the hall wasn't as forbidding as he'd expected. He'd only ever seen prison visits in films – those American-style booths with chicken wire; the guards packing guns and batons. This was more like a crèche or a primary school, with an area for visiting children and family members at one end, a bank of vending machines at the other.

He'd been led to a long bench where single visitors were arranged opposite the women prisoners. There'd he'd been seated and told to wait. He hadn't been able to stop himself from looking at Jessica's fellow inmates. There were women of all ages and ethnicities; some painfully young, many with tattoos and missing teeth, and the hollow-eyed junkie look he knew so well from London streets. Many were overweight, talking aggressively. Some were in tears. Every so often, a guard would appear and point their attention to the clock, or tell them to calm down. It was a horrible place, Stuart concluded. Beneath the veneer of the welcoming hall and the happy cries of visiting children, it was a nick like any other. A brutal institution, and one his sister might never leave.

And when Jessica had finally been brought to him, she hadn't been how he'd imagined. Her face was shockingly gaunt, free of the weight it had carried the previous summer. Her hair was now razed in a number-one cut, accentuating her pudgy lips. Her eyes were red and gouged, as if she'd been digging her knuckles into them for hours. There were dark circles around them too. She seemed diminished somehow in her monochrome jumpsuit; shrunken, *less*.

He'd asked her why, to begin with. Why had she done this terrible thing to another person? To a whole family? To herself? But the fact was, he knew why, and didn't want to hear her answers. Jessica had been in tears at first, with nothing to say about any of it. Then they'd begun to have a raging argument. The inevitable one: the only one. They'd spoken in hissed whispers at first, so as not to attract the attention of the guards, and then more fiercely; their voices raised under the din of the other visitors. All his anguish of the past weeks had flooded out. It was as if they were continuing the row of the summer, hurling insults at each other. Except this time there was no chance of her blacking out. A guard had come over and told him the visit would be suspended immediately if they carried on like that. It hadn't mattered anyway. Arguing like that had been getting them nowhere; going over the past, their

mother, the house; her intractable beliefs for which she'd paid for with her freedom, and which a life sentence hadn't seemed to have materially altered. At several points, he'd felt like getting to his feet and walking out; washing his hands of her forever, until she'd calmed down for a moment and asked him a question he thought she'd never ask.

'So... can I see them then?'

'See who?'

Stuart looked up at the clock. The time had flown by and now they only had five minutes left.

'Your wife and kiddie. You must have a picture. All husbands do.'

'Why do you want to see them now? You didn't care before.'

'Because it might be the only chance I get. You probably won't be coming back here, and I want to picture you with someone. In my head.'

Stuart looked her squarely in her damaged, charcoal-rimmed eyes. He tried to discern any trace of sincerity there, any vestige of the girl he'd once known; the one he'd grown up with. The girl who was gone. Was she just playing games with him? Asking him for information so she could use it against him in the future somehow? Was she just insane? She must be, to have done what she did. It was beyond his comprehension.

She was waiting for him to speak. 'Go on... It won't hurt you.'

'I can't.'

'Why not? You mean you don't want to?'

'No, I couldn't if I wanted to. Which I don't.'

'Why's that?'

'They took my phone off me at the door.'

'Oh yeah... Well, describe her to me then. Make me see her.'

Stuart realised he wanted her to know. He'd wanted her to know all along. He'd wanted her to know he'd married a black woman. He'd wanted to see her reaction, to show her the world she lived in was really very tiny and sick and barren of anything human.

'Okay.... Well, she's a bit younger than me.'

'I knew it. Blokes of your age always go for younger birds.'

'I've known her thirteen years. We've been married for ten. The age difference doesn't matter so much when you're in your forties.'

'What's she look like then?'

'Well, she's the same height as me. Quite stylish, wears a lot of jewellery. If she wears heels, I'm shorter than her –'

'What's she do? Is she just a housewife?'

