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Regards from the Angel

PhD in The Contemporary Novel: Practice as Research

Centre for Creative Writing, University of Kent

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Abstract

Regards from the Angel enacts issues of loss, event, and representation. It interrogates ideas of what the psychotherapist John Bowlby calls a “secure base.” The novel acts out events, as theorised by Badiou, Deleuze, and Lyotard. It dramatises the effects of the death of a parent, of abuse; and of the loneliness of spiritual “lostness,” via Derrida’s analysis of Freud’s idea of melancholy and mourning. In the novel “lostness” produces certain symptoms: addiction, promiscuity, and even psychosis.

The novel takes a classic format: five acts. In each act a new factor is introduced. In the first, the protagonist moves to London and meets the antagonist. In the second he experiences the realities of living in the city. In the third, he meets a woman called Megan, with whom he falls in love. In the fourth, he suffers a loss of unity and becomes divided from himself. In the fifth, he lives with and then leaves Megan; and the antagonist dies; the protagonist suffers a breakdown.

The novel is highly intertextual. Because of the nature of the characters, especially Megan, there are many references to other texts.

The very short thesis that follows investigates some of the issues raised in *Regards from the Angel*. Bowlby’s idea of “the secure base,” Derrida’s refutation of the classic Freudian model of mourning, and Badiou’s theory of the event all are discussed.

Ultimately though, *Regards from the Angel* is a novel about loss, event, and love.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Scarlett Thomas. Thank you so much for all of your help.

Thank you Dr Will Norman. Your help has been invaluable. We'll always have Jane's.

Thank you, my students, past and present. Thanks for nominating me for a teaching award. You never forget a good teacher, apparently, but also you never forget a good student. And "good" doesn't necessarily mean good grades.

Thank you Hannah. God bless you.

Thank you to the superheroine paramedics – whose names escape me, for obvious reasons – from Ashford Hospital, Kent.

Thank you sincerely also to my dear friends. Thanks to Ian Bond, a true poet. Also to the fashion designer Carmen Woods, and to Ollie. Your practical help and your magnanimity thoroughly are appreciated. Thank you Gavin. Thank you too, to Dr Alexis Paknadel.

Thanks very much to the staff at the English Department at the University of Kent. Thanks to Helena, Carole, Claire-Ann, Megan, and especially Anna.

Thanks also to the poet, Professor David Herd, and to the novelist, Professor Abdulrazak Gurnah. You both have inspired me.

Thank you to Professor Josh Cohen. Without your help this wouldn't have happened.

Thank you also to Bob.

Cheers to Dr David Rudrum. Didn't thank you before. About time I did.

Thank you to my parents. Thank you for being there for me.

But I reserve my greatest thanks for my dear Naomi.

"If you live through this with me I swear that I would die for you."

You did and I would.

Paris. 2014.

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Conventions and styles

This thesis consists of the novel *Regards from the Angel*, and the essay “*Regards from the Angel: Loss, Event, Representation.*” Both conform to the University of Kent criteria. Hence both components of the thesis are written according to MLA style.

I use the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing* (Third Edition).

Where necessary, I use the *Chicago Manual of Style* (Sixteenth Edition), as laid down in the University of Kent guidelines.

As *Regards from the Angel* is written in British English, for British spellings and grammar, I have used the complete *Oxford English Dictionary* (Second Edition). I also have used the *Oxford Style Manual*. For example, I use “any more” rather than “anymore.” When American characters speak, then I have retained the American spelling, i.e. “Mom.” Foreign words – unless in common usage in English – have been italicised, in line both with Oxford and Chicago. If a section is in italics and there is a non-English word in that section, then I have not used italics for that non-English word. In speech, when characters speak and are interrupted or speak an incomplete sentence, most-times I have used dashes rather than ellipsis, as I believe that this better mimics interruption or truncation. Some punctuation and conventions deliberately are transgressed. Towards the end of the novel, there are deliberate derogations of conventional grammar, structure, and style, the better to bond content to form.

Declaration

A modified version of pages 401-410 has been published in *The Kent Review* (Canterbury 2013).

John Deamer

Regards from the Angel

This is a work of fiction. Any similarity to any persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

To Naomi

**Such a classic girl gives a man a great idea
And hears you tell your friends, hey man,
Why don't you listen to my great idea.**

Perry Farrell

There is not only need for tenderness, there is also need to be tender for the other: we shut ourselves up in a mutual kindness, we mother each other reciprocally; we turn to the root of all relations, where need and desire join. The tender gesture says: ask me anything that can put your body to sleep, but also do not forget that I desire you – a little, lightly, without trying to seize anything right away.

Roland Barthes. *A Lover's Discourse. Fragments*. 1977.

O my child, who wronged you first, and began
First the dance of death that you dance so well?
Soul for soul: and I think the soul of a man
Shall answer for yours in hell.

Arthur Symons. "Emmy." 1892.

Dinosaurs on the quilt I wore.
With a girl.

Jane's Addiction. "Classic Girl." *Ritual de lo Habitual*. 1990.

Hush.

Hush.

Be still now. Quiet now. No more of this. Sleep now.

There are places now I can visit only in dreams.

Hold a dark emotional séance; speak a few names into the shadows; try to invoke the old dead; try to search out a response, and all the long night nothing. Yet some nights a purple sky, bare trees, a song, a scent or taste – those old favourites – a blue ice slushy and, often against your wishes, you're there, back again in the old spaces. Old places strike up half-remembered tunes; about sand dunes half-heard refrains softly turn.

These things.

I can't forget them.

I cannot let them go.

1.

“We’re having an Indian summer.”

That’s what he said, so late in the day, a bloom of sunshine heaped over the tall buildings.

I said, “it’s warm for September isn’t it?”

“Fucking right.”

It was a Thursday as I remember it. I’d waited for him all day. Sitting on the step, on my luggage, such as it was. Until half past five, I’d dragged my bags around the city; across streets spastic with traffic, cars and bicycles, up and down steep steps in dusty, thronging tube stations, along pavements surging with boorish force, all the while

trying to fight against the tide. I'd waited in the Square for three hours at least, listening to tourists speaking in tongues, hearing the tube trains yowl under the ground. I had sat on the top step for hours, watching some smart men and women come and go, and some other, less smart men, come and go. I had watched shadows lengthen whilst people climbed over me to get in or to get out. Soon I stopped asking after him, and I began to wonder if he lived there at all.

When first I found the place I draped myself around iron railings. The afternoon sun warm on the small of my back; grey-veined marble porch and kitsch ionic columns were cool to the touch. Four buzzers lined the right-hand side, corresponding to four shiny brass plaques. These in turn comprised three finely etched nameplates which apparently corresponded to the inhabitants. They read:

ANSELL, DEARET, AND FOPP, SOLICITORS.

MRS A. COAZEN, FRSA.

ENIGMATIC LTD.

I pressed each four times. An unnamed buzzer for the top floor. The brass plate simply was blank like a misplaced belt buckle, and instead there was a faint scrawl scribbled on a piece of squared paper. On the paper, which was held in place, *Blue Peter* style, by double-sided sticky tape, was a smiley face, the sort you see on disheartening nostalgia programmes about the nineties. I sort of figured that this was the one, mainly because it was the only one that didn't respond, and because a disembodied voice didn't tell me that they had never heard of him. It was a complex process of induction: an okapi

couldn't've done it. He had mentioned the place was at the top; this much was clear: he had little regard for the missions of the Royal Mail. Anyway, how could he afford this place? Maybe it all was a joke, a sad story.

At about half past five, I rang the thing again. The sizzling intercom grille. The tall heat. The big city in summer: the singular, stifling closeness of the slow, closing throes of a Whitsun fete. Pressed it again. Still no reply. Fuck, I thought, everyone else lets me down – why shouldn't he? I considered waiting around. Tourists in Converse with EastPak daypacks. Still, girls, though: girls with wonderful bellies, navels pierced and unpierced, hair dyed and dreaded or braided or plaited or highlighted or shaven, arms bared or covered or tattooed, lips painted or naked, at least that's how I thought of it. Girls everywhere, even one would be enough.

I gave up asking after him after a time. Round about six, with the solicitors stepping over me as though I were melted ice-cream, I thought, that's it. Struggled to the edge of the square to a partially-miraged green phone box. I looked through my bag and realised that it – his number – lay in the depths of my suitcase; I had not called him with my phone: I didn't want to leave tracks. I gave up again. I walked back to the door. What do you do in situations like this, when all you can do is wait? You wait.

Leafy for this part of the city though; you know, I always thought: brick, stone, steel. Whatever, I figured I was going to live here, I could get used to it; now I'm fucking not. I looked into the square, fringed with railings; tourists sunbathing, eating falafels. *That's it.*

And this is the way it goes: Just as I'm about to leave, this figure, all shadow, comes towards, across me, past me, then looks behind me, keeps on going, turns again.

Then he turns around again, spits on the ground, or he doesn't, I don't know, I don't remember it, and then, I remember it, he's staring at me. Perhaps he's staring at me. The sun is behind him. He's probably staring at me but the sun is in my eyes so I don't know for certain. I remember him probably staring at me. He smells of plants, oils. He spins around, looks behind him, turns back to me, begins to walk towards me. I look up at him and see a bunch of darkness because of the sun.

"Don't want your fucking change," he says, standing still.

"Sorry," I say.

"Who're you?" he says.

I don't know.

That was first contact: offering him money – given what happened in the months to come, well, I don't know – he towers over me, blocking out the sun with wild black hair. A pale complexion, later I'd learn. Very thin; a cut-off shirt and tight black jeans, which would have seemed inadvisable in the heat, inadvisable full stop. Couldn't see his eyes – I rarely did throughout our so-called relationship – because of the dark glasses. There was a lot of hair to hide him. It seemed – felt – as though I were in his way, even though surely I wasn't. This was a moment which lasted longer than most others. A moment isn't mass; it's weight.

"What do you want?" he said.

The Soho heat. The late sun.

I said: "Do you know Jim?"

"Fuck off," he said.

He began to walk away.

In doing so he seemed not only to be walking away from me, but also to be walking away from where he was going in the first place. That was it. I stuttered five valuable words. He turned around and stopped and looked me up and down. He sort of smiled. Aside from hoping I hadn't got myself into an argument, I thought: either this isn't the house, or this isn't the man; if it were his house, then he would go into the house, and if it were not, he wouldn't. You have to get up pretty early in the morning to get past me. He squinted in the sunlight, now on the other side of me. Shuffled about a little. He looked quite comic in his black get-up, with everyone else in bright summer colours. He scanned about him. I thought he was going to walk away again.

"Jim García," I said.

"Well," he said, "he used to live here, but he moved out about a month ago."

And then he smiled for a second. "Funny guy," he said.

I looked up at him. He really was very tall indeed.

"Did he leave a –"

"– Nope."

"Oh."

I breathed into the soft air.

I picked up my luggage to make my way back to the station. I had made a mistake. There'd be no end of explaining to do when I got back. He did not live here any more. I was resigned to what I saw, for a few moments, as my fate – *get the Thursday paper for the jobs on the way home* – when the figure shouted after me:

"Who'll I say it was, if I see him?"

I turned around, and then I knew, as if I didn't before, despite my naïvety, that it was him.

"James," I said, "his cousin."

Then he, long "lost" cousin, laughed (and when Jim laughed, heck, he laughed), his dark eyes rolling back in his head. He was lost and I never really found him.

"Hey," he said, after he'd stopped the laughing thing, "James, Jamie, how you've *changed.*" Funeral small-talk.

Yet there was a silence – or rather a near-silence. It wasn't just that we didn't say anything, not just an arbitrary wordlessness, but that across the square, suddenly, as when underwater, there almost was no noise at all, of birds, of people, traffic. A moment of submersion, perhaps. Something had begun. No: there was a sort of silence and that is all. A subtraction from knowledge. He shifted a bit. Strange boy always. This was the first of strange times: it was strange then, it got stranger, and now it is stranger than it ever has been.

"This is you?" I said.

Was this the grown-up little boy that I'd seen in the family photos, the guy with the page-boy bowl-cut, the one with the Garden State gym singlet holding the wrestling cups, the one with the all-American clean-cut image that Dad had boasted about? He sort of shifted again. And then the laughing again, filling up the square like Old Testament water.

"I think so, Jamie. You've grown, man. Oh, yeah, oh yeah – oh I forgot you were coming."

I could just about make out his eyes through the Ray Bans, and as I looked at what I could make out of them, I wondered if I had made the right decision. This was when he started on about the summer coming late and how beautiful it all was, or would be, or might be, or could be, for all he knew, were he not forced to work such long hours. He talked rather a lot. Sometimes even if he were not talking it seemed as though he were. Trying to keep up with his verbal triathlon, noticing for the first time the sunlight on the structures on the other side of the square, I followed him into the foyer of what appeared, on the inside, to be an office complex. It was very clean, with still more brass fittings and a table with glossy magazines in the foyer. *Condé Nast Traveller*, *Men's Health*, that sort of thing. There was a little portal on the right with an old guy behind it, behind glass. He didn't look as though he was having a very good day. He looked up from his paper – *The Racing Post* – and then at Jim, and scowled a bit. Jim looked back and scowled far more competently. Practice, perhaps.

“Used to be in the Paras,” he said, “or that’s what he claims. I think it’s bullshit.”

The man looked down.

“It’s quicker to take the stairs, man,” he said, “but as you have,” gesturing towards my luggage, “all that shit –”

He pressed the button to call the lift. The porter looked at him. Jim thumbed a gesture at him.

He raised his voice as the lift slid down: “I doubt the guy could handle a Starbucks to be honest. I mean look at him. His best days, such as they might’ve been, doubtless are gone.”

The porter looked at Jim, and then went back to *The Racing Post*.

“Moonlight Clive,” said Jim as the floor pushed up at my feet, “he thinks because I’m not a solicitor or design websites, because I don’t work with Fopp and the rest of those fucks, that he doesn’t have to say good morning to me.”

“Oh.”

Lifts are funny things. Even if you’re in a lift alone, you still have a sharpened awareness of your own being. Everything is heightened; no wonder he called it an elevator. This is far worse when you’re in a lift with others, because this situation compounds that awareness with the anxiety of being perceived. This feels uncanny. You each try not to look at the other. By doing so, you each try not to exist. It’s a situation in which the most throwaway remark takes on serious importance; every word exchanged has terrible consequences, and at the same time, because once the doors open you are free again, hardly any at all. In lifts, the steel cables keep not just the car, but also duration itself in differential suspension. Addicts, in this sense at least, live their lives in a lift.

And so he must have been aware of this, in silence. His face was not so pale as I had thought; our eyes adjusted to the dark light. He held the doors open, so that I could drag my bags out into the hallway.

I wondered why he didn’t use the switch on the lift panel. Maybe it didn’t work, I don’t know, I don’t recall. Down a long corridor and up some more stairs which led to the top. I thought at the time that his haste – I trailed behind him as though making a low-rent documentary – was to do with the murk of the hallway, and to be honest, I never really got on with that hallway, but maybe that’s because of some of the things that happened there; and anyhow, that’s London for you: the ectoplasm of history all

over the face of the now. And anyway, I was always a dawdler, never on time; thank goodness this wasn't Switzerland. I'd be burnt at the stake.

He railed about Moonlight Clive all the way down the corridor, as I dragged the sum of my life behind me.

"I'll tell you what I think," he said, "he hates his name. It's obvious. Every time someone calls him by name, it's an insult. It's nasty. It's grotesque. And all the more so because he's heard it – how many times would you say? – fifty thousand times perhaps, in his inferior life? Imagine, you know the way that you can hear your name over house party chit-chat? Imagine if it's Clive. *Clive*. To be called Clive is to receive a gift of hate that keeps on giving. Personally, I reckon he should get it changed. By law, you know. To, like, Tom, or something, or even James. Personally, I'd have it out with my parents: 'why you fucking called me Clive?' Yeah, I'd fucking have it out with them. I'd have it out with the fuckers."

"Why do you call him Moonlight Clive?"

"Because he usually works the night shift."

You think no one talks like that? Jim did. I wondered: is this how he always is? Not always, it turned out, but all things said and done, more often than not.

Some tattoo on his left forearm, Celtic, tribal stuff; like the cul-de-sac bikers back home. It is most often the least exotic types who cling to tribalism; from one tribe to another: *Lord of the Rings* box sets and a fading band of knotwork to go with the Punto and the semi-, yet despite this dated symbol of something or other, there was something exotic about him which went further than the smell of patchouli and the coconut in his hair.

He continued to eulogise the virtues of not being called Clive while he fumbled about with some keys. Noticing my interest in all of this metal, he smiled.

“Yeah, the locks, man – I mean, what’ll Clive do? – and the *kubotan*: pressure points.”

I just went with it. And the clunking of the various locks crackling around the corridors. It was like the scene in *Return of the Jedi*, when R2D2, and C3P0 – in all his lamé splendour – approach the door to the desert palace. Yet to the best of my knowledge neither of us resembled either of those characters.

“So – James, right? – here we are.”

I couldn’t make out where “here” was at first, for the glare, but soon my pupils adjusted and I realised why Jim had kept his sunglasses on in the corridor. The door thudded behind us. Inside there was no hall – just a sort of alcove that disappeared into the wall – no reception, just a massive lounge type thing. The heat swaddled my body too, as two huge windows squeezed all of the sun into the room. Monastic velvet drapes hung on either side.

Jim checked a few things that I didn’t understand, spent a long time looking at the top of a large glass-topped coffee table and a bunch of what appeared to be ripped-up club flyers, and then turned left into a doorway. He returned with two black bottles in one hand, with which he mopped perspiration and melting, coconut-scented hair wax from his brow.

Cold water dripping from his nose, he scrunched into an armchair and swung his feet up onto the coffee table. His Caterpillars looked as though they had been worn on many a long and rainy walk: my father wouldn’t’ve had them in the house. Lolling back,

he fixed me in his gaze. He looked like a gothic King Louie out of *The Jungle Book* and I almost expected him to start singing, yet he was full of night and I felt the heightened sense of being-there that only comes when you're standing up, self-conscious, tense; and someone's sitting down, observing you; from the unease which accompanies the uncanny sensation suffered when someone who knows just how to stare, just stares.

He cracked open one of the bottles of beer, drank half of it down in one go, and placed it next to those Van Gogh boots. There was a silence – and it almost *was* silent – until finally, he said, “look, there’s a drink there,” nodding at the other bottle, like I’d never had a drink or something. Let me tell you, I rehearsed, but instead I thanked him. The heat. The sweat.

“Come on, sit down, *please*,” he said.

I took up a place on the carpet. I looked out of the low window at some trees and then back at Jim. If Tom Cruise had been out on the town a bit, say every single night for a year or so, letting his hair grow, prior to making *Interview with the Vampire*, then this would have been close to how Jim looked that strange afternoon. I wanted to like him a little, enough to like him a lot, even when – especially when – he was hard to get along with.

He stared at me.

“You’re James then.”

“Yes. You’re Jim.” He was.

“That’s me. We have the same name, don’t we?”

“I guess so. Sort of.”

“Maybe we’ll swap for a few days. You be me; I’ll be you.”

“OK. But I can’t do the accent.”

He didn’t laugh.

“Well,” he said, “I don’t get many guests here you know. Why’re you here, Jamie-boy?”

He called me this, particularly when intoxicated, despite my clear dislike of it; nicknames are channels of tenure. I’d wait for the right time and then I’d raise it with him.

“Washed up.”

He didn’t answer. He gazed at me with those Disney eyes.

“Well, if you want to get yourself unpacked –”

He paused for a long time, looked around, nodded towards my bags.

“– or whatever it is you want to do, with all... all... that, then go ahead, fucking unpack, man.”

I looked at the bags.

“I need a shower... You can have one too, if you like, later. There should be enough water.”

Later. I’d travelled for eight hours. The *least* he could do was – I didn’t know what at least he could do.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Always make sure the window’s shut.”

He took off into the kitchen. I heard him laugh and say “washed up,” and then the top of another bottle coming with a crunch into contact with his teeth, then chiming the lino.

The living room. It was quite a homely site for such things to take place.

Before I had a moment to check the CDs or read the make of the guitars on their carved headstocks, he was back. He stumbled about for a few minutes. He took off his shirt to reveal a surprisingly toned chest, and another tattoo of a snake on the nearside bicep. He must have got it done a few years ago, I thought, as he looked through me as though peering from one stained glass window into another. He turned his back again. I was something of a curiosity to him.

He clicked his fingers as though remembering something of limited importance.

“There’s your room,” he said, and then, much louder, in an exaggerated Latin American accent complete with appropriate flailing of upper limbs, “*Super discount! The boss, he gone crazy!*”

Gesticulating violently, and heading for the bathroom, suddenly he went all serious:

“Hundred bucks a week. Soon as you got a job. That’s less than half-price for ’round here. I must be nuts. I mean, I must be nuts.”

Another silence. He would flip from mania to gravity in a heartbeat. Over his bare shoulder he stared and then, slowly turning around, with infinite solemnity, he said:

“You do have a job, right?”

Without waiting for an answer, he slammed the door behind him. Soon the condensation babbled on the door-handle while I sat on the floor and looked out into the city. More light. He was singing to himself, Aerosmith: *Bah-dah, buhd-dah Dude Looks like a Lady.*

My cousin was caught up in his improvised karaoke booth for some time so I figured I'd check out what my virtual capital bought me. And there I was – am – dragging “all... that” across the threshold. Jim, living historical object, singing badly a song from *Guitar Hero*. A tiny room with insignificant rose walls. A small window, a three bar fire, a couple of gunmetal units, cabinet things that would be more at home in an office. No decorations, no shelves; a dog-worn single bed, no headboard, no sheets, no pillows. No net curtains or blinds. No clock radio or telephone; dressing table or bookshelf. This is what was not there: well, it gives the place an airier feel. The place is functional; it's all demonstrably pre-Ikea, possibly pre-war. A taupe mattress represented in, as if by intention, a cracked full-length mirror. The smudges on the mirror, on closer inspection, are lipstick. A hardened moment. According to a survey by Shisedo Cosmetics, Tokyo, some 87% of American women ticked a box saying that they had left traces of lipstick in unwanted places, whatever that means. Is this an unwanted, forsaken place? Do I have a choice? No problem: aside from this spectral trace of a fossilised kiss, it's proper legit *tabula rasa* accommodation. I step around nothing to invert the window in the mirror; a specular deixis, spatial transfer: widdershins reflection of a spiral of steep steps. Opening it will wah the roar of street, admit the stench of burger onions, couscous spices, the refined piss and beer tang. Overcast dust, layered on the latch. Iron fire-escapes ivy across the opposite block. I am describing how it looks to try to describe how it feels: have I failed? A thin sheet of glass against the grime, the muck, the stink, the beauty. A carafe of pigeons. Jim's bad singing. Beer on my lips for the first time in two days. There I was then.

Back in the bright lounge and the scuffed armchair leather adhesive on the legs. The window reaching to the floor. I pull the armchair up to it. The city surprises me right there; it rises like Mycenae, purple and grey. In the mirror behind me, even the sun itself is falling to the left. Was this the wrong decision? A low, throbbing drone of water pumping beneath the floorboards. And this peculiar larger-than-lifer, complete with heavy metal water-moccasin, serenading himself. Low, mauve sodiums coming up. Malfunctioning, over-eager photocells; naked, stray voltages. A miniature populace scurrying about mutely below: the end of their day. They are on their way home, to the suburbs or to the countryside. Not me; no more those looks from insiders outside provincial locals, no more the tired remarks, from the old and the young.

I don't care how angular this Anglo-American is: at least he isn't one of them.

The lounge was pretty much soundproofed, or at least if it wasn't, it was so far up that you couldn't hear much. It never was silent, or if ever it was, I never noticed. There it was – London – on the other side of the glass; a lot like watching TV with the sound turned down. The muted growl of traffic might easily have been the coursing of hot water through old pipes. *And then the lighting of the lamps.* Putting the bottleneck to my mouth, I tasted my own blood: it was irony, a dark Mexican brand. Distant Andalusian roots, and still more distant, ancient, dark blood, scarlet as the Seville sun, the searing earth. It even tasted dark too – dark like us, he would say in the months to come. They say in summer in Andalusia you can cook meat in the burnt orange earth if you bury it for a day; I can't vouch for its nutritional value. The drink was so cold that it was painful to gulp it, but all the same, almost all in one gulp, I worked it. Below, the city stretched out, a living cadaver, and there was the heat, and there was Jim's singing:

take me down to the Paradise City. I stayed there, my face pressed up to the window, for a very long time – take me down – and the world was wide and the grass – *won't you please take me down* – was at least a kind of green and the girls, I felt certain, were pretty.

Doing nothing to dispel the *Twilight* shit, he corporified in a curl of steam, beneath a hooded black bathrobe. I didn't know whether to laugh or to be afraid. I mean what do you do? Do you laugh or fear? Most-times you do both at once: that I've learned. Laughing apparently can make evil spirits go away; sometimes it works. Jim looked at me, the hood covering up that shock of hair, and without word or gesture, went to bed.

I woke late. It was dim in my room. It would transpire that it always was dim in my room. It didn't matter which direction it faced – I never worked it out – because the buildings around were so tall that very little light spilled in: it was like being at the bottom of a loch. A near-silence. I got out into the lounge. On a flip-chart for corporate presentations, in the middle of the lounge, Jim had written:

J, HOME ABOUT FIVE, BEER IN REFRIGERATOR. DON'T ANSWER THE DOOR. J.

Practical information between two identical initials.

I moved the flip-chart against the wall. I went into the bathroom and threw some water onto my face. Breathing out, I looked into the mirror. The mirror steamed up a little, but still the reflection. I looked different. I went back to my room to double-check. That other mirror. That lipstick. When broken, mirrors can kill. And they reverse what they reflect.

Got a glass of water and looked for breakfast. There was no breakfast. I heard something in the lounge. No one was there. But music. It was music. Quietly, but all the same, the thump, thump of drums and bass. I turned around and there, in the corner of the lounge, the rather outsize television was on. It was *MTV*: The Red Hot Chili Peppers. That's a little weird, I thought, I could've sworn it was off a moment ago. I just turned it down a little. What's that thing about electricity and the uncanny? Light and magic? I don't know. But it broke up the afternoon silence.

Figured it was best to unpack. Office furniture is all right in an office, but in a bedroom, it's confusing; you don't want to live in an office. No chests of drawers or wardrobes. A plywood office cupboard and a metal filing cabinet. What the hell: opening up the suitcase, I put my few possessions into the company cupboards. Sneezing, I dusted. Jeans and jumpers and trainers and stuff all went into it. Written in Tippex, on each part of the cupboard: A-D, E-H, and so forth. Oh, well, I thought, I can file Levi's under "L" and Converse under "C" and so on, and at least there's plenty of space. Office minimalism: the *Wallpaper* wet dream.

Jim hadn't given me any keys. Just as the day before, I looked at myself staring out of the window onto the square. It was late afternoon and people were salamanders in the sun. I wanted to go and join them, but also to remain aloof: isolation is an addiction. There were few children – this pleased me greatly – and lots of tourists. People in suits, people in sandals, people in stasis or in motion, reading or talking, arguing or laughing (or so I supposed for all was silent up there); a silent film, a karaoke drama. I sat down on the leather sofa and stared up into the trivial, visible part of the sky.

Rockpools and old songs and an oversized greatcoat. Ghosts in the waves and slow ships out ahead. The windows are high and the house is deserted. Even when visited the house is deserted. Christmas is coming, the grandparents departed. Cards of Thanksgiving from far-off America. Radio Three and the throng of the cellos. Foam of white horses and no stars and no speaking.

He came in at just gone six. It was all Metallica.

“Unpaid overtime. That’s what it fucking is,” he said.

It turned out that some magnate who represented a minor pop star was desperate for a “truss rod readjustment,” whatever that was. Everybody else had gone home and the job was left to Jim.

“Cunts,” he said.

But other than so wise a word as this, he had little to say on the matter. He muddled into the kitchen – “oh restful fucking Allah, I’m tired” – and opened two bottles of beer. The bottle tops chimed into the sink just as before. Smiling all the same, he passed one to me. A slight sense of *déjà vu*, alleviated by the fact that this actually had happened the day before.

“Oh well,” he said.

I opened the beer and, just like the day before, drank deeply.

“Oh well,” I said.

As imperceptive and fucked-up as I am, it didn’t take me long to work out that Jim’s life revolved around bars to a carnifical degree. Every single night, except later on, he

would go to a bar and drink. When he had drunk enough for the bar's location to be absolutely irrelevant, then he would leave and go to his bed, or would leave and go to someone else's bed, or leave and have someone else come to his bed, or leave and go to other people's pseudo-marital beds. The beds became as irrelevant as the bars, although someone once told me that he liked to have bars on the bed. It all seemed to be irrelevant to him and yet it was his body and his life – in a way – that were involved in the occupation of these bars and of these beds. He left the bars to go to the beds, and he left the beds to go to the bars. That's supplementarity for you. In any event he always was leaving.

There were a few bars in which he drowned his sorrows or intensified his joys. These comprised a small district really, from Camden to homely Soho. He liked to drink in places where people who have died have drunk. He rarely ventured into the West – that is to say Kensington and Chelsea – and only occasionally, when visiting a friend, and sometime dominatrix of his called Harriet, would he venture into the East. (To be a dominatrix, he once carefully told me, a woman had to have a male-sounding name. They had to be called something a bit butch such as, for example, Butch. Tracey wouldn't do. Mistress Katie always is star-crossed with dispersuasion, even while she pulls slowly on, her Texan, spectral hold-ups. Phillipa and Harriet were fair game because they were derivations of male names. Jane was borderline because it sounded a bit like John. In sum, whichever way the issue chanced to swing, butch bitches, or bitchy Butches were the stern, starry, blonde order of the day.) But Jim was a man who knew where he wanted to go – to licensed premises – and once he had decided which one, and in which borough, there was no calling it off.

Tonight it was one of his favourites, an Irish bar around the corner. They had a basement in which whiskey was always today's special – "day" being the stressed point. I followed him down some steep stairs and he leaned on the bar. A large lad manned the empty bar.

"Gerard," he said, "two double Jim J's."

While Jim always said, "friends don't owe," he always chose the drink himself. He never once asked, "what would you like?" or "what're you having?" He simply thought that as he was buying, then it was up to him.

Gerard passed him two very large whiskeys and Jim thanked him.

"So, you're here," Jim said to me. I think he smiled.

The bare floor.

He said, "what're you going to do now?"

"Well," I said, feeling my way, "I guess I'll look for a job."

"OK," said Jim.

A longer silence. It was like he was fucking Finnish. I took a sip of the whiskey.

"I can do computers," I said.

I lied a lot then, and I lie a lot now; and yet to me it all seems true. All of us tell stories. Are some more true than others? What if some of it is lies and some of it is true?

Jim just looked at me again. I said: "I can, umm, teach piano... to about grade seven."

"OK," he said.

I looked at my hands. After some time he said: "Look, I'm not going to ask you for rent until you've got a job. But in the end, I guess you've got to do something."

“I guess.”

Everyone has to do something. That’s gloomy.

“Well, go and sign on tomorrow and we’ll see what we can do. Don’t say you’re living here. Say you’re homeless, living on people’s sofas and that, and on the streets. Say you’re a Personal Issue customer. Don’t shave.”

“All right.”

“Even Gerard here might be able to sort you out – cash in hand.” He motioned to the barman.

“Yo Gerard, any jobs right now?” The barman looked at the ceiling and back again.

“Not now,” he said, “but I can’t hack it here for much longer. I think I want to do myself in, to be honest. And I don’t want to go back to Cardiff.”

“Don’t put him off, Gerard. He is young and young.”

“Oh,” said Gerard, “it’s for your mate... Well, perhaps we’ll see what we can do.”

“Cheers,” said Jim, putting his arm around me, “he’s family.”

Gerard looked at Jim. I didn’t say anything.

Get that in your nose, said Jim.

I lay in bed looking out of the window and craned my neck at the twin moons, just like on Tatooine. Security was as otherworldly as that planet. Living in an office – Jim clearly had not completed, or perhaps even started, the transformation from work- to living-space – but that didn’t bother me. Neither did the fact that my bed was tiny, old,

and creaky. It had seen some action. *Oh, let there be more now, on this old frame.* I was so young, so stupid. The only thing that I thought I knew was escape. I shivered; what was to come, a void of delight. I didn't know it but I knew it. The blood rushing through my stupid young veins – I could measure its velocity were it not surging so. Sad thick blue blood streaming the speed of light. Is the speed of light a constant, necessarily? Can we know? What has love to do with all of this? Is love a refracted index? Is love relativity? Does it alter all possible worlds?

And then Jim throwing up in the bathroom.

Jim pushed his way to the bar. I stood next to a framed poster of Ozzy Osbourne.

It was a bar which knew what music it wanted to play and precisely how loud it wanted to play it. Bikers with beards, leather and studs and stuff. Tourists of course, with their backpacks and their health, but predominantly this had the feel of a locals' place. Of course, at the heart of any big city, this invites paradox, because in Soho there rarely are any locals to frequent a bar. But this was a local bar for nomadic people.

"There you are Jamie-boy," said Jim, with a shot glass, "down the hatch. Here's to Anglo-American relations."

"All right."

"That wasn't limeade, you know," he said, as I nearly brought it all up.

"I had this job once," he said, "on Old Street, doing AutoCad and stuff. There was this man there, a really nice guy, from Barking or somewhere like that – lived with his mom – and he brought this stuff in – we were working overtime on the weekend; drawing maps of the underground cables beneath the Angel subway on a Saturday

morning – and he prepared it like they used to do in France back in the day, cooking up the sugar in a spoon. Right at his computer. It was great. But they don't do it like that here, they just give it to you in a shot. Don't drink it like a shot."

He sipped his. And then now me, trying not to throw up. I thought of *Moulin Rouge* and Kylie Minogue and Ladytron; and how things that appear glamorous often are not glamorous.

"Right," he said over aural hostility generally set aside for Steven Seagal movies, "just a few tips."

He came closer. I thought: why don't we just go outside and talk about this where we can hear one another?

"Now, there will be a person you'll meet, possibly tonight, and there are a few little *empirical* factors that you need to be aware of."

What factors? What empirical factors?

"It's just that – hey, perhaps I should ask – have you noticed any... any people, I mean, well, *female* people in the flat lately?"

"No."

I hadn't been there long enough.

"What I'm saying is, did you see any women – you know: girls – in the flat last week?"

"No," I said.

"OK."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, I'm certain."

“Indubitably?”

“I guess.”

There were women – and girls – in the bar though; that was empirically certain. In the flat, there had been a bit of bustling around the previous day, but I had figured it was the wind and a pizza leaflet. If I’d seen a girl, or a woman, however ordinary, however unremarkable, then I would have said so.

“Not a blonde?”

“No.”

“With sort of blue bits. Her hair’s kind of blue. Miles Davis hair.”

“No.”

“Good.” He seemed relieved.

“Have you been – visited by any women before, without warning?”

“Well, actually,” he said, “it’s a bit fucked-up, but sometimes this girl – you could call her my girlfriend I suppose – has this habit of letting herself in. Don’t know how she does it. I’ve asked her not to. But she does.”

“She has a key, right?”

“I don’t know. Probably. Maybe not. Probably not. Whatever. Sometimes I come home and she’s –. She just turns up sometimes. In fact, I nearly killed her once. It’s a Monday night. I’m tired so I go to bed pretty early. I watch Conan O’Brien. I even have a cup of Horlicks – I am trying to fit in here you know – now that doesn’t happen very often. I’m sleeping, right. Now, get this: She... materialises like a fucking vampire under the door and wakes me up – it’s way gone three. And she has this, umm, kind of, shiny Catwoman mask thing on. And these shiny impossible heels. Nothing else. I mean,

nothing else. Freaks me right out. I go for the old Slugger under the bed and I'm a second away from whacking her good and spilling her brains all over the bedroom. Then I see it's her. She thinks it's hilarious. Freaked me the fuck right out man. You Brits. That mask. Her Essex eyes: nothing like them in the whole world. I know Essex girls have a bad reputation but they're the best. Manchester girls are supposed to be a bit slutty, but they could never keep up with a girl from Essex. There's a fine line between sexy and slutty and I like girls to cross it. Anyway, it worked out OK in the end. Bit of Imovane and those heels – and that Catwoman mask – it was all right."

He took a sip of his drink.

"But how would you like it? And that's only the entrée, man. She pulls shit like that all the time."

"Like?" I said.

"Oh, you'll see, you'll fucking see: she's always got something up her sleeve.

Perhaps that's why –"

He put his head in his hands and then raised it again.

"You know," he said, "look, like this might sound a bit weird, but I think she can kind of shape-shift, you know."

"Shape-shift?"

"Yep. Go under doors and stuff. Like become other things and that. Cats, squirrels, all that thing. She's done all this occult stuff and that. I don't mean Wicca, I mean the serious stuff. That shit that you can get in Atlantis. But sometimes I feel she spies on me. Especially if I'm with another girl. She looks at me. Sometimes I feel her looking at me."

“So where does the, what did you say, ‘empirical’ factor come in?”

“Let me put it like this: what she can’t see, what she can’t hear, et cetera – you know, in *the empire of the senses* – won’t hurt her, OK?”

“Oh sure,” I said, “no problem. You’re OK with me.”

“Good. Thanks. She’ll probably be in later. Just, well, don’t say stuff about, well, our little lives together, right? Because things can get pretty funny around here. And I’ve taken you in. Discretion, Jamie-boy. There aren’t any house rules but this is one of them.”

“OK,” I said.

“And don’t encourage her.”

“OK.”

“And don’t mention the fucking mask.”

I was running out of money. Over and over, Jim would return with beer or the green stuff, or both. We stood out on the pavement. Jim smoked and didn’t say anything for quite a while; told me about music and America. His mobile wasn’t silent but he never looked at any messages. We went back in and it was very loud. After a while he said:

“OK Jamie-boy, we can stay here, go home-o, or go to this little place called Zerocity that stays open all night and I’ve a good friend there who can sort us out and – well – what d’you say?”

“Velocity?”

“Zerocity.”

“Can we go home?” I said.

So we go down to Zerocity and we don't meet the guy he mentioned and about the next thing I knew is this big guy with a shaved head and I pass out on a sticky floor and about the next thing I know there's this girl with her hands in my hair and she's got breath like pear drops and then the next thing I know I'm nursing a migraine in my room at four in the afternoon.

"So it's official. Jamie-boy *does* like to party," said Jim.

He was a lump of shadows.

"Leave him alone."

"He does, though. I have seen it, with my own eyes. I have smelled it, with my own nostrils."

"Oh, come on Jim, give him a break. He's only been here a few days."

"Yes, but *what* a few days."

I was having trouble focussing.

"How about a nice line, Jamie-boy? Or perhaps some fine Czech fairy liquid?"

"I told you, Jim, fucking leave the kid alone. You're supposed to be helping him. The learning curve."

Three shapes: one on the office-armchair-shaped-thing, one on the office-couch-shaped-thing, and one on the carpet.

"Nobody mentioned helping," said Jim.

Sitting down on the floor. One of the shapes got up off of a larger shape and got a glass of water.

"Drink that."

I looked up. The shape was filled with colour and light and then it surely was a woman's body and then that face.

"Anyway, it was an all right night, for a Tuesday," I heard Jim saying, "you should have come."

"But, perhaps our absence was a key factor in your *all right* night." An English accent for a change.

"Can't rule it out," said Jim.

I drank the water. Soon, my eyes adjusted to the light. There were two women with Jim. One draped a shock of blue and white hair across the arm of the office couch while the other, paler one sat upright with the former's legs draped over hers. Neither of them was wearing a great deal. No introductions, no greetings, nothing.

The pale one flicked through the channels on the mute television. There was *Richard and Judy*, and then there was something about torture on the news, and then something with people dressed up as aliens.

"So where were you then?" said Jim.

"I told you," said the blonde one, "indoors."

"Oh, balls to this."

"I only sent you about fifty texts," said the blonde one again, "I told you – you check your phone – we were staying in."

"*Pretty Woman*, strawberries, and Marks's champagne," said the pale one.

"Just like in *Pretty Woman*."

"Yeah, but without Richard what's-his-name."

"Gere," said Jim "and they don't have Marks and Sparks in LA"

“You could’ve come over.”

“To do what? Watch *Pretty fucking Woman*?”

“That would’ve been a start,” said the blonde one. She sort of looked at him.

“I love the bit where he drives up and, you know, with the limo and the opera and...,” said the pale one.

“Whatever.”

These conversations would repeat themselves over the course of the next few months. I don’t think that I ever understood any of them.

“Actually,” said Jim, “if this is the right one, the one with the thigh boots and all that, I think that the biggest pimp of all is that guy, you know, that guy who like liquidates the companies and shit. What a cunt.”

“Oh,” said the pale one, “but he changes.”

“No way. He bites the bullet. He thinks, hold on, he’s old, Julia Roberts – I mean she’s nothing much to write home about these days, but back then, you know – and anyway, he’s just lonely. A lonely guy, desperate for a good _____. On a regular basis.”

“Aren’t we all?” said the pale one, “It doesn’t happen in real life. That’s why we watch the film.”

“And we don’t cry at the end because we’re happy for the couple,” said the blonde one, “but because we sense its absence in our own lives.”

“The absence of what?”

“Love,” chimed the blonde and the pale one together.

As soon as I met Ana I couldn't stop myself from picturing her in that mask and those impossible heels. This, one way or the other, had its ups and downs. And there was Mary, a pale tough waif from Ulster. There're some adjectives for you. I couldn't look at her from seeing her. I thought I'd implode or something. I wanted to crawl into the filing cabinet next to the couch and file myself under "T" for Tired and Emotional. But I couldn't look at her at first, so she looked at me. I wanted to disappear. I wanted to be more like Jim.