'No. She's not just a housewife. She's a school teacher.'

'Which subject?'

'English.'

'Makes sense.'

'And she's a writer too.'

'Birds of a feather, then.'

'Yeah, but not like me. A proper writer. A serious writer.'

'Done anything I might know?'

'She's not published yet.'

'Maybe she never will be.'

'Why do you want to know all this?'

'Like I said, I just want to picture her. What kind of hair does she have? Long, short?'

Stuart wanted to let her have it. She was definitely out of her mind somewhere. She'd said at the start of the visit that she was on meds every morning. She had that druggy lack of affect he'd seen in those on powerful anti-depressants.

'She's growing her hair out, actually. Has been for years. She's got quite an afro now.'

He let the word linger in the aviary din of the visiting hall.

'You mean...?'

'Yes, Jessica. She's black. Why's that so surprising?'

'It's not, I just –'

'Thought she might be white?'

'Yeah.'

'Got a problem with it? Like it matters now.'

'So your kiddie – I never asked his name –'

'Kwesi. He's mixed-race, yes... And my wife's name is Efua.'

She was silent for a moment. She seemed to be processing something behind her sunken eyes; something obscure but vital. He had no idea what she was thinking. She was ultimately unknowable. His own sister.

He cleared his throat. 'So now you know. You can picture us all together.'

'Yeah, I can.'

A moment of silence. She looked down at the desk that stood between them, as if she might find something important there.

'We've only got a minute or so left. Anything else you want to say?'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'What's the regime here?'

She seemed reluctant to expand, and he didn't really want to know the answer anyway. He just didn't want the last moments he ever saw her – and he thought they might be the last moments of contact, given everything that had happened – to just be blank silence. But maybe he wanted to picture her too, if he needed to in the future.

'It's all about rehabilitation.'

'How so?'

'They make you do jobs and stuff.'

'Are you doing one?'

Almost proudly, she said, 'They got me on catering. They want me to mentor some of the younger ones. Cause of my experience, and that.'

'Well, that's something positive, isn't it?'

'Is it?'

'There's a sense of structure.'

'No shortage of that. You're up at six, then some shit for lunch at twelve, then back to your houseblock at four. Lock up at six forty-five. Then they turn the fucking lights out.'

A bell rang, signalling the end of the visit.

There was commotion all around; resistant voices, tears.

He suddenly wanted to get out of there. More than anything in the world, he felt the urge to flee.

Without thinking, he rose to his feet.

Then she said something quietly. So quietly that he thought he hadn't heard it.

'I was abused, you know...'

Stuart stopped and stared down at her. She seemed even smaller than before. A shrivelled, almost expired thing.

'You were abused? When? In here?'

‘No, when I was young.’

‘How young?’

For a terrible moment, he thought she was going to say she was abused by their father. A whole alternative past was forming before his eyes.

And then she said: ‘Fifteen.’

‘At the house?’

‘Yeah. By one of the blokes.’

‘Who?’

‘You wouldn’t have known him.’

‘Why’s that?’

His sister’s voice became abruptly forceful. ‘Because you’d fucking *left us* by then.’

Her eyes were full of tears now; the pupils almost impossible to discern.

‘That’s awful. I’m sorry...’

Guards were going along the row of visitors, hurrying them along. Some were pulling resistant inmates to their feet. Mothers were being separated from their children.

‘No you’re not, Stuart. If you were sorry you wouldn’t have fucked off. You’d have stayed.’

They were back on the old territory. It was too late for it, and they both knew it.

‘I said I was sorry. I’ve got to go now.’

‘Are you going to come again?’

An indescribably pitiful look had now taken over her face. Stuart could barely focus on her. A look of infinite vulnerability and fear.

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘You always thought too much for your own good.’

‘And you never thought enough.’

Before she could reply, she was hauled off; her face disappearing along the line of her fellow prisoners.

He was on the train again, travelling east.

He was looking out of the window of the slow train to Broadstairs; Kwesi on the seat next to him; a tablet device in the boy's lap on which dinosaurs silently leapt and roared.

A morning in early March; the countryside reviving; new life dragged from the hard earth by sparkling, unexpected sunshine. They'd crossed the river immediately after leaving Victoria, heading south through Sevenoaks, and then pushed into the hop fields of Kent. A landscape of memory and longing. Above them, the clouds had been stacked in double, triple-decker banks, the March sunshine illuminating them celestially. They'd stopped at villages the fast train never bothered with. Charing. Chilham. Wye. They'd passed great banks of willows, their fronds undulating beneath the surface of streams. Then they'd hit a stretch of water parallel to the tracks, with more willows and swans, before ragged hedgerows had shrouded the view. A world of pastoral peace, with Oast houses abruptly revealed on promontories; the trees still bare and leafless. And now they were at Chartham, a village Stuart vaguely remembered to be very near to Canterbury West; recognisable by its green signal box, with its wooden sign declaring: *1888*. Before long, they'd be out on the coast; the sea revealing itself, as Stuart always felt, like a welcoming smile.

He was on his way to see Hartford-Jones. Though he didn't refer to her as such anymore. In her direct-message exchanges – and later, her emails – she'd become Yvette to him. It had been terribly hard to make first contact, and not because she was difficult to find. He'd asked her to follow him on Twitter, and she had, allowing him to send a message introducing himself. No, it had been hard because he thought it was bound to make everything worse, for her, and for her family. She'd been through unimaginable trauma. She'd just given birth. Why would she want to meet the brother of the woman who had tried to kill her? What possible good might it do? And who was he doing it for anyway? For himself, only? To salve his conscience?

Yet to his great surprise and relief, Yvette had suggested they shift to email correspondence so he could better explain himself. He'd sent her a four-page outpouring, detailing his sister's history and his own involvement in tracking her down and his failure to act. He'd begged her forgiveness. He'd even told her about his own situation; about Efua and his young son, saying he knew how impossibly hard this must be for her children. It was this last mention, he thought, that made her agree to 'a coffee sometime' to talk. They both had young children – a bond Stuart had always thought of as spurious when waiting at the gates of Kwesi's nursery, forcing him into artificial friendships with parents with whom he had little else in common. But Yvette seemed like a person who was naturally interested in people. She was fascinated, she said, by his permanent move from Broadstairs to London, while his sister had stayed. To his astonishment, she said she'd already forgiven Jessica. He had no idea whether she was religious or not, but this seemed like an incredible, meta-Christian feat. His sister stood for everything Yvette had worked her whole life to eradicate. Yvette had even said she would like to meet Jessica one day, to 're-educate' her. After his own visit to the prison, he didn't think this was very likely, but he'd read somewhere that the

relatives of the murdered often seek out killers in prison in a bid to understand – to come closer to a comprehension of how a human being could do such a thing to another.

Yvette had told him she was still convalescing and nursing her new baby. Ideally, he would come to one of her monthly surgeries in Deal and they would talk afterwards, but she was off work indefinitely. Stuart hadn't known what else to suggest until the day he'd found himself discussing the meeting with Efua when Kwesi was present. Stuart had always imagined he'd go on his own, but the moment his son heard he'd be visiting the seaside town where his daddy grew up he became curious. 'Why do you never take us to the seaside?' he'd wailed. 'But we do. We went just before Christmas,' he'd replied. 'But I want to go to where you *live*.' 'I don't live there now, Kwes. I live here with you. I just used to live there.' 'But I want to *go*! Why you never *take me*?'