They went to a place out East where some DJ from Osaka was playing. I was tired; I liked being on my own most of the time, until I was on my own all of the time.

"Come on," said Jim, "we're on the list. You've got to come. What else'll you do?"

"I'll see what's on TV," I said.

Anaïs said something about *Pretty Woman* again.

"Hey, I mean, it's Wednesday night, man. We've got to do *something*."

"To be honest, I just had a bit too much last night, you know."

I could feel her stare. A curious persuasion. Not as though she were attracted to me, but as though she were intrigued and slightly amused.

"But Jamie, you like to party don't you? You like fairy liquid and –" said Jim.

"– come on," said Anaïs, "leave him alone. He's had a long few days. He's just a country boy."

"But –"

"– let. Let him. Let him be."

So off they went and I was left alone in the flat. It's Wednesday night, he had said. You've got to do *something*. The fact was that, not for the last time, I didn't know what to do. That accent; those eyes.

But late at night you watch any old shit. Police reality dramas, live psychics from Essex, reruns of list-shows, sex documentaries with any discernible sex pixelated out, reverse-auction shows in which products – china figurines of ballroom dancers, cubic zirconia gold-plated rings, extremely fragile exercise equipment, anti-virus software you've never heard of, sundry items with certificates of authenticity and limited numbers, macramé kits, cigar cases, Elvis Presley box-sets, cased editions of Grimm's Fairy Tales – get cheaper as the seconds tick by; all of this stuff slides by, London outside. You think, I should go out, get some ice cream or something, or I should download a film or whatever, but you just sit there, watching the live psychics, waiting for something to happen.

What I did need to do was to get a job. Jim got more interested in me getting one. In fact in the end, my indolence and apathy led him to get one for me. One afternoon he had a cut on his hand.

“How's the job-hunting going?” He said.

“OK,” I said. He knew it wasn't.

“OK,” he said, “like I said, you can stay here, rent free, for as long as you like. You're family. But you've got to have some kind of money, don't you? Like going out and stuff. I mean, I can't subsidise your pub life, man.”

“Hey, thanks, I’ll be OK,” I said.

I had savings, not much. I’d sold some stuff. I didn’t realise just how generous my cousin was being, especially as we didn’t know each other.

“Just letting you know,” he said, “nothing comes for free here you know. Nothing. And your pound doesn’t go far. You should get some kind of employment.”

He got up and went into the bathroom. He shut the door behind him and I heard the sloshing of the water as he lumbered into the bath. I went back into my room and shut the door. Next week, I figured, I would go and get a job, but like I said, he beat me to it. I tried to be grateful; oh me: *I am a lazy son. I never get things done.* I wasn’t really that pleased with the concept, or rather I was pleased with the concept so long as it remained one: an idea, not a situation. Jim said that the job would be like “getting money for going out.” But that’s what everybody does, apart from those lucky ones who get paid for staying in. I mean, my father got paid for going out (and a long way out at that, in Istanbul, Dubai, and other more exotic places in the Middle East; places where if you steal, they slice you at the wrist. It is a miracle that my father still could count on all his fingers. Mind you, you still can knock the shit out of your frail, strong, Spanish wife; and if she seeks solace in the legs of another, then she is washed, buried to her neck, and has her eyes sewn shut with stones). But Father also got paid for staying home, with his Elgar on full blast. Good for him. Perhaps coming from the small town encouraged laxness. No one there really worked. They left school – assuming that they went to school in the first place – then they went on the dole. They pushed buggies or sat in pubs and that was it. They got old enough, lived long enough to die. They seemed to have a

rate of reproductive increase far in excess of what you'd think wise or prudent. But what place has prudence in this story?

The next afternoon, he came in like a Vivaldi concerto: all trills and athletics. He opened a beer with his teeth. Then he said, "hey Jamie-boy, I've got something good to tell you."

"What's that?"

"Big Gerard's gone back to Cardiff."

This meant nothing to me at all. I looked at him as if to say, so what?

"That means you have a job, dude."

Don't call me dude, mate, I thought: even from an American it sounds as though you're trying to sound American.

"Oh. Thanks man," I said.

That's how it happened. I was to be a replacement for someone. Big Gerard had left. There was a position. I could fill the hole, however big, left by Gerard. There was a place that was filled and now it wasn't; now there was an empty space which needed to be filled by something else. This is the way things go, in the world.

At last, my first job. I had put this shit off for a lifetime.

"You can start tonight," said Jim.

He wasn't even the boss.

“These are your optics, these are the highballs, here are the shakers; hey, you’re supposed to wash up every time you use them, but I don’t,” said the blonde man, looking down at me, right in the eye.

Shit I was tired.

“Here’s the till: you must use the key on your belt loop. It can extend. So you don’t look like you’re having sex with the till when you serve the customers.”

He did the actions, bending down a little and pretending to fuck the till with his impossibly thin body, looking me dead in the eye, all the time. He never wore anything except blue Levi’s and pristine, ironed white T-shirts. Later, this woman called Megan would say that he looked just like a young Truman Capote; I had no idea what she was talking about. I didn’t know who this guy Capote was; if I had met him, then I perhaps would have said that he looked like this guy. But he was a good supervisor, in a way; a strange one – perhaps not the strangest one the world has ever seen – but funny, reasonable, and most importantly, absolutely disinterested in anything work-related. He just didn’t give a fuck about the job. And his name: Jussi.

“You see?” said Jussi.

I wanted to die.

“I can do a South African accent,” he said, “I can do an American accent; I can do a Jamaican accent. I can even do your snotty accent. You want to hear my Scottish accent?”

The funny thing was, he actually could do a reasonable South African accent, to my ears at least, but they’d only heard penguins at the zoo. Thank heavens he never did the Jamaican one. From the start I knew that the end would be spectacular, but not to

that extent. The only accent Jussi couldn't do well was London. But what does that mean? London has all the accents in the world. No: I meant mine.

Sometimes, some Aussies would come in, desperate for some proper Irish whiskey and there it'd be: a believable Aussie accent. Jussi must have had some reason or other but pretending to be someone else only fools other people, in the cold glint of morning. He learned English in school: English as a world language, even though he told me he hated English; that was the way that he had picked it up, through desperate, twenty-something language tutors eager to motivate the snow-kids.

We would have theme nights. On the Mexican ones it didn't mean that we'd put on sombreros or whatever, or have tequila on special; it just meant that, that night Jussi would pretend that he was Mexican. This, given the snow of his skin, the blonde crop, and the incandescent camp, was less than convincing; but it helped to pass the time. The very notion of this nigh-on seven foot Scandinavian pretending to be from Cancún was fuel enough. I tried to join in, but it was a disaster.

It was in a basement; it bestowed sweat, sawdust, and the occasional altercation; but I don't feel like talking about that just yet. The ceiling was not much loftier than Jussi's cranium, and the floor was sticky, slippery, and sawdusty. Part of my job – or Jussi's: he didn't really care whether he was taking out the empties or ordering new stuff – was to sawdust the floor before opening. We had bags of sawdust shipped in from a wood-yard just outside Hornchurch. People think that this sort of thing doesn't exist any more in Soho, but I can tell you, it does, and perhaps always it should. There were pictures of Kilburn, for whatever reason, from the sixties, all over the place. There was a picture of a bridge over a river in a city. A picture of a street with a big "Bovril" sign,

and many, many pictures of toucans. I liked the toucans very much: they were sunlit, wily, clever birds, not least of all because they always appeared to have a pint of stout on their amazing beaks. The darkness of the stout set off the blossom of the beak. Six feet under just off Dean Street, the birds were beacons of sun-drenched hope.

The bar always was quiet until ten. About then, the Soho Crowd and a few tourists – who'd got lost or had someone tell them about it; or simply couldn't be bothered to get to the Edge or some other such fleshpot – would line in. But up to ten, the bar always was quiet. It was owned by a man who I only met twice. His name was Murphy. Murphy.

He didn't come by the bar very often. He did not like to drink much these days. Rumour had it that he already had drunk enough for one, two, perhaps as many as nine lives. That sobriety which came so late in life explained his survival. Some old alcoholics just drink and drink, and then die. He jumped off the slow-track to oblivion just before the end of the line. He'd gone sober once and he never lapsed. Now Jim told me he liked Bar Italia and drank coffee there all night, just as he had whiskey in Dublin, and in London. He watched the football late at night. He watched live football from Brazil at midnight. Jussi told me that Murphy had learned Italian not just because he liked the sound of it, nor to chat up the out-of-reach women, but mainly because he wanted to speak to the first-generation Italians who could speak English but didn't. A Dubliner in London and his Italian brethren. Some of the old Italian guys were first-generation émigrés who remembered the war and were as confused about it as he was. Many years before Jim moved to Soho, Murphy drank coffee with an Italian who, during the war – and after thirty-three years of living and running a business in London – had

been incarcerated by the British. This was a story that Murphy liked to tell. But to us he was our boss – yet perfectly absent. He talked with a very heavy (Mary told me later, North Dublin) accent which was like one of those poems I had to study in school: they sounded nice, but I had no idea what they were on about. He was gruff, amiable. As I had to work very late I was conscious of his presence only a few blocks south, sipping his espresso amidst Soho's sizeable Latin community. He never seemed to sleep. Having spent much of his life drunk, in a stagger of sleep, now he seemed to court alertness and concentration. Bar Italia of course never actually closes, so even when we were polishing the bar for the next afternoon's shift, we were aware that he was awake, completely sober, and ready to come and give us a whole bunch of shit at two moments' notice.

I had no idea what I was doing, or why I was doing it, or how to do it. Pouring halves of lager was impossible. Jussi said it was just as well I didn't work in the French House. Sometimes the tiny bar would be about ten people deep with only Jussi and me to serve them. The Media set equally were attracted and repelled by Jim and me – thank God we disgusted them more than we enamoured them – it's a fine line to tread. But that is why their careers had chosen them: in such bondage: they could slip in and out of a dangerous world. Anyhow they were just hot, sweaty, and in need of refreshment. And that's what we provided, with a smile, a sneer, occasionally a little more – in the way of, for instance, the penis or the anus, or on occasion both; fortunately we weren't below such things – and a friendly disdain of all things human.

At the end of that first night I arranged myself over the bar in an assemblage of fatigue and disgust, and poured myself a beer. Jim nodded and I got him one. I asked

him for some money and he laughed. Jussi helped himself. Now Jim sat at the bar, smiling to himself. I draped my skinny shy body over the bar, wondering why he was so jolly about the situation. He just kept smiling.

Well, said Jim, I'm going to treat you to lunch. You've got a job, you've got a place, you've got a friend. Let me buy you lunch.

OK, I said.

"Oh, it's really no big deal, man," he said, after I thanked him, not for the last time, "you see, I know the manager. In fact, time was when the manager was me."

"I never had you down as a manager."

"What, based on your intimate knowledge of both the industry, and of me and my many, many business ventures?"

"Well, no, not really. But with Uncle's business and all that," I said.

He didn't really respond to this. He just kept smiling.

There is a joy to basement bars in the mid-afternoon, and ninety percent of this joy is desertion. Not the serious dives mind, but the sorts of places that people go to for their office Christmas parties to eat facsimile food and drink simulacrum beers. There were a few touristy-looking people, but otherwise we were alone. A couple of Chinese women in a booth. I envied the barman: his job comprised polishing glasses and looking in the mirror. We were served by a bored pretend Mexican girl with a plastic bandolier slung over her mahogany shoulders. She slowed down as she saw Jim.

"Becky dear," said Jim, "how're things?"

"I'm here," she said, "that's how things are."

“Still the RADA thing?”

“Of course. I have no children to feed.”

“You look well.”

“Thanks. Acting is my business. That and waitressing. But I can balance both lustrous careers at once.”

“It’s a talent you have.”

“Equally blessed and cursed, Jim.”

She looked up at the ceiling as if to see the sky.

“Now what can I get you?”

Jim leaned in and whispered and she looked put-out. She nodded and sighed and looked at me. If anything, she was full of pity.

“You can have the specials,” she said, “I think they’re *quesas* but I’ll have to see.”

She set off, the bandolier swinging about her rosewood hips, to the bar.

“Rebecca North,” said Jim, “has never been to Mexico.”

“No shit,” I said. The place smelled of lemon-wipes.

“I’ve been in here,” he said, “more since I left, than when I was working here. I don’t really miss it. I don’t really know why I come back.”

“Why do you come back?”

“I don’t really know. Thing is, most things around here cost a fortune. I mean that pizza place on Compton, that closed ages ago. I forget the name. Pollo or something, I don’t know. That’s what happens, after a while, you forget the names. I remember one afternoon there with Anaïs. It was snowing outside. It was very nice.

They used to put shitty Cumberland sausage on the pizza but still it was great. Would've been the first winter here. The smell of those pecan nuts, man, on every corner. Blue lip gloss, she was wearing. Smelled like the Art cupboard in high school."

That Catwoman mask again and those heels. Banish that thought. The bandolier girl came back with a huge basket of food and two plates.

"You've got to pay for the drinks," she said, "- and come to this."

She gave Jim a flyer for *Twelfth Night*. She was on it, dressed as a boy.

"I'm Viola," she said.

"Are you?" said Jim.

She shrugged. She didn't look much like a boy.

"Upstairs at the Gate," she said, "I have to strap my tits down. And don't bring Ana."

"All right," he said.

"Get any pit work?"

He scratched his head and leant into his hands.

"Not since that fucking thing in Hammersmith. Anyhow, I had to sell my Mark IV. Can't really do a pit gig without the Mark IV."

She shifted a bit. Adjusted her bandolier. A tattoo at the small of her back. I wondered if it had hurt.

"Sorry Jim darling, about your little amp" she said, "well, do try to come along. I know it's not really your thing, but it'll be fun. There're songs. It's actually *for* Twelfth-night, you know."

"Sounds festive."

“Beats *Puss in Boots*.” She put her hands on her hips.

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Don’t start, Jim,” she said, shaking her head. He looked at those hips as though remembering a rainy holiday at Center Parcs.

“But enjoy your lunch,” she said. “It’s nice to see you.”

She strode away; vanished as soon as she had appeared, through slamming swing doors with little painted guns.

I was invisible. Londoners can be like this. This is something that I like about them.

You only can hold back so much. Perhaps I have an alluring anxiety disorder. Drink took hold, and being careful to be heard only to myself, I asked him.

“Jamie-boy,” he said “there are some things that are hard to explain.”

This wasn’t enough.

“Come on, man,” I said, “I mean you and me, we’re sworn to secrecy now aren’t we? He hasn’t phoned, has he?”

He laughed again.

“No, he hasn’t. I screen my calls. He *can’t* phone, Jamie, you’re all right with me. If he turns up, then I’ll lie. No worries, Jamie-boy.”

“Thanks.”

But still I needed to know.

“I mean, how did you get here?”

He sighed long and deep, and then shot me a glance. I persisted.

“Well, you know, he used to own this place down the street. Things were pretty shitty and he sold up in London. I think things were doing so well in Jersey that he figured London was a waste of time. People like to eat in America, you see; here it’s sushi this and tapas that, but in New York State and Jersey, heck, even in New York, well, people like to eat. The only people that really eat around here are tourists. It’s a Weight Watchers republic. Have you noticed that some bars around here even have calorie counts on the cocktails? It’s true. Those media girls get their iPhones out and study the menu. They’re not on Facebook, they’re totting up the calories. That’s why they drink so much vodka. They hit eight hundred or whatever and then go all Grey Goose on you.”

I drank fast to keep up with him. Come on Jim, I said, what happened?

“He had a restaurant on Greek Street. Have you noticed that in Soho there are no American restaurants now? Well, there’re a couple in Covent Garden I guess and on New Oxford Street, but that’s for the *We Will Rock You* crowd. He had this London office. I don’t know why he didn’t just sell it when he sold the place. I think that he thought the best thing to do was to keep it and rent it out or something, or maybe to give himself somewhere to crash in London, you know, for affairs and that. So he kind of you know, set about turning it from an office into an apartment. That’s why, when you think about it, the place has a kind of office feel to it.

“After a while it became clear to everyone – the family, that is: Dad, Uncle Mike and all the others – that the business was pretty much finished here. All Dad’s money went into the U.S. stuff. I think it was just a gut feeling on his part. And as it turns out, it was the right thing to do.”

He looked somewhere (out of a window? It was a dive bar).

“Thing is,” he whispered, “things weren’t exactly happy between Mom, Dad, and I. There were... issues.”

I toyed with my food.

“So, after this big argument,” he said, “which I guess you might literally have heard here in England, Dad just said to me, look, James, you can go live in the London apartment. Just look after it, get a job, try finishing the office-apartment metamorphosis, maybe go to college even, and well, the rest you’ve seen. I played a few jingles and sessions and stuff, I nearly applied to teach at MI, but hey, you know.”

That’s impressive, I said. Didn’t know what it was.

“Yeah, I guess it is OK. I think he thought it was good for everyone that way. I have to say that the place is all right, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I mean, the location... It’s all about that. I mean, Soho. I never thought I’d live here.”

“Well yeah, it is handy for things,” he said, “but remember the apartment still belongs to him: he could kick us out tomorrow. He’s never in touch but he’s always there. But I always think, well, he – Dad – must’ve really wanted rid of me to have given me so much. To get people to leave you have to give them either a lot of something or a lot of nothing. Or alternate between the two and keep them off balance. Whether it’s money or violence or both, then that’s the way it goes.”

“How much?” I said. I wished I hadn’t.

“When I moved in, about eight years ago, Dad was going to put it on at something way over half-a-million. But that’s chickpeas compared to what it’s worth

now. And it's nothing to Dad, really: he is so loaded now it's nuts. Just Google the old cunt. You'll see him on some list. He didn't make *The Times* rich list because of some small print loophole about America or something."

He did the staring into space thing again: "Well, perhaps that's how much I'm worth. And you know what? If that's the case, I continue to appreciate with age."

More laughter was what it was. Are tears the opposite of laughter or is there no opposite? Depends who you ask.

"In a sense, Jamie-boy, I am the fine wine that no one wants to drink."

He looked for Becky and she turned away and made for the kitchen. An assemblage of muscle, bone, skin, and brains; it's a shame she won't be in this story any more. Another waitress came by and took an order for our tequila.

"What about Uncle Mike? Do you ever speak to him?"

Jim looked at his hands and then he said: "he's not really in the UK any more. He spends most of his time on his boat. He loves that thing more than life itself. I can imagine it now, him on his boat, his boating shoes. Fishing or something. Pretending to fish. He's like that guy out of *Ferris* fucking *Bueller's Day Off*, you know, with the Ferrari. But it's a boat. You know what? The only time he goes into work he samples the food. Sits down, has a steak. He likes to go undercover you know. Likes the idea of being... what's that word where you see everything? Oh well, you know what I mean. You know, he has ten restaurants in New York alone – that's the state, though, not the city. I told you about that. He only really works as a kind of... leisure activity. Isn't that funny? And me, I'm slaving away for ten quid a fucking hour fixing Floyd Roses for rock stars because they haven't got the dexterity to fix them themselves. Not even the

stars themselves: the rock stars' techs. Even they can't be bothered. I never meet the rock stars. And compared to the techs the rock stars are introverted, bald Buddhists. Well, whatever; what could my Dad and I ever have in common? He's on a boat; I've shipped my oars."

He had a mouthful of beer and sighed, "well, let's just leave it at this: we get on a whole lot better now we're in separate continents."

After a while the other waitress came with our drinks. He nodded at her, and she went away. He picked up one of the shot glasses and raised it.

"Salud," he said, and drank it down in one. I did the same and had a huge acid reflux reaction.

"Ah, we need another, I think," he said.

That night I lay in bed looking out of the window. The moon just was visible. It was noisy with the window open but I liked the hot city air. I thought about Father, working from his big house with his iPad and his Elgar. Jim's father sounded like him, in a way. Dad lived in the shadow of Uncle Mike. Uncle Mike was the big shot; Dad wanted to be the big shot too. He had the desire but not the means. He wore boat shoes too. He wore golfing jumpers like from the eighties. Uncle Mike always would be dressed more formally. Sports casual, my dad. And Dad adopted all these Americanisms, pronounced the names of towns – even British towns – with a New Jersey accent, wanted to have Eggs and Ham, spoke about breakfast "eggs over easy." How weird it all had been, but things would get more so. Have you ever seen something strange; felt a sea-change?

The job was OK. Jussi constantly had music on. It wasn't hooked up to a computer like in most bars. There was no shuffle play, which in a lot of places is a euphemism for whatever advertisements for products the under sixteens were buying. (Pop music is unique in that it is an advertisement for itself. You consume the sign; but the sign is the thing itself. The advertisement is indivisible from the product: it is the product.)

We just had a CD player with a radio that didn't work because we were six feet under. This quaint arrangement meant we could bring our own music. I learned all about Scandinavian trance and Finn-Pop and Jussi learned a bit about Hendrix, or whatever else I could steal from Jim's collection. To be fair, aside from Jimi Hendrix and a load of eighties and nineties metal bands, there wasn't much there. Often I'd bring in one of his instrumental albums, by people with strange names like Vai or something, and we'd listen to it up to about halfway through. The two conclusions we usually arrived at were firstly, how the hell does he do that, and secondly, why? Later Ana told me that Jim often was in between these guys: home-made singles with names like "Burger King," or "Lord Mayor's Show." Where he got the names for these things confused me at the time, but later Ana told me. They were jingles.

Usually I'd get to work on time but not always. It didn't matter. No one really cared or noticed. It made it easier that on time meant not on time. Typically my shift'd begin at three sharp, which on a good day meant half past three. That's time for you; it's either too fast or too slow. I would work, with a break for lunch of forty-five minutes, until three fifteen the next morning. This might sound harsh, but it wasn't: I was young and I soon learned that, so long as I was careful, I could drink and listen to Hendrix for money. I was pleased to indulge the girls with free drinks: this is what it's like in Soho,

believe me. And by the time Jussi and I had locked up and everything, sometimes one of the girls came home. A slice of toast and a cup of tea and all that sort of thing were preferable to a night bus. I pitied their partners. Jussi and I actually got to know a few of the local office clerks. After coming in all the way from places like Barnet or Slough, after huge, ridiculous commutes like something out of a Steve Martin movie, a bit of Soho lowlife was a breath of not-so-fresh air for them.

We had arrangements with local businesses. The Brazilian place gave us a half-price discount, we got into most places for free, and pretty much everyone was polite to us. In return we served our friends from the former Eastern bloc first, particularly over American tourists; we put an extra shot into the Italian girls' and boys' vodka and Cokes; and gave the guys from out East free sodas; we made sure that the police considered us a very tight joint. Jussi was wonderful at this and made sure everyone was happy. Everyone knew that, while there sometimes was a long wait, James's and Jussi's bar was the secret sparkler of Soho.

All the time, Murphy would be in the Italian bar, drinking half of Brazil.

Partly because of our casual attitude, we attracted the not-so-great and not-so-good. For a bit, a bunch of out-of-town guys would come by. Armani and Estuary English, that sort of thing; cigars, and shouting at girls. The police turned up one night and arrested one of them. Resisting arrest, batons, cuffs, like something off of a reality crime show. I thought nothing of it. Later I learned that the man that had been arrested had been held in connection with a killing in Upminster. Crime was life, I realised that very soon, yet every day something weirder seemed to take place. At first it bothered me but then it didn't any more. This Upminster business was just an everyday murder, but

the devil was in the detail. Apparently this guy, one of his boys had run around on him and started trying to go straight. He'd got a macho boyfriend and everything. This was not allowed; the rocks were enough for most. The boy told the out-of-town guy to fuck off, to go and fuck his mum. The out-of-town guy probably had a few minor issues about which he never would have told his mother, nor the coarse-spoken men with whom he played low cards for high stakes. Eventually, left with no other option, the out-of-town guy had filled up the boy's throat with Domestos. The boy had puked it up. Blood and vomit and detergent all over the kitchen tiles, what a state. The boy was half-dead; either the job had to be finished or measures had to be taken to ensure the boy didn't rat. An easy choice. The out-of-town guy had duct taped the boy's mouth shut so that he would not puke it up any more, and then the same to the foamed nostrils. But what is it to us, the ashtray of tonsils and windpipe, the bubbling, singing larynx, the flayed eyes, the raspberry-rippling kiln of the burnt-out throat? Essex has so much to answer for. At first it bothered me but then it didn't any more.

But Jim had been grinning so much, that first night. I realised that the reason why he had been so keen on me getting a job was nothing to do with rent, or with me working at all, but rather his predilection towards alcohol. Because Murphy trusted Jussi he thought that everything was fine. He was in Bar Italia, watching the football and downing endless shots of ground beans, while Jim got drunk most nights for free. Such stuff happens all over the place, from suburban pubs to city cocktail joints, but Jim took things to an entirely new altitude. He'd roll in at five thirty, usually with some guitar or other over his shoulder, which he'd thump down on one of the wooden shelves, and just nod. I'd get him a large vodka and Coke.

“Nice one, kiddo,” he’d say.

And so it went. After a while, because he worked in Denmark Street, he’d come in at lunchtime. If I were there then he’d be sure to come. He’d be the only one in the bar. By the time he left, the fumes exuded from him just as Middle England plug-in air-fresheners secrete lavender. How could he tie his shoelaces, let alone put new strings on some rare guitar?

One Monday I was changing the barrels, and Jussi just came up to me and said, “your cousin’s here.”

It was the first time he had not used Jim’s name. It was an early shift: we wouldn’t open until midday but Jussi already had let him in.

“Are you all right?” I said. He said nothing. He had scratches down his face. There were traces of blood on his bike jacket.

“Mate?” I said.

He said nothing. He nodded. I got him a large vodka and Coke. He downed it in one. Coughed a lot; I thought he was going to be sick.

“All right, Jamie,” he said at last.

“All right mate,” I said.

He sat there for a long time, at the bar. I put on a Hendrix album. I knew he’d like it.

And later some women came down the stairs. Jim was collapsed on one of the tables, some fluid running down his chin. The women took one look at him and left. It was a shame: they appeared to have Australian accents and Jussi could have done his

Australian spiel for them. It was time to ask Jim to leave. I walked him home while Jussi took over the bar.

“Mate,” I said, as Jim hung on to a bar stool, “watch yourself man. I might get the sack.”

I took him home. I put him into bed.

“The sack, man” he said, “hit the sack.”

I left him in his bed, and went back to work. Jussi still was there. We sat there for a long time, saying nothing, until the first night time customers started to turn up.

“You know,” said Jussi, “your brother’s a nice guy.”

“Cousin,” I said, “he’s my fucking cousin.” It’d been a long morning.

“No need to swear, James,” said Jussi, “but my friend, he needs a good woman in his life.”

“He has one,” I said.

He looked at me for a long time. He did silence well. He poured himself a small beer and sat next to me, on the other side of the bar, by the peanuts.

“Well,” he said after some time, “do you want a game of cards?”

I knocked off at eight that night. After I’d had a quick whiskey I got home to Jim. Never liked that corridor much. The light was broken and no one ever had bothered to fix it. But sometimes at night, tiny bright things. Things in peripheral vision. He still was asleep. It was very quiet in the flat and I was glad to close the door.

I miss you. I know it's early in the story but I can't keep from saying that. I lie most of the time but I can't lie to you. It's like my tongue has been cut out but still I must speak

you. You swam like a mermaid. You were my chart, my stars, my shipping forecast. Now I'm lost in a tempest and crow-dark waves. I long for your ink: haunt me. Star my sky.

But you're sunken treasure; a lost folio. Drowned in language.

The next morning he was gone. He would have been able to get to the music shop. There was a half-empty bottle of Pellegrino on the worktop so he must have tried to hydrate himself. And there it is: light splashing in through this vast glass. It was Monday yesterday. Time seemed to be – what do they say? Off of its hinges? – or something. It's like you came in the door and that was it: time would either stand still for hours or simply accelerate.

I got to work late again, not that anyone cared. I nodded at Jussi. Jussi nodded to me. I poured myself a half, with great difficulty, and sat behind the bar. No one except us.

“You get a paper?” asked Jussi. *A paper?*

“No man, I don't read the papers. No one does around here.”

“We need something to do.”

Oh for a block of flats and gravity.

“It's OK,” I said, “I can just sit here.”

And that's just what I did. But Jussi clearly was bored and after a while he told me he'd had enough and that he was going out for a bit. Fine, I said. I worked the optics slowly, getting nicely drunk having a shot from each one. It was nice to be alone. I admired the toucans flying about open skies high above dirty cities. They were excellent things. I put an old CD into the player and propped myself up on the top. It was an old

blues record, all slides and stuff. Perhaps, I thought, I could learn to play, like Jim, and then I realised that I'd never actually heard Jim play. For a guitar player, he didn't play the guitar very much. He told me about his band, but he hadn't rehearsed for a while. Maybe he didn't have a band. Maybe he didn't play the guitar. Perhaps I should snoop around.

And then the sea. I didn't want to go back, but the sea sparkle on a summer morning was my solace. The sea, hushing, hushing. Days swimming, coming home, sitting under the shower to cool down, my mother singing in Spanish downstairs.

Jussi came back with a large Hamleys bag containing various travel editions of board games.

"To pass the time," he said.

"Why the travel ones," I said, "why didn't you just pick up the real ones?"

"You would be a bit more grateful, James," he said, "if you had worked with some of the people who have been here."

Shame doesn't come easily to me but I said I was sorry.

"And, as you ask, I got travel versions because," he said, demonstrating a little secret cupboard under the bar, "you get it?"

It was a great idea, in retrospect. He had *Scrabble*, the *Star Wars* version of *Monopoly* and a reduced version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* Motioning to the last of these, Jussi said, "look, we can become rich, in our minds."

And in a way, he was right: whereas we didn't actually win any money at all, what I think he meant was that we would pick up some information along the way. Thus,

I began to memorise the answers. Each answer is filed away in my brain – at that point I could do that. I memorised information such as the height of K2, the population of South Korea, the number of strings on a sitar, and so on.

The days became almost tolerable because of the games. Jussi bought most of Mos Eisley spaceport but I had property on Hoth. He said he didn't want to buy anything on that planet because it reminded him too much of home. Perfectly reasonable, I conceded, while I figured that the Cantina on the planet I chose was not unlike this place, give or take some extraterrestrial diversity and the lightsabre. Each night, as the public began to pour down the stairs, we'd place the boards carefully in the secret place and the night would begin. Then the real fun would start.

Jim would capitalise in large measure on me making long drinks for a living. On an average night, he would have about nine and pay for just two drinks. Occasionally I'd get reckless and he would leave with more money than he actually had when he turned up. That helped pay for my side of the flat. By the time I closed up, he would be helpless. This didn't just happen occasionally; it happened every single night. He didn't have any real friends apart from Anaïs – who would come and see him for a bit, as did several other women who looked very much like younger or older versions of her – but I never really overheard any of the deep, and not-so-deep conversations that twenty-somethings have after eight lagers. The closest he came to that was an argument with an Australian about a guitar player called Yngwie something. Jim was going on about his technique, and that he did it “all on just a Strat and a Marshall,” whatever that meant, and the Australian said something about egos. In the end Jim just ignored him.

“Are you going to ignore me all night?” said the Australian.

Jim didn't answer.

Another time, he threw up a little over the bar. It wasn't nice – clean it from the bar. I figured before long I would have to have a word with him, but how could I? In a sense he was my landlord. I hardly could go back home. I never can go back and I go on going back.

One evening he left early with a media agency girl who had a "Triumph" tattoo.

"See you, Jamie-boy," he said as they attempted the stairs.

He tripped and fell down a few. He got back up, said something to her; they laughed and off they went.

Early evening then. I shouted out his name. Nothing. I looked around the door to his bedroom. He was asleep. The girl was asleep on him. She seemed to be wearing more in bed than she was in the bar. He looked like he was dreaming of something better than this life. The TV was on. There was a little static on the right edge of the screen. The room, weakly lit, like an aquarium. It almost was dark. I felt my way to the light-switch – not the big light, but an office lamp. It threw a little light on the table. That was less eerie. It was sort of odd being there, with the TV with the sound turned down and the dark rising outside. I thought about that boy – the incident with the bleach and all that; I thought it wouldn't bother me any more but it did. There were people in the square, just gearing up for the night. The vast windows: a silent film. And in the deepened dark, the only real colour was from the street-lights that were just coming on: bars of red and then orange in the evening. The dark deepening, something wasn't right. I didn't know why. But I knew something: that ever since I moved in, that something was not quite as I had

thought it would be. Jim was a nice guy, but every day, without any hint of shame or self-consciousness, he was destroying himself. We all destroy ourselves one way or another; *we might not mean to, but we do*. But his was a sustained, deliberate mission into oblivion.

Still, I'd only been there a few weeks; maybe this was a difficult time for him, what with my settling in and everything. And anyway, it was not just this Jim thing; it was something else. I didn't know what it was at the time, and I know almost nothing about it now, but whatever it was, there was something spectral, a dark luminosity. It was only then – a sort of a gut feeling – that I felt – yes, felt certain in that risen dark – that bad things were to happen here.

2.

The horses breathed into the cold air and every morning a few girls and one boy would go there before school to feed them and to brush them and to muck them out. I could see them from the corner of the guest en suite window, kids in their jodhpurs and gilets, moving about in the mist with forks and spades. Sometimes they would ride them, she told me, when there was time. Otherwise she'd have to wait for after school. She never told me the horse's name but I knew that it was ____ even so. She had told me that she had wanted to call him Ariel, but that she thought that that was going a bit far. She'd set the alarm for 05.50 so that she could get there just as it was getting light, she said, because horses tend to start moving around, snuffling the air and creaking their quilted coats, as it gets light. As it got lighter later, she adjusted her alarm accordingly. She would wake up her horse and feed him. Nearer her GCSEs, when she'd stopped caring about school, she would ride longer. The June sun grazed the thick, bright manes, and flecked her hair with darkest blue. She would ride until late morning, and get to school

late, plodding the road and then over the quaint little bridge over the stream, on the edge of the hockey field, sulking as only a truly bored female can. Most-times she'd have to go to the headmistress, all of that. It was a long, long time since the hats. Letters home, forged letters back. Those letters home, she told me, were more faked than her replies. Intercepting the letters was very easily done: most often her mother was still in bed. Her father had long gone away, she had told me, to Norwich, where he would remain until his widely-welcomed death. Most often her mother didn't get out of bed early. Her mother was in bed quite a lot, she told me. There was nothing wrong with her, she told me. When I ride I feel free, it's the only time I feel alive. Most weeks I intercept the letters, she said. I write back, they never ring up. She liked to have time off school. I liked to have time off school too.

I go and sign on and then I go to work. I go in and sign on and then I go and get a large glass of cheap Merlot and a feta and rocket panini in a café off of New Oxford Street. I finish it and get another Merlot. In the JobCentre Plus, a conversation repeats itself every fortnight. It happens something like this:

“Looking for work still?” says the fat man behind the desk.

“Sure thing,” I say.

“Can I see your applications?”

I give him some unsent letters, some emails posted to email addresses for which I myself have signed up, print-outs of emails that Anaïs has sent to me and to some bloke called Big Bob, with addresses like jobs4theboyz@yahoo.co.uk, and analysts@hotmail.com.

I recall that a serial killer used to work here. I can't remember his name but I think he found a number of clients fertile new positions in large plastic bags intended for garden waste.

"You'll hit a trigger just" – the man strikes his keyboard and adjusts some papers – "before... *Christmas*, you know."

He smiles.

"Shucks," I say.

"Are you American?" he says.

"No," I say, "why, do I sound American?"

"Sometimes," he says.

He is a moustache and a tie, a man in need of a girdle, possibly even a corset, somewhat like those gentlemen who dance quite a different dance at the bi-monthly event *Whip It!* that Jim skilfully resisted last Friday. Safe-words are for cowards, Anaïs had said. Safe-words are for people who have met *you*, Jim said, and each of them wish they'd agreed on one long in advance. Anaïs had screamed and screamed at him, thrown crockery at him – another dish in the wall – until I went down to The Edge, but now the fat man behind the desk is asking me where I live, while I happily conceive of him, gagged, plugged, *painted* (as I have heard it said) – quite against his will – courtesy of one or more of Anaïs's broadminded and cheerfully swingy team-mates from *Whip It!*, without a safe-word in sight.

"No Fixed Abode," I say.

"Roughing it?"

"Couches."

Clichés.

“Couches.”

He reddens and coughs. Why most often are the jobs which demand the most sympathy, exclusively occupied by those who lack a sympathy chip? I sign a form and wish him well. We will see each other several times before Christmas. There will be a trigger.

“Watch less daytime TV,” he says, “then you’ll sound less American.”

“I watch the live psychics from Essex,” I say, “that’s all I watch.”

I make my way out, past the dogs that the NFA customers leave outside. The poor things are tethered far too close to one another, hence they amuse themselves in the way that dogs do: in any case it is pandemonium. An old man nearly knocks me over, his beard a nest of dead wasps, his teeth coralline slivers of Old Holborn tobacco.

I make it to Charing Cross Road and take a right, sit in the Square for a bit. The students very much are present now, just as Jim had said they would be, reading on the benches, all clean backpacks, iPads like joss-paper, Berghaus jackets. It must be fun to start learning stuff, like the people my age, bright young things, sitting on benches, it must be fun to be learning stuff. I should just go to work, or at least indoors, but I sit myself among some leaves next to the statue. The leaves flurry about the railings. And that’s when I think about the horses and all that; leaves in her hair where she hadn’t ducked low enough, on the days that she’d deliberately left her riding hat at home. The way the horse’s brown ears moved about, she had said, like little radar, keeping you safe. Helping her dye her hair in the bathroom on a clocks-go-back Sunday, her back still grimy with dried sweat and the nape of her neck charcoal with stray dye, her lips

chapped from the morning chill, horsehair rubbed into her bootcut jeans; her skinny body doubled over the small, white bath, mum on the Valium and the tricycs, propped up in bed with pillows, calling out to her for a decaf tea, half-watching the afternoon film, Pierce Brosnan, Cary Grant. The clocks going back and the ammoniac smell on my wrists and in her hair; the look in her big eyes. And then a light drizzle and then the people making their ways to the cafés and the bars, and I sit there for a bit, neither liking nor the likeness of anything.

Murphy's was quiet so I let someone else take my shift. I had a pocketful of benefits so I didn't feel much like working. Benefits last about a day. At about ten I remembered I hadn't eaten: that must've been what was keeping me awake. I pulled on my jeans and threw on a T-shirt, neither of which had been washed for weeks. I learned to do my own washing long ago, I had to, but there was no washing machine in the flat; Jim tended to buy new clothes rather than wash them, back then. And sitting in a womb-dark bar in Dean Street. It was a table for one but one was enough for me. Being by a window is virtual company. I ate more than I'd eaten in the whole of the last week. It was nice not to be in the flat. The waiters and waitresses buzzed around me. I finished eating and ordered some more beer. But suddenly that girl – she was not there and she was there – the girl, that accent, the one that was going on about *Pretty Woman* and all that, somehow almost-there.

Her eyes meet my eyes in the window; her hair is in my hair. Spectres stalk me I tell you. They did then and they do now. You think you will see someone again and sometimes you do and sometimes you don't. Sometimes you see people who are there

and sometimes you see people who aren't. Sometimes people who aren't there see you. And her looking at me, across the way, from the street – or it was someone else, I don't know. Stick with the beer: spirits – how aptly named – and all the rest take their toll and you end up letting someone else take your shift. Sometimes you see people again and sometimes you don't and sometimes you don't see things that aren't there and sometimes you do.

And the Soho night, a filth of light. A couple on the next table: a man pretending not to be drunk and a woman pretending she's believing him. They're married, perhaps; they don't look happy. They aren't kissing. The woman laughing, tossing her thin hair over her shoulder as girls do in films, hair that seems as if it should be red even though it isn't. They're trying to rekindle something perhaps: there is something which comes between people eventually, a terrible thing.

I pay the bill and leave, and negotiate the pavement, the short distance home. The late night chill; people saying goodnight, kissing on both cheeks. I pass Bar Italia and sure enough, Murphy is there. Football on the vast TV at the back of the bar, the screen large enough to see from the road, Murphy sitting upright, watching the football, the Italians watching the football, the commentary in Italian, there is no translation, there are no subtitles, and Murphy sitting, there is no translation, there are no subtitles, watching. He has his football, as do most boys of all ages.

Jim is still asleep when I get back, sprawled out over the bed with his jeans around one ankle, covered in girl. I feel like I'm intruding because I am. The TV is off now; I must have turned it off before I left. I look around at an office space. Cabinets and chairs. A leather sofa. How can someone live in an office? How did the beds get

here? Perhaps it's all a lie, perhaps it's just a sad, lost story from one sad, lost soul to others. Whatever. I brush my teeth, rinse – *rinse!* – and go to this bed, my bed, all of the noise of the city in my head.

Anaïs was getting on it again. The bar staff seemed interested. She was banging on about some club in Angel and then another one in London Bridge, which sounded even more fun, and she was discussing some threesome or foursome or other – after it goes beyond three, it's just academic – although not in too much detail. About the most detail we got, against our wills, was something about just not bothering with condoms after a bit and other such tender trivia that I could have lived without.

“Here we go again,” Jim had said, “she’s talking about love. A long time ago, in a Ford Galaxy far, far away.”

Jim was on the Cokes for some reason, without any Jack Daniel’s, trying to ignore her. Big Bob turned up and I asked him what he thought about the email addresses that Ana had set up for us so that we could keep signing on, and what he thought about the way that all of them suggested that they were agencies run by and for gay men.

“Doesn’t bother me,” he said, looking out of the window.

“But Bob, menatwork@yahoo.com? Where does she get it from? Doesn’t that bother you at all?”

“Doesn’t bother me.”

“Well, me neither really but the job centre people seem to think it’s all a bit, I don’t know. Look, if anything they discriminate. Make it harder for us. This one guy, this Scottish guy, he keeps on talking about going down to Office Angels.”