Stuart emailed Yvette to say that if she was ever in Broadstairs, his son had expressed an interest in visiting his old hometown. To his surprise, she had said yes, asking him when he was intending on travelling. Depending on nursery days, she said she would have one or the other of her two older children with her. And her baby, of course. It would get her out of the house where she'd been cooped up for so long. A day was set for the first week of March. It wasn't long after he'd seen his sister, and, as with that visit, he'd experienced the urge to cancel at the last moment; to run very fast in the opposite direction. What if he really *did* make things worse for Yvette? Apart from the terrible fact of Jessica's attack, maybe all they had in common was the fact of having young children, and outrage over the election result and the fate of the country; something they'd also discussed at length in their email exchanges.

He'd spoken to Efua about his doubts, late at night, a glass of red wine in both of their hands. As with him visiting his sister, she was gently adamant: he had to go. If Yvette thought it was a good idea, then it *was* a good idea. 'Do you think we should all go?' 'I can't,

I have to work. But you should take Kwesi. It would be an adventure. Just father and son together.’ ‘Our first, probably.’ ‘It might turn into an amazing day.’ ‘Or be an unmitigated disaster.’ Efua had fixed her eyes on him; those spoons of honey he still adored. ‘If the wounds of the past aren’t tended to, then they will fester.’ ‘You sound like your mother now,’ Stuart had laughed. ‘I am my mother,’ she’d replied. ‘That’s every woman’s fate, isn’t it?’ Stuart had thought of quoting Oscar Wilde, but felt the moment was far from right.

And now the train was sliding out of Chartham and heading for Canterbury West. Soon they’d be at Margate, and then Broadstairs.

He looked out of the window again at the tightly wound streets of the city; the spire of the cathedral bright in the mid-morning sunshine. So many years of his life had been spent here, yet it still felt alien to him. Like a forgotten dream. Just maybe, he thought, for the first time in his life, it wasn’t the best idea to cut yourself off so totally from your roots. Those deep roots were always there, ever-present underground; a rumour forever threatening to become fact. You could never escape them, no matter how many miles you ran away. They were part of who you’d become. To think you could completely reinvent yourself was a naïve notion; one that could only exist in the mind of a twenty-year-old. Sitting there with Kwesi on the seat next to him, it felt good to be taking his son back to his hometown; the nowhere he couldn’t wait to leave. Whichever way his meeting with Yvette went, they would still have this day together.

‘But I want the dinosaur bones,’ Kwesi wailed. ‘I don’t want *dancing!*’

Stuart looked over at the iPad. His son had pressed several buttons by mistake. Instead of the palaeontology game where you had to dust a patch of ground to reveal a T-Rex skull, there was a line of stegosauruses dancing a kind of Copacabana.

‘Hand it over.’

‘But I want the *dinosaur bones* one!’

‘Daddy will change it for you.’

Stuart had deliberately turned the volume of the tablet down in deference to his fellow passengers.

‘But they’re still dancing!’

‘Just give me a second.’

At that moment, his phone, which had been charging from one of the plugs Southeast Rail helpfully provided under the seats, gave a low grumbling hum.

A text had appeared from Efua.

He glanced at it casually. At first, he thought it was the expected question, asking whether everything was okay. She would be on her morning break, with only a few minutes to make the quickest of communications.

But then he saw the message had a different import. From the amount of exclamation marks and emojis, he could tell at once it was some kind of good news. The best news ever, by the looks of it. He read it steadily, holding the phone with one hand, the iPad in the other.

*Stop press!!! Editor Martha wants to buy my novel!!! All of it. Every damn page!!!
I’m going to be publisssshhhhhhed!!!*

Stuart couldn’t quite believe it. After all this time, after pushing at the obdurate door for so many dispiriting years, it had finally given way. A wave of happiness – for her, for them both – coursed through him.

He began writing a text back at once, clumsily making errors with his thumb.

‘But why can’t you fix it, dad?’

‘Wait a minute, Kwes. Something’s happened. Something good.’

‘What’s happened?’

‘Your mummy’s going to be a writer.’

‘But she already *is* a writer.’

He smiled to himself. ‘I know, I know... This just makes it official.’

‘What’s official?’