“Going down on Office Angels?” said Jim.

“Doesn’t bother me,” said Big Bob, looking at his iPhone.

“Well,” I said, as one does when making small-talk with someone like Bob, “keep on keeping on.”

“Keep on *signing* on,” said Jim, “sign on you crazy diamond.”

Jim and Anaïs almost took it in turns to become helpless with drink. I never really worked out if it was by accident. And then, as sometimes happens when luck is low, the conversation turned to the past.

“I don’t think I’m what you say,” she said to Jim.

“Neither do I,” he said, patting her braids.

“You know, when we were kids,” she said, “we used to have these parties, you know. There’d be clowns or balloon guys or someone a bit famous. Bouncy castles.”

“I pissed in a bouncy castle once,” said Jim, “at graduation. It was a very hot day. Garments, and indeed graduations, were ruined.”

She gave him a look.

“Do you want to hear my story or not?”

Jim looked at her. She said:

“Later, when I was about twelve, my mum was going to get one of Take That to come round and play a guitar or something – I didn’t know any of Take That could play

guitar, and I anyway I absolutely hated Take That – but my mum was very keen on it, knew I liked guitars. Thank fuck none of Take That came round.”

“Could you imagine it,” said Jim, “Robbie Williams, or that other one – Gary something, the one that can’t play the piano – turning up in fucking St Albans? The oestrogen, man, the fucking *oestrogen*.”

“He’d get the fuck knocked out of him,” said Big Bob.

“I wasn’t in St Albans then,” said Anaïs, looking at Big Bob and then away again, “I grew up in Essex. I never want to go there again. We had to move about a bit, Mum and me. It was after Dad moved out, then we had to move into a tiny semi- and then he moved back in, and then back out again. And then someone else moved in, and then *he* moved out. And then Dad moved back in and then *he* moved out again. For about a year it always seemed like there was *someone’s* suitcase sitting about. When it was Dad it was Louis Vuitton and when it was someone else it was BHS or the Army and Navy or something. I guess my dear old mum and dad tried one last doomed stab at fidelity; I guess you’ve got to give them credit for that – or the opposite. Poor old Mum. Anyway, Take That would’ve had a bloody hard time doing one of their little dance routines – even just one of the little pricks – in the house we lived in then. They’d have to do it down the industrial estate. Outside Morrisons.”

Jim looked down at his Coke. He shook a bit.

“One of my friends who still lives in St Albans – in one of the villages, obviously – had Blue come round.”

“Blue?”

“Southern boy band.”

“What? Like Lynyrd Skynyrd?”

“Not exactly.”

Big Bob, looking out of the window.

“Well, when I was still in St Albans, there was this guy, must’ve been early forties, who’d come round and tell jokes and bring loads of presents and that. Really warm guy. Like an all-year-round Father Christmas. Some friend of the family. Maybe he was Dad’s boss, thinking back. He drove a red car that was lower on the ground than I was, and that was when I was a kid. I quite liked him for a while. Well, I found out the other day, from an old friend, Becky from Colney Hatch: he’s in prison now.”

We helped her home. She wasn’t young any more but still she was beautiful. It is a sad thing, to have money, and to have peace and security; and then to have it all ripped away overnight. To have to switch schools, to go from M&S to Iceland, from the BMW to the bus; to see grown-ups – the people you’re supposed to respect and to trust – try to destroy each other because they love each other and because they detest each other too. It is a sad thing, they look at one other as though there is an odour of sulphur in the room. It makes you cherish your toy animals when you’re a child and it makes you cry into those toy animals when you grow up. It makes you keep a camping bag under the bed; and shore a jar-load of coins against your ruin. Sometimes, as you grow older, it makes you fuck everything that moves; yet in clubs and in bars you are alone: it makes you old, young. She comforted me towards the end, we went on a day trip and she said some nice things. Anaïs wasn’t young any more but still she was very beautiful. And Jim was no picnic, and Anaïs was looking for something. I think that she may have looked for that something, through whichever means, all of her life.

Later, when Anaïs had woken and sobered up a bit, we were sitting about in the lounge, and Jim jumped up, dashed down to Nero, and got a huge frappelatte for her, and he went by the whisky shop near the cash points to get some Islay for us. She lay on the leather couch and he stroked her body.

“Did I ever tell you about my dad’s maze?” he said.

“No,” she said.

It sounded a little bit like the noise a cow makes, but not entirely in an unattractive way. I decided to hold my silence.

“Well, back in the nineties –”

“– what, your dad had a *maze*?”

“Yeah. Big damn maze.”

“Wow,” said Anaïs.

“I mean, you could get lost in it. Until you knew your way around it –”

“– *Wow*.”

“...which took about three days to memorise.”

It was getting dark.

“Tell me about the Maze, Jimmy,” she said.

He gave her a look.

“Well, there was a big craze on British things – at least in my house – during the nineties, and Dad had bought all this real estate in the UK”

“Up in St Albans, near my mum.”

“Yep, up in St Albans too. And so we visited the UK, went to London – this was the first time I’d ever seen London – and he and Uncle Mike interviewed all these chefs

and sous-chefs and staff and stuff and Dad spent a lot of time over here. Met your dad Jamie-boy, and Aunt Maria and everything. Mom didn't like it so much – or aspects of it – so she stayed over in Jersey a lot.”

“Jersey?” I said.

“New Jersey, Jamie-Boy,” said Jim.

Anaïs looked at me as though I were very ignorant.

“Well, anyhow, he goes on all these trips to big *ancient* houses, all that shit from old British writers and all that stuff, and then he goes to – where was it now? – Hampton Court, and he gets really into the idea of having a maze.”

“In New Jersey?”

“In Jersey. At our house. So he comes back, hardly says a word to Mom, and gets on the phone to these gardening types, and he designs it himself on paper and all that – originally it was going to be the exact same design, a copy, of the one at Hampton Court, but he figured that he couldn't afford that – and you know how it is, men come and go, and after a bit, with all this conifer stuff that seems to come from Canada, or nowhere, one day, I walk out and the trucks are gone and – it was early April, I think – there's this great huge fucking maze.”

“Wow.”

“It was great. I could see it from my bedroom window. And I kind of loved it for a bit because I was pretty young and I'd run around this huge maze. It was like *The Shining* – in fact, I used to pretend I was in *The Shining* – but of course there was no Jack Nicholson to chase me about, so it was fun. I spent a lot of time in that maze. And then later it became a great place to, umm, spend some time alone, and later still, it

became a great line you know. I mean, I'd say sometimes, 'hey, my dad's got a great maze. You've got to come over and see it,' and so that was useful. I nearly got laid for the first time in that maze."

"Jim," she said.

"Sorry. Well don't stop me yet because we haven't got to the best bit. One day, Dad's really mad. I mean, nearly *The Shining* mad, and his businesses aren't going so well, and his main steakhouse on 57th closed and all this shit, and on top of that, Mom says she's – and all the other stuff – although they are, miraculously, still together, my mom and dad, but anyhow, one day, he gets all this gasoline. He gets all this gasoline – it might even've been kerosene, from the 'copter he had to sell; we used to use the copter pad for basketball after it'd gone – and he asks one of the guys to cover the maze in gasoline. The guy refuses. Well, he declines. Says Dad's going a bit crazy. So my dad goes out there and – I'm not joking – covers the whole goddamn maze in gasoline. This takes all afternoon. It's getting dark. And then, he gets a small distance away from it, I saw it all, and he throws a Molotov Cocktail in there."

"Come on Jim," said Anaïs, "you've never told me this before."

"Well we don't know – as I learned this afternoon – everything about each other."

She gave him another look, a longer, sorrowful look.

"So Dad goes out there, and just sets light to the maze. And it went up like the fucking Cali forest fires man, just burning and burning, and it didn't seem that it was going to stop burning. And he's just standing there – it was twilight by then but it looked like something out of one of those British movies, the whole sky was lit up – and he's

just standing there, watching it all go up in flames, and I'm staring out of my bedroom window –"

"– how did you feel?"

"– how did I feel?" He looked at her. "I thought, you know what, this is some pretty fucked-up shit. That's what I thought. I thought: this is some pretty fucked-up fucking shit."

He took a huge slug of the whisky.

"But the most messed-up thing of all was – get this. No –"

He collapsed for some time. After a while he composed himself, and said:

"The *heat* was incredible. I've been to fucking Ecuador but that was nothing. But the most fucked-up bit of all was this: after a bit, when it really starts roaring – you won't fucking believe this – guess what he fucking does? He fucking starts *dancing*. Just little steps from left to right, to start off with, left to right, right to left, like ten-year-old kids starting Modern, or a fat guy at a wedding or something and then – *get this* – after about fifteen minutes, the bonfire in full fucking swing, he starts *really* dancing, leaping about like it's Saturday night in the dance tent at Glastonbury, just 'having it' as you Brits say, just *dancing*, punching the gasoline air, watching his precious maze – that he designed, financed, and himself enjoyed getting lost in – his precious maze go up in flames like something out of *Apocalypse Now*, just going nuts like at a DJ Shadow gig or something. I guess that was the end of the British thing. But he was almost in ecstasy, a wild music in his old head, dancing with pure joy, ecstatic in the destruction of his dream, a party of fury, in a rapture – like in that Greek thing with the women, I don't know – but I'll never forget it, that dad of mine, dancing about that burning maze."

He took another drag of the Islay. That's not the way to treat fine whisky.

"After about an hour, the firefighters came by. There were three fire trucks in the grounds of the house that night. And then the fucking cops showed up. I saw it all from my bedroom window. I'll tell you the truth I was frightened. Later the State tried to sue Dad for arson. He argued that it was his property and that he could set it alight if he wanted to. He had a good lawyer. The Jersey police has a file on him. They tried to get him into therapy, but he didn't go. Instead Mom went. But it's one of my best memories, that huge bonfire, and my old dad and his gasoline, and the maze, the flames, blazing into the night, lighting up half of the town below and most of the night sky – and him, my dad, my dumb old dad, dancing."

Anaïs said we might as well go back down the bar.

He was out of the house around nine most days. Sometimes he would come home with cut hands. One time he came home with a burn on his wrist from an EL34. Someone had left a Marshall on standby and he'd tried to change the valve without properly looking. It easily could have killed him, with the current and everything, had he popped it out, but pain kept him alive. He seemed to enjoy coming home much more than he enjoyed going out, and yet he didn't really seem to enjoy getting home.

When he got home he would turn on the radio and open a bottle of Dos Equis. Every afternoon it was the same. Then we'd order a pizza or something, or we'd go out and eat or Anaïs would insist on cooking something if she were there. She was very keen on Jim eating. Noodles and stuff, stir-fries. He always would want to go out, even if she'd brought over a bottle of Smirnoff. Other nights he and I'd get home about two, and

he'd not want much human contact. He'd say goodnight, very pleasantly, and I'd go to my room and try to sleep, or else go out and get a coffee at Nero or something, or a beer at the Brazilian place. I don't think he disliked me much more than he disliked anyone else. But I remember it well:

“Just let me have some time to myself,” he would say. “I just need a few moments.”

He would stare out of the window, a glass of Bacardi or something on ice in tow.

“Just let me have some time alone,” he'd say, “get my head together.”

Likewise, before he went to work, he insisted on solitude. I was not to get up at the same time as him nor to get in his way in any respect. I just had to get up earlier or later – this was not open to discussion. I remained in bed as he huffed and puffed about the house, having the first cigarette of the day, rolling it up, burning and crumbling it in. I heard ice cubes tinkle into a glass even in the dead of winter.

One morning early on I ventured into the lounge while he was getting ready. He was sitting at the table looking at his hands. He sensed I was there.

“Fuck off,” he said.

For those early mornings I just hung about the place. There was nothing in me that screamed: *achieve! achieve! achieve!* I thought of how empty the big house must be now, a successful but aging man pacing its floors, ignoring the echoes much as first-time buyers in their hospital conversions ignore long-resident ghosts.

He came in after five.

“This place,” he said.

I looked up at him from the armchair, smiled.

“You know, some fucking cabdriver nearly knocked me off my bike.”

“Are you OK?”

“Yeah. I’m always OK. What’d cunts like you do if I wasn’t?”

“Are you covered?”

“No way.”

“Are you OK?”

“Yeah. Motherfucker. I just braked really hard so I got the saddle in the balls.”

“Oh.”

“But it’s OK. I’m just gonna go have a shower. Wanna Coke?”

“Please.”

He poured some Sainsbury’s Taste the Difference bourbon into two glasses and then he poured a little Coke into them. It was the time in early October when it is still quite light in the evenings. It is quite light, but it fades fast. It gives the impression that the evening is both long and short at the same time. We had had an Indian summer.

“These guys,” he said, “you know, I think I’m going to sell my bike.”

“I didn’t know you had one until today,” I said.

“Yeah. It’s like being in *The Great Escape* around here. And all these pricks, you know, cab drivers from Harlesden and Basildon all over the place. They should fuck off back to the suburbs.”

“Yeah,” I said, “they should.”

“Riding a bike around this town is like getting too close to a woman, over and over again.”

“Huh?”

“It’s not safe; it’s not healthy. Being your own boss is healthy. Being on your own is safe. Don’t fall in love.”

“OK.”

“You want to buy a bike? One careful owner.”

“I’ll have a think about it.”

“Murphy’s tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’ll swing by about ten, I guess. I’m going to get some sleep first. It’s Sick at City tonight. We’ve got to go to that, really.”

This meant that there was a night called Phone in Sick at Zerocity. He had laminated passes, with barcodes and everything. Each had cartoons of a thin, pretty, ill-looking woman on one side, and a thin, pretty, ill-looking man on the other, and each of them had a telephone in their hand. I figured that not only were they both phoning in sick, but also calling each other – *what will survive of us is love* – but maybe I read too much into things. So we would go to Phone in Sick, and this in turn meant that we would be up until five or so and that he would either, as the name counselled, phone in sick, or else spend the next day and possibly the next few days vacillating between a haze of gin and lemonade and the simulated alertness of amphetamines; and being rude to people in a guitar shop. I didn’t have to get up until about three, so I’d get a few hours after whatever partially had left my system.

Well, he swung by. Most nights he was there. Previously his existence had anchored itself exclusively in the murky depths of dive bars; now it was one particular diving-bell in which he descended. This of course was because I gave him all the free drinks that he could drink, and that, in those days, was saying something. He would sit there at the bar, just nod at me every now and then, and I'd get him a top-up. I didn't mind really, and in the end, it was just a way of being part of the gang – Jim's one man gang. Nor was it the free drinks system that eventually led to the foreclosure of my life as a barman. Sometimes things just happen. There's no reason, no logic, not the slightest beginnings of purpose; something that previously wasn't in the world erupts into it: it's just that out of the blue, without warning or sense, events happen.

One night, something came up. I sat waiting for the people to come in. Jim came in with Anaïs. Here we go, I figured, and got him a Southern Comfort. Some joker asked us if we did food and Jussi told him to try All Bar One. Anaïs snarled for a gin and lemonade. I scooped the ice into a highball and cut a couple of slices of lemon. I pushed the bottom of the glass up onto the optic three times, giving it time to fill up again after each measure. There was more gin than lemonade. Her septum-ring dipped into the gin as she began it and she hummed her thanks, her eyes coming up over the rim like a crocodile's. That's it, Jim said, we're never going anywhere else now Jamie-boy's working here. Yep, Jamie's the best barkeep in this city, I'll tell you. Hush, man, keep it down, I said. Jussi was puzzling over a question on the *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* game, which he had taken to playing alone; something about the Cuban Missile Crisis.

It could have been a Tuesday night; Jim still was keen on Phone in Sick: it certainly was a school night. Well, I figured, we'll probably end up at Zerocity. There

seemed little else to do and we didn't have passes to anywhere else. Jussi asked me a question about Virgil. I told him that the answer was Dido. Dildo, said Jim.

By ten the place was heaving and Jim was going on about leaving. I told him that due to the fact that I was employed to be here, most-times I had to be here. I tried to rationalise it – he could come and go as he pleased because he wasn't on the payroll. But *you're* not on the payroll, Jamie-boy, said Jim, no one who works here is: that's why I got you this job, so you can sign on too – buy one get one free. Get them all free, I said. For the first time Jim gave me that look. Leave it, said Anaïs, fixing him, I've had enough of you already tonight. And stop looking at her, she said. Jim said something nasty.

She'd been going to the bathroom a lot. She flirted with a soap opera of Australians whilst staring into the bar mirror, so much so that it seemed at times that she actually was flirting with herself. She liked the way she looked tonight and so did everybody else. Jussi flared bottles into the air like a juggler's fantailed torches, more often than not without smashing them. This night abandons temporality; now night has its own differential logic.

Jim looking into his drink as though he'd lost something valuable in it a long time ago. His glass floating in beer and ice cubes. The ice liquefying, swelling into a pool, reflecting the Asahi sign; the bar surface losing its corporeality, becoming bottomless; the lights in the meniscus, undersea constellations. Ana's blue-blond braids swimming in beer, clotting, drenching into marine ropes, sea-snakes, witch-oils.

Perhaps it was not as I say. Perhaps it seems as though that this was how it was because of what happened next. It all was quite normal and then suddenly it wasn't. I

looked over at them and someone else was there. You have to look twice. The smoke and the beer, a clamour of people, brandishing twenties and fifties like riot shields. But amid it was the girl from the other afternoon – the one with the eyes in the window the other day – oblivious to me as though in a calm air pocket.

Bursting heart, stinging eyes.

I try to be like Jussi, tossing a bottle of Bombay Sapphire a few feet in the air, turning around to catch it. It shatters. There is laughter and cheering. My Swedish friend tells me to clear it up. It's a health and safety issue, he says. Fuck health and safety, I say. I clear the floor. Ha, he says, you know all about Virgil but you can't even flare a bottle. Fuck you, I say.

Jim sitting there, clearly enjoying the whole thing. I serve as many as I can as quickly as I can. Anaïs asking for two gins. Me passing them to her and not pretending to take anything for them. All the while, I'm trying not to look back at the girl, feeling that every now and then, she's looking right at me. And one minute she's there and the next she's not. It's like she's in my peripheral vision: every time I try to look at her, she seems to disappear: every effort to grasp her image, loses it. I need to go home but I want to stay out.

Wants always will displace needs.

We're supposed to kick out at three but we go for two. Murphy will go nuts, probably sack us. We should join a union. We give out cheap admission flyers for a club in Covent Garden. *Please, please, go away, don't you all have somewhere to go?*

But one of you can stay.

Everyone leaves except the ones that stay. Jim comatose; Anaïs decanting her braids into a shelf of ice and light; Jussi sitting reading something or other, having poured himself a whisky and Coke. It's late. This girl is there. We lock in.

Hey, I say, looking at the floor, we're closed now, do you want a drink? I don't ask her what she wants. I make her a huge Alabama Slammer, with floes of crushed ice and everything. I get a slice of orange and spike it with a stirrer – *why hello Dr Freud, have you really been here all this time?* – and the peel twists like a galaxy. Thanks, she says and it's like a movie trailer. There's deep red on the glass: this is not creepy; this is simply what you notice when you don't notice the world because of something better in it. And eventually those eyes. So, you're Jamie-boy, she says. James actually, I say. No bother, she says, I'll call you James, *actually*.

And she does and we talk a bit. One solitary good memory of school that I have is of Drama, one rainy Wednesday afternoon. Drama was the perfect way of avoiding Physical Education. The classes, such as they were, were held in a huge amphitheatre, while most of the rest of the school were kicking rugby balls, footballs, and each others' heads around the waterlogged playing fields. We each had to stand at opposite sides of the theatre and then we had to whisper something to each other. No louder than a whisper, the young teacher told us. Because of the acoustics of the theatre, despite the distance, we could hear every whispered word. It was intimate almost to the point of religious experience, a dome of sensation, public secrecy, away from the sport. This is how it felt, talking to the pale girl, that night.

But mayhem always triumphs and Jim's moaning about bed and Anaïs is glaring at him. I figure I should get him home. Anaïs and I get him up the stairs and she follows

behind – she has seen this sort of thing before. Her heels click the steps. See you later, I call to Jussi. *Hei hei*, he says. It's fresh and cold outside. We make our way across the square, and I put Jim in the lift. You're my best buddies, he's saying. Shut your fucking mouth, Anaïs says. And in the lift the pale one looks at me curiously and it's so inevitable that it may as well already have happened, yet so unattainable that it never can. We get Jim to the flat; don't give a fuck about that corridor tonight. The door is a problem but we work it. He's totally there, totally on it. You: you're the best guys in the world, he says. Shut the fuck up, Anaïs says, cutting up a line, I've fucking had it with you, I'm sick of staying up all night just to make sure – and then she shrugs and works it. The girl lays him out on the office sofa: the flat is a makeshift chapel; stained glass television light. Is he all right, she says. He turns straight to her: *and as for you, you look like a fucking panda*. Fuck this shit, says Anaïs. She's already chopping up another. Mary dear, she says. No thanks Ana, comes the answer. Yo, he's saying, bum rush the show. Shut the fuck up, Anaïs is saying, I've got fucking work in the morning. Phone in Sick, says Jim, belting it out like Tom Jones. You can do that yourself for a change, says Anaïs. Fuck you, Jim's saying. Not fucking tonight, Anaïs is saying. Not fucking ever, Jim says, it was fun while it lasted.

Jim's retches quieten down and I take out the bucket. It's all going quite nicely. I might as well rack one up, he's saying. She says to me, James, I have to be at work in a few hours, and I mean – she gestures to her attire – I should get a cab. She starts to play about with her phone but Anaïs is having nothing of this – it's hit her – and vows to drive her home. I roll up the same banknote, wet from Anaïs's nose, and bring it in.

What about Jim, she says. Fuck Jim, says Anaïs. The girl looks at me: just *wherever you're going I'm going your way* – choice is for idealists – *oh, you're taking me over.*

I would learn that Anaïs had a habit of drunk-driving. Quite often, she was drunk at the wheel. She had a conservative car, and drove conservatively. She rarely was much over the limit, but usually over it all the same. And then she'd rack one up and that'd sharpen her up and that's the way she did it. Even in the destitution of Asda-quality amphetamine, still she wouldn't speed in a *motoring* sense; mind you though, she'd usually talk like a slowed-down me. Indeed, snaking along the North Bank, me supine in the back like when I was seven, she and the girl singing along to some Irish song or other in the front, despite the stimulant, she drove like a Sunday pensioner in darkest middle England. The lights slipped by me: Cleopatra's Needle on the Bank, Temple on the left, those festoons on the South Bank. I just lay back on the back seat, my heart at warp nine. The tide of it coming in, the deep current, the surging fucking rush of it.

We're driving east. The night sky giving in to morning. On the right, boats and lights. This life this soul this unfathomable thing.

We stop way out east. Anaïs kisses her goodnight and looks me up and down. Be careful with him, she says, I thought he was gay I swear. An expanse of eastness, the Olympic Park and all that shit; and her. Skeletons of football nets, a wasteground, a halal joint closing up for the night. A few voices about. A pulse of light in the sky, illuminating the rim of the world, just light enough for one to distinguish, every few seconds, the roof of night. Even facing north: a diffuse drum, a filmy glow on a skin of sky. It's like being in a huge Imax.

“So, how do you know Jim?” I say.

“He’s Anaïs’s guy,” she says, “that’s all I know.”

Her boots look as though it’s been raining, even though it hasn’t. We turn left into a narrow street.

“Hungry?” she says.

She puts the key in the lock; and there’s a lift and there’s a birdcage of wire over a flickering bulb. She presses the button. Her brown eyes. The lift rattles open. She reaches out to hold my hand, as though I need to be guided into the lift. The must of the corridor, like someone had left a tent in the hallway after a festival. Her fingers entwined in mine, never still. We file down the hall and she puts another key into another lock and says: *after you*. The dark and then she turns on a light – our cheeks an inch from one another, first in the dark and then otherwise – and this is her face: a pale, sad glory. I want to kiss her but I don’t. She asks me would I like a cup of tea. I decline: no more stimulants are required. I’m rushing like hell and feeling very big and very small at the same time. She gets a bottle of Buxton out of the fridge. Please, she says, don’t be loud, Becca has to get up early too, she’s training to be a vet, you haven’t seen stress until you’ve seen an uptight Kiwi training to be a vet. She holds the bottle of water and wipes it over her brow, the perspiration trickling down her face.

While the kettle boils, she tidies up a few plates and wipes the work-top.

“Jim’s looking after you, then,” she says.

“Yes, sort of,” I say. She laughs.

“Looks more like you’re looking after Jim.”

“It can get a bit like that. Tonight’s the worst I’ve seen him.”

She sort of looks at me.

“Where you from?” I tell her and return the question.

“Ulster,” she says, “via Coleraine, Glasgow, Manchester. I don’t know where I’m from, half the time. Left Coleraine ten years ago. My Da taught there. Haven’t been to Ulster for longer. Glasgow was all right. Manchester not so good, they’re a funny lot in Manchester. I lived in Liverpool for a bit. It was nice there. And then I got a degree, came down south, got an OK job here. I still kind of don’t know where I am though; I mean, this is London, isn’t it, we’re supposed to be kind of lost and disorientated here, aren’t we? That’s why we come here. We’re sick of knowing where we are. We’re sick of knowing who we are.”

I sort of look at the floor.

“Sorry,” she says, “this probably doesn’t help.”

“Help what?”

“Us getting to know each other.”

Now I’ve a CV of her habitats. Her wide eyes in the window, there’s rain now. The morning sky turning violet there. She’s caressing the palm of my hand, looking into my eyes.

“So you’re what relation to Jim?” she says.

“Cousin.”

“Oh I remember now. Blood relative, aye,” she says, “I thought as much.”

I am taken aback.

“Why?”

“You look alike,” she says, “a little. The dark skin and that. Very Latino. Lots of girls love a bit of that.”

“We’ve Spanish mothers. They were sisters. One married an American, one married a Brit.”

“And you’re the Brit contingent, I’ll guess.”

“Yeah. My dad wanted to be an American, and my uncle wanted to be a Brit. So they both married pretty Andalusian girls. I’m not sure if there’s any logic to that.”

“Fiery, is she, your ma?”

“At times. She got less so.”

“Mine too. I’ve been to Andalusia actually. Everything looks red or orange. Or very white. They have bullfights there, don’t they?”

“Yes, they do.”

“In big damned rings. People pay to go. I mean, they *pay*. People dress up nice, to go. They keep the bulls drugged and they... I’ve not seen it, but I have heard it. iPods have their uses.”

The kettle boils and she makes some tea even though I said I didn’t want any: Barry’s Tea. I look at it and I know I’m not going to drink it.

“It’ll be good,” she says, “for Jim to have someone to look after.”

I don’t really understand what she means. Perhaps I am some sort of hamster to him, or an angelfish.

“I mean, the little tool couldn’t look after a boy scout, but it’ll be good for him.”

“How so?”

“Oh, he’s been through it,” she says, “I mean, we’ve all been through it – hell, we’re *going* through it – but he’s had it harsh.”

“What about Anaïs, doesn’t she help him out?”

She’s quiet for a while. Then she says:

“Anaïs? Look, she’s my friend. I’ve known Anaïs a couple of years now. But get to know Anaïs and then tell me what you think about Anaïs. I’m not saying much, James, but get to know her: you’ll see. And those guys they hang about with. Have you met Big Bob yet?”

“Once. He didn’t say much.”

“Henry?”

“No.”

“Milton?”

“Who’s Milton?”

She takes a sip of her tea. Her lipstick on the cup.

“Look, I’m not saying anything, James. But stick around for a bit,” she says, “and you’ll see. Don’t get hurt. Watch yourself. This isn’t *Love Actually*.”

Don’t be noisy, she says, my flatmate’s highly strung. She’s the most highly-strung Kiwi you’ll ever – oh I told you, didn’t I? This is my room, please excuse the mess will you. She’s on prescription downers but they don’t work any more. Sometimes she sells them to Jim. I tried them and they work on me but they don’t much work on her any more. I’d have one now but I have to get up in two hours – *shite: less* – and they actually take about half an hour to take effect. You can stay here in the morning if you

like; no sense in doubling the headache count. You're very pretty, aren't you, she says, your big eyes, you're.

She doesn't put on any music, doesn't ask me anything more about myself, nothing. She kisses me on the mouth. Turns off the light but it isn't dark and there's her hair in my hair her eyes in my eyes and she is above and over and onto me a plane onto a rainy airstrip and I'm trying to hold back with all my might and she comes, hard and long, and then I come quick and eager.

And now she sleeps but I'm wide awake, her warm heartbeat throbbing through me, her slow breath, her breast rising and falling every few perfect seconds.

I shake my head and have some of the Buxton. It's six. Didn't notice the *passé* tattoos before. Her toned biceps. She breathes deeper now; I figure she doesn't want to be woken up but I turn up the light just a bit, all the same. I lean up on my elbow, being careful not to trap her hair under my arm, her eyelids shivering as she dreams as though undergoing ECT. And *she's* like a dream, just there and stuff. Little crows' feet around her eyes; a few lines around her mouth. Oh my heart. I prop myself up, get up, and wander about her room. I feel like I'm trespassing again. Little pictures and things. Photos of smiling people, holding drinks, in silly hats. A picture of her, clearly way back, with some orang-utans, their little eyes staring at the camera rather than at her, fascinated. Her Alienware laptop on the floor. A work suit neatly laid out, and a pair of plain white M&S knickers slung on the handle of the aged wardrobe. An iPod dock on the floor. The daylight already is there behind the cheap blind. Some candles and shit. The city still is there, just the way we left it, waiting for us. Day crouches behind every night, before every sombre dawn.

At seven the radio comes on: Xfm. She moves about. Hi, oh, hello, she says, oh thanks, hey there. She manages a smile, focuses on me and then looks away. What time is it, she says, oh shit, is that the time, oh shite. Pulls about her ankles. She stands up and swears some more. Hey, she says, I'm gonna get a shower.

This life.

She comes back, puts on a shirt and pulls on a pair of tights. A dark skirt and a pinstripe jacket. The make-up is very different. See you, she says, snatching an attaché case, look, let yourself out, and don't be a tool, don't take anything that's not yours. Usually I'd kick you out, but, but you're grand, and anyway, if you stole anything, Anaïs'd cripple you. And thanks for last night, it was really, really nice.

And then she's gone. Back in the real world, I guess I crashed out for some time after. There's a can of Lilt and a packet of Anadin Extra on the table. Her room was like a sixth-former's, but a sixth-former who could afford a lot of stuff. It was the fifteenth floor, and I wondered if there was a thirteenth, or if they had just gone from twelve to fourteen. You could see halfway across the city, you really could. I mean, when you looked out of the window at Jim's place in the Square, you could see a bit of Soho, a bit of the city, a little way down Charing Cross, and a lot of fire exits, but not way across the city like this. Up here you could see the river, the ships on the water. Quite close, apparently on the south of the river, there were cranes and pylons and smokebelchers: a Giant's Causeway of riverside industry. There were great grey monoliths with bright blurring banners in this landscape – everything seemed to hum and to flicker without discernible cause. This great, desolate Rosetta Stone of a building with a huge beacon at its summit, to warn off airplanes; that was the pulse of light from last night. It flashed in

a rhythmic throb and even though it was getting light, with each pulse still it lit up the sky a little. You could see lots of flats from her place as well. An expanse of stone and steel. A canal behind winding semi-vertically. Electrified tube lines breaking surface concrete, Bromley-by-Bow. Trains without drivers. Some park.

Up there, lostness and difference – loneliness perhaps, even in her enchanting wake of zinc and sea salt – looking over the city. It hardly was an executive pad but the view sure was good. Perhaps it was just that she wasn't there and that she had left for work. I figured I should leave for work too. She would be at work now. She sure had a better job than me: that LCD screen and the Alienware. She even had a couple of consoles, the Microsoft banner and the Sony sigil. Photos of friends, postcards and pictures from Arizona, strange colours in stone. I took a look at the shirts hung up on the curtain rail: each one was M&S.

And this is what a guy notices, his schoolboy curiosity aroused even in the thud of a comedown: her fishnets from last night, strewn on the carpet, coiled, shed skins of water-snakes, double-helix debris, the trace of a night done fucking, and yet also the leftovers of an incommensurate intensity, a singularity shared between woman and boy. Fishnets: such an appropriate name for the garment, remarked someone once, someone kind and pretty and wise; and she was right. You can get that from your rock chicks James, she would say, if that's what you want from a girl, and I can do it too, but Jamie I got that out of my system before the age of consent. But here they're just nylon, dependably totemic of *what boys like*, now strangely lifeless, fragrant and shrunken, and how much now like discarded condoms.

I stood there for a long time, but after a while I left. I shut the door behind me, took the lift down, and turned right out of the estate. The streets were paved with unsure stones. There were little launderettes, halal takeaways, grocery stores which sold bright fruits, afro hairdressers and empty pubs. All the roads, margined with railings. Barbed-wired public toilets; playgrounds without children. On the fringe of the park, a congregation of drunks. The fallen leaves cast shadows on them as light through chapel windows, bronze and canonical. It was all Special Brew cans and grey beards, old women with blotches on their arms. Oh well, I thought, getting a ticket at the Docklands station, I guess I'd better get used to this. All sense of the rush hour gone, the *Metros* and the odd *Daily Mail* or *FT* plucked across the seats, I made my way to the back of the train, put my face against the cool glass. The grey light and Isle of Dogs receding in the near-distance, and somewhere down there, she was there, doing whatever stressy job she did, telling people what to do perhaps, handling important accounts or something, and last night she had come to me, and that was enough.

Don't fall in love.

This isn't love, actually.

Don't fall in love.

Fuck health and safety.

You're sitting in the shower on a summer afternoon. You've just brought yourself off and now the hot water is washing it down the plughole. You rest your head on the tiles and you close your eyes. You've just been to the beach but the tide was out, so you walked out, and walked out over the mudflats, out into the sea, and you swam in the sea alone.

Hardly anyone was there because the tide was out. Even this sea was warm for a change, and this sea never gets warm, not even in August. You're sitting under the shower in the late afternoon. Some family are round, Dad's in Istanbul; there will be a dinner. When you came home, there was laughter coming from the house. Grandma is in the kitchen downstairs, laughing with your mother. They are making dinner, which seems to take forever. It takes forever for them because they talk and laugh and laugh and talk and joke and occasionally get around to making the dinner. There is garlic and chick peas. Grandma is quite stout now, an invincible matriarch, and one day your mother will become one too. This afternoon, all of downstairs – and most of upstairs – flairs of chilli and of oranges. On the huge table a vintage Rioja is almost gone. Grandma doesn't drink much any more but mother does. They are good friends, it seems – apart from when they scream at each other and don't talk for years. And you are in the open shower, sitting by the plughole, and there is the low white noise of the radio from the kitchen. They are listening to some pop music and laughing, and then they put on some music from Spain: Rodrigo, Segovia, that sort of thing. You can hear the primary colours, the major chords, the flattened seconds, the harmonic minor, the tremolo, rubato, and the Phrygian cadences of the guitar. They are laughing and listening to Segovia and then some silly Spanish pop music, and then they start speaking Spanish. You cannot hear the words but you know that they're talking in Spanish because you can hear the inflections, the vowels, diphthongs, and the burnt lisp of Andalusia. The language, even though you can't hear the words, is fiery as paprika. You don't even know the language that well: it's just what Mum sounds like sometimes. Mother, possibly is singing: it's all so long ago. Grandma has bought a whole bunch of cherries.

You eat cherries in a funny way: you don't put one in your mouth and then spit out the stone like most people do, you open up the cherry and pull the stone out with your fingers, and then you put the fruit into your mouth and you eat it. It looks like a blood-moon. It gets all over whatever you're wearing and looks like you've been bleeding. You're sitting in the corner of the walk-in shower and you wash your hair with the family shampoo, and condition it with the family conditioner. It's so bright, the water is coming down on your face, and you laugh, it's that wonderful, the water and the sunlight through the huge windows and the water falling down onto your face. The shower gel smells of apricots and coconuts. The euphotic, angelic light. You have just brought yourself off in the shower, and Mother and Grandmother are downstairs, and they are laughing, and there is Segovia or Rodrigo playing, and you wash and rinse and piss, and sit in the shower, washing the packed sea-salt out of your hair and out of your pores and the whole huge bathroom smells of light.

"Hot," he said.

He repeated himself. I poured a beer.

"Hot," he said.

I avoided his questions.

"Hey, and she was" he said, "and you're the man, aren't you?"

"Meaning?" I said. I had bought a paper.

"Hey, that girl, James, she was *hot*. Come on man, don't make me do all the work here."

"Well... you know," I said.

I was self-conscious. I smelled of her.

“There’s no ‘well’, James – she was a real *kulta*.”

I had never heard anyone say that about anyone, but I decided to let it go.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” he said, “she’s probably got a husband back home doesn’t know *what* the fuck’s going on.”

“I don’t know what the fuck’s going on,” I said, thinking I did.

“I think Anaïs said she’s got a job as well, I mean, a proper job. City girl. Gets the *FT*. Not like us lowlifes.”

“Speak for yourself, O Oracle Jussi.”

“I am the oracle,” he said, “and I tell you the female of the species is the undiscovered country.”

“For you, perhaps,” I said. He stood up straight. He seemed even loftier than before.

“Ah, you underestimate my curiosity,” he said, “if not my preferences.”

“And you overestimate my preferences, if not my curiosity.”

He looked at me kind of funny. Then he said: “But you had a good night, right?”

“Oh, yes,” I said, “I had a good night.”

I couldn’t help smiling, just as she had. You discover each other in the space of sheet lightning, and then you lose each other just as quickly, but the loss can’t cancel out the discovery.

“Oh well, *Itku pitkästä ilosta*,” said Jussi.

“What?”

I spluttered beer.

“Finnish proverb. Means sadness will follow joy. That’s the way it is in this world. You’ve always got a sad look on your face, James. That girl’s wicked, man. She’s been coming in for months. I reckon you’re gonna get sadder.”

“Thanks a lot,” I said.

“There’s no charge,” said Jussi, “you’re that kind of guy. I can see it in your big sappy Latin eyes. I can give you counselling when it’s all over. We’ll get you another married woman.”

“Leave me out of this,” I said.

“Just kidding you, James,” he said, flicking off the television “just kidding you. Relax.”

I tried to relax. I decided to change the subject.

“Anyhow,” I said, “you’re Swedish, right? What’s the thing with the Finnish proverbs?”

He turned and looked at me. He looked like a bald eagle. He obviously looked after himself: none of Jim’s casual, louche pouts.

“I am Swedish,” he said, “but I’m a Swedish Finn. I went to school in Finland. In the North.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Near the Arctic Circle,” he said, “like Basildon but with the Northern Lights, and lunch at eleven, and eating reindeer for dinner.”

“No shit,” I said.

“Ah yes,” he said, “Six feet of snow, piles of it every few metres, taller than me. Silent buses; people are very quiet. The sacred sauna – we hit each other with birch twigs to get the blood flowing, in the sauna. Northern Finland: top of the world.”

He looked up at the television. It was getting fuzzy again.

“So what are you doing in London?”

“I don’t know,” he said, “I really, really don’t know.”

Jim turned up alone about nine that night. He made little paper planes out of the leaflets that Murphy had asked us to put out on the tables. They were leaflets for Maker’s Mark, which hardly was Irish, but Murphy didn’t care and neither did we. A couple of customers ordered one, and we gave out a couple of free hats with the whiskey. How munificent Murphy could be. Jim of course, made a big thing out of it, hamming his accent up as much as he could. He was talking to a woman who didn’t look a day under seventy as I closed up, spinning yarns about New York City and Key West and all this shit, and she was telling him about the EPCOT Center, and she and I helped him across the square after hours.

When we got home, I dumped him on the armchair, got him a glass of water.

“Do you want a cup of hot chocolate?” I asked the near-septuagenarian.

“It’s all right darlin’,” she said, showing me most of her left breast.

Fuck this, I thought, and went and sat in my room.

I couldn’t sleep. The woman was screaming in Jim’s bedroom, sounding more as though she were in pain than being pleased, and when the ghastly hullabaloo had died down, I could hear her breathing. I put on one of Jim’s CDs but it didn’t work. The

cabinets glared at me. I didn't even get her phone number, I thought; that's the least I should have done. Over the years my shyness and arrogance would cost me dear. While Jim preached that lowering one's standards led to better living, I didn't have standards to lower.

It was just gone four a.m., the time at which the body is least active, and the hour during which most people die. Someone wise once said something about 4.48, but I can't remember. Still I couldn't sleep. I pulled on my jeans and shirt and again grabbed my denim jacket on the way out. I walked around for some time. I got a Brazilian beer in the late night bar off of St. Anne's Court, the one where the cabbies go at the end of the night, and sat outside, watching the hardcore of Soho come and go. This was when the hood was off, when the working mechanisms of the subculture of Soho are most discernable. It was still only early October; somehow the cold seemed at a distance. People still were kissing, laughing. It was late and this was only a midweek thing. I wondered if those that weren't working now, would be working later. Perhaps they had jobs like mine: get up at three, get to bed at six. Not a bad living for kids. Mary, the M&S blouses, the Clinique shower gel. Not for the first time I thought: how wonderful it must be to be on holiday here; the lights, the all-night bars, the strip-clubs, the Michelin restaurants. I mean compared to almost anything in Europe, it was a joke, and a dangerous one at that, but I didn't have to learn Dutch to live here. The neons are not kind. And here: the coming and going of lost people, the violent people; and the coming and going of prostitutes: most ending their busy shifts; a few beginning theirs. Jim said they usually changed their shoes –slipping into Reeboks, Nikes – after the shifts. With their backpacks and trainers, they almost were indistinguishable; they ghosted into

overseas students, Matalan mums, pram-faces without strollers. It truly is a terrible thing, to be alive.