Before he could reply, he glanced up and saw, to his immense delight, that they’d arrived at the coast. Stretching as far as the distant horizon was the glittering ocean; green and gold in the harsh spring sunshine.

He saw Kwesi was looking at it too. All interest in the iPad and the dinosaurs had vanished. His son said simply:

‘Daddy... This is the sea.’

And now they were fifty feet away from its waves.

Stuart had wheeled Kwesi from Broadstairs station all the way to the Esplanade and shown him the site of his boyhood home as promised. But the wind-blasted property had long since gone, replaced by a bland new build. When he’d last visited four years ago, he’d made a point of not returning to the old house, and it had been a wise decision. There was nothing to see, but everything to remember. All Kwesi wanted to do was run about on the beach, and he was glad to oblige. They had an hour before they were to meet Yvette, and the sun was up and the tide was out – perfect rockpooling weather.

He’d wheeled the pushchair down the long winding ramp and onto the slaloming stretch of sand under the cliffs; the winey odour of seaweed stirring all kinds of memories. To his surprise, he saw they had the beach to themselves, give or take the odd distant dog-walker. Just like he remembered it from his early morning missions. He unclipped the Maclaren straps, pulled a beanie on to his son’s head, changed the boy’s shoes for red wellies, and let him run loose, like an animal freed from captivity.

It was blisteringly cold and windy. Filling his lungs with the invigorating air, he stood for a long while just staring at the curving promenade of pastel beach huts. Such a familiar

sight from his youth! He could probably draw every colour in sequence from memory. They seemed to be unchanged from thirty years ago, though he imagined someone must touch up the paintwork every year. Overhead, the same high-built cloud that had accompanied them on the train journey drifted slowly; as stately a movement as the tankers on the horizon. Gulls, in tight kvetching circles, yakked and whined. Such a familiar sound, deep in his blood; like the boom and suck of the sea.

Making sure Kwesi never left his field of vision, he made his way further down the beach. He was glad the tide was out. It made it harder for his son to reach the waves. He'd take him paddling soon, and was glad also that Efua had presciently packed a towel. The silty sand was scattered with the white limestone pebbles he remembered so well; riddled with holes like an Edam. There were conch shells, and dried slivers of wrack, like discarded bandages. He recalled picking these up as a boy and tasting them experimentally; the shock of salt on his tongue. It was all still here, waiting to be discovered and enjoyed afresh by his son.

He wanted to reflect on everything that had happened recently, but it seemed impossible. The sad meeting with his sister. The possibility of leaving the UK for France. The news, just now, of his wife's book. Things were changing, and he told himself to hang on to his soul if he were to keep up. Soon his son would start school and enter the great system that only spat you out at eighteen. These purely carefree days, lost in the boy's memory, would disappear. Would he remember the day, aged almost four, when his father took him to the same beach where he once ran as a child? Possibly not. Or maybe it would be his first ever memory. Stuart hoped very much this would be the case. He couldn't think of a more halcyon one.

Squinting against the force of the wind, he saw his son had made it to the rock pools and was stomping in and out of the puddles in his red boots. He resisted the urge to intervene.

Let him explore, like he had done, so many years ago. That was what was missing, he thought, from contemporary childhood. The utter freedom to do what you wanted, for hours on end. Everything was so stratified and organised. His own favourite memories were of unmediated hours. Those days that appeared to last a lifetime; foraging for shrimps or crabs in the pools; the sun burning his arms and shoulders; his hair stiff with salt. He wanted his son to have some of those days for himself, while there was still time.

Time seemed to have stopped; the waves raking back and forth distantly down the sands; the ocean sparkling in the spring sunshine; the sails of the windfarm on the horizon revolving eternally.

Looking down at his feet, he saw a stretch of pebbles leading to the bank of black rocks and seaweed where Kwesi was merrily splashing. About to move on, he spotted a hagstone. Another deep memory. He'd forgotten about the hagstones – with their perfect apertures through which the future was supposed to reveal itself. He picked it up. It was smooth and heavy in his hand; brown as the flank of a racehorse. It really was perfect.