This was the way it was, more often than not, at this late hour. The nightlife hardcore would comprise those who didn't have to get up in the morning, and those who were young enough to get up in the morning despite being out all night. I liked straddling both categories; I guess I just wanted someone to share it with. Jim was sort of company, the jokes, the generosity, the parties, but he was a ghost too. I imagined that I could walk right through him sometimes, and he'd not feel it. He'd just carry on wisecracking, drinking, racking up, skinning up, throwing up, without much deviation: a corporeal hologram. Sometimes when he looked at me it was as though he was regarding me from another way of being, like a spectre or something. But we liked each other, in a way, and we were companions, after our own fashion.

Late at night, just before dawn, my favourite time. The sun can break out at any time, through limpid skies or films of cloud. Even while they made me feel more alone, I loved the way that people kissed, and, in a way I can't describe, I liked the near-break-up of violence away from the lights. While I wanted someone to share all of this with, I still felt more accepted, more a part of the situation here. I sat outside the Brazilian place and then walked down to the river before day would come again. In the end, sodden, I worked my way home. I decided to go the long way so that I could peer into Bar Italia. Just as usual, there was Murphy, watching something on the widescreen, a large coffee cup in his hand. I felt for him, that he had no one. He was always there, but almost always completely alone. And that was it: this is partly why I had come, because late at night in Soho, you're alone but never really alone because you're surrounded by those

who know the same aloneness as yours, but not the actual specifics of a particular, individualised loneliness, but its formal virtuality: an order of feeling rather than that feeling's haecceities; like knowing roughly what a species is, rather than the individual intrinsic relations between examples of that species. It's the ghost of virtual formality; the privation of the comfort of its actual embodiment. But even if you're alone, the shared aloneness, the burden of being alone among other lost ones gives you, if not hope, then something. I realised that, like Old Murphy, I had nobody. I could not really entertain the prospect of ever having anybody that knew me. That was no problem. I was part of the biggest lonely hearts' club in the world: a world where no one cared about anyone, and therefore no one was left out. With that happy idea warm in my soul, I made it back, the night already behind me, the whores and the police at one together, the light just beginning to show.

His phone woke me up. I was still half asleep. I heard him speaking. I wasn't sure whether it was real or not. He was protesting innocence about something or other. I looked at the alarm clock. 9.15. It was nearly dark. By now he was having some sort of row with someone about money or something. I rolled over and went back to sleep.

It was my day off. A Thursday, it must have been. Murphy liked me to work on Friday and on Saturday nights. Jussi and I got the debris shifts; only now did I realise that other people manned the place when we didn't. I had seen other faces there, behind the bar, but in my ignorance just didn't really give them any of my time. It might have been pretty obvious to most people – two blokes do not a Soho bar staff comprise – but

to me, who hated work and anything to do with it, it was quite weird, to think that the place went on in my absence. It was so inane that I couldn't imagine anyone needing to do a job like mine. It was so facile it almost seemed as though, if I were not there, that it would do itself.

I got into television. There were shows on about sixteen-year-olds from places like Chester or Norwich, throwing parties which would have cost more than most people's weddings; and dating shows which I watched with the sound turned down, imagining instead the glut of insults delivered from one contestant to the next. There were reruns of talent shows, musicals from the forties, psychology talk-shows hosted by unqualified psychologists, and diet shows in which an untrained dietician analysed their hapless contestants' shit. My permanent favourite was the Psychic Channel, on which various methods of sortiriary were employed to come to conclusions far less conclusive than the questions that were asked of them. All of this pleased me greatly.

Later on all he ever did was sit around and watch TV. Even the PlayStation hit the window in the end. But in whichever altered state, prescribed or otherwise, he didn't seem to be that different than to any other time. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

On my days off I went to everything that was free. I'd always walk – never get the tube or the bus, said Jim; aside from the constant paranoia, you just never saw the city, just a load of darkness, dirt, and ruined people – and I walked as far as my legs would carry me. Be a *flâneur* he said; I didn't know what he meant. I liked walking in the evening, so on my days off I'd walk the parks, walk the Mall and the Embankment.

"When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life," said Jussi.



“I was tired of life since the moment my mother shat me,” said Jim, “but I have not yet tired of London.”

It’s funny the way men try to signpost their lives by means of the girls that they have known.

He said: “Well there was this girl, way, way back, when I was crashing floors in Surrey and doing jingles for a living, and back then I really thought that I could hack it, that I could live on love and music, doing jingles for a living – which, by the way, you can’t – and anyway, there was a girl, this girl, in Surrey – can’t remember the name of her little village – or her name, for that matter – and she was trained as a junior cellist: all these impossible Gabrielli *ricercari*, the geometric Bach, and she didn’t go to work. She never seemed to get any gigs. But she was really intense; while she didn’t seem to enjoy doing anything, all the same she’d do anything. You know what I mean?”

I nodded. I didn’t.

We sort of looked at one another.

“I mean, even though she’d do *anything*, she didn’t seem to like anything, or indeed any of the anything that she’d do; even the dumbest things, you know, watching *Friends*, playing tennis, drinking this cloudy cider stuff, getting high, whatever, she just didn’t enjoy it. Always with this hang-dog expression on her face like there was something eating her. She was beautiful you know, she was *hot* in that British pale – whaddatheycallit? – *peaches and cream* or something like that sort of way, but permanently, she’d have like this look on her face, I don’t know.

“She seemed to be happiest up a tree. Most afternoons we’d get drunk and then she’d want to go climb some of the trees in her dad’s orchard. Only about nineteen, or seventeen, I don’t know. She’d shin up these trees in her bare feet and her skirt – oftentimes no bra or any of the rest – and sit up there and yell down that she could see Berkshire or Kent or something. Like fucking Greystoke, man. She’d sit up there and taunt me to come up, show me her, that sort of thing. I can’t fucking climb, can I? – I mean, look at me James: some days I could hardly walk; Archway Road’d’ve done me in. Well we’d walk through that old orchard of hers and then break open the cider stash that her dad had – *family reserve*, I guess – and slowly get drunk. It was that really strong stuff, like in the West you know, all cloudy and warm. No additives: good times. And some days we’d get a blanket and go eat some of these proper Cheddar cheese sandwiches – none of your Monterey Jack or gruyere shit man; this was the real deal: the authentic stuff that smells like a ranch. She’d’ve made these sandwiches, and she’d’ve drained that cider vat, and we’d sit there – you could only hear the old wood-pigeons and the bees – and wait for it to get dark. Sometimes she brought her dog, others not. And other times, she’d stay up one of those trees happy as fuck, throwing the odd red apple down to or at me, telling me to come up and join her, that it was her ‘tree house’ or whatever.

“It’s funny in the Home Counties. It’s a bit like Jersey in a way. It even gets dark funny in the Home Counties Jamie-boy, you know, it’s not like being here in the city. It gets dark slow in summer. It’s like twilight is the longest part of the day, people sitting on their patios, looking at their blackberries, I mean real blackberries. Tennis, that sort of thing. But we’d be away from all of them: it was two hundred acres, she said. She’d

sit up there – I’d be listening to the portable radio or whatever, her iPod with the Bang and Olufsen speakers – and either she’d be reading, or singing sometimes: songs from the shows, *Oklahoma*, *Me and My Girl*, that sort of shit; or old jazz numbers – she did a cracking Billie – and it’d be nice. I can see it now man, she’s sitting up there until the dark pretty much, looking at the light and the treetops, the lower trees. I’m fucked out of my mind, staring up at her ass, and then we hear the old wise owls’ call-and-response tenor-and-soprano chamber music ringing through the leaves. The ochre landscape, man, it was like fucking Endor at that time man, no fucking cars, trains or tubes – I almost expected to see Chief Chirpa distantly rattling his spear in the near-dark – this purple and yellow in the sky, nearly ten at night, her up her favourite tree, me on the blanket, finishing off the cider and the Parma. The smell of her armpits and thighs, from the climbing, the sweet alcohol in her pores, and the heat; and the smell of fresh apples, and leaves and branches, and earth, and cider. Pretty fucking pastoral. *Walden* shit. She was intoxicating, Jamie, in every respect. I couldn’t climb so I never went up.”

I said: “What’s the use of going up?”

He shook his head.

I thought of telling him to fuck off, but with the exception of Anaïs, who seemed to be the closest thing he had to a friend, no one ever told Jim to fuck off. Perhaps that was his talent. Perhaps it was because, with the exception of Anaïs, Jim always fucked off before anyone got the chance to tell him.

Jim looked at the wall. He shook his head.

“So,” I said, intrigued by now that Jim could feel bad about doing anything at all, “what was this wrong of yours?”

He straightened up. The telephone did not ring.

“Well, one afternoon – her dad was on business for a week in Dubai or something; dads of a certain age most-times are on business somewhere or other – we were sitting about in her lounge watching *Cash in the Attic* or something, and she was petting this dog, and I’m sitting over on the sofa, and she’s on the rug with her toes touching mine. She was wearing this purple summer dress, all chiffon – is that the word? – and stuff, and she had bare feet. I remember her bare feet. Tiny things. She painted her toenails. Like little pale LEDs her toenails. Like on a Boss pedal. I remember those bare feet. She used to walk a mile each week, to the next village, and buy *The Stage*, in – get this! – bare feet. Fuck knows why: she wasn’t an actor. Bare fucking feet. There was a gravel driveway the length of a sea-front fun run; she must’ve had soles like a hobbit. I anointed her feet and kissed her grey toes as she scanned the classifieds.

“Anyway, we’re sitting watching daytime telly, you know, *Masterchef* or *Loose Women* or something, and I just say to her, hey – hey, I remember her name now: Laura. Laura. Laura, hold, on, it’s coming, Laura Carter-Jones. That was it. Shit man, it’s all coming back to me now. Well, anyway, she’s sitting there, stroking this dog, and shit. The dog was called Chopin. Chopin. Like Kate Chopin. I mean it was pronounced like Kate Chopin, not like Big Fred the pianist, like Kate Chopin. In school in the States you can’t escape her.

“And you know, we – what is the term? – make love, but with Noel Edmonds or some other of your British National Treasures on the TV – Alan Carr or someone, I don’t know? – louder than any of the noises that either of us were making, such as they were, and it just struck me as so sad. These shows are for the hopeless, and somehow

they managed to soundtrack our, umm, *union*. We didn't bother to do it upstairs, or even on the table, and all the rest of that stuff you do when you're twenty. Just watching some game show or something, fumbling for the remote. Chopin sort of watched for a bit, a bit of the game show, a bit of the floor show, neither of which, naturally, appeared to appeal to him, but it darn well bothered me; then he'd had quite enough to look at and went into the garden or something, didn't stick around. Probably pissed up one of the six hundred apple trees in their orchard."

"I see."

And I figured that was it. There was a silence in which we said something. We were getting better at saying nothing to each other; yes, back then there at least was a kind of progress. And then he sort of let out a cry, a sort of quiet cry.

"What's up now?" I said. The silence resumed.

"Really man," I said, "what's up?"

And then I looked and I could see that he was out of sorts.

"It was all wrong," he said.

"Come on man," I said.

After a long while he said, quietly: "Well, it lasted about six weeks, you know, it's summer, that kind of thing. The daytime telly gets boring, I couldn't sleep, that sort of thing, and I sort of missed looking at myself in the mirror all night, so hey, I come back to London. She says she'd love to visit me but she never calls. I left her my number and everything. But eventually, through a friend of a friend, quite by chance, in *The World's End* – not the usual one but the one in *Fulham* of all places – some fat old friend of Henry's from fucking Eton or whichever rich and dumb hub of bugging

smugness he reluctantly plugged, well I heard about it. She'd gone out there. From one of the highest apple trees, apparently. She'd gone out there. She'd gone out there one summer evening as it was getting dark, and – she'd gone *out* there – climbed to the top of the tree. She might've sat up there, looking out at Berkshire, or Kent, or whatever, wherever, for a bit. She might have sung some Billie. She had jumped – it wouldn't've been less than thirteen feet I guess – and swung from the branches.”

I didn't know what to say. I said something but he wasn't listening.

“Traditional, quick, pastoral. Henry's friend – now I really can't remember that cunt's name – told me a lot more, in fact, he seemed to enjoy the idea: apparently after her mother died, which was about two years before I met her, her father used to hit her and do all sorts of – *horrible* – things to her and that. And you know me Jamie, I'm not a violent man, but I'd've knocked the fucker out, if I had've known. I'd've knocked the fucker out. I'd've got the police round, shit, I'd've got Milton round, I'd've fucking got *Milton* round, I'd've fucked that fucker up.

“And I kind of never know how – or what – to think about her. I didn't think about her for ages. But then I thought about her. And I think about her a lot. Sometimes I can't help imagining it: a Surrey summer night, with Chopin at the bottom of the tree, applescent in the air, cider in the barrel, Dad away on business in Qatar or wherever; and Laura, hanging – *strange fruit* as Billie used to say, mind you, that *was* a different situation – almost motionless, from the wise, dependable old tree that bore the red apples and that had sheltered her – since she was a little girl – from the rain and from the sun. She must've tried to sleep, to hide under it when her dad was beating on her mom. I can see the purple and the yellows, hear the hum of the bees, the distant drone of trash

television: *How Clean is Your House?*; *How to Look Good Naked*, stuff like that, and her body, her English peaches and cream body, swinging in the breeze. Her hair like leaves. The morning sun in her cool blue eyes. I remember her singing, 'All of Me' or 'All the Way' or whatever, and I still can hear her dead voice now. And I think about the times we had together, Jamie-boy, the summer in Surrey, the stupid times. The way she'd try to mimic my accent – badly – and she'd end up sounding like Bush. I would mimic hers and sound like Keanu Reeves in *Dracula*. Her cut feet after she'd gotten *The Stage*, and then her reading through it, telling me about courses and bit-parts, pit gigs, for which she might apply – and for which she never would. Her white body, swinging in the breeze, dad not home for a week, her stiff, beautiful body, a little stiffer with each quiet, private weekday dawn, skirt and Nirvana T-shirt damp in the mist, and her small, bare feet, her painted toenails like Christmas lights on the tree, in the vapour, paddling the air, treading the airy nothing.

“And the more I thought about her, and the more I thought about her qualities, the more I thought about her being-there, I kind of conceived of her and then I didn't, and then I conceived of not conceiving of her and then I – I don't know.”

I offered him a hit of the Jameson's. The afternoon was coming in.

“And then I missed her absence, then, and now, when she wasn't there. I wanted to call her up but she wasn't there because she was dead – you can't always call up the dead no matter how hard you try – and the funny thing was it was better that I couldn't call her because she was dead because the virtual her was better than the actual her. You know, I think everyone's like that deep down. I missed being able to miss her in the

context of her possible presence, but I liked missing her more in the reality of interminable absence. Isn't that fucked-up?"

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

"Well, one day you will."

We watched the daytime television, *I Want that House* or something; *Animal Hospital*, that sort of thing. He poured an Italian measure of Tesco's Finest gin into a pint glass, crushed up some mint and ran the tap into it a bit; got a couple of ursine ice cubes out of the freezer. In they went. Poured some into a coffee mug for me. We watched television for a bit. *Newsround* came and went. I reflected that the current presenter was not as hot as the last one.

After a while Jim looked quite serious.

"I guess I did something very bad," he said.

"What was it though?" I said.

"I don't know," he said.

I said, "Ana is right."

"Really? Maybe. But you've got to have limits. The doctrine of the golden mean, it's called. Aristotle, kiddo. Everything in moderation. Like this whiskey."

He did not drink whisky in moderation.

"And the gin?"

"The gin, Jamie, also."

We went out and then some time later we came back. That is the way of things, in the days and in the nights. Millions, millions of cunts do it, all the world over. We just did it

most nights whereas most do it only weekend-nights. Where's the harm in that? And after looking into the mirror for most of the night, and on going to bed alone that next morning with the iambs of the city thumping my chest and its cool electricity coursing through my willing veins, I wondered what Jim had meant. Most of all I thought of the resistance that the suicide posits. Kant can go hang. You should never get so broke that you can't leave town, even if the only currency you have left to spend is a few feet of Homebase rope and the good sense to jump.

And miles to go before I sleep.

And there are the birds in the trees.

And there are ankles in the morning mist. Rainbows.

3.

Sunscream. Faint light.

Sonic Prescription. *Phone in Sick*. *Fuck the Right to Vote*.

18,000K P.A.

Euphoria. *Popstarz*, *Koko*. Bleak casting. Faint film of sunshine, filtered through plain curtains. The crinkly veneer that casts all other from.

That man with the sunglasses, looking too old to be wearing them. *Slimelight*, *Spaced Out*, *Sin City*, *Silver*.

Ththghgthgugh. Thhuhghhgrrh.

Bottle with an agate variegation of once-warm wax; knifescraped butter along dim green glass. Sancerre: too tart for Bridget Jones, playing gooseberry.

Thhuhghhgrrh.

Barfly, *Feet First*. *Full Tilt*.

The tournure of maltailored light around the perimeter of the curtain, brightening at the edges and almost reaching the window-ledge and frame. In a shelf of light below the curtain, the London mists. Here, opaque peripheries enter upon one another: a limbus-nimbus of edges and endzones. Cold out, and far too light: the glare that blinds you as you walk along Oxford Street toward the Carrara marble; *the time of violet*. But it's not violet in the morning – the light leaks into our atmosphere at a different angle at dusk. Dawns have more yellows, even dull ones.

Silence save the snoring.

Trainers've seen some action. You hardly can see the swoosh for the mud. Head almost immovable; aches like a tetchy wild boar butted it. Hurts so much it makes the room bend. You'd think, with London rents, the apartments at least would keep still.

A makeshift dressing table, thrown together from a desk; but having no legs, it is not a desk because desks have four legs: so what is it? It is a thing. A thing is thrown together out of other things. Perhaps that Pythagorean dream, the angles of capability – the brackets, the screws, the veneer, the hardy material – perhaps in spite of this sacred geometry, one day someone will come along and say, I've had enough of this desk, this thing, I've had enough of it now, and the thing will be taken to pieces. This effectively will efface its existence: and then the things that comprised it, though visibly weakened, can go back to being the things that they were before their arbitrary, propitious union. Yet are we not speaking of love?

When she stops snoring it is as *satori* among the jasmines. I am half- wearing Jim's scuffed trousers. The leather is dirty and municipal. Jim! Where'd he go?

A bracelet is gone from my wrist.

As hangovers go this hangs pretty low. We all know the process: go just one over and your head is among the Anguses. The bed is hardly a bed, either. It's not big enough for one, let alone two, which at least would explain something. Mind you, the dinosaur duvet lends the place a happy feel, amid the ironies. Never enough pillows, I always get that.

Drinking vodka: lots of vodka. Perhaps indeed someone did spill something in here; it sure smells that way. Strange wooden thing behind the head. Corners hard. Try to see in the half-light. Can't move head much, so I turn to it. Dumb patterns like something out of Tolkien. An eye, a triangle and letters. *Yes/No* –there's a platitude for you. I turn, and come eye to all-seeing-eye with the supernatural. It's the metaphysical *Thomson Local*. Perhaps I might use it. *Call up the dead*. I wish you were here; I don't know where I am. Strange, sleeping on it, though, there can't be much in it then, can there?

Well, fuck it: drop it on the floor.

"Awhgh, you."

And there she was – is – with her angry babyface sprinkled with faint freckles and peering, trying to focus, through a drape of yellow fringe. She's still trying to focus. Then she shifts. She rubs her forehead, mops between her taut eyebrows where, apparently, it has just dropped.

"Thanks 'lot."

That's funny, I thought she looked like Naomi Watts last night. I thought she looked like someone else last night.

She does not look like someone else.

She leans in further and I watch her pupils adjust. Where is here? A dark corridor smelling of bleach; a taxi heading somewhere: *here*. Music, lights, a short trip, possibly north; the Prudential building with all the mirror windows. This'll happen again someday; it's happened before, someday. It's a short trip from to "where" to "here." Now, *here is where?* These old deictics.

She is angry and holding her head. It doesn't appear to be bleeding. What exactly does a boy say when they cosh a girl, however involuntarily, with a solid wooden ouija-board?

"Sorry," I say, "I didn't know you were on the floor."

"You were sick – *sick* – in my sink."

"Sick?"

"Sick. You vomited. You can't take your drink. I could've drank what you did and still stayed up. Usually."

She had not.

"Well, I'm..."

"Sorry. Yes, I know. You're sorry. The maids'll clean it. I shouldn't leave it to them but, you know..."

I did not.

"Well, I think it was a good night."

Silence.

"We had a good night, don't you think?"

We did not. Further silence. The trouble with silence is that while it lasts it is hard to imagine it ending; silence is never a wrong number.

I feel like I'm making a habit out of this sort of thing. Every few days, I wake up and say goodbye to someone I'll never see again.

"Actually," she says, "you can wash it down. Why does someone on *MINIMUM BENEFICIUM* have to clean up your puke? Fucking hell. It's not like we have a separate room for puking. This room is my home, anyway," she says, hanging on the long *oh of home* for just a little longer than is usual, "I know it's not Laura Ashley," she gestures about her, nearly touching all four walls and coming weirdly close to the ceiling, "as you can – well... – see, but, but, you know."

Exasperated, she visibly decides there and then that I'm not really worth explaining things to. This is disheartening because I'm a *new man*, that's what I am, puke notwithstanding. A man may not be able to prevent himself from coming to issue, in and of many matters, but a man of the *now*, on at least half of these occasions, or perhaps slightly fewer, will clean up after himself. Some may also clean up after others, but I am not that sort of person. I've never been that hungry.

"I'll wash it down," I say and, noticing that she probably looks *better* than Naomi Watts, "I'm really sorry about the, you know, the whole dropping that thing... on you... that thing... and everything."

(Coherentism never did it for me. If I'd received an empty envelope from Edinburgh, when my Aunt Dotty was at the fringe, I'd assume nothing but further evidence of the fact that the world is unexcitingly unpredictable. Why couldn't her precious gothograph have been a pillow, or a toy giraffe or something? It would've made it easier to sleep – hell, we might even have copulated. Actually...)

"Did we –"

“– No.”

That there is a radiator near the window has yet to register to any senses other than sight. Now my eyes bring the room in: I can make out ice along the single-glazing. I gather the covers about me. The dinosaurs are clean and crisp and faded. She stands up and apart from the indescribably unbuttoned Thomas Pink draped about her thighs, she is naked. Now the lower section of her small, strong body is eight inches from my face, my nose roughly at her understated navel. Coming to consciousness is intolerable at best, but this would come to represent, through the hanging, drawing, and quartering of the deafening mornings, one of the more manageable arousals. It is pleasing in a way – no, it is a suddenness of paradise – her being here, in her room, present to all of my senses but two, and now suddenly I yearn to fill up my remaining senses with her thereness.

And her minimalist navel before me, a tiny shell: a pink, three-dimensional ampersand with neither object nor subject; merely an implied question mark (one must never trust a navel like a question mark); it sinks almost lily-white at the circumference – in keeping with most of the rest of her body – and dips and deepens to pale salmon at the first folds, deepening and dipping still into its floral axis, into the soft thulian carnation of its own secreted filaments.

Such were my thoughts when contemplating the navel of Megan Hunt, a nineteen year old modern languages student, with serious fucking problems, from Reading, Berkshire.

Walking back from work and it's four in the morning and still dark. I swipe the keycard and Moonlight Clive looks up at me and gets back to yesterday's *Racing Post*. I take the lift up to the top floor and unlock each of the locks. The first thing that hits me is that Jim is snoring away in his room. The second is that the television is still on. (I like her, you know, I like her.) But I'm pacing about and I can't contemplate sleep. Instead I contemplate the night and pour a glass of beer. And then it hits me: I haven't eaten for days. There's nothing in the fridge apart from beer, a sandwich well beyond its use-by date, and the fake can of Budweiser which we use to hide stuff. I have to get some food. The twenty-four hour place will do. I lock up on the way out. Looking down the dark corridor, there are little green sparks along the skirting boards. I've seen them before of course, but most-times I ignore them, not that they ignore me – London makes you like that. I'm kind of happy to get back in the lift.

“Do you want anything from the shop?” I ask Moonlight Clive.

“If today's *Racing Post* is out, García –”

“All right,” I say.

There aren't many people on the streets. It's the nethertime. But I work my way up to the twenty-four hour on Oxford Street and get a microwave pizza and some Lucozade. Centre Point looks unusually dark tonight. I guess the people there are asleep at last. It's kind of weird to stare at Centre Point from the ground. It's where runaways go, if they're lucky, taxiing along runways without skies. I heard they have a kind of no drugs, no prostitution, not even any alcohol sort of policy. It is a halfway-house for those people who spend their lives running, the kind of people that everyone has forgotten. Some people don't have a Jim, or a James, or even an Anaïs to cling to. They are

fireflies, always already there on the peripheries, the liminal zones. *Agony, always agony.*

Tomorrow's dailies are on sale. I ask the assistant if they have *The Racing Post*. He nods, points to the stack of papers.

"You buying that?" says the assistant to an old man looking at the pornography.

The old man shuffles off out into the night.

I pay for the paper, and take the microwave pizza and a pint of milk. The assistant serves me without a word.

I make my way back and it's still dark, although the night is beginning already to smell of morning. Back onto the square and the keycard again. I give *The Racing Post* to Clive; he puts his hand into his pocket.

"It's on me, no worries," I say.

"No mate –"

But I'm already in the lift.

Well, give a little, that's what I say. Karma is not so coy as people would like to think.

I go through it all again, although the little sparks seem to be gone, and finally put the pizza in the microwave. I pour a glass of milk.

And I watch the sun come up, eating the pizza and drinking the milk.

I feel almost happier.

"I get a thing," he said, "where I keep going through this stage of nearly leaving."

When he said "leaving," it sounded a bit like "living."

“Leaving this job?” I said.

“Oh no, leaving this job’s nothing. I’ve sort of already left. Just by working this job we’re leaving it; we leave every time we turn up. No: leaving this town. Perhaps this country.”

He shuffled a few beer mats about, and – for the first time I’d ever seen – carefully put some ice into a highball and poured himself a real drink. It was Absolut: he didn’t fuck about. He sipped it and stood up straight.

“Finlandia’s better,” he said, but we’ll settle for the Swedish stuff today.”

“OK,” I said.

“You can be yourself here,” he said, “so long as you don’t mind other people watching you be yourself.”

He took another sip of the Absolut.

“There is freedom, but within boundaries. You can lose yourself here James, but other people find you. Other people find out your location, even if you don’t know yourself where you are.”

“I don’t want to be found,” I said.

“Well,” said Jussi, “you can lose yourself, but others will find you, sooner or later. Fate has GPS.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“You’ll see, sooner or later,” he said again.

“How do you know this stuff?” I said.

“I just know,” he said.

I didn't know what he knew. I served a few late-lunchtimers. One of them asked if we did food. Jussi laughed and gave them a flyer for the Chilean place.

"There you go," he said, "go and get yourselves some *congrío*. You'll like it there. They've got natural light."

They looked at him sort of strange.

Jussi was still going on about other parts of the world, and the whole natural light thing.

"You know," he said, "where I grew up, it never gets light in December. And it never gets dark in June."

"I like the sound of December," I said.

"But June is *kulta*," he said, "you can ride your motorbike for kilometres and not see another person. You're more likely to see a reindeer than a person – I'm not making this up. It's special. Here, you can't walk a metre without someone getting in your way, checking you out."

"True."

"And it's crazy, James: in Lapland if you go out of the city in midnights: everyone's partying and cooking sausages over open fires – the northern lakes glow with hundreds of fires where people are eating, and drinking *lots of vodka* – good stuff like Finlandia or this Absolut. Some people call it Finnish white wine, and some people get so fucked-up on it that the government instituted these state-subsidised *Alkos*, which only open at certain times. In a normal store in Finland, the strongest beer you can get is 4.7 percent. They did it to control the drink problem, although now it's not so much bad now as it was with my father's generation. But I miss the open spaces and the trees and

the open fires, the sauna and the birch. The silence; the sound of the snow. It's like a special music you can't actually hear with your ears. You only can hear it with your heart. Sorry, I'm being sentimental. James, I'm no mystic, but sometimes it seems like I left my soul in Finland."

Someone asked for a Laphroaig. He poured it.

"So, you going to go back and get it?" I said.

"Probably not," he said.

"Why?" I said.

"James, look, I'm no philosopher. And I know I've been talking shit. I give it to you straight, now. No analogies, no bullshit. There are guys who say that they run *to* something. But that's mostly bullshit. In order to run *to* something, you have to run *away* from something. Don't let anyone tell you different. In order to make one choice, you have to turn down another. That's just logic. And when you have decide where you live, the language you speak, the culture you adopt, it's an important choice."

"So what are you running away from?"

I started to polish the bar.

"Well, nothing really. But we've known each other a while now, James, and I like you. You're shy, aren't you? You're not well-equipped for life. Well, I'll tell you something: neither is my brother. He is a sad boy. I never miss him more than when I'm in the same room as him. We sit in the sauna together sometimes. We say nothing. I mean, in Finland, you don't really speak in Sauna. But there are a hundred kinds of silence. Here it is unusual. In the winter it gets very dark. Some people find *kaamos* – that is twenty-four hour darkness – very hard to deal with. It gets to people you know.

Just under a month without light. Someone once called the northern forests in *kaamos* as utterly black as the caves of sleep. It's a special time for some people, especially *Same*, and it's a time of meditation, reflection, working in call centres, and eating high-fat sausages. Making sure your car's charged at the power point. But it's not for everyone, really it isn't. A lot of people kill themselves in Sweden in the winter – some just go out walking into the forests and die of cold – and while we Finns have a greater resistance – *sisu*, we call it – to sadness, even so, some people still get really, really sad. So that's not literally what I'm running from, but I am running from something like it, I suppose. The sadness. *Kaamos*. No, James – I guess we're friends now – most people cannot admit to running away from something, especially you British. It's funny, that. But I admit it. I ran. Thing is I ran to *here*."

Me and my big mouth.

"Why?"

"Saint Martin's. Couple of friends. Society. Now I live in Balham in an apartment the size of the toilet, which is boiling in the summer and freezing in the winter, with a landlord like Mussolini, and at least one of my friends is nearly dead, and the rest are thinking about leaving. Hirkka still comes by to see me but I can't deny it: she can't wait to leave. I ran here and now everyone's leaving. Living in the UK just isn't all it's meant to be."

He cracked open a bottle of Coke. He'd had enough of the vodka. Drinking wasn't really for Jussi. So much for Finnish white wine.

"But fuck it," he said, slapping his forehead, "we can't go on talking like this. So, you then, James – I've told you a secret. All men have secrets. Tell me one."

Jussi never betrayed me, or if he did, I don't know of it. So I figured I'd tell him more than I had told anyone else.

"Things were hard at home," I said, "there was a kind of – darkness – at home. That word you say where it doesn't get light."

"*Kaamos*," he said.

"That's it," I said.

I keep going through this stage of nearly living.

It never left.

Anaís turned up and said, I can't do this on my own.

Can't do what, I said.

This, she said.

All right I said, what do you need me to do?

Nothing much, she said.

Her old GTi was parked outside. It's nothing really, she said, but I can't do it on my own. What the fuck do you want me to do, I said. Oh it's nothing, she said. I just want someone to be with me. What about Jim, I said. Are you fucking joking, she said. For the first time, I looked into her asphalt-in-the-rain eyes and saw almost nothing. She was wearing perfume, maybe because she'd been to work. She still had her work suit on and she looked pretty tired. I wouldn't've kicked her out of bed though, I'm ashamed to admit it; she looked pretty tired but that wasn't all: I wondered what kind of knickers she was wearing under her skirt, what state they were in after her long day at work.

It's nothing really, she said, but I can't do it on my own.

We pulled into Charing Cross Road and made it up Tottenham Court Road. We pulled through Camden and I stared out the window towards Camden Road. We carried on, up Kentish Town Road, up through Kentish Town, past Tufnell Park, right on up to Archway. Then we got on to the Archway Road and drove further north. Where are we going, I said. Up North, she said. We worked our way up to Brent Cross. Would you like the radio on, she said, look, I can put Xfm on if you like. I'm not really bothered, I said. OK, she said.

We got past the Brent Cross retail-crater, a droning hub of outposts: World of Leather, Carpetland, PC World, and Frankie and Benny's, all malled together, synthetic, regenerated pods of a fallen, organic and noctilucous space station with its own gravitational fields, its own orbitals. This is a simulated village far larger than some actual towns, where years are lost playing at working, and working at playing.

She was twitching and everything, I mean it really was fucking bizarre. We turned into a suburban-looking street and turned a few more corners, and there were these little houses and outside most of them were Ford Granadas and old Escorts and St George flags and things like that. One of the houses was covered in paint and graffiti and that. There were cars up on bricks and stuff, and there were people walking dogs, and lots of track suits, and kids hanging out on each corner, all of which reminded me very much of back by the sea. OK, she said.

She parked – expertly – outside a semi-detached house with an old BMW in what was left of what once might have been a driveway. The wall was half fallen-down; where there once might have been grass there was mud and dirt. Several garlands of dog-shit adorned the patch just to the left of the front door.

“Right,” she said, taking a small envelope out of her handbag, “what I need you to do is to ring the bell, go in, and give this to the man. It might be Milton. It might be Henry or Big Bob. Maybe Milton. It might be Milton. He’ll give you another envelope and then we’ll go back.”

“What’s in it?”

She looked at me.

“What’s in it?”

“Money.”

“No, the other package. The one I pick up.”

“Just over a hundred grams. Actually it’s a bit more. Nothing much.”

“A *hundred*?”

“That’s what I fucking said, James.”

I looked at her.

“Come on Jamie,” she said, “I’d usually get Jim to do this but he’s – indisposed.”

“But –”

“ – This,” she said, “is not the time.”

Kids, kicking a football about the street. Lights coming on.

“Look,” she said, “we need to do this. Jim’s not doing well. This might help. It’s not for us, you know, not much of it anyway. We both know what’s going on here.

Come on, for fuck’s sake James, I can’t do this on my own.”

Her blonde and blue hair on her pinstripe jacket. The perfume.

“All right,” I said.

I took the envelope and whacked it into my backpack.

“I’ll be out here,” she said, “I don’t like this either.”

Across the terrace, long shadows lengthening. Kids kicking a ball against someone’s garden wall.

I got out of the car. I heard the locks click. All up the street you could hear televisions: *EastEnders* finishing. The drum-roll and the sickly chord melody of the theme tune.

I rang the brass-effect door bell.

The whistled, ghostly coda of *EastEnders*.

Eventually the door opened. A man in his track suit. He looked like a character from a fighting game on the PlayStation, I don’t know which one.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m one of Jim’s friends. I’ve come to give you this.”

I showed him the envelope. He looked at me.

“All right geezer. Come in. Quick.”

The place smelled of dogs and cannabis and Chinese takeaway. I followed him into the lounge. He didn’t seem – thank goodness – to be very interested in me.

I sat next to him on the sofa. The net curtains rippled in the early evening, filtering in the suburban nightshade.

He opened the envelope. It was full of twenty-pound notes. He counted them there and then. It took some time.

“One of Jim’s friends, yeah” he said, “you’re not American are you?”

“No.”

“Good. I fucking hate Americans. It was them what done nine eleven.”

He counted the money again. Twenty-pound notes. More money than I had ever seen in my life. Twenty-pound notes. A good few thousand pounds. A dog started barking in the next room.

His head shining in the dusk-light.

The man switched off the television.

"You're a grand short," he said, "what the fuck's this shit?"

"I'm sorry," I said, "I'm just –"

I didn't know what I was. But then he sort of almost-laughed.

"Just joshing you mate," he said, without smiling, "loosen up."

"All right," I said.

"All right," he said, "wait there."

After about ten minutes he came back with another envelope, bigger than the one that I had given him.

"For fuck's sake," he said, for no apparent reason.

Then he looked up at me and I could see his eyes. He looked very carefully up at me. He never forgets a face.

"Right then –"

He looks at me. *He never forgets a face.*

"What's your name, mate?" he says.

His scalp, his eyes.

"John," I say, "my name's John."

"Do want to test this, John?"

"No."

“Do want to see it weighed?”

“No.”

“Right then, John,” he says, handing me the envelope, “there you go, John. Say hello to Jim for me. Wish him well. And his wife or whatever it is.”

“I will,” I say.

“Good,” he says.

“What’s *your* name?” I say.

He looks at me and I am frightened. I am scared and I am frightened.

This is taking much too long.

“I have many,” he says.

And then I notice the tattoo on his neck, something with numbers and stuff. It’s inverted. It’s one of those things like when you need to read it you have to put a mirror up to it.

“OK then,” I say, “thanks a lot.”

He just nods. I put the package into my backpack. It’s worth a lot of money, it would seem. It is beautiful and deadly.

“Thanks for coming, John,” he says, “and be lucky, bro’.”

Be lucky.

By the time I get back to Anaïs’s GTi I feel ill and inexplicably cold. I’m shivering and shaking. I can hear the theme to a hospital drama blaring from most of the houses in the street. I open the door to the Volkswagen and Anaïs doesn’t look at me. I sit down in the bucket seat, fasten the seatbelt, check it twice. This car is an old car but it is a fast car.

“Everything all right?” says Anaïs.

I don’t say anything.

“Everything *all right?*”

“Yeah. Yeah. Everything’s all right.”

She starts the car and it’s nearly sunset and the sun is orange in each of the windows on the left side of the street, the sunlight trapped in the net curtains like butterflies in webs; and the kids are still thumping the football against someone’s front garden wall – the Polo in the driveway has a disabled badge on the inside of the windscreen – while bald Phil Mitchells walk gladiatorial status-dogs. A stereo bangs out nothing-but-bass R&B from behind shrouds of net curtains and people shout at each other in front-room domestic-violence arenas.

Imagine being old here. Close your eyes.

Imagine.

Anaïs floors the accelerator. We pass the house with the graffiti and I can just make out the word “peedoe” on the front door.

We get back down on to the A1, past Brent Cross, but somehow the Ikea floodlights seem more welcoming now, halogen desk lamps on asphalt shelves. And then south to Archway, to Kentish Town, then down to Camden, back down the Tottenham Court Road and thence to homely Soho. On the right, the blue sun is a new moon.

We don’t say a word to one another on the way.

But after this Jim and I breathed in lightning night after night. Several weeks of uninterrupted self-objectification. I kept on at Murphy's but I let others take my shifts over and over again. Jim'd stick around at Murphy's and he'd make more money in a night than I made in a week. Perhaps because I had sponsored his scheme, he was incredibly generous. We'd go out after I'd close up, or Jussi would close up and Jim and me would go and get on it. It was the Garage, Koko, Barfly on Saturdays, Kerrang, Phone in Sick, the Fridge, the Slimelight, Full Tilt, Heaven, sometimes if Ana and Katrina were about, The Torture Garden, and a hundred other places. Plus all the clubs with the up-for-it tourists. We even started on the trendy clubs for a bit but that wore thin very quickly; in most of these there is nothing to do but to drink vastly overpriced champagne and to develop one's own sense of godlike superiority.

And the city vanishes and you're on it, there and now, only here and now. It hits: time becomes *Aion* – the pure and empty form of time. It doesn't matter that you're in a toilet in a Soho bar, or speaking very bad German with bored Austrian tourists in a basement; none of this matters because you are become pure ego, pure sensation, pure haecceity. You slip between worlds: the blush of rush; the palpitations in the heart, the hyper-awareness of the very air. The floodlit tears on the tarmac on the way home, the way you can't stop running your thumbnail along your fingertips, over and over again; and the imperative to hinder the latent paranoia for another night.

The company seems better; it seems easier to condescend with the synthetic conviction that you're a whole lot more interesting than actually you are. For a week or so Jim's flat became a little extension of the bars and clubs. People were there all of the time. Jim picked up the tourist girls and boys each night and they were still there the

next morning. This occasionally had its advantages. Some days he would ask me to call him in sick, and some days he called himself, and some days he actually managed to get to work.

While it shrivelled me up like a week in a Jacuzzi, Jim's physical excursions seemed, if anything, to triple. Early one Saturday morning, I was trying to come down gently with 20 mg. of Temazepam. I was trying to watch the television – children's television that is – I was trying to learn some French from some dolls on the television, I don't know why. And the next thing I know, Jim's fucking a very tall thin girl over the sofa, her breasts – small, covered thank goodness – grinding against the cushions on which not five minutes ago, I had propped my bashful head. Her liquid hair over the sofa, inches from my knees; and her sighs bedded Jim's Chewbacca roars. Shall I go to my room, I said. She paused a moment to stare through her hair, combing it with black nails, whilst clearly Jim was well past stopping. The whole damn sofa shunted slowly across the floor with each new American impact and so too, each time, her cushioned face seemed to move closer to mine. It seemed as though she wanted me to kiss her or something: there is nothing wrong in itself with liking attention. In any case it seemed that there were two options available – I look back on this with arrogant self-disgust – I took the easy way out and went to my room.

This life. Up or down, the morning tautology.

From what I could make out from the noises, there was no sleep to be had. I resigned myself to the situation, brought another line in, in spite of the Temazepam, waited for it to hit, and had a little goose-step about the lounge. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Jim – the rascal – had slunk away into his bedroom where

someone else seemed equally as ready to go as the tall girl. Either that, or Jim was the noisiest masturbator in London. The tall girl stood with her back to me, gazing into Jim's room as though watching a wildlife documentary. And there is something decidedly bizarre about seeing and/or hearing other people have sex: it should be a turn-on but ultimately it isn't. It's like karaoke where you never get handed the mike. For my part, no, I can't say it, there was something else with the whole tall girl thing then, no, I can't say it, I don't want to go into all that now; she was wet: I've said enough as it is.

Even so, the next afternoon she was still pacing about the flat like a caracal in an Eastern bloc zoo.

"Do you want some cornflakes?" I said.

"You're Jamie-boy, aren't you?" she said, "that's your name?"

She had an accent of some kind. I didn't once see her blink. She looked down at me.

"James," I said, "my name's James."

"OK," she said.

She still was pacing about.

"Where're you from?" I said.

"Switzerland," she said, "I'm here on vacation."

"Do you want a joint," I said, "would that help? We've got some stunning Thai."

Nothing.

"And I think I have some Valium. Or Zopiclone. Would you like some Valium? Works wonders for me. Brings me down nice and slow. No charge, I promise. Fruit juice and a nice Valium then, is that right? How about some toast?"

(Oh please, for goodness sake, *have some fucking Valium*. I have to go to work; I can't call in sick again. I can't leave this poor girl alone here.)

She smiled.

She was having none of it and so I let her out to roam the streets, to walk it all off and out.

I went to take a piss and there was a figure slumped in the shower. I couldn't make out if it was man or woman, alive or dead. It was like *The Shining*, but vertical.

The hell with this, I figured.

Later that afternoon, just before I went to work, I went up the Tottenham Court Road and bought a bunch of tools and some hardware from Dyas. The prices were very good. I went home and, finally making use of what they tried in vain to teach me at school, I screwed two bolts to my door – one on the outside and one on the inside – to be secured with a combination padlock on whichever side, depending on whether I was in or out. For once in my life it was quite a good job.

That Saturday about midday, Anaïs showed up. Jim was nowhere.

“All right all right,” I said through the intercom, “I know it's you Ana. I'll let you in. Just let me get dressed. Talk to Moonlight Clive for a minute, will you?”

“What shall I talk about?” she said.

“I don't know, try horse racing or something.”

I pulled on a pair of jogging pants and one of my mother's jumpers. I let Anaïs in. She threw her leather coat over the sofa. This must have been her weekend daytime look; she looked very different in just her blue Levi's and a tight white Ibanez Guitars T-

shirt, with a red and black bra underneath. She looked almost American: perhaps that was the intention, should Jim be home. But no, she knew better than that. And if anything she looked prettier now than in the nights – all of that corset stuff, and the arse-tight suspenders.

Her hair was still blonde and blue though. I squinted as I opened the blind.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Is he having one of his ‘Lost Weekends’?” she said.

“I don’t know,” I said.

She breezed about the flat like a landlord on routine inspection.

“He’s ill again, isn’t he?” she said, picking up a Stratocaster off of the floor.

“I don’t think so. I couldn’t say. Not really, actually – I don’t think so.”

“Daphne Blue, they call this colour,” she said, “Jim’s had this since he was fifteen. Look at the fingerboard. *Scalloped* they call it. The stuff they do in Fullerton, I ask you.”

I looked at the neck of the blue guitar. Indeed there were deep scallops in the rock-maple, under each fret, like carved-out shells, maple meniscuses hugging up to the polished nickel.

“I wish he’d take more care of his stuff. Ever since he had to sell his ’62, he doesn’t seem to give a shit. That was his pride and joy, that thing,” she said, “rumour has it that it once belonged to Robert Cray, but I don’t think that that’s true. God knows who it belongs to now. Probably in an attic somewhere gathering dollars. He bought it for about twenty-two thousand. It’d be worth double that now.”

She strummed the guitar – an open A7 – and carefully put it back down on the floor.

“Have you ever actually heard him play?” she said, patting the Strat.

“No. He never plays. Sometimes I wonder if he can. Can he play it well?”

“He can. He’s a fucking genius.”

She shivered a little. Pulling herself together, she picked up a used glass and examined it.

“Bloody hell,” she said, “how do you boys actually *live* like this?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“How’re his arms?”

“He wears long sleeves.”

“Has he sort of – lost interest – in life?”

“I never noticed any in the first place.”

She glowered: “Don’t get cocky with me James. Don’t be a smartarse. You’ve never had to clear up his bloody excrement. Don’t start with me.”

She sort of looked around awhile. The landlord persona had vanished. Instead now she looked about the place as though she were visiting an old flat, now occupied by somebody else. She looked a lot shorter in her pinstripe Chuck Taylor’s.

“You’ve got a lock on your door haven’t you?” she said, “what’s the matter? Do you not feel safe here?”

“I just want to protect my stuff, that’s all.”

I had no stuff. She didn’t reply.

She went into Jim's room, then came out again. She breathed out slowly. She rubbed her forehead, as though hung-over.

"Tell him I'm not happy, Jamie, will you? No, tell him I'm really worried."

"All right."

"There's a lot you don't know, Jamie, you realise that don't you, darling?"

I thought: and there's a fucking lot *you* don't know, darling.

"I mean, we sort of have an open relationship – I think you've worked that out – but I don't like being lied to."

I thought: if you don't like being lied to, then why are you hanging about with a failed musician who can barely keep a grip on things, with enough money to do basically what he wants? Join the dots, *smartarse*.

I kept my mouth shut.

"I called a lot. It takes a lot for me to come over. I don't like to interfere."

"I'm sorry, Ana. I'll talk to him."

"I'd appreciate it if you did. He seems to listen to you, a little bit. I think he thinks you're clever or something."

"Wrong, exquisitely wrong."

She smiled.

"You're not so bad, Jamie," she said, sitting on the floor between the guitar and the window, "there's a lot worse. You might talk funny – you talk a lot of shit, you do – but you're not a bad kid."

I lay on the sofa and looked at the ceiling.

"Do you want a drink?" I said.

She thought for a moment, then declined. She lay back on the carpet. Her breasts.

“And that reminds me,” she said, “Mary thinks you’re pretty. She said you might not last long but you’re pretty.”

“Wrong again. On both counts,” I said.

Ana’s sort of sighed. After a while she said: “Well, tell Jim to call me. And talk some sense into him. We were supposed to sell at least half of that coke. Sounds to me like it’s all going up *his* nose.”

She was right. Mine also.

“He’s a stupid boy, Jamie, but you and me: we’re supposed to be his friends. If it doesn’t get sorted soon, it’ll be very hard for all of us when it comes.”

“Well, I’ll talk to him, Ana. I promise. It’s Saturday night, right?”

“It will be soon.”

“Wait there.”

I got up and went to my room. I did a bit of physics and a bit of origami, came back and gave her a wrap of three grams.

“Something for tonight,” I said.

“Do I have to pay for this?” she said, standing up, her thin legs casting a wishbone shadow over the carpet as she did so. Then she straightened up – quite tall even in her All Stars – and looked at me.

“What do you think?” I said.

She kissed me very lightly, on the cheek. She smelled of make-up and office furniture. Foundation and plastic chairs.

“Thanks Jamie-boy,” she said, “you’re not so bad. Later.”

As she left I kept the door open and sat right down on the floor, my arms around my knees, I don't know why. I heard her footsteps down the corridor and then the lift rumbling the old structure of the block, as it came up. I heard her – just – take the lift and descend.

It had begun to get dark earlier. The phone seemed only to ring at about six p.m., but still it worked. One afternoon I got back from a rare early shift and he yelled out to me:

“Jamie-boy, someone called for you.”

“Who?” I said.

“I don't know,” he said.

“What did they sound like?”

“I don't know.”

“Did they leave a number?”

“I don't know.”

I went back into my room, shut the door, locked it with the combination lock, and went to sleep.

I figured it was time to get another phone. I had to get rid of my old one, and all of the contacts – all five of them – were lost. That was OK; losing contact with people is a talent that I have: now old voicemails enter upon one another and form disjunctive conversations. Now my old cellphone is a chatroom in which no one can speak to each another.

I went back up Tottenham Court Road and got myself a new phone. It was “Pay as You Go” – or more accurately, quite literally, “hand to mouth.” Now I had a phone

but no one knew my number: the perfect situation. I dreaded the idea of it ringing but after a while I almost got used to it.

It was the end of the Indian summer. On my day off I walked down to the river and then over the bridge to the South Bank. It was nice, in a way. I bought a bottle of cheap red wine and sat down by the National Theatre. Then I worked my way along the bank to where the little boats go. It takes guts to ignore everyone, the people pretending to enjoy themselves. Just to the west of Waterloo Bridge, there was a flight of steps which led to sand – actual sand – on the shore of the river. I thought about getting a ticket for the riverbus but decided to save my money for other things. Down there, no one about, just the river and the river-birds, it was pleasant. It wasn't exactly Lake Geneva – on the banks of which once I sat down and wept – but it was something. I finished off the wine and made my way back home.

Days passed slowly and I worked too much. I got up about two p.m. and went to bed at four a.m. I worked almost every day, to pay the rent and all the rest. Work was kind of polarised: nothing to do during the afternoon and way too much in the evening. But that was OK: soon it all would end.

Originally the plan for Murphy's was to turn it into a sports bar, but that didn't work out. Instead, the hard core afternoon drinkers would come in – the guys who couldn't get club memberships: accountants, shop managers, or graphic designers who'd lost their way – and drink Bushmill's or Black Bush and all the rest of it. Most-times for the first drink they didn't have ice in the whiskey, often not even water. Usually they'd hit the first one about one or two, right there at the bar. After the first one they'd take one with

ice, sit down, and read the papers. They weren't really reading the papers: they were contemplating what had happened to their lives.

For a time a couple would come in for a lunchtime quickie. On a couple of occasions a woman with red hair would get a glass of lemonade and put it on a table, and then she would disappear down the stairs to the lavatory. A few minutes later another office type, or a workman, or a shop assistant, I don't know, would get a Jack Daniel's and Coke, put it on a table, and then follow her. Their drinks waited for them on the same table each time, the ice melting as though to tempt them back. They tried their best, I am sure, at discretion, not that I think that MI6 would have had them. Both of them would be gone for about ten minutes at the most. Then they would come back, together; it was a whole relationship distilled into ten minutes. To their credit, I never once heard a thing: they were quite tactful about it. I guess that they couldn't afford a day-room at the Metropole, not even for their love. The man would disappear down the stairs and then Jussi would wink at me. Off we go, he'd say, *l'amour*. We let them get to it – what civilised human being wouldn't? – life is bad enough. It almost was pleasant to see these poor people happy together, assuming that happy is what they were, or that at worst their lovemaking made them a little bit happy, or less sad, however briefly. It was nothing. Nothing at all. My only objection was that when I cleaned the toilets, when it had been raining there were supernatural footprints on the toilet seat, and that it was a bit of a pain to fish out the condoms which wouldn't flush down the bowl – and all of this with the whole cubicle smelling of Dior, rubber, and Whitstable.

But in the nights it was a different story. There were Americans who put on Irish accents when they ordered a drink – perhaps they thought me and Jussi were Irish, I don't know, I wouldn't hold it against them – and then, when they returned to their table, they spoke with American accents. I never worked that out. I would prefer not to be me, that is for sure, but not to that extent. I lie all the time. Soon the place would be heaving again and I'd be paranoid and fucked-up. But yet each afternoon I would put on my jeans, throw on my polyester shirt, and go and serve drinks. Pour a Coke and something stronger, and sit waiting for patrons to come in. Hello *unikeko*, Jussi would say, you sleepy boy. But it's better than working for a living.

Jim was becoming a one-man Joy Division tribute band. He'd sit there in Murphy's knocking back whiskey most of the night. Then we'd close up and, much later, he'd be cutting up the lines on the bar and talking shit for an hour as Jussi and I cleared up. I'd wake up the next afternoon frightened and bored, turn on the television and wondered where the TV psychics were. Waking up with perfume on the bed sheets, sometimes blood.

One evening after hours as I was tidying up, Jim came over all inquisitive.

“So, did you hook up with Mary?” he said. He was as wired as necessary.

“What?”

“Did you call Mary?”

His eyes narrowed. Jussi looked over.

I didn't really know what to say.

“I didn't get her number,” I said.

He rolled his eyes.

“You didn’t ask her for it?”

“She didn’t give me it.”

He looked up the ceiling, strode behind the bar – Jussi looked up again – and Jim poured himself a Jack Daniel’s.

“Should you be drinking that?” I said, thinking about what Anaïs had said, “you should take it easy –”

“– so the answer’s no, then,” he said, “you haven’t called.”

“No, I told you, she didn’t give me her number.”

He inhaled the fumes of the drink before taking a sip. This was a new thing.

“But look Jamie, it’s none of my business I know, but I’ll tell you something. Even nowadays, women don’t just give you their numbers. At best they talk some shit about Facebook, which is kind of a way to avoid the issue – and anyway, it’s kind of rude to say no.”

“I’m not on Facebook,” I said, “are you?”

He gave me that look.

“What do you think?” he said.

“Is there even a computer at home?” I said.

“Yeah, there’s a fucking computer. It’s in my bedroom. You’ll need to get your own if you need one. I only use it for the usual. And iTunes, and ProTools. That’s all it’s got on it. And Ana uses it when she’s over for networking shit, if she hasn’t got hers, which is very never. As for me, my ‘web-presence’ isn’t exactly high.”

"I can't understand why people want to be so well-known," I said, "what is it about people?"

"You're asking the wrong guy," he said, "you see, I move through people; I get tired of people quickly. I don't like people."

"Me neither," I said.

He looked at me. Took another sip.

"So what about Anaïs?" I said, "you know her quite well."

He paused for longer than usual.

"I haven't got tired of Anaïs, not yet. I don't think I ever will. You see, she's my constant, my rock. I don't really know what I'd do without her. I wouldn't like to think about it. She's kept my interest for a good few years. I know we don't have the perfect relationship, but hey, she's the closest thing I've got to family, I guess. It's good to have someone to count on."

"She's worried about you," I said.

He looked at me.

"What do you mean, she's worried about me?"

"She came over one of those nights that you didn't come home. You went back to that hotel with that Austrian girl. Was she Austrian? Her friend was Austrian, I know that much. Lichtenstein, was that where she was from?"

"What the fuck are you talking about? What do you mean, she's worried about me?"

"You didn't come back with me, remember? That Austrian girl came home with me, don't you remember? She left very early. We were all going to go back to some

hotel but we didn't because I was ill. I got paranoid. She had a friend. You went back to the hotel and I stayed at home. The friend was Austrian too, I think. Don't you actually remember?"

"Hotel? What hotel? You stayed home?"

"I don't know; I didn't go there: you did."

"Maybe. I think there was a swimming pool."

He looked at the wall as though trying to find a book in a dusty bookcase.

"Well that Saturday, Anaïs came over," I said, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you before."

"Oh fuck, here we go."

"She just seemed concerned, man. I mean you disappear for days, man."

He looked at the ceiling.

"It's my right," he said, "to disappear for days. I can become invisible. I may as well make use of it."

"But she's worried, man," I said.

"So you said. I need to get some air."

"Don't worry, I haven't said anything."

Jim stood up and climbed the stairs.

Perhaps he could count on Anaïs. It occurred to me that I didn't have anyone I could count on. He went into the street and did some deep breathing. He came back and propped himself up on the bar. Then he said:

"Which brings us back to my question, Jamie-Boy, are you going to call my old friend Mary? She's got this whole thing going on about -. She has great -"

I finished shutting up and washing the floor and everything. Someone had vomited in the far booth and I had to take care of that. I got the disinfectant, briefly had the compulsion to drink it, fought that, held my nose, held my breath, and wiped up the vomit.

Spluttering, I yelled at Jussi: "it's your fucking turn next, Finnish boy."

Jussi smiled: "Of course, of course."

"You keep avoiding my question," he said, shortly before bed.

In the distance, rain began. There would be a storm.

"See, I told you," he said, "we're having an Indian summer."

"She really didn't give me her number," I said.

"We already did this bit," he said, "look, I'll ask Ana."

"No, please don't," I said.

"Oh for fuck's sake Jamie, do you know nothing? Mind you someone did call, but it wasn't Mary. Definitely English. But no, Mary, she's pretty much royalty around here: corporate goths do not often surface. Not in the daytime, anyways."

He put his feet up on the coffee table. One of our silences again, they were getting longer.

"Look," he said at last, "you're scared aren't you?"

"Of what?"

"I don't know. You're scared though."

"I'm not," I said.

“You are. Every time that phone rings I can feel you seething. What’re you frightened of? Look, your dad is history. He may as well be on Mars. He may as well be dead. What about school? Did you have a bad time at school?”

“Hardly went. After a while they got me a home tutor. Quite a few actually. They didn’t last. Dad wanted me to get a job in the City. I suppose I did, in the end.”

“Stop talking about your dad, Jamie. Fuck your dad. No. Girls, women, right? You’re scared of girls.”

“I am not.”

“Well, it’s none of my business, like I said,” he said, “but Mary’s great: give her time, she’d blow your fucking mind and make you a man in a single weekend.”

“I don’t want to be a man.”

“Well, Jamie-Boy,” he said, “to die would be an awfully big adventure, wouldn’t it?”

He went to bed.

I wish he hadn’t’ve asked me about school, because those damned home tutors came back to me again. I couldn’t help but think of them. Between ages about fifteen and seventeen. They must have been very unhappy. Some old Maths guy called Ken, with a moustache that smelled of onions and a nose like a champagne cork; Ken helped me get my Maths “A” Level. A crazy old demanding Music teacher, Mr Gleeson – clearly, like many music teachers, a failed musician – who would shout at me. I bit him. And later another Music teacher, Kati, a soft-spoken, middle-aged woman from the former East Germany, who, quite in the middle of Chopin’s Eighth Prelude, stroked my

knee and worked her way up. It felt like fireworks. Spread out on the Egyptian rug, covered in sweat and all of the rest, hours after she'd gone forever, I wondered what had happened. Probably nothing. It was probably nothing. I'm not even sure if it happened or not. It probably didn't happen. Nothing at all. Actually, no: nothing happened – I made it up. Well, the home tutors, they taught me some maths and some music, and they taught me some other things too and ultimately, for my father, the novelty wore off, and I was back at school – or not – like I'd never been gone, but much, much worse. Next time I saw Becky I felt different.

Fuck this. I really so need to chill out. I pierced a Temazepam with the corkscrew and squeezed the chemical into a glass of Highland Spring. I licked my fingers after; the sour suspension sizzled on my tongue.

To be alone. The silence and the night.

I looked out over the lights of Soho.

I crave silence and solitude and yet each terrifies me.

Soho isn't that tall, not compared to other parts of town. London is a rivertown: it grew not just from palaces and hunting grounds, but also from banksides and mudflats; swollen and swelling to outlands and salt-marshes, satellite settlements, retail parks. Paris was planned; London wasn't. And Soho extends below the city, in basement bars, windowless rooms, Victorian charnel houses. It's not exactly Manhattan. Arborescent Manhattan grew up; rhizomatic Soho grew down. But some of the lights are on all night, twinkling prisms of lives; dim lights still on in cryptal rooms. Inexplicably, these give earthlight to the streets, not down from the moon but up from sewers, stars in oil, piss on bricks, perspiration on tissue, the hush-hush glands of the underworld. All through the

night people come and go, waifs and ghosts – I can hear them, I think – in the little rooms, the basements, the undercrofts beneath these pavements, and in the paintless garrets far below the sky.

To be alone here. Still my beating mind.

Lightning over in Streatham or somewhere.

And then memory barges in: the bright lights over on Canary Wharf, the sky-town, the river-people. That was nice too, watching Mary sleep. I might not last long, Mary said, I might not last long but I'm pretty. The oracle had spoken. Could anyone ever ask for more? I turned away from the window and turned off the dim light. Only the lights of Soho and the television remained, and even they seemed to become one and the same. *Until the shadows and the lights were one.* Crunching into the sofa and then stretching out, I switched the television over. The live psychics from Bolton and Essex. The downer took me in her undertow. As I cruised drownwards, the psychics spoke deep into the lounge, about other people's lives, other people's deaths; perhaps mine, I don't know.

Jim woke me on his way to work. You've got a bed for that, he said, switching off the shopping channel, and get in there Jamie, I need some space before I go.

Thursday was signing-on day so I called in sick and went to the JobCentre Plus. And then instinct took over. I took the 24 to Mornington Crescent and wandered about for a bit. I had a look in the charity shops and bought an old copy of the *Elektra* for fifty pence. I wandered up Camden High Street, amid the tourists, towards Chalk Farm. I stood at the bus stop opposite the Stables Market and the noise of the present seemed to stop; here, north London enters upon its own past with eloquent disquiet, and even in the

day, there unquestionably is a funny feeling around the Stables. Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim. You hear the old voices of people who aren't completely there and perhaps never really were.

I got a drink and a sandwich in The Enterprise and wondered why I was there. The bar was almost deserted. There was no music. It was a clear, bright day, and I didn't feel too much of a come-down, so I felt satisfied, in a sense. I'd walk.

I took a left, down Prince of Wales Road. I looked about me. It was pretty quiet. I lost my way and hit upon a school. It was very quiet, I don't know, it must have been half-term. Standing on Prince of Wales Road, very few people about, early autumn, leaves in the gutters, it felt strange, I don't know why. I don't believe in *déjà vu*, but *déjà vu* believes in me. I walked past a sports centre and another school, to Kentish Town Road.

There the noise came back, the roar of the vehicles and people. At Camden Town tube I took a left and bought some wine at Sainsbury's. I found myself gravitating towards something. Just after Lyme Street there were some stone steps. I followed them down. I seem drawn to water, I don't know why. I followed the steps down. Not a person in sight. A few tattered ducks, crisp packets and used condoms. I sat down on a bench. I unscrewed the wine and drank. The tannins on my teeth. I had been down here before I think, or near it. I considered rolling some in. Sparkling in the sun, the water was the colour of granite, like you see on those eighties tombstones. The noise was still there but at a distance.

You're looking into the water. It seems that things happen for no reason. Her leather coat wrapped about you. No one about. White horses out there, frothing the brine. A wild wind out there, on this old wide sea. Out on the blue water, all white horses, riding up and roaring and coming in. The lighthouse seems disused now, like the derelict power station up the road. Over the sea other places. France is not far. Now she won't let it happen any more.

Get out of my head. Get out of it.

The wine is good. Life is good, almost.

And then this guy comes up to me and starts to talk.

"Go away," I say.

He looks like Steven Seagal. All in black. Bomber jacket type. He starts to talk again.

"Look, man, I'm not interested. I haven't got anything worth taking. Look, I haven't even got a watch."

And then he reaches into his pocket for a knife or something and I start to panic and go to get up, and he says:

"Police."

He shows me his badge. A plain-clothes detective.

Oh why me? What does he *know*? What have I *got* on me? Oh here we fucking go.

"I'm Detective Inspector Evans, sir," he says, "I'm going to have to ask –"

"I'll go away. I'll go back home officer. No trouble."

His face softens.

“Are you all right, sir?”

“Yes. I’m, I’m fine.”

A hundred grams of it there was. What a prick I am. *I’ll be banged-up*. Mary said I was pretty! I’m *fucked*.

“Look sir, it’s just we’re taking pictures.”

Oh for fuck’s sake.

“What?”

“We’re taking pictures because we’re investigating this area for evidence. Unless you want to be in the picture, then I’d advise you to go elsewhere for half an hour to an hour.”

“Evidence,” I calm down a little, “evidence of what?”

“I can’t say sir. It’s been on the news. You might have seen it. It’ll be on the news tonight. We’re looking for something, sir. I can’t say more than that.”

He looks at me. He has grey in his hair, just beginning to show.

“OK,” I say, “I’m not very photogenic anyhow.”

The cool afternoon air, winter’s on its way.

“Thank you sir,” says the policeman, “we sorry to have troubled you.”

I look up towards the bridge, where horses used to drag the barges up and down the river. There are men in scuba gear. It’s October. They are looking for evidence.

“Oh well,” I say, trying not to flip out, “keep in touch.”

He nods.

I climb the steps and get to the top. Then I turn around to watch. Something is in the canal. As two police frogmen dive, the Steven Seagal Detective and another, female detective start snapping away with the same kind of compact camera intended for holidays, barbeques, and birthdays. They photograph the scuffed grass, the granite water, the bridge and the bench. It's still very bright – one of those bright autumn days – and I make my way up to Camden Town and get on a 24 and show my ticket to the driver.

“I mean,” he said, “what’s wrong with that?”

We resorted to The Fox. I looked out of the window: a transit van stuck behind a slow-moving dustcart. People sometimes walk quickly in Wardour Street, but not now.

“Asshole sends a letter home. He sends a letter to my father. My fucking father. Who probably, while I didn’t know it then, knew something about it.”

“The headmaster?”

“Principal. Like in *The Breakfast Club* or whatever, all those old John Hughes movies where the principal is a total prick, you know. About such debris, Hughes is rarely wrong.”

I nodded. A large bald man got out of the van and emoted to an athletic dustman. I nearly was at the bottom of the pint. I considered going to the Seven Eleven on Shaftesbury Avenue and buying some Special Brew to top it up under the table.

“I mean, they were trying to go all British and that. Fuck knows why. Apparently it’s big in Canada. But this wasn’t Canada; this was ‘Jersey.’”

The large man ratcheted it up a gear. The other dustmen emptied bins. You just don't want to get involved around there; you never know what you're going to get.

"I mean, it was in assembly: we'd just finished all the *I pledge allegiance* stuff and he just said, 'boys and girls, we are going to have houses'."

"Houses?"

"Houses. Four years left of school and I had to be in a house."

I thought for a minute and then realised what he was talking about.

"Houses," I said, "Yes, I remember. That bollocks."

"What were yours?" he said.

I thought for a minute.

"I think they were scientists. I was in Galileo. I think. Apparently he was a scientist. Or a fucking philosopher or something."

"Apparently. Died for his views too didn't he? Like he'd want anything in some shitty school in – where did you go? –"

I told him.

"Well, there; like he'd want some house in some curtain-twitching suburban hellplunge to be named after him."

All hell broke loose in the road. People stopped to watch. Who can blame them: life is a shock of boredom. Someone had taken their shirt off to reveal a relief map of sinew. For October, you have to give them credit: it was a sincere gesture. I couldn't hear what the bald man was saying – from behind the window it was as though someone had hit the mute button – but I figured it was what they used to term *blue*. He had tattoos.

“So we’re in assembly, right, the whole school, all the teachers and shit and the lab techs and the librarians and all those fuckers that are too dumb to actually do something and have to teach it instead, and he says, ‘we are going to have houses.’ *We are going to have houses.*”

“Well, that’s quite British.”

“British shitty. Crumpets, strumpets, God save the Queen. *Houses.*”

He looked as though he was remembering some sort of traumatic event. But he was on a roll now.

“So the principal goes, ‘now who among you students would like to suggest a theme for the houses?’ And some cheerleader type puts up her hand says, ‘how about *famous explorers?*’ She goes on, Principal Hedges humours her, goes on about Scott and Lawrence and Aldrin and all this. Some other kid – can’t remember his name, acne type – suggests *galaxies*, you know, this is really dumb. I mean, ‘The Milky Way’ is bad enough, but, hey, what about ‘NGC forty-fucking-four-fourteen’ as a house name? Yeah, that’ll stick. That’s burning leaves for future nostalgia.”

“Not much worse than Galileo.”

“No Jamie; much worse than Galileo. But I was really, really offended by the whole thing, so I thought it’d be kind of appropriate, you know. So I just put up my hand, and said, ‘Principal Hedges, I know that at first this might sound a little strange, but please sir, like they say in England – and as you know, sir, I’m half-British myself, so I consider myself, if I may be so bold, to be a modest authority on the subject’. And he mumbles something like ‘spit it out García’ or something like that, and I say ‘so sir, I propose that the most appropriate inspiration for our new Houses initiative is the much

derided *persona non grata* of the film industry: let's name our houses after porn stars. And if it's all right can I be in Jenna Jameson? I doubt she'd spit it out sir.' Everyone went nuts. They went for British Castles in the end. I was in Warwick."

Things appeared to have died down a little outside. The man had his shirt on again and the traffic was moving.

"Principal sent a letter home. Like I fucking said. Dad knocked me into the next week, when I was allowed to return to school. How's that for being born under a bad sign?"

The next weekend a bullet train of pills and blurred lines. Light and trails and dawns smudged into nothing; in each aftershock I lay in bed listening to nothing.

"You asleep yet, dude?" he'd yell though to me.

"No," I would say.

"Shall we go get some lunch?" he'd say.

"No."

"Just asking," he'd say.

Then about half an hour later we'd reverse roles and do the whole thing all over again.

"You asleep yet, mate?" I'd say.

"No, dude," he would say.

"Shall we go and have a lunch or a beer or something?" I'd say.

"No," he'd say, "fuck off."

I imagined all of the James Bond movies we might have watched together, or if we were into sport, then all of the matches we could have shouted at. But we each hated sport, specifically British sport, and couldn't understand narrative even of the simplest kind so we didn't watch anything on television.

But later he sort of got concerned.

"Are you supposed to be at work?" he said.

I looked at my watch, then at the rota that Jussi had printed out for me.

"Yes," I said.

"Well, you'd better go," he said, "you need that job."

"I can't do this," I said.

I called the bar but Jussi was having none of it.

"You have to come in," Jussi said.

"I'm sick," I said.

"You've got to come in," he said, "I'm on my own here. Look, you just serve a few drinks and I'll do the rest. Murphy's been in. He's been asking about you."

Jim said to stay up on it. I got a huge coffee at Nero – I swear *everyone* was looking at me and talking about me – and then went to Murphy's for my shift.

It was fucked-up but Jussi was kind. He handled pretty much all of it. It was unnaturally quiet. It was Sunday after all. We closed up early. I nailed some lines.

I was so on it that I walked the streets all night. I'd been pouring dumb amounts of speed into glasses of Irn Bru. I walked along the river, up to Temple, and then right up to St Paul's – I'd never been there before. The whole place shone: it wasn't exactly Paris but

it blossomed like something out of a tourist movie, the kind of film where Hugh Grant and his friends have to get somewhere, and one moment they're at the Savoy and the next the Bank of England. I walked all along High Holborn: it felt like riding a rainsoaked *Shinkansen*. Stopped at the Viaduct to drink in the liquid stars, and right up to old Bloomsbury.

The taxis carved past and I heard old voices, not voices of the living.

Flagging at last in light, I sat myself down on a bench in Bedford Square. I huddled my mother's leather jacket about me. I'd get a slice of toast, and go home, I figured, although I wasn't hungry at all and I'd eat the gone-cold toast that afternoon. I'd whack down a Valium or something, maybe two, maybe 30 mg. Temazepam, and wait for tomorrow. Then eat the hard toast. The autumn leaves were dirty now; not long ago they'd been crispy like an old relative's diary that you shouldn't read; twenty-Euro notes curled up in the sun. Near-winter leaves. They didn't whisper any more; just the sound of the breeze through near-bare branches.

"You're not very talkative, are you?"

I didn't look up.

"Not as a rule," I said. The comedown nearly had begun.

"You don't remember me?"

I looked up and there she was again: aureal hair in near-winter sun.

"Yes, yes, I do remember you," I say, "I do."

"Are you all right?" she says, "You look ill."

"No," I say, "I've got a bit of a cold."

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing. Nothing. I'm Bru."

"You look like you could do with a square meal," she says.

She sits down next to me. Her eyes are kind and fine. She has little freckles, leftovers from young days. Her voice: calm and articulate.

"I know," I say, "I'm going to get some toast, and eat it, and go to bed."

Lies.

She looks at me. She is wearing a leather jacket also, a bike jacket, all quilted on the shoulders and elbows, shiny in the morning sun. Like a beaver makes a dam. The leather squeaks against mine.

Students, coming and going.

"Been out all night, have we?" she says.

"For so long."

"Seriously," she says, "are you all right dear?"

No one ever called me "dear" before.

"I'm all right," I say.

She nods. There is a silence.

"Look," she says, motioning to her sports-bag, "I'm on the way to the pool: you know, the old 'gym 'n' swim' thing. It's only a couple of quid between eight and nine. I try to do it most days but really it ends up being just a couple of times a week. You get a lot for your money."

"All right."

I'm not exactly up for a gym and swim myself.

The wind has got up. It's even blowing the wet leaves about now, about her Chelsea boots.

"Look," she says, "I'm going to go and have that swim, like I said, but if you're about after, say in about an hour, I'll get you fed, if you want. I don't have any lectures until ten. And you look like something out of *Our Mutual Friend*."

"All right," I say, "what's *Our Mutual Friend*?"

"Don't ask. It's a long story. Relatively. Bodies in rivers. Fathers and daughters. Look, I'll meet you later if you like. They'll be doing breakfast in the canteen at about nine. Actually they'd be doing it now but I'd have to sign you in."

"OK."

"What, you want me to sign you in?"

"OK. Yes. Thanks."

So we go to ULU and she signs me in and comes up with me to the fourth floor, and I sit down. The place is pretty much deserted, thank goodness. So this is where the clever people go, I guess.

"You hang on here, if you like," she says, trying not to let me see that she's scratching her left nostril, "and I'm going to get my swim. I won't bother with the gym. But I do like to swim in the morning, so I'd like to do that. And I did get up early this morning to do this. And then I'll meet you here."

I look up. Her blonde hair and apparent absence of make-up.

"And," she says, "I promise we'll stay off the topic of erectile dysfunction." I look up at her. She smiles, a little.

"Hey," she says, "till later then."

“Have a nice swim. It’s Megan, isn’t it?”

“It’s Megan.”

But after a bit something gets into me: following the signs I take the stairs down to the basement, where one can spectate swimming events at the University of London swimming pool. Through toughened glass I recognise her, her blonde hair and tight thighs. She’s wearing a black swimming costume, and goggles instead of her glasses. She dives in and perhaps I hear the splash; and – I don’t know why – I stand there transfixed as she crosses the water – a silky, shy selkie – back and forth and back again – her bloneness darkening in the chlorine; and I just about can hear the ringing through this subterranean water-cathedral: the splash of the young men and women diving; then the oaring of water; the toned triceps treading the turquoise; and now she ploughs the photic lanes, down and up, there and back – *fort, da!* – winging the waves, soaring Lorelei; and for once I feel something good in my chest, something that mimics her gentle, fierce butterfly strokes; and this whole perfect thing makes me happy but tired, so I’ll leave her to it.

I take the lift back to the fourth floor and order a cup of tap water, as students slump over lecture notes and iPads.

Can’t really eat now. I’ll force it for the sake of health, I know that much.

Eventually she shows up. She’s a little blushed, probably from the shower.

“Well, what do you know,” she says, “you’re still here.”

I can’t think about much else than seeing her swim. Maybe I’ve got a thing about women who fight against the tide.

“Good swim?”

She sits down and drops her sports bag onto the floor.

“Always is. No such thing as a bad one, so long as you don’t drown. And there are those who have drowned out of choice, so maybe even that premise is open to debate.”

She fumbles for her wallet and produces a ten-pound note.

“Go to the bar and get what you want. I’ll have a green tea. They don’t do Sencha but you can’t have it all, can you?”

I’m not used to this kindness, not for a very long time.

“Are you sure?”

“Sure. Let the mirror decide.”

The bar guy looks very bored and very healthy.

“Yes?” he says.

I get some toast and some orange and I sort of pick at the toast and down the orange. I’m shaking a little and getting the butter onto the toast is not straightforward. She looks sad but doesn’t say anything.

“I always liked to swim,” I say, “but only in the sea. Then I sort of didn’t want to any more.”

“Grew up by the sea did you?” she says.

“Mostly. Never liked PE though.”

“Well, there’re only two kinds of PE, and you don’t learn either of them in class.”

Her nipples show under her green T-shirt and I’m trying not to look. She sort of looks at me looking at her and then glances at her watch.

“So, I’ve got to be off in about twenty minutes,” she says.

“OK,” I say.

“You’re new in London?” she says.

“No,” I say.

“I’ve been here for a couple of years now. Just over. Final year now. Not that that bothers me very much. I’ll probably be here for a bit longer so long as I do OK.”

None of this means much to me.

“What is it you do?”

“I read books and then I write about them. Then someone who’s read more books than me, and who has written more about reading books than I have, decides how good I am at writing about books and – in relation to themselves, it would seem – gives me a number from one to a hundred.”

“That’s fun.”

“That’s higher education.”

I think she is waiting for me to return the ball. She leans on her hands and runs her fingers through her damp hair.

“Up the street,” she says, “the big dome.”

She sometimes sounds like she works for the BBC; and sometimes for *Deutsche Welle*.

“But I’m boring you,” she says, “eat your toast. I could’ve saved the money and had a Bacardi Breezer or something, with my lunch.”

She kind of laughs. Well, I’ll have a go, I figure.

“Books, you say, what sort of books?”

“Well,” she says, putting her head on her hands, “lots of different stuff really. I like Woolf a lot but I’m a girl, so it’s contractual obligation. Nabokov too, which is not. That’s a boy thing. But some people used to tell me I looked like a boy. Make up your own mind.”

She paws the yellow hair; and then there are her eyes: they’re red from the chlorine. She must have put the goggles to one side, or around her neck.

“What about that thing you said I looked like? Something about a friend.”

She sort of laughs:

“Oh yes, this big old Dickens thing. It’s full of bedraggled people, and I thought you looked quite bedraggled, that’s all.”

“Thanks.”

“But there is one good image in it. There’s this man, and his job – well no, let me give you some context here – in Dickens’s time people would drown themselves in the river. About four a week on average, according to one source. Waterloo Bridge, you know, was known as ‘The Bridge of Sighs,’ and ‘Lover’s Leap,’ because people used to jump off of it in the night, to commit suicide. Then they’d be carried downriver on the current, and washed up out East, near Wapping or Dagenham and places like that. There were people who were paid to retrieve the bodies. But they got paid per capita, as it were, so they went out in their boats, looking for the bodies of the drowned, before they were washed up.”

“That’s fucked-up.”

“Well, in *Our Mutual Friend* there’s a character, Gaffer Hexam, who takes his daughter to fish out bodies from the water. The men that used to do this, they checked for rings and other jewellery, to sell.”

“Happy days.”

“People still do drown themselves though, there. One man that jumped actually weighed himself down with a dictionary, so I’ve read. I think of him drowned by language, like they used to say about Lucia Joyce. And look at that chap from the *Manics* – remember them? Sylvia Plath poems and cut-up arms. Thinking is a very dangerous thing; feeling is positively lethal.”

Everyone the philosopher.

“Well, I can swim,” I say, thinking of how wonderful it must be to swim with Megan.

“But when I saw you, I don’t know why, you just reminded me of some of the people from that book – probably because I only read it a few months ago. I don’t want to suggest that you’d take rings from a corpse or anything like that, or that you’d try to jump in the river.”

“I am drawn to water, you’ve got that right. In fact, I was down at the canal near your place the other day. I don’t know why. I got moved on by a detective. He was taking pictures.”

“Oh yes, but that wasn’t a drowner. That was bits of a body, so I understand. Not sure they found the head. A witchcraft killing, apparently. Whatever that means. It was in the *Camden New Journal*. It’s just like living in *Quattrocentro Venice*.”

She looks at her watch again and pulls her hair back into a pony-tail. She stands up and somehow I recall her naked navel.

“Hey,” I say, jotting down my new number and passing it to her, “give me a call. I like talking to you.”

“OK,” she says, “so long as you eat that toast.”

And then she’s off again and I can’t imagine how wonderful it must be to know her.

A very cold, clear Autumn night. I woke late – it already was four thirty. There were messages from Jussi on my phone and I regretted ever having given him my number. Shivering, I threw on my jeans and grabbed a jumper that someone had left over. Some model or other, or a bassist. The wool irritated my skin, but at least it kept me warm.

No evidence of Jim. The bastard must have made it to work. How could a man’s body and mind deal with living like this?

Moonlight Clive nowhere to be seen; instead there was a man who looked as though he was in his seventies. He didn’t acknowledge me.

Incredibly cold, perhaps it was me.

Shivering like a fish on sand.

Outside in the square kids in green giving out flyers for something or other.

Without thinking better, I took one.

“You’re always late,” said Jussi, “come on, man.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Oh, and check this out,” he said, pointing to his chest.

“What?”

“Uniform,” he said.

And he was right: a green T-shirt with a decal on the left breast pocket. It read, *Murphy's London*, in gold letters. There was a picture of an *It's a Small World* leprechaun holding a glass of stout, the most pissed-up leprechaun I'd ever seen in my life; the kind of thing that should be on a St Patrick's Day Drink Aware campaign.

“Oh for goodness' sake.”

“Trust me,” said Jussi, “this is the beginning of the end.”

“We'll be a fucking O'Neill's soon.”

“A what?”

“You know, like at the west side of Chinatown. Wardour Street. Guinness, more Guinness, and bouncers on the door. I went there with Jim once. We stayed about five minutes.”

“I need to get out of here.”

I took off my jacket, put my keys and wallet into my jeans pocket, and poured a whiskey.

“And Murphy's been checking the levels again. Apparently he's getting a manager in. Used to work for Nando's.”

“Perfect.”

I knocked the whiskey back. Jussi just stood there looking at me.

“What?”

He smiled and motioned to the staff door.

“There's a surprise for you in there.”

I went to hang up my jacket in the staff kitchen. On the table, *with my name on it* there was another T-shirt with the same blarney. On the back there were the words, *A Little Drop of Temple Bar right in the Heart of Soho.*

I put it on, over the jumper. I was averse to freezing while working. As I came back out Jussi, in stitches.

“Very funny,” I said, “why hasn’t your one got your name on it?”

“Murphy wasn’t sure how to spell it,” said Jussi.

“It’s got five fucking letters. How hard can it be?”

“Plus everyone will mispronounce it. If I’m juicy it’s my business.”

Well, now everyone would know my name. This would not bother most people in most situations, but it would bother me, given time.

Jussi nodded at the flyers on the bar. They were the same as I took in the Square.

“Murphy’s paid a load of students to give out flyers in the street,” said Jussi.

And there it was, our little bar, fully McDonaldsised, O’Neill-ed, scuppered.

Céad míle fáilte. Come for the *craic*; mine.