‘Kwes! Over here!’

His son looked up.

‘Come and see what I’ve found!’

Without hesitation, Kwesi began to sprint in his direction.

Stuart held the stone to his eye and watched him approach; the boy getting bigger and bigger until his arms were around him.

‘The Continental simply do the best paninis...But then you might beg to differ, given your job.’

‘They look pretty good to me.’

He'd spotted her at once, standing in the centre of the bandstand where they'd agreed to meet. Yvette had been unmistakable in her scarlet beret; her baby in a maroon sling, and her older boy charging around unstoppably. They'd agreed to meet for lunch at the bandstand as its grass surround would be perfect to allow their boys to let off steam without constantly having to run after them. She'd greeted him warmly and they'd stood for ten, fifteen minutes talking and getting to know each other. He'd been very nervous beforehand. Some of these nerves, he knew, were down to his old class anxiety. Making his way with Kwesi up the long straight path to Victoria Gardens, he'd been gripped with the same nervous excitement he'd felt every time before meeting his first girlfriend, Angela. The same imperative not to say or do the wrong thing. But Yvette had made him feel relaxed at once. She was a warm, vivacious presence, just as she'd come across in her emails. Of course, he'd wanted to apologise in person before anything else, and he had. He'd said sorry too many times (and had ordered himself not to say it again). It had all been quite overwhelming. The only thing preventing him from breaking down in tears was Kwesi. He didn't want his son to witness that.

They'd moved to a bench facing the sea, with just enough elevation to sit while looking down onto Viking Bay and its funfair; the big inflatable giraffe (something he didn't remember from his childhood) dominating the sands. They'd talked about Yvette's injuries, her hospital stays and multiple blood transfusions. She was only just strong enough to start wearing the sling, she'd said, and had wanted to try it out during their meeting. The baby was fast asleep; just a whisper of blonde hair nestling against its mother's chest. A true miracle baby.

And now Yvette was breaking out the picnic lunch she'd promised in her last email. A feast, by the looks of it, from the Continental Corner deli. Mozzarella paninis for their boys; and a selection of tarts and cold cuts for them, along with two take-out paper cups of

Earl Grey, steaming in the crisp March light. They'd promised their children ice-cream at Morelli's afterwards if they were good.

'I thought I'd get us these,' Yvette said, taking a pair of mini-pies from the cardboard container. 'They looked pretty special.'

Stuart read out the label: 'Seaweed-seasoned lamb and aubergine tarts: Romney Marsh lamb, flavoured with Kentish bulse and kelp, topped with local aubergine in a gluten-free polenta and potato crust... Wow. There's a little corner of Broadstairs that's forever Muswell Hill.'

Yvette laughed. 'Dig in.'

'Thank you.'

'I didn't think you could come up a more ironic name for a deli than the Continental Corner, given what's happening to the country.'

'You're right,' he groaned, sampling the pie, which was, he had to admit, first class. 'Though I like the way they've tried to appeal to the Brexiteers too, saying the lamb came from the Romney Marshes.'

Along with the lamb pies were a couple of garlic roasted beetroot tarts, and smaller blue cheese muffins topped with pears and hazelnuts. It all looked fabulous, and he felt a deep sense of ease for the first time since the morning. It had been the right decision to come.

'If there's any left over, I'll take it home for Ollie.'

Stuart looked ahead at Kwesi and Stan. They appeared to be playing without conflict, running in and out of the bandstand's arches, yelling with delight. A little brown boy and a bigger white boy. They seemed to be having quite a bromance.

'Kwes likes older boys,' Stuart said, nodding across to them. 'He's still learning from them.'

‘I’m glad to hear it. We’ll have to watch Stan, though. He has a tendency to take over. He can be a bit of a bully.’

Stuart turned to her. ‘Hey, I’m so rude. I forgot to ask your baby’s name.’

‘We called her Mia in the end.’

‘That’s a lovely name. Why Mia?’

Yvette appeared slightly embarrassed at having to expand. ‘Well, it was the name of our old housekeeper. I’m sorry. You probably didn’t grow up with one of those.’

‘Hey, don’t worry. It’s hardly your fault.’

Her face broke into a winning smile. ‘Ollie says the same thing. But I never believe him.’

‘Did you have a special relationship with Mia – old Mia, I mean?’

‘She was the rock of our family. The only thing gluing it together. I can see that now, though I couldn’t then. But the real reason we called the baby Mia is that when I was in the coma, I had the most intense dreams of her, you wouldn’t believe.’

Stuart took a sip of his Earl Grey. ‘Tell me. It sounds fascinating.’

‘I went on this whole – how can I describe it – phantasmagorical trip. She took me back to the Philippines with her – a place I’ve never visited, I should say – and introduced me to her extended family. I never knew anything about her or her extraordinary life. Never bothered to ask, most probably, in my ignorance. It was Mia who kept me going and hoping somehow. She connected me to planet earth. My first words when they brought me round were: ‘Where’s Mia?’ I was babbling incoherently about her, apparently. It was only later that I realised how important Mia had been to me. That I’d grown up living with a real-life working-class person, under my nose all along. But I just hadn’t been interested enough in her then... So we called the baby Mia.’

‘That’s incredible... And she was four weeks early?’

‘Yes. We spent two weeks in Special Care.’

‘Snap. Kwesi was a preemie too.’

Yvette dusted pie crumbs from her hands. ‘So how was your experience?’

‘Pretty good in the end... I changed his first nappy in the incubator.’

‘Me too!’

‘The worst thing was what the other parents were going through, to be honest. We had it easy. But there were children in there who’d been born at twenty weeks. They seemed so silent, in their hot cots or whatever, with their parents keeping a vigil when they visited every day. I don’t know how many of them made it.’

‘It was the same for us. Mia was fine in the end. But tiny. When we got her home, the health visitor said she’d never seen such a tiny baby outside of a hospital.’

There was a screech of seagulls overhead. He looked out over the sea. So familiar, the curve of green, its glassy planes shimmering in the sunshine. Only the line of windfarm propellers, turning soundlessly on the horizon, seemed strange. He thought he might have even sat on the very same bench when he was a boy, enjoying the view.

He thought he should ask her about the future. He had no idea how a near-death experience might change how you saw your life. It would probably alter everything, he thought.

‘So... How are you coping? I mean with everything that’s happened?’

Yvette straightened up, and for a moment he thought little Mia had awoken. ‘The papers said it was a miracle we survived and it was. I shouldn’t be here, eating polenta and potato pies, enjoying my children... There was such a wave of – how can I describe it – *love* from the public, that it gave me the strength to go on. There was an outpouring of public concern for me after the attack. And outrage too, of course. You never know how deeply you’re loved until something terrible happens. For most people it’s too late.’

Stuart nodded. ‘And your family?’

‘Oh, it’s brought us closer, no doubt about it. My mother and father too. They were barely speaking for years before this.’

‘Well that’s really something.’

‘It’s all part of the process of healing. I have the best medics, the best therapists. Not everyone has access to those, though it’s all NHS, I should add...’

‘And your husband?’

‘He’s been incredible. Out of this world. I just feel so incredibly... lucky. Every day is a gift.’

‘That’s amazing to hear.’

She turned to him, paper cup steaming in her hand. ‘And the healing has to begin for the whole country too, don’t you think?’

‘I agree.’

‘Not in the stupid facile way Johnson said when he made that speech after we left, but in a real way. With the divisions in the country. They need to be healed too.’

He nodded. He had no idea how this healing might come about; only that it was deeply necessary now.

At that moment, Kwesi and Stan ran towards them – almost a military charge.