“The students were cute,” said Jussi, “and tonight we’re going to start doing food: Irish tapas.”

“Irish *what?* Tapas? Isn’t that a contradiction in terms? Can you imagine it, little plates of colcannon, mini-baskets of farls?”

“Like I said,” said Jussi.

It was one of the last things I ever heard him say. (But many times since, I’ve thought of him with his many accents, his kindness, and his uncompromising resistance to all things serious.)

So the place – anyway – was rammed way before usual. We were doing three-for-two's on the Oloroso Bushmills, little stamp-tickets for pints of Smithwick's and later on, bar snacks were bussed-in from Murphy's Italian friends. Pizza strictly speaking, is not a Celtic thing, but we had it anyhow; and the students also helped us to serve preprepared Waterford Cheddar panini, prosciutto soda bread, and – inexplicably – gorgonzola finger-sandwiches served with shots of Burgundy.

By eight, people were drinking, right up the stairs. The people and drinks both spilled out onto the street. Jussi, ever the stoic, took orders, poured drinks, and looked unusually depressed.

A woman with a mouth like Texas perched herself at the bar and started ordering Southern Comforts. The only woman I ever knew that could've matched her drink-to-drink was Anaïs. The woman kept on ordering and I kept on serving.

"James," she kept saying – damn that shirt – "same again, sweetheart."

The place was heaving like never before. There were scraps of the Irish tapas in the sawdust – Murphy may not have thought this through. It almost was how I imagined it to be in those places on Fleet Street hundreds of years ago; places like the Cheshire Cheese: candlelit faces; falsely-festive indiscretions; sawdust and meats pestled under heels.

And I kept filling up the glass.

"You're an actor, aren't you?" she said, "I've seen you on the telly."

"No, not me."

"You've been on the telly. I know you have."

“I assure you, I’m not off the telly. I’ve never been on telly. I don’t even watch it.”

“Yeah you are. *Casualty*, you’ve been in, haven’t you? You’ve been in *Casualty*.”

“Not yet.”

“Or – I know. You’ve been on one of those talent shows haven’t you? Were you dancing or something? Playing a guitar.”

The very thought of it. And besides, the things people deduce from just the length of a man’s hair.

“No, I’ve never been on that either.”

She looked put-out.

I kept on serving. When someone looks into their drinks it doesn’t necessarily mean trouble. Not every time. She looked into her drinks, pulling her top up, then pulling it down again, and then up.

“You all right?” I said to Jussi. He didn’t answer.

“Look man,” I said, “can you take care of that lady over there? She’s hitting on me. She’s twice my age.”

Jussi nodded. Without a word we swapped places.

People thrusting twenties at me, Valium in my blood. Kind of dizzy. I needed to get home but it was just the two of us. Murphy had doubled the work while keeping the same staff. I didn’t really blame him – and I don’t now; he did his best – but it had got a bit much. But this woman thing, it was pretty usual. It was just that the drugs had lowered my libido; I camouflaged this with falsely increased standards. A few months

ago I'd've been up for it; growing old is something not wasted on the young. Jussi kept her happy.

Feeling kind of skittish, kind of rabbit-in-headlights.

I poured myself a whiskey and one of the Italian guys saw it. Fuck it, I figured and downed it anyway. I wished that Jim was about. Jim would know what to do, wouldn't he? He'd know what to do.

In my peripheral vision I saw her point to me, but I couldn't see why or who. The whole place seemed to be glaring and laughing at me. I tried to think of calm things. The music – this terrible fiddle reel – pounded my head, and the roar of the customers was too much.

"Fuck this," I said to Jussi, "I need to sit down."

He looked at me. But the woman somehow was in front of me again.

"Double this time, sweetheart," she said, and put her hand to my face, "you're pretty, aren't you? You *have* been on telly."

And then another hand, on my face, and then in my hair, and it takes me a second to work out it's not hers but it's too late – the hand becomes a fist, and another hand is behind my neck. And then an impact and I am on the floor and Jussi tries to help me up. Blood all over the sawdust, the bar, my nice new green shirt, the fiddle music crashing into my head, that bloodtaste in the mouth and nose. But he's clambering over the bar – this huge monster of a man – over the bar, and she's yelling at him, "Shane, Shane, no," but he's got me by my neck. One second of blood-letting and it's everywhere. I pick the thing up, it wrenches from the wall, the optic splits, the plastic breaks, the gin leaks, and

it hits, *hits*, right there, right there between a fury of eyes, a band of red, and he lurches back into the soda bottles.

It's raining glass and I look up through blood. He's still falling back but it's made him worse. His blood now, covering his beard; someone yelling, "please, please stop, Shane, fucking Shane," and people raising their hands to catch the event with their cellphones. But he's coming again. I jump over the bar, bringing down some shot glasses of Burgundy, getting gorgonzola finger-sandwiches over my woolly sweater, under a rain of Guinness, and Waterford Cheddar panini. But this thing, it grabs me, it's going to do *real* damage, it's going to fuck me up, but I've still got what's left of the bottle. I plunge the teeth of the shatters into his neck and draw it up into his nose – the glass slices lip-tissue as it goes and at last he falls back into the crowd. Some fucking do-gooder tries to seize my arm but I slash his wrist with the bottle and anyway I'm already up the stairs, still blinking back the blood, getting out onto the street, running for all my life, leaving the Minotaur, the labyrinth, and the shitty job behind.

I keep running for all I'm worth long after people have stopped yelling behind me. I can't be out on the street with all this blood; people are slowing down to see.

"You all right, mate?" says someone.

"Yeah, yeah," I say, "just had a bit of a knock."

I run again, through the cold, mopping the blood with the wool jumper, and get to the Square. Thank goodness it's not Moonlight Clive. The new guy doesn't even look up. In the lift mirror I see my nose. It's swollen and covered in dark, thick blood.

There's glass all in my hand, like on a Gore-Tex glove after you've made a snowman.

The lift stops. I run along the hallway, getting away from the bad things. I just manage to get inside before I collapse. I drag myself over to the sofa and then it all goes blank.

The lounge bright and the dried blood on my face and on the sofa.

“What the fuck happened to you?”

“I can’t go back to work.”

He got a drink from the kitchen. It was getting dark. He sat down on the floor in front of me.

“Have you seen yourself?” he said.

“Not really.”

“Look, I’ll call Ana. She’ll clean you up, dude.”

“No, really, don’t call Ana. Please don’t.”

“She’s good with this stuff. She used to be a nurse you know.”

“Please.”

“All right. Go and clean yourself up though. You need some antiseptic or something. I think I have some Germolene.”

So I washed and took some codeine that Jim had left over from something or other and it gave me constipation.

“You’re talking funny,” he said.

“Fuck off,” I said.

“No need to be funny,” he said.

But in the end Ana sort of had to come round. It was either that or explain lots to a doctor. She brought around a big magnifying glass and some special tweezers and

some needles, and she sat on the end of my bed and pulled the glass out of my hands and wrist.

“What happened?” she said, expertly removing a glass splinter from my thumb.

“I’m not sure,” I said.

“You’re not much trouble,” she said, “why would anyone do this?”

She sort of looked at me.

“Someone thought I was coming on to his girlfriend or wife or whatever. I wasn’t. He came on to me. Then I came on to him.”

“Men,” she said.

But the days and nights came and went and I stayed indoors. Ana brought me some milkshakes that were full of vitamins and stuff – “Build-Ups,” I think they were called. And it was useful in a way: I didn’t feel like going out, doing anything. I couldn’t eat, nor drink much else but the milkshakes or water because it stung my mouth. Whiskey was out. Also I lost my taste for coke and all the rest. To be fair Jim let me rest for a while. But soon he had other ideas.

There is rain over the beach. The Italians flee the rain. Huddled under the bar awnings, some of them stare at you as you stand still under the sky. He’s back at the hotel, in this town of mosaics where Dante is laid to rest. It’s a pit stop he says to you, to get it out of our systems. She and I – he says. You’re too young to understand, he says.

The whole town is a mosaic. Basel was plain and clean; Geneva, warm and vast. The crêpes, knudeln, and Sekt gave way to piadini, Spumante; piazzas of heat. The Swiss girls were aloof, healthy, sportliche; the Italian girls couldn’t give a shit: they

didn't notice you were there. At the beach it's a little cooler, but even here at night it's way into the thirties. Little lights along the beach, the lettini all folded-up in the rain. It's a pit stop, son, he says, we need to have a rest. Go out and do your walking thing, you like that, don't you? It's funny, he says, I always liked being alone, and you like being alone too, don't you? It's the closest thing to a conversation that you have with him on this business trip. On planes, you feel at home.

And in the warm rain, at last you're alone. You walk out to the edge of the Adriatic. There are tea lights leading back to the bars, trilling in the rain so that the candles look more like artificial flames made from silk than real fire. The lanterns lead back to the bar but they also lead down to the sea. And this kind rain gives you the solitude you need. A song by The Cure echoes across the wide sands. You sit down next to the sea, among the lanterns, and time passes. Soon it is past midnight but you have no time to be back. He will be slightly drunk on icy Chianti, and she may well be gone. I can't leave you at home, he had said, it's against the law. You'll have to come with me. I don't like it any more than you do. What about school, you had said. No matter, he said, travel teaches you more than school – you need to be sharp for business, you need to know how people think, what makes them tick – I'll take you to Dubai next month: you'll like it.

There is rain over the beach. The rain falls on the water and it falls on the sand; and it falls onto your face and into your hair; and now there's another song, something in Italian, almost drowning out the Red Hot Chili Peppers bouncing from the adjacent bar. The two songs are out of phase, out of time, as are you, the inclusive disjunction of the heart alongside the clarity of confusion. Things just happen, that's all. What's the

point of worrying about meaning? In years to come, old enough to drink and young enough to remember, early one evening in Camden High Street, you'll remember this night and you might even tell somebody – someone who had to travel too – about it.

He went away for a long weekend and I had the place to myself. I watched a lot of television, but avoided *Casualty*. I worked my way through the DVDs under the television. Most of them were music videos – Jimi Hendrix, Steve Vai, that sort of thing.

He came back not quite renewed. Time was not regained.

“So now you don’t have a job,” said Jim.

“No. You know that. Look, I’ve still got a swollen face. It still hurts.”

“It’s getting better dude. What sort of bottle was it anyway?”

“A Jameson’s bottle, I think.”

“Nice choice. Appropriate.”

“Actually I think it might have been a gin bottle. Yes it was a gin bottle. Ana was nice to me. I told her quite a lot too. She says I should keep my head down for a bit.”

“You usually can trust her,” said Jim, “she filled me in. And yes, I think you should keep your head down. The thing about this place – there are two dangerous things about this place – the first is people who live here: that usually means they’re connected so best to leave them alone; and the second is people that come here from the suburbs – they’re the real fuckers – because they think Soho, and the West End in general, is like Vegas. They can come ‘Up West,’ cause shitloads of trouble, knock the shit out of each other, and then fade back to Essex or Sussex or something. I mean have you *seen* the cunts outside those clubs off of Leicester Square? Top Man suits and shit.

Aftershave, that's what you call it here isn't it? They can't take their drink; they wouldn't know decent coke if someone forced it up their asses. Which to be honest is unlikely."

"I just don't know what to do next, Jim," I said.

"I'm away for a bit," he said, "and everybody, everybody fucks up."

He looked at me. I decided to change the subject.

"How was Brighton?" I said, "or was it the Cotswolds?"

He looked at me.

"What, hanging out with two ex-teachers that now work in IT; and fish and chips on the beach," he said, "where do you think? Ana enjoyed herself, though."

"Lovely," I said.

"She needs it. She's come to need it. She loved it – more than I did," he said, "especially with your little stunt. She might look like she takes it well. She doesn't."

"Girl-boy girl-boy?"

"Same old same old. I tell you man, it's all the same to me."

"What's it like?"

"I'll tell you what it's like. It's like a bored couple, in their late twenties – or so they said; thirty-four at least – and me, and Ana. She met them online. How do you meet someone *online*? You meet them or you don't. We have a few drinks. Then the rest."

"Are you all right with that?"

"Depends. Most people like to get a hotel to neutralise the location; you know, not in the marital bed as it were, but these guys were pretty broke. You know, that woodchip on the wall thing that you Brits have. A bit of Oasis on the stereo, Paul

Weller. The three of them were getting stoned but I was just on the coke. It's not good for your hard-on but who cares? Yeah, I'm cool with it I guess: Ana gets bored easily. It's her thing. Like you and your talking shit all day. I turned her on to it, and now she's sort of made it her own. It was a free vacation."

"Can't be bad," I said, "what did you get up to?"

"You want to know what this is like? They were all right. A little basement flat in Kemptown near the beach; a nice pub in the town. Shitloads of dope and coke. Seagulls, little waves. It was fun, in a way. They were cool. The girl was a bit past it, mind you, you could tell she'd been a teacher. You can't disguise cellulite as well as the ads say, and she looked pretty sad in white fishnets. Her eyes were like a mercury thermometer when she got turned-on. And the guy was a bit macho, but we fixed that. I mean they used to be teachers. Maybe they still are. The girl was really slim, slimmer than Ana. She obviously was older than Ana – I mean, Ana really works out, and does that Clinique skin-tightening thing – so up against her the other chick looked like a wrinkled kid. She used to be a Geography teacher, and the boy used to be a Math teacher. Why do they say this shit? It's probably lies. It's a story. It's a lie. And I hate teachers. But vanilla-acting, no strings, fake names – I was Steve; Ana was Alicia – the whole package. The girl got all dressed up. Like I said. It must have been a big night for them, an anniversary perhaps. The guy kept himself fit. Ana wore a mask for some of it. She looked great. Her face looks great in a mask. We all tied the guy up nice and tight and then Ana blindfolded him nice and tight – I think she might've pissed over him but I'm not sure; I wasn't interested; I was coked – but his wife was mesmerised. We left him there for about an hour with him just listening; then Ana made him try and

recognise his wife's come over Ana's and mine, and of course his own. The guy's wife and Ana laughed at him because by that time it was impossible. What's that word in Lab where you mix elements? I'd fucked them both by then, with him tied and blinded. He had a lot of cunt on his face that night; I hope he fucking appreciated it. A waste of time. As for this guy, he had a small cock, I don't know why Ana even bothered with it. Their hearts were in it, but not mine. I just kept with the lines. And then later Ana drew some deeper blood. I wasn't into the girl but she was into me. And their kid asleep in the next room; they put a load of Night Nurse in his bottle that night, with his milk."

He looked at the television.

I didn't say anything.

"I don't think we'll ever do it again."

"OK," I said.

Silence. Then he said:

"But in the morning I felt a bit better, and decided to check the place out. I got a bottle of Gordon's out of the swingers' drinks cabinet – I mean, who has a drinks cabinet? We never have drinks long enough for a cabinet; if we had one we'd probably sell it to buy drinks. I got a cream cheese bagel – fucking awesome: just like in New York – in some shitty bakery; and then I walked the beach. I just left them to it and it was about nine a.m. and I walked the beach in Brighton, from Kemptown to this place named Hove and back. I walked past two piers – one all British and gaudy, and one like a sinking birdcage. Like a chandelier had dropped from the sky and smashed into the sea and all of the shattered glass had settled on the water, leaving the frame to rust. And

everything was blue and cool and not so cold but real windy; it was pretty sweet. The sea never stops. I sat on the shingle and I drank the gin and ate the bagel.”

“I feel a bit sad when I look at the sea,” I said, “I guess gin helps.”

“Well anyways I was walking the beach, as I’m there, and then this cute little Brighton girl was on this quad-bike picking up trash and stuff for the council. She had a council high-visibility jacket on, you know, the yellow ones. She ripped about on her quad-bike looking for trash. When she found some trash, or dog shit, or a dead seabird or whatever, she’d pick it up with this stick thing and put it into the appropriate coloured bag on the back of her quad-bike. Then she’d get back on and do it all over again. I was sitting there looking out to sea and she stopped and said hello. She asked me if I was all right. She was really friendly. She talked differently to the way Ana talks – more like you, Jamie-boy, sort of cultured, more *British*, you know, like Keira Knightley or someone like that. She was really cheerleadery, in an English sort of way, the sort of girl you’d imagine playing badminton or something – ‘jolly hockey sticks,’ that sort of thing – just so optimistic. She was real nice. She told me that she was studying Marine Biology, but that she was taking a gap year. Living with her folks and saving up money for study, collecting trash for the council. Can you actually do a degree in Marine Biology? Swimming with dolphins and that? I don’t know. Doesn’t sound much like work. I would have invited her for lunch, but then Ana and I had to get back to the city for Ana’s work and everything. Ana would’ve been tired out anyways, after it all. But the shingle beach was nice, the swoosh and the pull-back of it, and the fucking wind, and the quad-bike girl and I sat there with her, she in her high-vis coat, and we shared the swingers’ gin together. She probably was on her break – probably while Ana was getting

fucked, or at least getting her fill of seafood – and this girl told me that, more than anything in the world, she really wanted to come to America and take a semester there and everything, to study porpoises off the coast of Florida. Her name was Gemma. She said she was from Hove. She said she had read the Qur’ān but that she wasn’t a Muslim. She said it’s supposed to be really bad luck – that you’re sort of cursed – if you read it and you don’t believe in it. She said that that’s exactly why she read it. I said we’d have to meet up some time for lunch and she could tell me about the Qur’ān. I said I could come down and see her or she could come up to London and see me. You’re American, she said. She asked me if I was from New York City. You sound like you’re out of *Friends*, she said. Jersey I said, it’s like Essex, but bigger. Porpoises, she said, we don’t know much about them, they’re very mysterious, more mysterious than dolphins, and that’s one of the reasons I like them, she said. She had dark skin and bright hair. She’d fit in well in Florida; not sure about the porpoises or whatever you call them.”

“They sound great,” I said.

“I’d like to see her again. And anyways I have her number on my cellphone. Her gap-year thing, picking up trash on Brighton beach in the high wind, and driving a fucking quad-bike. And back in Kemptown, I guess, was Ana, sitting in that basement flat with a couple of ex-teachers, swingers into the bargain, sitting there drinking grapefruit juice and eating toast and jam at the breakfast bar – *is there a sadder term in the entire English language than ‘breakfast bar?’* – trying to think of something to say – I mean what do you say after watching your partner suck off someone else, I mean what do you say to either of them? – and I’m sitting on the beach talking about porpoises with

this beautiful, gentle quad-bike girl. I'd love to go to Brighton to see her. Read the Qur'ān or something with her. Ask her what she thought about it. Gemma."

"Nice name," I said, "and Hove's all right. I had an auntie there. Nice bookshops, good bars. Like Camden-on-Sea really. It's where comedians live, successful ones. Not the shit you get on panel shows."

"I don't know why I tell you this stuff," he said, "I'd never tell this to anyone else. Don't mention Gemma to Ana, she'd go crazy."

"No worries, man," I said, "we're blood aren't we?"

"No shit."

We watched television some more.

"I'd like to ask her about the porpoises," he said. I hardly could hear him.

"Sounds nice," I said, as he realised he'd said it out loud.

"But anyway," he said, "you hit this guy with the bottle: you better keep your head down, dude," he said, "I doubt that they'd've called the cops, but they've probably got friends. Everyone knows *some* people in low places, you know?"

"Yeah, I know."

He disappeared into the kitchen and I heard him mucking about with ice and things like that. Soon he came back.

"Jameson's, straight" he said, "I thought it'd be fitting. Here's to lost jobs. I've lost a few."

Cheers I said.

"I lost one in a bank, once, when I first came here" he said, "in Cheapside. It was a good job. That was the last time I wore a suit. I was composing music in my notebook.

I mean a real notebook, not a computer. I used to be able to do that. In my head. But you have to write it down. This wasn't exactly Wolfgang in the Vatican. I still compose music in my head sometimes. Berklee does that to a guy. But they found me out. We know what you've been up to, they said. Fuck you, you cunts, I said. Security threw me out."

We sat there, for about half an hour, drinking in silence. My mouth was much better. It was nice not to have to go to work, I figured, it was nice not to have to get up in the afternoon. It was nice to have him shut up.

"So at least you're still signing on," he said.

"Yes, I'm still signing on."

"But you've got to get some more work," he said.

"OK," I said.

"Everyone has to do something."

"Yes," I said, "I know."

I considered my options. It didn't take long.

"Let's go out and fucking get wasted," I said.

He turned to me. Those eyes again.

"That's not the answer to everything," he said.

I stared him right back. The Jameson's was getting into my system.

"It's *your* answer to everything," I said.

"Fuck off," he said, knocked back the rest of the whiskey, got up, and went into his room.

Graceless asshole, I could hear him saying.

I sat in my room for a bit, looking at the fire escapes twisted down into unseen space, then put on my jacket and left. I walked right down to the Mall, then back up again. I sat down on the gravel next to the ICA. Time passed, more or less. What was that in my hands? It was my head. I looked up at the traffic and the people queuing up for some event or other.

Eventually I walked back, past the footlit skaters outside the National. They twisted in the air, light-plushed in the granite glow. Then I hiked back up to homely Soho and got a stale croissant in Patisserie Valerie. I thought about Jim and his bagel. I read some of the papers, did the *Telegraph* crossword in about a minute. Then I asked the manageress if there were any jobs available. There were not. I asked her if there were any more crosswords available, or coffee refills. She walked away.

This was one of two times in my life at which I'd considered begging. On this occasion I rejected this idea, and the second occasion is not part of this story.

I trudged back to the flat and apologised to Jim.

"It's all right," he said, "but don't talk to me like that again. Even I have limits, not many. I don't have huge limits, but limits all the same."

"OK," I said.

He sat down on the floor next to me as it got dark.

"It's Ana's birthday next week," he said.

He looked at his hands in auto-palmistry.

"How old's she going to be?"

"I don't know: older than me or younger than me. There's a fifty-fifty chance.

Either way she'll be older than she is now. I'm surprised I remembered. It'd be best to

live life backwards, but the thing is, we have to live it fucking forwards. Someone once said that.”

“What are you going to get her?”

“I don’t know. Maybe some running shoes and some scissors.”

He looked up.

“Got any more Jameson’s?” I said.

“No,” he said, “I drank it.”

“Got anything?” I said.

“Got some rum,” he said, “it’s been sitting there for about a year. Some Canadian-Jamaican girl brought it round a few New Year’s Eves’ ago.”

So we drank the rum and later he talked about bringing one in and I thought about what Anaïs had been saying and I said maybe we should just leave it. All right, he said, we’ll drop some Temazepam. Where are they, I said. In my room, he said. So I popped the jellies out of the GmbH blister pack and stuck a needle in each of them; and then squeezed them out like teenage zits into two glasses of Robinson’s Barley Water. We did the Temazepam and before it took effect, alongside the rum he said:

“Tell you what, can you still play the piano, like you said?”

“Yep.”

“I mean, not Elton fucking John stuff, I mean the real deal. I did a year at Berklee in Boston you know.”

I wasn’t sure why he was giving me this information again. He said it as though he’d been inside.

“Grade eight,” I said, “distinction.”

He sat for a while. We watched MTV: a show about affluent families paying for sixteenth birthday parties for their offspring, which cost substantially more than most people's funerals. After about twenty minutes, the Temazepam calmed us.

He said, "I can help you. I've got a piano in storage. A Yamaha. People don't think Yamaha make good pianos because they're not German. But the Japanese sure know how to make stuff; it's a great piano and I played it a lot when I was a kid. It's worth a few grand I think. I should've sold it but something stops me. My dad pays for the storage. I've never had the use for the thing. I've got a nice Korg somewhere, for backing and that, but I'm not a pianist. If I got the Yamaha, could you give some piano lessons?"

They were 20 mg. jellies. I was starting to go off-radar, out to sea again: paddling with sea witches.

I said, "I could do that." I didn't mean it.

He nodded, very slowly.

"Well, we'll go out and get us a little piano then, Jamie-boy. We'll get Ana to get some cards printed and perhaps a website, and you can earn money that way. How's that sound?"

"Horrific," I said.

"Well, before I taught guitar I'd never taught guitar."

"I -"

"- it's settled."

Touch me with your soft hands, Welsh girl. There are green stars in the waves. Come back.

“There’re two actually,” Jim said.

“Oh,” I said.

I’d never taught anyone before. It sounded hard and sad.

“There’re two. An upright and a baby grand. Dad left them in storage. He tried to learn to play piano but he ended up crashing out these upsetting major chords – no sevenths even: nothing – like Elton fucking John; and *really loudly*. He used to play stuff like that theme tune from *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and all that shit; show tunes, movie scores. Nearly made me give up playing guitar. But then the Berklee thing. But he used to play all these ballads, not well, not well at all, but very badly. He’d get these *Easy Piano* scores for kids and miss out all the tricky bits. Can you imagine it? ‘Wonderful Tonight’ – a terrible song anyways – played by a balding man who can’t play, from an *Easy Piano* folio? Not a pretty sound, dude. He’d be in the music room and I’d be in my bedroom, and he’d yell through to me ‘how many sharps in G major, kiddo?’ and I’d tell him. Often I’d tell him this stuff wrong so he’d get frustrated when he’d fuck it up – I’d tell him there were six sharps in G major, and he’d go fucking nuts. ‘*This isn’t G fucking major,*’ he’d scream across the hall at me. I can almost laugh about it now but at the time it was like a Columbian necktie. And don’t get me started about Beethoven.”

“I can do Beethoven,” I said, all brave.

“What, ‘Für Elise,’ or the *Seventh*?”

“Anything you want. Just put the music in front of me. The timing’s hard on the *Seventh*, I’ll give you that. The rests.”

He looked pleased.

“Well, whatever. I called Henry. He knows guys with vans. Mainly white ones. Henry can’t make it – some shit in Hendon; something to do with Milton; someone needs a visit – so it’s Big Bob and some guy called Steve. As a favour they’ve agreed to come by with the van, and then to go down Tilbury and collect the piano. See what I do for you? You can earn something. Don’t say I never do anything for you. I’ll put an ad on the boards of all the shops. It’s still done the old way down here, the Knightsbridge lot like it. You’ll have talent show hopefuls lining up down the haunted corridor.”

“Haunted?” I said.

“Just kidding,” he said.

“No really?” I said.

“Really,” he said, “it isn’t.”

She called that night, round about eleven.

“Not bad,” I said, lying.

“I was worried,” she said, “you looked like death warmed up. Sorry, but I love a good cliché. Clichés make the world go round, don’t they? Those and luxury cruises.”

“I’m all right,” I said.

“Which in themselves are clichés on water. Never has the sea looked more ruthlessly beckoning.”

“I feel OK,” I said, “I just had a late night.”

“Good,” she said, “just checking in. I thought you might be homeless.”

“No, I’m not homeless,” I said, “I live just south of you, in Soho.”

“Nice address,” she said, “I’ll tell all of my friends. Like I said, life here by the canal is more or less renaissance Venice.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Megan,” I said.

“James,” she said, all serious like.

“If you like –”

“– no,” she said, “too much tonight and tomorrow. Working Friday night. This life, eh? And Saturday I’ve got to go to this darn film. It’s a premiere. Quite near you as it happens. I think Jennifer Aniston is in it. I get free white wine. Ainsley Harriot’ll probably be there, Jamie Oliver. Such a raconteur. Actually, I might wear knee-socks. And then it’ll be: falling out of taxis, showing my knickers to paparazzi heelers, oh it’ll be like the last days of the *Roi-Soleil*. In fact, if you’ve forgotten what I look like – which I’m guessing you have – I’ll probably be in the *The Sun on Sunday* by the time you wake up. You wait and see. Go and buy one. As you know by now, I am a glamour girl.”

“I haven’t forgotten what you look like. I very much remember what you look like.”

“But Sunday I can do. Actually, *next* Sunday. I’ve got an essay due in. I forgot about that. Unless you want to meet for breakfast, at the same place. Not the bench. I’ll sign you in again.”

Oh happy day.

But I don't know anything:

"What'll we do?"

A pause.

"You choose. You're the urbanite. Or the sybarite. Take your pick. Existence precedes essence."

A date! I'd never been on a date before, and it kind of stirred something in me, even though I didn't understand half of what she had said.

"I'll have a think. I'll call you. I used to work in an Irish bar but now I don't, so that's out."

"You are *so* romantic. You're practically Byronic: You're sick in my sink, you wake me up by dropping a solid pine ouija-board – only got it amuse myself by the way; it was either that or my Rabbit – on my head, you don't eat the toast I get you, you talk to my nipples after I've Aphrodite-d myself out of the swimming pool, and now you used to work in an Irish bar but now you don't. What's a girl to do? How could I ever refuse? Lock up your daughters. Well, have a think."

"OK," I said.

"Take your omega oils and eat your five a day, she said, "good for staying alive. Sorry. Only joking. I'm not your mum. Do what you like."

"OK."

"Well, give me a call on Sunday morning. I'll be up, probably. And sleep well."

She laughed – but kindly, I think – and then she hung up, and I slept well.

At about seven on Friday evening Big Bob and Steve turned up.

"All right Bob," I said.

He didn't answer.

"Howdy, boys," said Jim.

"I want to do this quick," said Big Bob.

"It's only a fucking piano," said Jim.

"It's Friday night," said Big Bob.

We took the lift in silence. This Steve guy, he smelled of cigarettes and Calvin Klein. He had a scar on his left cheek, a botch-job Chelsea-smile.

Bob's Transit was parked on the double yellows outside. He pulled open the door.

"Fucking congestion charge as well," he said.

"I told you dude," said Jim, "I'll pay the congestion charge."

Down to the Embankment in silence, right through to Cable Street, up to Commercial Road – the fabled A13.

"Used to drive down this road every fucking day," Big Bob said, "right down to the Marshes."

"Nice," said Jim.

Bob gave him a look.

"You all right for gear?" he said.

The rain started just before Limehouse, and by All Saints it was in sheets. The traffic was blocked up the A13.

Another paranoia attack:

The A13 is the opposite of an arsehole on poppers. Unlike that human canal it is unnaturally narrow. As an arterial road, it has a serious case of thrombosis: gasping for strychnine, it longs for blood and poison. While the M25, some say, is constructed in the shape of an ancient witchcraft fetish, the A13 is a far truer avenue of chaos. A thyroid disorder, a diabetic psychogeograph, the road forces one either to consume too much or too little of it: to keep up with the flow of traffic, one shunts clonically from metre to metre; Heart Essex blares boy-bands, R&B from wound-down windows, or else one is coerced into autobahn speeds by boy racers from Basildon; travelling salesmen from Barking; international bankers hurrying to Heathrow; Rainham wide boys, Elm Park geezers in a fucking hurry, mate.

The A13 has one of the classiest fatality quotients in the United Kingdom. It outclasses even the M1, mile-for-mile, for pile-ups. Its narrow oiled lanes suspend the saccharine perfume of human remains long charred in belly-flopped Astras and handed down Escorts; girder-sutured Puntos and jack-knifed trucks, beside a pitch-perfect backdrop of oil refineries and sewage treatment works. The accidents are not always accidents: melting steering wheels stuck to hard-working palms, nylon socks souffléed into boy-racer ankles. And there're no second chances on this highway to the sea – once you crash, you're fucked: fire engines are incommoded in a miasma of traffic; the police legally are unable to cut the victims from wreckages. The traditional East-ender's holiday route echoes with pleas for merciful amputation – *rip this fucking thing off, it's on fucking fire; hack it off please, hack it off, I'll be in a chair I swear, I swear I'll be in a chair, I swear to fucking God* – red-taped police officers stand still trying not to watch as flesh on trapped limbs ripples, bubbles and flares like inverted roman candles. This

sort of thing has happened for a long time: Essex girls imprisoned in the Escort; Pendle girls in Lancaster Castle. Essex boys pressed under the Astra; ill-starred Salem boys under a mountain of stones. Ford grilles become George Foreman grills; the air is laced with oil, petrol, blistered nipples, and lightless bonfires. Thirteen's an unlucky number.

The A13 is traffic anti-Prozac. Perhaps this is because no one wants to go to the places to which it connects. No one wants to be depressed, do they? Thurrock – derived from Saxon “thorrocke,” or the underbelly of a boat in which bilge collects; and which not two hundred years ago was an area in which nearly half of the population died of malaria – now houses a retail park. On a Sunday – this is England after all – the car park is full. Here one can consume simulated light, culture, even money until oneself becomes a simulation. A legend goes that along the nearby Thames, one can hear the music of three drowned fiddlers. Their strings are alive and well in the lifts, boulevards, and bistros of Lakeside, siren music bedding night sweats.

The A13 leads ultimately to Southend, the town with the longest pier in the world. It is a town that is trying to escape from itself so much that it stretches as far out to sea as possible. It keeps burning down but it's in flames. You can walk up it, look back at Southend from the end of the pier. There is a café and heavy chains. Beneath the slatted platforms sing whorls of coiled water. If you want to drown, make no mistake: Southend-on-Sea is the place to be.

The only place in popular culture that Southend turns up on is *EastEnders*, and that is because Southend for a long time actually has been the last stand of the East End – literally the End of the East. Go any further, and you'll have to speak French, chum. The markets and the laundrettes once thrived here too. Cities spread virally; the end of

the London badlands ends – as so it must – at Southend. Yet between Bethnal Green and Shoeburyness pure liminality leads to littoral perpetuity.

Southend isn't the only Golgotha in southeast Essex. Canvey Island glows the night, a virtual floodland of broken crockery and starter-homes; a flare on the oil refinery flickers like a carbon-footprint Lucifer. The Island is a sprawling retirement home for faces in hiding; an anti-Hollywood of outsourced, flat-packed, no-HIV-test-required Argos Panasonic point-and-shoot HD pornography; a rehabilitation park for casual torturers gone straight. Further down the line are Shoeburyness, Sheerness, Foulness: post-industrial, post-vacation, end-of-life-care Barratt-towns, eavesdropping on Dagenham and Barking, séancing through to long-gone relatives in Hackney, Mile End and Bethnal Green; listening out intently for the silenced heartbeat of a past long since sacrificed for life in the Thames Estuary, supping sweet sadness, nostalgising abortions, London calling.

We pulled up in a car park purring with electricity from an annexed pylon.

"Here we go then," said Big Bob.

Jim didn't say anything.

A concrete complex built on a jetty over mudflats. We went over to a prefab hut marked "Reception."

"Hi," I'm Jim García, he said, "I need to collect a couple of things."

"Got your papers?" said a man.

"Sure," said Jim.

The man didn't look up.

"What number's it say, then?" said the man.

“902,” said Jim.

Without looking up the man threw a set of keys on the table, and a cardkey.

“Last one on the right,” he said.

After the paranoia began to lift and my eyes adjusted to the dark, Jim fiddled with some locks and we filed in to the storage facility. It was full of stuff, all this stuff that obviously Jim’s father had brought over, or just bought in the UK, and left there. There were fine rugs, paintings, a cello or at least a cello case, about three hundred DVDs, a huge Bose component system, and indeed, two pianos.

“Can we manage the baby?” said Jim.

“You what?” said Big Bob.

“That one,” said Jim.

“No we fucking can’t,” said Big Bob, “we’ll get that upright one.”

Bob and Steve heaved it along the corridor.

“You coming then, Elton?” said Bob.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” said Jim.

I went to leave but halfway down the corridor I turned back. Jim stood there. I was quiet. He didn’t notice me, not like when he told me to fuck off that morning.

He stood there for a while – it was like the space was soundproofed – and he touched some of the things. There were some toys. He didn’t touch them. He pulled the sheet off of the baby grand, just a little way, and played a chord. Out of tune. It sounded like the piano had been treated. Then he tucked it back up again and looked at the paintings, the component system, touching each of them as he went. *I want to sleep forever.* He stood there looking at it as though looking at something to do with his life.

I went back to the van very quickly.

After some huffing and swearing we got it eventually up the stairs. Big Bob was sweating. The pianoforte sort of clunked onto the carpet.

“Nearly fucking dropped it, Jim,” said Bob.

“Thanks for doing this,” said Jim, “do you want a drink?”

“The bird’s got plans,” said Big Bob, “I’ll invoice you.”

He didn’t sound like he was joking. The Steve guy looked at me. I hadn’t offended him. That didn’t matter.

I moped about the apartment avoiding the piano. Jim still went to work. Things didn’t stay still.

“It’s Ana,” he said, “some IT consultant over in Clapham. I think he’s a bit fitter than me. Probably got a car and a proper job or something.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I couldn’t do that open relationship thing.”

“Well, fuck it, sometimes I can’t either. It never used to be like this. I fucked it up. I busted it. I was an asshole first, not her. I know that. It’s my fault again. I’m not Alfie.”

“Come on Jim, you’ll work it out.”

“No, we won’t. And I think it’s a night for the professionals. Hey, you can come too. You up for it?”

Call me naïve, call me romantic, I just couldn’t. Not back then.

“No thanks man.”

"I'll pay, dude. It's on me. If we both do the same chick, we'll most likely get a discount anyways. I can't afford anal though, if you want that or a three-way you'll have to add the extra – I'm not Save the Children."

"Really man. Thanks anyway."

I wanted to put on my trainers, and run as fast as possible, all the way to Camden Road, hammer on the door, and see her. Just to hold her hand. That would be enough.

"Well, I'm going to see what's on offer," he said, "if Anaïs calls, tell her to go call her loverboy."

He threw on his leather jacket then pulled out his wallet. He pulled up the right leg of his track suit bottoms and shoved a bunch of ten pound notes into his sock. Then he opened the door to his room and threw his wallet onto the bed.

Then he left me with computer games and downers.

He came back about midnight, having done whatever he thought he had to do. He just seemed to want to forget. In keeping with this, we dropped some acid. Very calm at first and then it scooped me up. He put some Doors on the Bose and we talked shit for a bit, then did the overriding laughing thing. Very sixties. It wasn't like previously. Previously we took Valium or even ecstasy with acid – pointless at best, that second option – but this time we just took acid. Two tabs each, unfinished Kermit the Frogs. We sat there in the lounge and watched it shimmer and shift. It was like being on the back of a giant yak. The carpet rippled like waves.

"Can you see this?" I said.

"See what?" he said.

“The carpet, rippling.”

“Oh yeah,” he said, “it happens all the time. It’s a very rare carpet. Very expensive. Dad brought it back from some cruise or other. A camel was sacrificed on this carpet. It’s a rite of passage over there. It’s possessed by a dead animal. Apparently there’s a cat here as well. You can’t get this shit in John Lewis.”

“You’re full of shit, Jim.”

“Seriously. An old fucker – no – fakir sold it to him.”

“You’re talking shit aren’t you?”

“Just go with it. You don’t know the half of it about this place. Things happen here. They can, they did and they are and they will.”

“Do you think you can get sea-camels?”

“Probably. Can camels swim?”

“I don’t know.”

“Anyways, it isn’t water, it’s the desert. Desert winds. I mean, the sea isn’t that colour, is it?”

“It is when there are clouds in it.”

Et cetera.

I wanted to go out and walk in the rain but Jim said he didn’t want to go down the corridor when tripping at night. I counted the silver bubbles in my hand, and along my arms, little five-pence-pieces of light. We played computer games. Jim wanted to play *Resident Evil*, but I got freaked-out and kept hearing that Minotaur who had lost me my job and broken my nose; and his vile wife; so we played some *NBA*. We tried with the

motion sensor but it wasn't having it, plus I was paranoid that if I jumped somehow I might not come down. You don't *have to jump*, Jim said, but it wasn't working and I just kept hearing the commentators talking about us: after some debate we concluded that there must've been something wrong with the game.

In the morning Jim said he was going for a walk. I'll leave you a Valium if you like, he said. On acid you can sort of see the future; I knew already what would happen: he would walk the streets of Soho and Covent Garden and open his mouth to catch the mist on his tongue and the rain in his throat. Before he went I held him for a moment, with the embrace that boys enact at the waning of hallucinations, the fading of it all; when the TV static and crude 3D vector-graphic visions give way to solid material objects and natural light. It was almost as though somehow we had become closer, when really all we had done was temporarily to alter our consciousnesses with cheap acid; to sit on a sofa in a Soho apartment that may as well have been in Whitehawk or Salford; and to play EA basketball. Even so, I embraced him.

He strode off, singing "Gay Bar" by Electric Six at the top of his voice all along the corridor. I heard him swearing, then his footsteps on the stairs. Then I fastened all of the locks.

I went to my room and lay on the bed. Alone in the apartment in the final stages of the trip, the nitre-sharpness of dawn. I took the Valium but couldn't sleep; I stayed there not frightened and not worried. The rain frosted the little window. And condensation like stained glass.

But after a few hours up on it I sensed something. I half-opened my bedroom door. It was pretty special. I closed the bedroom door again and swallowed hard. I went

back to bed for a bit but couldn't sleep. I just lay there on my back looking at the ceiling.

There was something in the lounge. It was in there now. Silence. I tried not to breathe.

"Jim," I cried out, "*Jim?*"

He was walking the streets. Breathing in mists after a night on acid. Walking with ghosts. Nothing uncommon; nothing to get jazzed about.

It's just comedown paranoia, regular dream-disease, nothing more.

The lounge.

But I knew it wasn't Jim. It was nothing to do with Jim. Suddenly the paranoia lifted. I thought I heard singing or something. But the terror had gone. Instead something quite different.

I had to check out the lounge.

I had not left the lights on. Yet some sort of light.

Slow steps, a look around the door.

Wide white wings, draped over the sofa, like sheets in a stately home out of season. I can see them across the gaps even now.

Just beginning to get light. That light, like at the swimming pool the other week.

Silken wings, draped over the sofa. Ten feet across. Feathers across leather.

I pace the lounge and she doesn't seem to be bothered. She's awake, her eyes are open, but they're not looking at me.

"Hello," I say.

"Hello," she says.

"You're not from 'round here, are you?"

She nods to her wings.

“Are you all right,” I say, “do you want a glass of orange?”

She doesn't say anything.