‘Ice cream! Ice cream! Where’s our *ice cream!*?’

They were on top of them; Kwesi throwing his arms around Stuarts’s legs; Stan hurling himself at Yvette.

‘Hey,’ she cried. ‘Take it easy, young man. Have you finished your panini?’

‘Yesssss... But now we want ice cream.’

She looked at Stuart. ‘Shall we walk?’

‘Let’s do it.’

They began to gather up their things methodically; the endless paraphernalia of parenthood; packing away the footballs and the debris of their picnic; Stuart folding up the pushchair as Kwesi and Stan scampered up the path.

‘Stay close!’ he hollered out. ‘There’s a main road up there.’

They began to follow the path out of the bandstand, both of them keeping an eye on the progress of their children.

‘And things *are* changing,’ Yvette began. ‘Though we lost the election, we won the argument. People don’t want to go on living in the same way; the way they’ve been forced to for years. There has to be a better, fairer life out there.’

‘I really hope so. And Brexit might soon seem small beer compared to everything else... The climate catastrophe we’ve got coming to us in the next few years.’

‘Or what’s happening now in China.’

At the start of the year, there’d been an outbreak of a virus in a single province of China that was now threatening to turn into a global pandemic. On the tube to Victoria station earlier, he’d seen more than a few passengers wearing face masks, a sight that was somehow mildly shocking. Yvette was right, seismic shifts seemed to be in the air.

‘It’s all extremely scary.’

As they rounded a corner and took the higher path towards Morelli’s – whose neon signs, he could see, were unaltered since his childhood – he was gripped with a sudden panic. He realised they would be passing Uncle Mack’s plaque – something he’d told himself earlier to avoid if they could. But now he saw it was inevitable. It was ten feet away, on its squat pedestal.

‘Perhaps we should – ‘

Yvette had obviously intuited his fears. ‘No, I want to take a look at it.’

In seconds they were standing before the familiar guano-spattered memorial; the fat jovial face still grinning over the crudely carved banjo. *He Brought Joy and Laughter to Young and Old*. A portly seagull perched anxiously on Uncle Mack's head.

Yvette appeared to be lost in contemplation for a couple of seconds as she stood before it. Stuart looked around for their boys. They were hanging around at the top of the path waiting for them to catch up.

'Do you think it will ever go?'

'You mean, will it be here forever?' Stuart asked. 'I hope not.'

'Some things *should* be forgotten, don't you think? We don't have to memorialise everything.' Yvette's voice had become softer, almost as if she were speaking to herself. 'It will take something extraordinary, I think, to get rid of it now.'

'How do you mean?'

'I just think there has to be a sea change soon. Something's got to give... A global shift of attitude.'

'You think that will happen?'

'Who knows... The fact is, the plaque's still here.'

Stuart paused. He had no idea what to say. He wished very strongly that he and Yvette would remain in contact, that they would become good friends in the future – that their children would become friends – when enough time had elapsed. It was all part of his atonement, he knew, but also, he hoped, of her healing.

'The most important thing is you're still here too...'

'Yes. You're right. I'd do well to remember that.' She glanced up from the plaque.

'Stan!?'

They both turned to look for their children, and were met with an extraordinary sight. A little further up the path, the older boy was giving Kwesi a hug.

‘What happened, Kwes?’

‘He said he wanted his mum!’ Stan called out. ‘But he’s okay now.’

‘Wait there,’ Stuart yelled. ‘We’ll catch you up.’

They began to walk.

‘You see?’ Yvette said wonderingly. ‘They don’t start out evil or racist.’

Stuart nodded, a crest of emotion bursting in his chest, like a surfer’s wave about to break. ‘You’re right. No child ever does...’

‘Shall we get that ice cream then?’

‘Why not?’

And so they made their way up the winding stone path, leaving the plaque to its gulls and corrosive gales, its unknowable future; heading towards Morelli’s, that slice of Italy on the promenade of a fading British seaside town.