“Do you want some breakfast or something?” I say, “we've got some pizza from yesterday.”

“I'm all right,” she laughs.

“Water?”

“No.”

“Gin? Let make some gin and tonics. I've got nowhere to be. I think we have some tonic water.”

“No. No thanks.”

Quite correct. No jinn here. I walk over to the window and she's cruciform on the sofa. She's in her underwear and a pink Adidas track suit top, and I figure she must've put on the wings after she put on the top. I look out into the dawn-dark light and she is in the reflection. She senses that I can see her, flipped around, in the glass. I can't look at her at first except as a reflection. She is doubled in the glass, too much to look at, like the sun when you do that telescope experiment when you're ten, you can't look at it directly because it'll fry your retinas.

This she knows.

“You can look if you like,” she says, “millions have seen me and still I exist.”

“Oh it's all right,” I say, “you've modesty.”

I look out at the morning; rain and mists.

She puts her head on one side.

“You can’t do anything to me. No one can. Well, you can touch me but it won’t change anything. I know what your cousin does. He’s a silly lad.”

She pulls the wings in and I’m trying to work out how she moves them. They cover her breasts and thighs, and touch the floor.

“Are you all right, James?” she says.

“Yeah,” I say, “I think I’m all right. Bit of a hard night; you know how it is.”

And then it gets me:

“How do you know my name?”

“I just do. Is that not enough for you?”

“How? Did you come back with Jim last night? I don’t even remember going out.”

“You didn’t bring me back. No one has ever brought me back. And anyway, of course I know your name. I know everyone’s name. I’m a local, sometimes.”

“That’s nice,” I say, totally freaked out, “I met a guy some time ago: he said he has a hundred names.”

She laughs but doesn’t look happy.

“I know them all. He’s not a nice man. He calls himself Milton, Doesn’t he? His real name’s Justin. It’s Justin Loman. And don’t let him tell you his surname is De’Ath. It isn’t.”

She looks about the place. Looks at me.

“You’re in trouble, aren’t you?” she says.

“I don’t know really. I guess, probably. Sometimes.”

“How’s your nose?”

"Better."

"You should look after yourself a bit better. And things should be OK," she says,
"for a while. Join a Yoga class or something. Go for a swim."

"Are you one of those TV psychics?"

"James García, I'm not."

"What, you know my full name too? Is this a joke? This is the acid, right?
You're not real, are you? This is just a couple of Kermits and a bottle of gin."

"I'm whatever you think I am. And the contrary."

I try to say something but it doesn't come out right.

She appears to ignore me. She is crossing her toes, back and forth.

It's overcast and dull outside.

She looks like she's got glitter around her eyes. She shifts her wings. They rustle.
They seem slightly to glow. Mind you, on acid, everything has a kind of light of its own.
But this is different.

The glitter and the wave of it: light without heat.

The light and the wings.

Dark blonde eyebrows like a kind, summer bow-wave.

She just regards me, as though taking pity. Is she taking pity on me?

"What are you on about?" I say again.

"Nothing you're equipped to know. You're too decadent to understand."

"Thanks a lot. Are you gonna take your wings off? You look like Claire Danes in
Romeo+Juliet."

She ruffles her feathers. Giggles to herself.

I pull at the feathers.

"Watch it," she says, "I've got feeling in those you know."

I look closer and the feathers are real. The plumes, the span, boned like a corset.

This is no fancy-dress shop stuff.

And then she sort of moves her wings and I know I'm tripping, because I recognise the knickers from a few nights ago.

"You're Nikki, right?"

"Of *course* I am."

Such a soft voice; I could listen to it all day.

"Nikki that –"

"– no, not exactly. I'm in your head. You like these knickers don't you? Agent Provocateur. I like to look nice when I'm down here. On business. A hundred pounds in Broadwick Street. Comfy though, and pretty. Pure silk. I'll put my wings away and wear the silk number to church. No one'll know about the wings, or the knickers."

Silence.

It is raining hard outside, there are no lights on in the lounge, and yet she glows.

I come under her wing – they were real feathers: *I'll never go back on that* – and under her wing I am safe and even happy. She smells just like honey.

It's raining hard outside.

I stay under her wing. I want to stay there.

"You know James," she says, "tomorrow I'll be gone."

I knew that.

"I can't be here for long, dear."

Somehow I knew that too.

"Tomorrow I've got to go to the Lake District."

"The Lake District?"

"What are you, I mean what *are* you?"

"Sometimes, girls can grow wings, look."

She moves them a bit.

"Theology shifts, James, girls can walk and pout, and we swim and we soar.

Sometimes we're not just girls. We're something else. Boys can do it too, but they're more self-absorbed. It's harder for boys."

"What are you? Are you in my head?"

"It's up to you," she says, "what you think. But yeah, I have objective reality: it's up to you if you want to believe in it."

Despite bafflement, her wings comfort me.

I snuggle down into her breast. I can smell honey on her breath.

"Your dad misses you, in his own way."

"I never got on well with my dad."

"No, I know. But your mother's all right. She doesn't miss you so much. But she misses hugging you. It is sad to see and not to be able to touch. It's like –"

"– watching TV with the sound turned off?"

"It's like. It's hard to explain. A special difference."

"I guess you don't watch TV."

"There's no point when there are people like you to watch. People like you are our reality TV. Speak Spanish to her now James; she can understand you better if you

speak Spanish. You can still speak Spanish, right? You probably don't remember this but it was your first language, in a manner of speaking. English doesn't come very easy to her now. That's OK. And you'll evolve. Even in this life you'll evolve. Not much.

That sounds sarcastic, doesn't it?"

"I don't know."

Then she laughs.

"You're thinking about what it might be like to have sex with me, aren't you?"

She's right. Sexual virtuality – if not its actualisation – is hard to shake. Not surprising really: you can't touch it. Maybe that's what she meant, when she said I could touch her but it'd change nothing.

"You are, aren't you?"

"Yes. I was. Sorry."

"Well, good luck with that. I won't make love with you, James. We hardly know each other. Not that that ever seems to stop you. You are too consumed with physical things. There's more to life on Earth than sex you know. But maybe you don't have to worry any more. In fact, if you play nice, someone might even love you."

"What?"

"A woman who knows a few languages and knows the human heart."

"No one I know."

"She has travelled to many cities, and she knows people's minds."

"That's from Homer," I say, all clever like, "*polymetis*, huh?"

"You're a smart one, James, aren't you?" she says, "read a lot when you were a boy, didn't you?"

I say nothing.

“And you travelled a bit too, didn’t you?”

“Sort of. Went away with Dad until I was old enough to stay at home. He didn’t like leaving me with the house to myself. I think he once watched *Risky Business*. Scarred the bastard for life.”

“Why did you bother picking up some of the languages?” she says.

“Nothing else to do.”

“What, no sightseeing?”

“I don’t like crowds. Come to think of it, I don’t like people. I didn’t learn language to speak to people; I learned language because there was nothing better to do.”

And she shifts again:

“You’re a funny one, aren’t you?”

“Not for me to say.”

“Your mother used to tell you stories, didn’t she? Stories she made up herself.”

And now the joke’s gone too far. *It’s gone too fucking far.*

“How do you fucking know this stuff? Don’t bring my fucking mother into it.”

She turns to me:

“Why are you ashamed of it? Why are you ashamed of what you are? You’re not that bad, James, although you’ve picked up some dirty words off of that cousin of yours. We’re all worried about him, but we can’t do it for him. He has to do it for himself. Just he’s been – led astray. Especially last night. Anyway, what are you frightened of?”

I say nothing.

If drugs are a bet with your mind, then I’ve just lost this one hands down.

"There's nothing to be frightened of," she says, "actually no: the way you're going, there's quite a lot to be frightened of. But it's not too late. It can be reversed."

Then something happens kind of weird. There's this warmth and I nod into her neck. Something is rising within me, like someone was taking lots of nits out of my hair.

"Do you like the stars?" she says.

I nod.

"You've never seen the Northern Lights, have you? You'd love the Northern Lights. All green and blue. Your friend at the bar has seen them. It's a shame what happened at the bar. You'll probably never see him again, you know."

I nod. I always wanted to see the Northern Lights.

"And you used to look at the stars a lot, didn't you? Why don't you look at the stars any more?"

"I don't know."

"And that's all you ever say," she says, giggling and snuggling me under her wing, under her sweaty armpit, "all you ever say is 'I don't know.' Are you going to say that now?"

I keep my silence.

"You know more than you know," she says, "and yet you always say 'I don't know.' Hold on to that. Life is hard. It makes me sad to see you. It makes me sad to see you this way."

The confusion and all out fucked-up-ness are too much.

And then I let go.

Big real salty tears; not comedown weeping. I try to keep it from her but she knows.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"I'm sorry," I say, "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right. It's all right. You're all right here with me. But don't stay here long. It's a sad place. No wonder you're sad. If you're in a cold place you get cold. The same is true of sad places. If you're in a sad place sometimes you get sad. It takes a special kind of person to kick against the pricks. This place and Jim are sad."

"It's all I have. Jim is all I have."

"I know. I know."

And in the dim light, under those bright feathers, I let go, let myself go. I fall into the wings and lose myself. I lose myself in her voice and in her underarm scent, in her quills and down, in her glittery eyes and soft cheeks; and she *is* there, I know this – *I am sure of this* – she is there, holding, stroking my head; and I am crying; I know this – *I am sure of this* – crying big soppy tears into her Adidas track suit top, into her chest, but despite the pretty knickers it is not sex. *It is not sex*: I know what it is; *I don't know what it is*: her fingers brush through my hair and slowly I feel light and a slow glow of warm release rises within and out of me; even though I am crying I desire to cry more and more – there are years of it, dammed behind my eyes – her wings are above me, protecting me; and her hands comfort me. Somehow I cannot keep my grief from her, my fear. And I cannot but cry in her presence. Her wide wings and kind eyes hold me, rock me slowly as a tide buoys one up in summertime, the gulls and the wash of waves rocking one into a dream of gentle drowning. And she doesn't mind the hysterics, and

that I am clinging gently to her, and now all there is, is she and I floating way out to sea – a friendly sea this time – treading the warm water, walking on wide, calm waves, and I let myself go, fold into her, let myself rest and hold on tight. She’s looking down at me; her silent words ink my soul. Yet soon she must sign off: *Regards from the Angel*.

4.

I woke about seven. It's funny because after acid it's very hard to sleep. I guess that Valium worked after all. You sort of catch up on sleep for the rest of your life, after acid. And I was on the leather sofa and it must have been Jim that woke me up: I could hear him bumbling about in the kitchen. He was singing to himself again. I looked about me. No sign of Nikki – it all was a dream, an acid ghost.

I looked about me again.

“Jim?”

“Yea-h?”

“Did we bring anyone home last night?”

He shambled out of the kitchen in his bathrobe.

“Want a beer?”

“All right then.”

He passed me a Dos Equis. He didn't say anything; arranged himself on the armchair, draped his legs over one of the arms.

"Let's go down the fucking pub," he said.

I threw on my jacket, pulled on my trainers and we locked up. We decided that The Fox, the Crowbar and most of Soho were no-go, especially after the thing with the Minotaur, so he trailed me down Denmark Street to a bar at the far end. It was more or less deserted but still way too loud. Why do these fools blast out beats at five in the afternoon? Most respectable people have only just got out of bed; they don't want to hear loud music. Jim muttered. We left and Jim rang on a doorbell on the other side of the road. No answer. I looked at the instruments in the shop next door: pointy Jacksons, elegant Fenders, and classic Gibsons.

"What're your favourites?" I said.

He smiled.

"Well, at my time of life I should be moving into Gibson territory. When I was a kid I had Jacksons and Ibanezes, even a Japanese Charvel from the eighties. When I got older I started modding my own Strats. I had a great Strat with a Hotrails in the bridge and an HS-3 in the neck. Sounded fantastic. Two pieces of alder – you don't get that often from Ishibashi. Well, some clown I used to play blues with, from Cheshire, stole it. So I'm on the cusp of my Gibson thing now. The Les Paul we have – it's a Custom, 1980; it's worth quite a lot – sort of sits kind of neglected. I used to loan it out to serious musicians; the GIT lot who didn't want to fly with their vintage gear – Larry Carlton borrowed it once, although he said he would've preferred a Standard – but one time it

came back with a scratch from a belt buckle and I never loaned it out again. But no, I'm still on the Strats. Thanks for asking."

He was a happy man, talking about music.

The door opened. A tall man with a long beard sort of smiled at Jim.

Jim said, "Hi Mac. Look, can I use the hospitality for an hour? I'll pay you back."

"Jim, there's a band in, in an hour. I have to set the place up."

"I'm calling in a favour, Mac. And besides, I'll help you set up."

Mac sort of muttered.

"I'll give you a gram," Jim said.

"Oh you bribing yank," said Mac, "you always get your own way."

So we piled up some wide, narrow stairs, at least four flights up, and Mac opened a soundproofed, reinforced door. We filed in.

Like a church hall but with a bar.

"Cheers, said Jim. I don't have it on me now, but I'll bring it to work tomorrow."

"You do that," said Mac, "and make sure you leave the money in the tin, for what you drink, right? Otherwise I'll be in trouble. Just going to have a smoke and then - hey Jim, if you want to get some fifty-sevens on the Deluxe, DI *and* mike the SVT, and EQ each channel on the Mesa V for clean, British crunch, and a nineties sort of lead, then that'd help."

"The lead: American or British?"

"It's a Mesa. But American. As it's you."

"Bad call: scoops all the tone out, but you can't tell anyone anything."

"I'll be in, in about half an hour to do the drums. Last time I left you with the skins it sounded like Lars Ulrich. That's not everyone's cup of tea, Jim. Indie bands from Finchley don't want to sound like Metallica."

"Indie bands from Finchley can fuck off."

"And Jim, if you have time mate, restring that Precision, will you?"

"All right," said Jim, "but the Precision won't be ready until tomorrow: you realise that, don't you?"

"Yes-s" said Mac.

"Can you fuck off now Mac, and leave us alone?"

"Yep. Cheapo Cordials on the right, George Ls on the left. Oh, and they want the Eclipse. And it's the usual Logic setup. Sixteen in, four out."

"Cheers. I'm on it. Now go away, my buddy's brother's just OD'd in Eindhoven. We need to talk."

Mac looked at me sadly and I tried to look sad. Then I heard the door rock shut.

"*Eindhoven?*"

"Yeah. Shithouse in the Netherlands. Nether-Nether-Land. About as fun as high heels on your chest, although, a bit like Eindhoven, I've heard that some people like that sort of thing."

It was a large enough space, but most of all, we had it to ourselves. There were drums and amps on a little raised stage, and everything was soundproofed. A couple of guitars hung on the wall and there was a Roland BK-9 in a corner. And just next to the door was a bar. No taps or anything like that: just a couple of crates of bottled beer, a crate of Coke, and a few spirits. Hardly a bar really, but it would do.

We pulled up a bar stool each and Jim reached over and took a couple of bottles of Newcastle Brown Ale.

“Cheers,” he said.

“Cheers.”

He drank it very quickly and then took another.

“Enjoy the trip?” he said.

“It was all right.”

“Cool.”

“Are you actually going to set anything up?”

“No. Actually, maybe I will. It’s not going to take long. Fuck it, I’ll do it. He can string that Precision himself though, the cheeky prick.”

“Know him well, do you?”

“Yeah, I used to be his boss, actually. Before that he was my boss. But he used to come in all wired or drunk and they fired him. And then I had a word with the owner of the company and asked if he could just have a part-time support thing, and I threatened to leave. It was an empty threat. Back then I was the best tech in the city, and I gave lessons in the building right next door way advanced of what these Brits could keep up with. I was fresh out of Berklee. They’re used to it now: I threaten to leave on a regular basis – but back then they weren’t – and the owner – he’s a really nice guy for what it’s worth – he used to set up Rory Gallagher’s rig when he was in London, back in the day – said all right then. Mac’s been straight for a long time now.”

“And you’re going to give him a gram?”

He looked at me.

“Jamie-boy, there is no way I’d give that man a gram. I think he realises that. If I did he’d just run his fingers through it for a bit, then wrap it back up and sell it. He just wants me to set this gear up for him so he can roll his own and listen to *Wish You were Here* or *Live in Japan* or something on full blast, in the other room. Mac does not like work. So, I better do this for him.”

He pottered around and plugged some mics into cables and the cables into the mixing desk.

“Sixteen in, eight out,” he said, “good value space, this.”

Then he picked a blue guitar off of the wall and plugged it into the Mesa.

“They call this an Axis Super Sport,” he said, “what sort of name for a musical instrument is that?”

He strummed a few times, adjusted a few settings and a five-band graphic equaliser, and then went to the next channel.

“It’s going to get loud,” he said, “watch your ears.”

And it did: this creamy, chiming aura of a ninth chord chased itself into the corners and up to the ceiling of the rehearsal space.

“Should do it,” he said.

Then he moved on to the next channel and played something so quick that my ears and brain couldn’t keep up with the notes.

He adjusted the amp again, closed his eyes and listened. It wasn’t right. He made a few alterations. Another line of notes, not so fast as the previous run, but still his right hand became a blur as a few bars of 32nd notes cascaded from the EV speakers. He smiled.

“Should do it,” he said again.

He carried on in this way for the SVT, slapped about on the bass, then messed about with the computer, nodded a bit and said: “bit of parametric, lots of squeeze, and there we go: ten minutes’ work for our own private pub.”

He came back and grabbed another Newcastle. I took one too. He put some cash in the tin.

“Apparently the Pistols used to rehearse here,” he said.

“Oh,” I said.

“Hard to imagine really, now, isn’t it? Imagine the bands that’ve come here. You can almost hear them if you’re really quiet. Shouting at each other. Playing out of tune because they don’t have perfect pitch, or even relative pitch, or a decent fucking tuner. Or making that sublime noise of ‘Anarchy in the UK’ or something. I never rehearsed here. I taught next door but I decided to work from home so I could just get out of bed and throw on some clothes and then earn thirty quid for an hour’s work.”

I asked him why he didn’t teach any more. He didn’t answer. And then I figured it was time to ask him.

“What?” he said.

“Did we bring anyone back last night? Any women?”

He thought for a second. And a laugh.

“Jamie, we didn’t even *go out* last night, man. We stayed in. I went for a walk early in the morning. I like to do that when the final stages kick in. It’s like being in a film. One of those arty ones like by that Italian guy where you see that Bond girl give that guy a blow-job.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah seriously. She does. You see everything. He’s got a small dick but she fucking sucks it well. Really slowly. Not many chicks –”

“– *no*, man, listen. Did we go out or not?”

“Jamie-boy, we did not go out. We stayed in with two Kermits each. No one came round. No one was there.”

I felt kind of weird.

“Anyways, I double-locked the door and everything, even fucked up the elevator, forced open the doors, to prevent people from dropping by. I mean, the last thing you need when you’re tripping is Big Bob coming by for an after-pub smoke. That’s why I was swearing when I went for my walk: I had to take the stairs. And anyways I like to lock ourselves away from that corridor. I don’t much like that corridor.”

“No one could’ve got in then?”

“How many times, Jamie? Get a grip. It was just acid.”

I gulped the beer quickly. I didn’t feel any better. I felt like I never wanted to eat again. I noticed that there were still traces of dried tears on my cheeks.

“Well, Mac’ll be here soon, and so will Finchley’s latest indie sluts,” he said, “so we better get moving soon.”

But before we left, he picked up the whale-blue Axis and plugged it back into the Mesa.

“I used to have one of these,” he said, pointing to the amp, “a better one than this actually; for pit gigs. I had to sell it. I miss it.”

And he hits a sweet spot on the rosewood and bends the A up to a twelfth-fret B. He leaves it there fretted, blooming, and applies a tiny amount of vibrato. The control he must have, to make it sing this way – a host of clear overtones, harmonics chiming the octave; a fifth, an octave below, even a seventh ring like glass along the dimensions of the rehearsal space. He slightly over-bends the note, just pushing into the C, and then, as the feedback swells, slowly lets the note down. Gracing the A and immediately pulling off to the G, he ends by hammering on to the E on the next string – no pick attack – and slides to the D below, then trills the interval between the two. The note rings out and all of his America seems to fill up this British space. Suddenly we're not in a rehearsal room in Denmark Street: we're in Baton Rouge with its Creole and voodoo, or Nashville with its hot-shots and big skies; but there's something else too: he's *young again* as long as this note and its overtones last; I can see his boyish joy as the current runs through the glowing valves; he is the flamenco boy possessed by the *duende*, as the alnico magnets pick up the subtlest of vibrations from the ringing steel – and I realise that I am privileged to know this man, as flawed as he is, this kid with a guitar with a silly name, and beneath his ingenious fingers, in those mature hands, in his punctured arms, it sings and sighs; and all the joy and pain of his heart – all of the pain and joy of the world – is in this evanescent bloom; it's channelled, concentrated, seared into five slow vocal notes, and bursts out in blues and greens filling up the space, deep from his old, sad soul.

We finished our drinks and soon Mac came in, but by this time I was so mesmerised I almost expected him to have an Austin accent.

"Now don't forget," he said, "tomorrow that gram."

"Sure," said Jim.

“Sorry to hear about your brother,” said Mac.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Did you string the precision?” said Mac.

“No,” said Jim.

Mac muttered to himself.

We walked back to the apartment, going by Taka’s on the way. Jim got a litre of no-name whisky and I got two bottles of wine just in case Megan wanted to come down. She hadn’t come over yet and I didn’t want to mess things up. Maybe I’d tell her we had a library or something.

Taka was his usual pleasant self, gently mocking the afflicted.

“Heard you lost your job in the bar,” he said.

“If I ever get over it –” I began.

“– come on,” said Jim, leaving.

I figured I needed another Valium to sleep. Maybe it was wishful thinking.

Jim disappeared for a bit leaving me to look out of the window at the night. Then he turned up again in the bathrobe.

I figured: why does he like that bathrobe so much? It’s not as though he showers very often.

“Well,” said Jim, “I think I’m ready for bed. I only came out to see if you were OK. You look kind of bummed.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Well, look dude,” he said, “now I can sleep. You should too I guess. If Ana calls by tell her I’m in. I could do with a bit of Anaïs, drugs do that to me you know. Do

they do that to you? About fifteen hours after the start of the trip, you're ready to fall into someone's, anyone's arms. So if Ana calls, let her in. But anyone else though, I'm out."

"No worries, man."

So Jim disappears and I'm left on the sofa, looking out into the night, finishing off the beer, getting up to get another from the fridge, the night coming in, covering and covering Soho in its damp mists – and on the top cushion, it's there: a single, tiny, white, soft feather.

Megan wasn't picking up. I figured it was next Sunday that she was free. I even tried to get into that place again, but they weren't having it. So instead, a week of being in a fish tank. Sedatives have that condition of slowing everything down, and you wake up at funny times. Your whole body clock is dominated not by natural, circadian rhythms, but by man-made, opiate jelly-beans. I became even more nocturnal than before, in the sense that I actually was waking up as the sun was at its lowest ebb. Most-times, I'd be up all night, sometimes bringing in lines – although this was without Jim and hence they ran out quickly, so instead of cocaine, it was cheap, grimy amphetamine. The speed was so filthy that having it up my nose was pretty impossible: it set the nostrils on fire, made the teeth numb, then bleed and ache; so instead it went into cheap beer, Robinson's Barley Water, Strongbow Super, whatever, dusting the sticky meniscus with its jetsam – and then I'd pace the flat, watch the sun come up, and watch television until mid-morning. Henry used to come round in the day and sort me out, post envelopes or leave

packages with Moonlight Clive. Pay me when you can mate, said Henry. I think Jim knew about this but I can't be sure.

I'd play the PlayStation: fighting games with female characters who, were they real, would walk with a Brothers' Grimm stoop, so huge were their chests and so slim their waists. Ice hockey with simulated blood on ice, with simulated teams from Chicago or Alberta; names of each actual player on the scorecard. You can play at being someone real to the extent that, with the downers and the speed, and the Southern Comfort and the Thai, you become more that someone than yourself. You have no time for actuality versus virtuality when you are playing. Gaming is *areality*. Areality is not hyperreal; it's the space between *Dasein* and *Das Nichts*; it is beyond becoming. It's not even a void, for it is an always-already-filled liminal space between consciousness and simulation. This liminality is a rite of passage that always already has begun, perpetually entropic.

We also had a wii but that was way too much like real life, hard work. Traditionally, the whole point of gaming is to become one's own other; to do something that you're not actually doing. But this is beyond simulation; it's negative meditation. Using a motion sensor is way too close to actually doing the thing itself. By colluding with the process of gaming, by becoming one's avatar, one becomes immersed in what one is not. Gaming is something that readily coheres with opiates, with skunk and prescription drugs, with getting chronically drunk, with intentionally poisoning your organs. This is not to say that this is a bad thing; gaming ingeniously eludes any faculty of moral judgement: *Grand Theft Auto* is a negative metaethics: it's (un)coded amorality in its basest sense. It takes place in a world where Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill,

Peter Singer exist only as uncoded code, people who have never existed and only inhere on the very edges of Popper's *World 3*.

There were DIY strip-shows that I watched not long ago, when I had to go on business with my father to Switzerland: in these shows college girls played strip Nintendo basketball. The students strip and they seemingly levitate, imitating the motions of the hoop-shooters on the flatscreen. The Swiss students were healthy, more-or-less sober, possibly even happy, although probably not. An interstice of cheap glamour shots, third-wave feminism, and the posthuman, it kept me amused and got me through the bruises. But areal gaming is nothing to do with health, sobriety, and happiness. Gaming is more than real and yet it's nothing to do with reality. It's not about imitation; it's definitely not about simulation – it's beyond that – it's mutual assimilation. It's becoming your own ghost, and your own ghost becoming you. Yet unlike traditional gaming, in this dual haunting there is no becoming: you are the ghost in the machine and the machine always already supplies your early ghost. Hence an avatar is no such thing: it's a spectre: the narcissism of one's spirit willingly conjured, a faux-masochistic projection of light and acronychal pixels, shifting opiates. At this point then even stripping seems pointless – and surely, while it has its place, stripping has limitations. It's not an orgasm: it's trivial, coded come, psychotic gambling. Gaming is beyond simulation, not-becoming what you are, getting into it, getting out of it, un-becoming other: Tiger Woods, David Beckham; pretending who you are, pretending you are you. These are not characters any more: the characters in the game are more real than the real people on which they are based – that's nothing new – but more so, they and the gamer inhabit a non-space of the areal. There is no game. This is beyond gaming. You

pace the apartment in an an-ecstasy, adrift on a raft with sea-ghosts and real apparitions. And in the middle of the night, Temazepam and gin, or amphetamine and Stella Artois, there are imaginary friends, vanishing presences, ghosts you spoke to when you were two years old. In the game and in that sticky-sweet sleep of alcohol and opiates, you un-become other; an ecstatic, narcissistic a-simulation of yourself in a paradisiacal, supplementary areality.

Wake to mists, swathing all; pink and blue candy-floss strings the sky; a chilly morning. Nothing to do. *Sweet F.A. to do today.* My watch says it's the 27th; I could have sworn yesterday was the 24th. Days melt into each other; nocturnal mists fuse into one differential veil.

The flat is bright and dim at the same time, as though underwater. It is as though the mist is unsatisfied with its externality: it wants a piece of us. That which is cold wants to come in from the cold. That which is sad wants to be outside of the sad place.

I'll tell you this, one thing this apartment does well is silence. Or near-silence. One almost can hear the blood pumping around the body, like John Cage in his isolation tank. I pace back to my room and open the window to hear something. Still it is unnaturally quiet. Perhaps indeed at last that longed-for apocalypse has come. The mist is there, but greyer, less luminous.

Then a noise from the lounge. Oh – not the angel again.

But no one's home. I peer into the lounge.

"Jim?"

Nothing. "Jim?"

Zero.

And then again a sound. I go into his room. Just a load of bed-sheets on the floor, some of them spotted with blood, and a near-empty bottle of vodka on the side. A pair of pink knickers slung about the headboard and a packet of cigarettes on the bedroom table. For some reason he has covered up the mirror.

I am snooping; I make for the lounge but something stops me.

Sounds like someone's pouring a drink. I hear the fridge open, then the pouring, then something being replaced in the fridge.

Shit. Jim'll go nuts – he'll probably kick me out – if he finds out I'm in his room. He craves privacy.

I steal a look around the door and there's just a glass of milk on the coffee table. No one's there. Perhaps Jim is in the bathroom. Quickly, silently, I make for my room. I nearly get to my bedroom and there's another noise: the sound of a glass being placed on the coffee table again.

"Hey Jim," I say, "you nearly scared the shit out of me."

For a moment everything is back to normal – or as close to normal as we can get – and I half expect Jim to start moaning on about needing time alone, and that I should fuck off and let him have his me-time, or some other such stuff.

There are ears. Pointy ears, almost like horns. Black ears. Little pom-pom things dangling just above the neckline. All in black. *We lived our lives in black.* Sheer black tights. Feline eyes, the mist outside.

Fuck this, I figure, and go back into my room. I pace about; I really should find more healthy ways to spend my time and money. I am drawn to the lounge again. It

looks female; I haven't had sex for about a week. It's this being alone, that's what it is.

Probably a flashback or something.

So I go into the lounge again and it's gone.

"Jim, you're freaking me out, man. Jim, you're doing my fucking head in."

Nothing. I check every room in the flat again, and no one's there. I check the locks: all three are bolted. Only the chain isn't over the latch, which makes sense, because Jim couldn't've locked that on his way out.

And I turn about again and suddenly there it – breath on my face – there it is, right up close. I find myself slammed up against the door, just out of sheer fright.

She takes a step back.

"Sorry," I say, "you startled me."

She doesn't say anything.

"Are you one of," I say, "Jim's friends?"

Nothing.

And then I notice her face. She has dark eyeliner that extends towards her freckled temples. She has some sort of contacts in. She has Kohl-ed mock cat-whiskers across her face.

"Anaïs," I say, knowing deep down that it isn't Ana.

"No," she says. A BBC accent.

"Look," I say, "I don't know who you are but I haven't slept in about a week so I'm just gonna go back to bed, OK."

"You were sleeping," she says, "I saw you sleeping."

But the combination padlock from Dyas.

She looks at me. Then she turns away and walks – all human, like – over to the sofa to get her milk. It's not really milk: it's some sort of pineapple smoothie. Why did I think it was milk? And then the *pièce de résistance*: she's got a tail pinned to her arse.

“So,” I say, “I'm gonna go to bed. I guess you're waiting for him or something – you do know him, don't you? – and I'll just leave you to it. Feel free to have a shower or whatever.”

She turns around. *Even when she walks she seems to dance.* I don't dare look at her nails.

“Can I ask though, why the cat stuff?”

“I'm a dancer,” she says, “I trained at the Royal.”

“Oh,” I say, “that's nice.”

Indeed, her body is brittle and supple at once, legs like a tuning fork. For a second I imagine her without the tights, or for a little fun, to start, *with* the tights, her taut thighs tangled in my hair.

“I'm in *Cats*, she says. I'm just a support dancer but it's a start. I'm Cat Thirteen.”

“Sure,” I say, vaguely remembering *Cats* and that sad bit with the old cat singing about her memories.

This headache is turning into something far more serious. There must be something quite wrong with me.

“I saw *Mamma Mia* once,” I say, “and *The Nutcracker* too. In Munich. At Christmas. I was with my Dad.”

And for a second those eldritch *Weihnachtsmarkte*, the hot red spiced wine, the shot of amoretto in the plastic cup, *der Stillenacht*. Father letting me to my own devices. The comet-blonde *mädchen*, the sausages and crêpes, the aroma of the *langos*. And the merry-go-rounds, the pipe organs and all that stuff. Never wanting to return to the hotel, wanting to remain hidden. The kitsch dream of chiaroscuro shelter.

“*Mamma Mia*,” she says, looking away, her scraped back hair; the verticals of her heels and tail.

But this is all too much. I can’t make small-talk today, I never could.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go to bed. Make yourself comfortable; I’m sure Jim’ll be home before long.”

She looks puzzled.

“You’re one of Jim’s friends, right? Or Ana – oh God, are you waiting for Anaïs?”

She’s gone silent again.

She’s looking out at the mists, leaning on the ledge; her powerful ankles, footballer’s calves, jet of hair, and that comic tail pinned to her costume, hanging between her boyish cheeks.

As the hairs on my neck start to stand up a little, even so do I.

“You can join me if you like,” I say.

More silence. The only time I’m bold enough to ask, and I get turned down.

She leans on her hand and without looking around, as if entranced by the thickening morning mist, she says: “probably.”

Megan shifts in her chair and dumps a few books on the table.

“Have you been waiting long?” she says.

“Oh,” I say, “I just got here. Really.”

She looks at me in that way she used to do, a kindly way, but one which says, *I know when you're lying.*

“How hungry are you?” she says.

“Oh no, I'll get this,” I say, “let me get this.”

“No really, James, it's my turn, isn't it?”

“No, you bought me breakfast, remember? I just signed on two days ago. And I'm going to be a piano teacher now. Let me get this.”

It's a Sunday and the place is pretty deserted. In fact we've nearly got it to ourselves. Now I'm marching less, I quite look forward to breakfast.

So we just get some toast and some tea and a muffin and that. It's nearly eleven and the bar'll soon be open. She is still wet from her swim. Her hair is yellow.

“You should've blow-dried your hair,” I say, “it's cold out there.”

She laughs: “I don't have a hairdryer.”

“But they have them at the pool, right, in the changing rooms? You can use the facilities?”

Again, she sort of laughs: “I'm not wasting my money on drying my hair. Next you'll be asking me if I have straighteners. Anyway, I've got my hat.”

From her sports holdall she produces a blue Berghaus skiing hat with ear-flaps.

“You know the funny thing about this hat? It’s supposed to sound German, or Austrian, I don’t know, but it’s only really the Brits and the Americans that wear them. Can’t get them in Germany.”

“I guess.”

“Anyhow, I can’t be bothered doing much with my hair. Can you imagine all the other things you could be doing instead of spending time drying your hair?”

“Mmm.”

I look at the books. They are thick, old, hardback tomes. I take a bite of the buttered toast. Sort of heavenly.

“So,” she says, “what are we going to do today?”

“I don’t know.”

She shakes her head.

“That’s all you ever say, James, come on. Make an effort.”

“We could go for a walk.”

“Sounds good to me, but my wet hair,” she laughs.

“Have you got to go to school?” I say.

“It’s Sunday,” she says.

“Oh, yes. Yes of course.”

I reach out for her hand. Just gently. She doesn’t say anything. Just sort of looks at me.

“We – you – could get dry; you could dry off at my place if you like. Jim has a hairdryer,” [of all the cheap seductions, this has to rate among the more cynical] “and

then we could get some lunch in – I don't know – Soho or – you know what, I've had enough of Soho: why don't we go to tourist-land, or over the bridge or something?"

"South Bank stuff?" she says, "maybe. I've got my press-pass: we could try and blag it to see a film. I don't know what's on. I should do but I don't."

"OK."

I want to tell her why I've had too much of Soho, Jim, and all of the rest of it, all these strange things happening, people coming and going, that I want to get a hotel for the night, like that one on Park Lane or something, or one of the Bloomsbury ones, or to go to King's Cross and get the Eurostar, or to Victoria and go down to Brighton, to get out of it for a bit, but I can afford none of this. I want to ask her to come somewhere nice with me. That's what it is: I'm embarrassed about the flat in the square. It's not a place for a girl like Megan.

"Touristy stuff, eh?" she says.

"Sort of."

"What, *Phantom* or something? The RSC?"

"Not exactly."

And then I remember.

"Hey, guess what happened the other morning?"

She props up her chin on her knuckles and moves closer. I can smell the chlorine in her hair. She leans in.

"Let me think. You got up before midday? You... you got through a whole sentence without pausing?"

"I always am up before midday."

“That’s because that’s your bedtime.”

Although things have changed, she’s got me with that one. She knew a lot about me, even back then.

And then I recall:

“With you talking about musicals and that. You know about that stuff?”

“Sort of. That and other stripes of lavish boredom. Supposedly fun things that – all being well – we’ll never do again.”

It just comes out.

“I hadn’t thought about this until now. I suppose it must’ve been one of Jim’s friends, or girlfriends or whatever.”

“OK. Jim’s your flatmate, right?”

“Yes. I’ve told you about that. Well, there was this woman in the lounge. I don’t know how she got in.”

“Maybe you let her in. Maybe you *invited* her in,” she says, “my little goth-boy piano teacher. *Come up and listen to me play Chopin*, was it?”

She smiles.

“No, it was nothing, nothing like that. And I didn’t do any – you know – that night. Had a few beers and a little whiskey, but that was it.”

“The decadence of it all. It’s like being around Byron, really it is.”

“No really, seriously. Stay with me on this.”

She nods, pretending to pretend to be serious.

“Well this woman, she was all dressed-up as a sort of cat. She was a dancer. From that musical. You know: *Cats*.”

She smiles, as if she knows something I don't.

"What?" I say.

She shrugs.

"Stalin, Pinochet, Mugabe, Webber."

"Well this girl, she had like pretend painted-on cat-whiskers and stuff, and a pin-on tail, and these heels and everything. There was no way that she could've got in. Basket cases and fuck-ups show up all the time at our place but this was different. It's like these mental cases all have a skeleton key or something, and that they're drawn to us. I think my cousin Jim is a bit of a magnet for this. He attracts the weird. Well, it just kind of freaked me out. I didn't see her arrive; we have three separate locks. I didn't hear her leave. She was just drinking a pineapple smoothie or milk, from the fridge, staring out at the mists."

"London autumn is misty, like Henley without the yachting mafia," says Megan.

"I didn't say much to her. She creeped me out. I haven't asked Jim about her yet. Usually there's no point. He usually just laughs, says things like 'you're asking the wrong guy' and stuff like that. Jim is getting a bit out there. I'm a bit worried about – crap, I'm boring you."

She runs her fingers through her hair.

"No, it's not that. That Jim of yours sounds like he needs to see a professional."

That smile again. She looks more feline than any dancer ever could.

"I'm not joking. I wasn't on acid this time. In fact, nothing. She had the costume and everything."

"Creepy, eh?" she says.

“Yeah. What do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

She sort of laughs again.

“*Seriously* though Megan, what do you mean?”

“I don’t really want to say. You don’t seem very stable.”

“Please. Come on, you can’t leave it at that.”

“OK. James dear. Ready now?”

“Yes, tell me.”

“*Cats* closed in 2001.”

“Are you sure?”

She laughs.

“Sure as can be. Gosh. I went to one of the last performances. My mum thought it’d be a nice birthday present. Fact is, it was her who really wanted to see it. It was my birthday present for her. It wasn’t bad. Then we went to Browns. It was my ninth birthday. Mum loved it. Cried in ‘Memory’, which I believe is the approved place to cry. I think you have to do that. It’s like audience participation, isn’t it? Karaoke grief?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Maybe there’s a revival of *Cats*. I’ll ask my mum, next time I speak to her. If anyone knows, it’s her.”

We walked down to the river. The mist had cleared, leaving a limpid sky. We got a drink over on Bankside.

“So you’re studying, right?”

“Yep. And then some. I am not ambitious but there’s nothing else to do.”

“And what is it you do there?”

“Books, languages,” she says, “Spanish and a bit of French, a bit of German. I grew up a bit in Germany so it’s easy. You can’t often take courses in all three, plus English, but I’ve lived in a few countries and soaked up a bit of the language, if not the sun. So I read these books. A lot of the students buy the translation, but I can’t be bothered with that. *Traduttore, traditore*. Like I said, I write about them. I’m hoping to go to Barcelona next year.”

“I’m half-Spanish,” I say.

“I go bright red at the merest hint of sun. That’s why I wear long sleeves.”

She smiles and it’s clear that if she has any Mediterranean roots at all, then they keep themselves hidden.

“I thought you looked kind of Hispanic,” she says.

“I haven’t been to Spain since I was very small,” I say, “no one really goes there now, from my family.”

“I’ve been, a few times. I’ve never lived in Spain though, although we – that’s my so-called family and I – lived in Mexico for a bit. And Argentina. That toughens a girl up, I can tell you. But I didn’t really see any of the nasty stuff. I was in and out of international schools more or less until I was sixteen. They all had security on the gates, but nowadays, all schools do, don’t they?”

“I had to move about a lot too.”

She stares at me through her frameless glasses.

She squeezes my hand. And it is remarkable, what just holding hands can do; when someone whose hand you long to hold, reaches out to hold your hand; in the street,

in a café, on the tube, in the bathroom, in bed – just the touch of a hand to let you know you're not so alone.

Soho rain again, darkening the light. Outside the foyer of the block, under the awning, a figure lay asleep in a half-open sleeping bag. The London homeless never zip up their bags, I don't know why. It's just what you notice. His sleeping bag rose and fell with his breathing, much as Megan's had that very morning under her faded dinosaur duvet. One of his arms twisted under the rest of his body. Mostly he was out of the rain. I dropped a pound coin into the sleeping-bag, just next to his free arm, and swiped the card in the lock, as the rain hardened.

"Can I see your pass, please," said some woman.

A new security guard, yet again. Only Moonlight seemed to be able to hold the job down.

"I have my key. I don't have a pass," I said, "I don't work here. I live here."

She stared. Not like Megan.

"You're the one up in the gods are you," she said.

"I'm James García. I live at the top."

I wanted to say: you look old. You look unspeakably old.

"On you go then," she said.

She went back to her crossword. I wondered how long it would take her to complete it. At least she wouldn't ask me to get her *The Racing Post* on my way in.

Some workmen were fussing about with the lift. They stopped what they were doing. One of them said something to the other. They looked me up and down. I took the stairs.

As I did so, I passed the various offices, with their chrome and gold fittings. I peered into the toughened windows. Each had a sofa in the reception, with lifestyle magazines and things like that on huge smoked-glass coffee tables. Watercoolers on each level, just inside each of the doors. Each flight of stairs was brighter, more superb than the last, until that is, the last.

He was sitting on the sofa, playing the console, in a Marshall T-shirt and a pair of French knickers. The knickers were black with a pink lace trimming: these are the things you notice. They were quite pretty, in a way. I figured that they must have been Anaïs's. And yet perhaps they were not Anaïs's, I don't know, you can't know, can you? You should never presume; yet somehow, I never thought to ask. Fortunately Anaïs's (for example) hips were wider than Jim's, although the briefs (like, alas, the anus) clearly were not designed to handle the male genitalia. Perhaps Anaïs (for example) had left them over. I doubt if she'd left them for Jim to wash. In Tokyo, you can buy a pair of pre-worn knickers to order. I suppose it's like a book (not that I'd know): you don't buy it for the paper, you buy it for what's on the paper – the event of inscription. But is there a point to wearing a woman's knickers if they are clean, fresh from the dryer; or is it futile? I have spent nights by the fire, in my dressing gown, in an exquisite maelstrom of doubt, while others have even been late for their daily walk around Königsberg, to consider this problem, and in vain. Will there ever be an answer to this question? Must man know fuck-nothing of himself?

Stroll around the grounds until you feel at home.

"All right?" I said.

A half-empty bottle of Gordon's on the coffee table, next to a bottle of tonic water and a bottle of Rose's lime juice.

The place didn't smell so much.

"OK, kiddo," he said, without looking up.

I couldn't work out what game he was playing. I couldn't work out if he was playing it. It may have been a demo.

"All right," I said.

He sat there for a bit, picked his nose, poured some gin, then some lime, then some tonic water into a glass, and drank half of it.

"Get yourself a glass," he said.

"I'm all right, thanks."

"Get yourself a job."

"I sign on tomorrow."

"What about that thing?"

The piano was stood by the window, as though intentionally positioned to darken the room.

"No pupils."

He sort of sighed and scratched. I got a glass, rewashed it and sat next to him.

I poured a gin, with extra lime. He nodded and I topped up his glass. He stared at the screen. Some car was driving itself around some track or other.

"So where you been?" he said.

"I've been looking for work," I said.

He looked at me. I sipped some of the gin.

"There's nothing much about," I said.

He continued to stare at the screen. He coughed very hard. Then he started this swallowing thing. He sort of looked as though he were salivating, then swallowing over and over again. This took a few minutes. After a while this subsided, and he took another sip of the drink.

"Fancy a game?" I said.

He didn't answer. I took out the key to my room and unlocked the padlock. The room was as I left it. I figured it'd be rude to shut the door. I lay on the bed, the cold sheets. I breathed deeply; I could hear him breathing deeply too. Then I heard him walking about and muttering to himself. Then a thump. Then he resumed the walking and the muttering.

I lay back.

We could do whatever you want. We could take a taxi to Heathrow and even though we don't have tickets, we could lie on our backs in the dew and watch the planes come and go, the meter still running. We'd give the driver my dad's credit card – he won't know it doesn't work any more – and we'd lie there and watch the runway and watch the landing lights. The driver would go to sleep, the meter still clocking, and the lights and the morning dew on your pale –

Wicked language.

I sat up on the bed, my arms about my ankles. Looked at my old clock radio:

18.12. *Let me be, you fucker.*

Don't provoke him. Don't incite him.

"Everyone goes," he said, "everyone fucking goes."

Don't rise to it. It'll only make things worse. He's family you know. This shit runs in the family.

"*Everyone goes.*"

I lay back down again.

"You're always not here, dude," he yelled through, "never fucking here."

I said nothing. I'd only been out for a while.

"You're a selfish cunt, you know that? You're not even paying rent now."

Then I heard him fall into the sofa again.

"I've given you most of my fucking savings, Jim," I said, through the gap in the doorway.

And then he started to cry. Broken glass on the carpet. I tiptoed around it. And there he was, his hair in his eyes, his head in his hands. Just making noises. I'd seen this kind of behaviour before.

"Jim, man –"

He sort of rocked a little bit.

"Mate, come on –"

He lay back, those knickers pulled up tight.

"Man, come on –"

He didn't say anything.

I put my arm about him and he sort of looked at me.

"It'll be OK Jim, I promise. I'll get some money in. I promise."

"It's not just that."

"Is it Ana?"

He didn't say anything.

It was pretty late and pretty dark. I got a new glass from the kitchen and poured him a beer from the fridge.

"Come on man, we'll go out tonight. Let's go out tonight. When was the last time you went out?"

"Fucking I don't know."

"What do you say we go out? It's iHate tonight, up in Kentish Town."

"Not tonight, Jamie-boy. Not tonight. We can have a night in, right? Just stay here with me. I've been on my own for a bit. Been talking to the walls."

"Well, walls don't talk back."

"They do around here."

He looked at me. His eyes were very dark. I got up and turned on the light, got the dustpan and brush and cleared up the glass from the floor.

Puddles down Denmark Street and I'm down to sign on again. The dogs shiver and shit. They huddle together and then turn on each other just as before, the ropes and chains chafing their necks. Some of them might be different dogs each time, but they do the same thing. The barking dies down for a bit and then they huddle back together and

begin again. This process repeats itself once every few minutes, in a flurry of claws and saliva.

I go and sign on and he says:

“Next month you’ve got a review.”

I look at my hands.

“You realise that, don’t you?”

I look at his hands, clasped together. Wannabe barrow-boy tycoon, NatWest clerk made-it-good.

“So you’ve got to bring in any letters, print out any emails, all of that. Or we can do it on the system if you like, it’s your choice. If you’ve been using the system.”

I look at someone else’s hands, client next to me. Their hands are older than mine, worn and furrowed. They might even have done some work at some point; now they are used to hold a piece of paper still and sign on it to say that they haven’t.

“So Mr García,” he says, “until then.”

“Are there any jobs?” I say.

He motions to the jobpoint terminals – rigged fruit machines that never pay out.

I tread softly around the dogs and take a left. The music shops’ windows are strewn with early tinsel. In one window, quite clearly, just under a drum, is a vomit-coloured pumpkin. It glows through the glass and into the rain, its already jagged smile distorted in the puddles. It cannot look at me – it is inanimate – but as I slouch towards Charing Cross Road I know it’s marking my steps. I kind of wonder if Jim got to work, whether I should go in and bring him a hot chocolate or something, but I think better of it. He’s probably busy, or in bed.

Someone's moved our guest along. In this rain, it'll be tough. As I swipe the cardkey and open the door, Moonlight Clive looks up.

"Back then?" I say.

He looks at me.

"Win anything?"

I assume too much.

"Lost everything I won," he says, "I come back with what I went with."

His moustache sort of turns downwards.

"Well, it was a free break, then?"

"No García," he says, "it cost me an arm and a leg."

I look down at his hands, resting on *The Racing Post*.

"I'm sorry man."

"Well, next time," says Moonlight Clive, "I might try the dogs instead; the dogs're cheaper."

I mumble my way up to the lift, and wish him a good evening. He's musing about dogs and I'm not sure whether or not he hears me.

The corridor almost is formless. The cleaners haven't been up here for weeks. Dust and cobwebs at the end of the passage. My trainers are leaking – the air bit in the sole has punctured. Even the rain on the window seems soundless. Time passes at a pace which suits it. But then the slurp of my waterlogged Nikes, and time picks up again.

I sit on the sofa and switch on the television. Children's TV. As I wring out my socks, a healthy-looking northern man presents a feature on Japan. He's in Kyoto today, he explains, walking about a temple or something. Bald bowing Buddhists humour him

as he explains to camera something about the thing that means everything to them, the thing that is their lives. He has broken their silence, and mine.

Too wet and tired to get up, I throw the socks in the direction of the radiator. There is vodka in the freezer – or at least there was when I left – but I can't be bothered to get it.

Moonlight Clive and his horses. Such people live permanent bereavement, punctuated by the odd ghost. The gambler possesses, and is possessed by, loss. We risk things every day – more than we realise. With each step in the rain we risk a fall; with every call and text we're misunderstood or, sometimes, worse, understood. Even leaving the house or indeed remaining inside the house, risks being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Life is one long series of risks, and the house, the crematorium, always wins. But gamblers actively court risk. This is a special risk though: it's controlled and regulated. Is it not tempting to spend one's life in a continuum of controlled risk rather than in the lunacy of the real? There's no continuum. The horse-race is an hypnotic. As the hooves fall and the crops smart, and sometimes, the foaming, broken horses are shot, each race is a new hypnosis – both a repetition of and a copy of the previous one. The bookie is the hypnotist; his stopwatch swings back and forth, curving time in its silver arc; and under this trance life loses its weight. Life is suspended in that great buoyant, hope.

But it is hope deferred. It's a kind of masochism – hope over reason – a negative theology of literal bankruptcy. And just as in masochism, one takes ownership of one's own humiliation, suspended in a falsely imagined future. Hence, winning is not the aim of the game: the real objective of compulsive gambling is to get to the next race. The

gambler who quits while ahead is not a true gambler: real gambling is economic troilism, a spectator sport in which winning is no sooner achieved than despised. But the masochist can get out of bed – at some pre-agreed point – and put on his or her suit, cover up any little red smarts, and go to work. The gambler is never allowed to get up, nor does the end come. There're no safe-words in real gambling. Entropic gambling aims not to win, but to lose, in order that the suspension of winning, the very hopelessness of hope, endlessly self-propagates. Poor old Moonlight.

Jim calls and I don't pick up. Instead I lie back on my bed again.

We could take a taxi to Heathrow and even though we don't have a ticket, we could lie on our backs in the dew and watch the planes come and go, the meter still running – we'd give the driver my dad's credit card – he won't know it doesn't work any more – and we could lie there and watch the runway and watch the landing lights. The driver would go to sleep, leaving the meter still clocking, and the morning dew'd get into our leather clothes, get into your perfect, pale skin. We'd catch bronchitis or something, there, watching the planes come into Runway Four, from Argentina or Mexico, places where you used to live; or go to Runway One, and watch the planes come in from places where I briefly lived. We could lie there, Ecstasy in our blood, holding hands, squeezing them every now and again, and the planes would come in from places where we used to live, and we would imagine that we could hear the pilots' landing addresses, in languages we used to speak, the ornate German, the hissing Spanish. And we would laugh and stroke each other and it'd be like the taxi driver would never wake up and the meter would just keep on running and running until the fare got way into the hundreds,

and we would watch the sun come up over the runway, and lie there as the blue stars each went out.

I hear him come in this time. The pop of a cork and that familiar glug of wine into beer-glass.

“You home, Jamie?”

“Sure.”

“You want a drink?”

“All right.”

I get up and go to pull on my jeans, then realise they’re already on, just undone. Since meeting Megan I can’t get enough of my hands. She wants to take it slow. I can handle that, up to a point.

“Well, come on then.”

I stagger out into the lounge. There’s a new string of purple lights around the window-sill. Either that or I never noticed them before. He gives me a cup of wine.

“It’s the *Pàpe*,” he says, “I thought we deserved it.”

EastEnders is starting. He mutters and switches it off.

“They had me back,” he says.

“What –”

“Yeah. I thought I was finished there. One of Eric Clapton’s guitar techs came in and started getting all Eric Clapton on me. I told him to fuck off.”

“No shit.”

“Yes, sir. I wish it’d been Clapton himself, the racist fuck. Good wine, this. Well they said I mustn’t tell anyone else to fuck off or anything like that. I’m on a written warning.”

He handed it to me. He’d signed it at the bottom, as had his boss.

“Me and Ana went looking for a frame for it but instead Ana bought me those lights up there. She said I could do with some light in my life. No idea what she meant by that. But I’ll still frame the letter. What do you say, in the toilet or above the piano?”

“The toilet. Definitely.”

Ana wants to go to Orbital over in Dalston but Jim’s having none of it.

“I’ve got work in the morning,” he keeps saying.

Every time he says “work” Ana is silent for a few minutes, then asks another closed question regarding why we should go to Orbital: do we really want to stay in on a Friday night? We haven’t been out for a bit, have we? Why stay until seven? You don’t have to. Why not stay until seven, then get a bagel and then go straight to work? Et cetera.

Each time she comes up with a reason his face drops a little more but he’s still fighting: I don’t care what night of the week it is. It’s all the same to me; no, we haven’t been out for a bit. I’ve been sick; what’s the point of leaving early once you’re there? Once you’re up on it, what are you supposed to do? Watch reruns of *Friends*? I don’t want to stay until seven. I’m not twenty any more; The bagels here suck. I have to go to work. Et cetera.

She's kind of won't shut up and I can't deny that tonight, Orbital is just the place for Ana. I sort of want to ask her to leave.

"And every time we go there we spend a few days getting over it," Jim says.

"You might," she says.

"You're a bit younger than me," he says.

"I know," she says.

I go back into my room and lie on my back. I can hear them arguing a little, but it's more Ana's voice that I can hear. When she's like this it's no fun for me. I can't tell Jim what to do. I pick up my phone and text Megan: *what are you up to tonight? I've got nothing on.*

They're still moaning at one another so I put the door shut and bring myself off. Less than usual – I'm doing this all the time – much thinner. The kind of come that most girls don't mind swallowing. Only some girls go for the thick stuff that you get if you haven't come in a while, or if you've been made to wait in some other, more pleasant way. I wonder where Megan fits, in this respect, whether she spits it into a glass the way Fi used to, or whether she gets it around her teeth and tongue like that girl from Norway whose name I couldn't pronounce (she couldn't pronounce my name either: there was no future in it). Would Megan come up and kiss me with it still in her mouth, the way some girls like to do? Do women that do this get off on a man drinking his own come; or is it a *look what I've just done* manoeuvre? Does the female do it because she likes it, or because that they think that the male likes it? Maybe it's attractive to some that I can't get enough of it, male, female, whatever. And yet to others it may be hideous. Life's rich pageant. And what it is that makes one person do one thing and another person do

another? One's size perhaps? The ill weather? Is it something to do with astrology? Or whether you've tidied the flat or not? Personal hygiene? Hairstyle? Does it help if you put on, for example, Billie Holliday? What does having Celtic or Hispanic blood have to do with any of this? Or is it something to do with love? Are personal hygiene and love somehow interrelated? Is there a significant correlation between swallowing, and all-drowning, crippling depression? Someone must know. Fuck: when I got here I virtually was a virgin: now if I don't have sex for a week I feel like going and spending thirty pounds. It's a dirty business. And yet, to speculate on the whole spitting/swallowing thing about someone you want to fuck, yes, there is a strange happiness to it, among the confusion, torturous contingency, and high likelihood of disaster. No. There is more to life than head. But not much more.

"I don't know, I don't know," Jim's repeating.

There's no sleep to be had here. I take a T-shirt off of the floor and wipe my chest. More out of boredom than anything, I listen closely to the soap opera in the next room.

Actually, I don't want to bring Megan back here. I don't know why.

She's shouting at him now and he's sort of murmuring. It sounds like he's trying to calm her down.

"Another fucking lock-in?" she's saying.

"Could be all right," I think he says.

"I don't just want to sit about drinking," she says, "I want to dance. We haven't gone clubbing in -"

"- two weeks."

“Two and a half. If Mary were here –”

“If Mary were here we’d be in bed. But I know, I know, you’d –”

“– Damned right I would –”

“– and you don’t have to work on Saturdays.”

“I do your washing, don’t I?”

She sounds like she’s pacing up and down. He’s mumbling and moaning.

“Look,” she’s virtually shouting, “my body still works. It’s not my fault –”

And then there it is. Fuck you he says.

The phone makes some noise or other. A text: *You’ve got nothing on?* Then Jim’s rattling the padlock on my door like an old-fashioned knocker.

“Jamie-boy?”

Here we go again.

I text Meg back: *no: fully clothed.*

“Jamie, let’s go out tonight man.”

“All right. I haven’t got a lot of money.”

“You just signed on, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, then.”

Megan texts back: *pity.*

“I can’t really go out in Soho,” I say, “you know.”

He sits on the bed. There's the pop and sizzle of Ana switching on the old Marshall and then the warmth of strummed chords. She's crucifying a dominant one-four-five. It sounds like the clean channel but still it's distorting.

"I've just got to keep my job, dude, I mean --"

"-- I know. You don't have to tell me."

"I mean, everybody's got to do something. My job's a tech job. I have to be able to keep my hands steady. I can't get blasted tonight. I need to give my old system a chance to sort itself out."

"I understand. Well, I sort of understand."

"She can get as blasted as she wants and just give her staff hell all day Monday."

The phone again: *Be in World's End for a bit. Might see you there.*

"Who's that?" he says, "I didn't know you had any friends."

"That girl from Phone in Sick."

"I didn't know you ever stayed in touch with people."

"Not everyone."

"That's nice. The cute blonde one?"

"That's her."

Jim looks at the T-shirt on the floor and sort of nods.

"She OK?" he says.

"I think so. She's really clever."

He's quiet for a bit. He keeps looking at that soiled T-shirt.

"Hey," I say, "what about we go up north tonight?"

Anaïs is pretty silent for a bit. Before we leave she protests about taking the tube but Jim says that this way she can drink and if desired, spend some time looking in the mirror in the ladies' room, then collapse back here. This wasn't enough so he went for the jugular: Full Tilt. This is accepted as a compromise, but it's clear she wants a more narcotic night than that. As he's in the bathroom though, she comes to my door.

"Jamie?" she says, barely speaking.

I ignore her.

"James," she says.

I know what this means.

"Have you got any –"

"No," I say, "I sold it all over at that club in New Cross the other week."

"Risky business," she says.

"I know. But less risky than doing it around here."

"You've got nothing though?"

"Like I said, I sold it all. That's how and why I got that phone."

Lies.

"OK," she says, doing her Audrey Hepburn turn, and goes back to the guitar.

Once she's gone I text Megan, wrap up about two grams, just in case, put on a T-shirt and throw on my jacket, and before long, we're waiting for the tube as Jim makes new friends by pissing against the Paolozzi tiles.

He's procured a half-bottle of Chekhov and there's not much left. He protests about *The World's End* – "tourists and students" – but we go briefly to *The Enterprise*.

Camden Town on a Friday night is a fine place for us. As you exit the tube the night air hits you. The night alive. The throng of tourists and the fantails of juggled torches.

We choose to head here because here we are closest to hidden. We feel the catacombs beneath the market, long before we know of them. Below the jewellery shops, “global street food” stalls, and Claire’s Accessories, there are skulls and teeth, stacked up one upon the next, forming the bedrock of the Stables Market. Stand on the east side of the High Street, just past the bridge, just before the Morrisons, and look into the walls. I cannot tell you what you will see.

And I have had most of the happiest moments of my life, guttered there, having puked, fucked, pissed – what does it matter? – the better to be closer to these bones, the better to be nearer to the whispering dead, the living dead, in Camden Town.

I push towards The World’s End bar and get rid of seventy-five percent of my jobseekers’ allowance. I catch myself in the mirror. I look different. I don’t know how.

Of course there’s nowhere to sit and it seems like there should be more of us.

“Why are we here again?” says Ana.

Jim doesn’t reply. I’m searching the place for Megan.

“Fucking terrible place,” says Jim, “should’ve stayed in Soho.”

“Jamie-boy can’t go out in Soho,” says Ana.

“I know, I know,” says Jim.

I say that I need the toilet and check out every last corner of the place. The World’s End is far from it. It’s like a haunted mansion, that’s for sure, but it’s not the end of the world: you have to go to Dalston for that. It’s vast – not the best place to try

to find someone on a Friday night – and unsecretive. If you want to have an affair, don't conduct preliminaries here. But I've always liked the place, especially in the days.

After a third search she's there. Just sitting at a wide table with quite a few others. She's staring into space a little, and then searching in a handbag. She's hard to notice and impossible to ignore, sitting there as though shuffling invisible tarot cards. I don't want to go up to her. The place is too loud. Jim and Ana are over the way, probably arguing. I go up to her.

"Hello," I say.

She looks up at me, smiles.

"Hello James, glad you could make it."

She sort of moves up a bit and I have a little room to sit down.

"You got a drink?" she says.

"Not yet."

"I'll get you one." And she's off, pushing to the front of the crowd until all I can see is a little glimmer of her bright hair.

Eight or nine people occupy the same table. They look at me and then look away and resume their conversations. They have accents a little like Megan, apart from one, who's Scottish. They're talking about football and about college, and about other things that I don't know about. It's like being at a party where no one knows you, and yet continue to talk about people who you don't know.

Soon though, Megan's back with a bottle of beer and a glass of lemonade or something for her.

“Here you go,” she says, placing the bottle of San Miguel in front of me,
“Spanish, right? I would’ve got German but it’s up to you.”

She looks kind of different in her night make-up, quite the girl-about-town. Her friends all seem to be looking at me and she senses this. Sixteen eyes or so – that’s at least two spiders – staring at me.

“This is James,” says Megan, “he lives in Soho.”

We go around the circle and everyone says hi. The sense of wanting to be back home, in the flat, haunted or otherwise, is overpowering.

“What do you do?” says a young, healthy man sitting opposite me. Megan brushes her hand on my thigh, so as no one will notice.

“Well, nothing much really,” I say.

The young men and women seem genuinely interested. They’re looking in at me as though I’m some sort of curiosity.

“What do you study?” the next guy says, quite kindly.

“Nothing,” I say, “I don’t study anything.”

The music is very loud.

“Ah,” says a girl with a hat, “so you’re one of the ones who work for a living.”

I sort of want to leave.

“I teach – I teach – I *will* teach – piano,” I say, “to private students.”

“In Soho?” says the first guy.

“In Soho.”

“Can you play the Rach II?”

“Yes.”

And then Megan to the rescue:

“Jamie can play anything. He just needs some encouragement.”

To great laughter.

Then I learn about their shitty lives at some university or other, or how three are taking a gap year, and how one is doing an MA or whatever – fuck me; what a carry-on – and how they’re all really, basically, loaded.

These eyes and then she squeezes my thigh and whispers, “don’t be intimidated, I just tolerate them. They buy me drinks. They aren’t as smart as they make themselves out to be.”

She kisses me on the lips very lightly, and over in the corner, Jim notices this. It’s crazy what he notices.

“Well,” I say, “I’m with those guys over there.” I point to Jim and Ana. Ana clearly is talking nineteen to the dozen.

“What, those old folk?” says Megan.

“They aren’t *that* old, are they?”

“They look quite old. Are they your older cousins that you told me about?”

“I only told you about one older cousin. That’s him. Jim.”

“Is he the one that owns the Soho loft?”

“It’s not a loft; it’s complicated. It’s a converted office space.”

She grips my thigh again.

“It’s probably less complicated than you think.”

“Oh, you’d hope. We live in an office, basically.”

“Curiouser and curiouser.”

"These guys, are they all university guys?"

"What do you think? Markus over there, it's his nineteenth tonight. They're going to get him drunk and take him to Soho. Anywhere you'd recommend?"

"No."

"Come on, you must know somewhere, James."

"I do. That's why I'm not recommending anywhere. Take my advice. Stay here."

"You disappoint me," she says.

"I aim to please. I'd disappoint you more if I told you where he could go. Well, I'd better go and see how Jim – that's my cousin – is getting on. Him and his pseudo-wife are going through a rough patch."

"Pseudo-?"

"Yes. They're not married but it's like they got married, got divorced, and then stayed together. That's what it's like. And give this to Markus. It's safer than brasses."

I give Megan one of the wraps and she nods. Passes it to Markus.

"Happy Birthday," I say.

"Thanks," he says.

"Buy Megan here a few drinks will you?"

"Sure."

And that was the first and last time I played the dealer card. Not for business, but for status. I'm not sure I should've parted with fifty notes for a bit of cheap respect, nor if Megan was happy with the image of her mixing with a bit of Soho rough, but it seemed

like a good idea at the time. Megan squeezed my hand again, and said, very quietly, "thanks. Sorry: call me."

We left The World's End and Megan; and I sort of left her to her college friends. There was a lock-in up Kentish Town Road so we got into that. NW5 has so much to answer for and most of it is wonderful. I gave Ana a wrap which seemed, ironically, to calm her down, but then she took a Zopiclone and drank six gins. Jim just sat there looking about him at the music business people, as though in an imaginary pop quiz with no questions or answers. After a while I got some air. Just in the calm of a Kentish Town Road backstreet at three a.m., the freshness on my face and the coke and alcohol in my veins. Apparently they interact quite nicely. The sweet liquorice smell of cigarette smoke from the streets. And I wondered if Megan had gone home alone, and whether to call her as she had asked. The thought of her, pulling off her knickers in her room, a little bit drunk, a little bit lonely. Her smell, the way she pronounced my name, and her jeans on the floor.

But Saturday night Ana gets her own way.

"I guess it'll be all right," Jim had said, "Big Bob and Henry might turn up later."

"And Catriona's coming," Ana had yelled from the bathroom.

"Yes, her and –"

"– and Katrina."

Whatever. Another Saturday night high in an unexceptional complex. A complex where most laws are suspended, an enclave of post-anarchy kept in check by the

guardians of post-anarchy, the Feudal Wide Boys. I switch off the television and it switches itself on again. I switch it off again. It's like the reverse of a power cut.

Again the tube up north. The cocaine currents and the sing of alcohol. Angel: the longest escalator in London. This means the most delightful, strong currents. I turn my neck back to imagined apples and stars and breathe in the night. It's around the corner from the Blue Angel. Just to the corner of City Road and Essex Road. There's a long queue, corsets and black. Jim talks to some Feudal Wide Boy and we jump it.

"They're with me," he says to the women behind the glass. We don't get searched, much.

And we go down into the basement, down glowing stairs, under the UVs. In the basement the full force of the roar hits.

The beat is deep down in the heartworks. People glide and merge under the strobes. Strangers glow and surge in the visible dark. We make for the lavatory and wait for a cubicle. There are no locks on the doors and there is no cold water. Jim puts his back to the back of the door. I roll up a ten-pound note, cut it with Jim's Oyster card, and bring it in from Ana's mirror. I lick what's left from the mirror, wipe it, and give it to Jim. We swap places, my arse against the door, him sitting on the lavatory. He takes the mirror, wipes it, cuts a thicker line from the bag. He nails it all in one go and holds his nose. He closes his eyes and clearly is trying not to sneeze. Outside someone's getting tetchy. They wish to use the facility.

"Hey, not long man, nearly done," I say.

"Well come on, get your cock sucked and get out."

It'd be easy for someone to surmise, from what they could see below the door and perhaps from above, that we're conducting a meeting of cocks and lips, but this is not the case.

Jim's still just sitting there holding his nose. He looks like he's going to have an embolism or something. Trying not to snite. I take the bag from him and try to rack up another, which is impossible in this position so I just pour some into the palm of my hand and snort it from the palm. I lick my hand to clear up the rest and it's bitter and clinical.

"Hey man, pace yourself," he says, his eyes still closed, "check yourself before you wreck yourself."

"How'd you -" and then he opens his eyes and he's getting there.

"Let's go and meet our people," he says, "who are not our people."

We're fidgeting on some sofa and Anaïs says, "hey it's Katrina and Catriona."

"Here we go," says Jim.

"And Nicholas," says Anaïs.

The music is way too much to hear much, mercifully. Names are about all one can pick out, and monosyllables. Catriona is scarlet-haired, handsome. Katrina is taller, blonde, less handsome.

The usual meeting bullshit and then Anaïs says: "Jamie, what have you got?"

"Usual. Less than usual. Almost nothing."

She turns to Jim. He shakes his head.

I ask Ana to go and take any monies in the lavatory. Money before merchandise, no exceptions. Ana's no trust fund.

A child at the piano, small hands on the keys. Why's a fourth the same and not the same as an eleventh? It's an octave up. It's still the same note. Let me show you a new way of playing it. A new inversion. You can even leave out the root.

Can't feel my nose, like at the dentist's: feels like rubber, it's nothing new. That metallic taste. Jim's muttering that we should've gotten some china but this feels good enough to me. Back up to the first floor and I'm untouchable. Holding on to one of the scaffold poles and I'm just full tilt, no one can touch me.

Katrina or Catriona comes up to me and says, "thanks for the discount."

"I didn't give you a discount."

"You're just cheap, then."

It's Catriona.

"Yes. I'm cheap." Cheaper than you know.

And we sit down for a while. She's telling me things about her and asking me about me. I'm no competent judge on either of these subjects. I'm listening – in a way, over the thunder – to what she's telling me though.

"You're – [*something or other*]," she says.

"You as well," I say. She smiles. She has a wide smile, uses lots of foundation, but she reflects men like a Heal's mirror.

"It's in West Sussex," she says.

"Yeah, me too."

"Are you Australian?" she says.

"Yes," I say, "I am."

She gets up to dance. Jim bounding over.

"Got some MDMA," he says, "Henry and Big Bob are here."

The lines've really gotten to me tonight.

"And?"

"Well, it'll be different, won't it? Like the nineties, that's what Ana said."

"I didn't like the nineties. I have bruises to prove it."

"Bullshit Jamie-boy, bruises fade. We're not on a downer tonight. We're on it tonight. If we ever die, it'll be tonight."

"Catriona's pretty isn't she."

"What, you going to fuck her?"

"No. I'm just saying she's pretty."

"She's not pretty: she's just young. You going to fuck her?"

He looks around as though there is nothing less interesting than here.

"How young?"

"Young enough to be home watching television. She should be home in the Home Counties watching some romantic comedy or something. Revising for her SATs. Instead she's at Zero Tolerance on a Saturday night, flirting with a cunt like you."

Everyone the anthropologist.

"Well, shall we with the MDMA? It's pointless on your own."

"I don't like things that are pointless on your own."

"Come on Jamie. No one likes a smartarse. Get this in your veins."

So we do the MDMA and nothing happens for ages so we do some more.

Another line in the lavatory and things are improving.

We go out back where the bikers are playing pool.

"So, where's Ana?" I say.

"Don't give a fuck," says Jim.

Kati at the piano. And then the perfectly sore knees. Just another interval. You can flatten or augment it, it's up to you. Just finger it, play it; make it make joy. You can invert it, lose the bass, sharpen the ninth. The permutations theoretically are finite, but not in one person's lifetime, nicht wahr? Ja: Fick mich. Come here and fuck me this time. Let's see what you can do. She was music and silence; love and poison.

We sit in a corner with our mineral waters, and no one's talking. No one needs to talk. Ana's lost in herself, Catriona and Katrina are still up dancing – they're probably not used to it the way we are – how delightful to have such a naïve metabolism – and Jim's thrown his head back speeding the lines.

I go downstairs, and then upstairs and get a pass and go out into the night. I take a brief walk down City Road and then a left down Gosford Road. It's freezing but I can't feel cold. The housing estates hum in the quietest hour of early morning; the junkies and the crack-heads, some of them're still up, I guess, tormenting themselves in the little flats. Perhaps there are couples, fucking in tiny rented bedrooms, young couples; or one-

night-stands with an hour or two to go before they never see one another again. The lamps going out, the flicker of the ones on the blink, the squid-ink sky. No one about. And yet one feels the human hearts beat, the underground bones, the slow coming of it all. This has to end, the rain whispers, Jamie, this has to end.

Jim's on a thrift run.

"Look, thing is, if we stay at Katrina's we can just get the tube home in the morning."

"It is morning," says Ana, sideways-glancing at Katrina.

"And Catriona has to go to – where do you have to go?"

"Cambridge," says Ana. Catriona looks at the ground.

"But not until the afternoon," says Catriona, looking for a moment at me – she must be cold – "I can't go and visit my grandma like this."

"Everyone wants to come down," he says, "everyone always wants to come down. You waste your money. You waste your money."

"It's no trouble," says Katrina, "you all stay for the morning. Later I'll make us all pancakes. That's what you call them in the UK isn't it?"

Yeah, that'd be great, everyone says but Jim.

I could do with the walk. Still fresh and in love with the world, I want to walk and walk these old streets, these streets sinking into the clay-mire. It feels good, walking from the sweat and heat of that place, out into the morning, up to street level, and into the dim

rain. It's much lighter outside than inside but it's still very early. Early Christmas lights pave the road with blackcurrant lighting.

Down City Road there's hardly any traffic.

"That eye hospital's got some great archives," says Katrina, "like Buñuel but human eyes. I was thinking of using some of the images for my portfolio. I've spoken to them and they might even let me dissect an eye so that I can paint it."

"Is that so." says Jim.

"Bacon loved cancer-colours," says Katrina, "he said they were beautiful."

Everything is suspended; time is moving at a slower pace than my own. My minutes are longer than everyone else's because I long for Megan. Yet I am not getting any older. Perhaps the place itself is timeless, or I am out of its time. Like when something happens, something really important, like the times I swam in Ravenna, but this time, nothing happens. This is a non-event of an event. Is it possible for almost nothing to happen? If this is the case, then is it an event at all? Can a nothing happen? It surely isn't a thing; it's ephemeral, pointless, easily lost and always inherent. It's like backwards *déjà vu*, a precise premonition which'll never be fulfilled.

But we can't get into all this nothing-happens shit: this is supposed to be a story.

It's a true story that's yet to happen. There men are setting up their stalls for the Sunday market. Most of the frameworks already have been assembled; now the men drape tarpaulin and plastic over the skeletons.

The produce just has begun to arrive. Flowers, in large buckets, in the drizzle. Then all sorts of stuff, pastiches of trendy clothes, silly hats, antiques of all kinds. But

mainly flowers. And as we cross the market towards Liverpool Street, the shouting starts.

“Is it bloody Halloween?”

“Nah, that one’s out of *The Rocky Horror Show*. Let’s do the time warp again.”

“I forgot my fucking garlic.”

A couple of barrow boys join in with the chorus from “The Time Warp.”

All six words of it.

“Where you been, has someone died?”

“Three cheers for the undertaker,” sings one.

“Wouldn’t it be lovely to be dead?” sings another.

Jim says: ignore them.

But Katrina isn’t used to this sort of thing. She’s from somewhere civilised.

She turns to one of them and says: I bet you haven’t had a decent fuck in your life. She says “decent” but it sounds more like “descent.”

Jim looks at her in a *you’re-not-in-Brussels-now* sort of way, but it’s too late.

“Ooh-la-la,” says a tall guy with – somehow appropriately – a handful of flowers, as though offering them to Katrina as a romantic gesture, “we know about your lot. From France, are you? I bet you can fuck, darling, can’t you?”

He turns to Catriona and then to Jim and says: “She your bird then? I love gingers. I bet she’s got a temper on her: I bet your bird can fuck. I bet she can’t half fuck. I bet she fucks straight off.”

“Ignore them,” says Jim.

Another closes in on Jim: “*Oi* – Edward Scissorhands – you going to let a bloke talk to your *mademoiselle* like this?”

“You’re pathetic,” says Katrina, “and I’m not French,” which diverts said market trader from Jim. The market trader looks Katrina up and down, as though, if no one else were around, things could get nasty.

“Come on,” says Jim. We walk much faster.

And we’re past them but the heckles still come, and a rousing chorus of “let’s do the time warp again” hangs in the rain, more xenophobic, more boorish, more brave, with each retreating step; and as Jim’s trousers and Catriona’s corset shine in the drizzle, and as it soaks the market traders as they set up their stalls, we make East.

“You want some coffee,” says Katrina.

“No thanks.”

“Ana?”

“No sweetheart, not now thanks.”

Catriona looks down, then looks at me.

“I’ve got two spare rooms,” says Katrina, “you can go where you like.”

Ana looks at Jim.

“Shall we make it a pure morning?” says Jim.

“Fuck it.”

“Shall we put a half-gram up Ana’s ass?”

She shakes her head. Not this morning, she says.

He cuts some more up and we get it up from Ana’s mirror. Katrina finishes it off.

“Going to have to sell some more of this if we want some more of this,” says Jim.

“Economics,” says Katrina.

“Later,” says Ana, lying on the floor.

And we put on the TV and there’s some news report about somewhere in the Middle East and some massacre or other, and Katrina says she’s going to bed. She disappears for a while then returns in a huge black sweater and some pink pyjama bottoms. She gives out two duvets and kisses Ana goodnight. She sort of looks at Jim.

“I’ll take the other room,” says Catriona. She looks at me again, as if in pity.

“Me and Jamie-boy’ll just watch the – what’s this shit?” says Jim.

“This is the news,” says Katrina, “it tells you about what’s happening in the world – not just here in London: the rest of the *world*.”

“Where’s that?” says Jim.

There is no here, here.

“And I get the sofa,” says Ana, “thanks for another great fucking weekend.”

“There’s no charge.”

Then she asks for some downers and Jim dispenses. They don’t work and it’s nine-o-clock and she asks for some more. Some tanks are on the TV, flattening a village. I switch over and it’s a rerun of *Friends*. It’s an old style TV, with a big back and everything, like a fish tank for the blind.

Jim says, “go and see Catriona, you know she’s into you.”

“No she isn’t.”

Jim goes to the bathroom.

Ana's sort of stirring on the sofa and she can't sleep. I cover her up with one of the duvets.

"Cheers," she sort of says, "Jamie-boy. Come on and fuck me you arrogant cunt."

Ignorance is bliss.

Jim comes back and says: "seriously, Catriona kept going on about you when you disappeared. Where did you go anyway?"

I tell him I went to get some air.

"I get drawn to places," I say.

"Drown to places?"

"Drawn. I got drawn to this council estate over the street from The Blue Angel. I don't know why."

"You're a funny guy. You're not shy; you're arrogant. But I'm telling you, Catriona wants you."

We lie there for some time. There is no sleep to be had. The tinnitus is hammering in my ears and he's getting no sleep either. The MDMA is still in there, and I feel like hugging someone. It gets to this point on Ecstasy and you want to feel someone around you. Megan will be asleep over in Camden; I can't go and disturb her now. It gets to this point on Ecstasy: you want to hug and you want to kiss or just to hold hands. Jim clearly is not in this mood.

I take off my shoes and go to where Catriona is not sleeping. I gently knock on the door. Come in, she says. I knew it would be you, she says. She is in bed: dark red T-

shirt matching her hair. What do you want, she says. I don't say anything, just sit next to her. She is small but with a slight belly, no abs like Megan. She puts her arms around my neck. It is just the drug, I say, I'm not really the one you want. I don't care, she says, you're the one that's here, and I'm back to school on Monday. School, I say? Just sixth-form, she says, I'm not jailbait, Jamie. I'm not Jamie-bait, Jamie. And I turn around and there's no need to kiss, just to hold hands for a while and look up at the ceiling.

"You know what," I say, "I'm glad I'm not alone."

The rain on the window.

"I'm glad too. I have to share a room, so I like being alone. But I don't want to be alone now."

"Boarding school?"

"The finest in Cambridge. It's a fucking convent school. We have a big pond. In winter, the ducks walk about on the ice."

But I don't want to know any more about her. She has her left arm about my neck and I have my hand at her navel.

And that is sort of it. She feels me hard and I want her and she turns over and I take her, but I can't come. We fuck for at least half an hour, until she seems to be in pain and I have to spit on my hand. I consider asking her to take me in her arse but she's really young and I don't want to hurt her. And then she climbs on top and keeps pushing away, and she's reaching down between her legs in the bitter end and – I think – she comes; but I can't, so it's a long road, stretched out, of pleasure and increasing pain. In the end we give up and then ten minutes later start again, then give up, then start over again.

"You've got some staying power," she says, "are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I say, "I'm fine."

She falls asleep and I lie there unable to rest, hard as an anvil. Jim, I shout down, have you got any downers?

I have to go back into the lounge at about two, because Catriona has to go to visit her grandma in Cambridge.

"Shall I walk you to Liverpool Street?" I say. She stirs.

She takes one look at me and says, "it's OK. You go home and get some sleep. You'll get sick like Jim. I know all about that. You can facebook me if you like."

"Sure."

I get my erection to die down, curl up next to Jim, who is snoring away despite the coke, and don't sleep.

Jim had said that he would be there at two and he was right. The old man took one look at the room and shook his head. He looked at my tangled hair through his dark glasses.

"Over there," I said.

He looked at me and went over there. He had a stick and a hat – all of the approved clichés, save for that he was not blind.

"Do you want a drink of something?" I said.

He looked out of the window. That's the thing about the flat; one of the first things that people did when they came by, was to look outside.

"Well, if there's anything I can do," I said.

I sat watching him for while, keeping the kitchen door open as I made a cup of tea. He was feeling about for stuff.

“Are you sure you don’t want a cup?” I said.

He took off his coat and laid it across the sofa.

I let the kettle boil and poured the hot water into the cup. Lotus flower and stinging nettles. I took the vodka from the freezer and poured it into another cup.

He took his time, plucking this, altering that. He turned to me.

“Impossible,” he said.

“As long as you like,” I said.

It was like watching a surgeon, not that I ever had done that before. I recalled Jim telling me about his mother, repairing furniture herself after her husband had broken it. He had wanted to throw it in the trash, Jim had said, but Aunt García insisted on repairing it. Like a doctor splinting a bone he had said.

I went to my room and left him to it. I texted Megan but the message didn’t get through. I wanted to put on my headphones and listen to some music, but the sounds from the lounge and all that. And anyway, he could’ve walked off with something, the little that we had.

The strange dissonance of it all. In order to get in tune, you need at first to be out of tune. And the little hammers, the damping, the flattening and sharpening of an instrument last played half a decade ago in New Jersey, followed by neglect in a Tilbury warehouse. The instrument was waking up. Not a bad tone. A new tone – not like the Steinway back at Dad’s – a new world sort of tone, for jazz or blues, show tunes or whatever. Not Chopin, not hotel-haunting Debussy.

I lay there listening to something that I had heard before, but I couldn't place when. The slow teasing of notes.

He muttered to himself and as I peered around the door, he had some sort of electronic thing on top of the instrument, a two-unit thing. I sat there and tried to text Megan again. No response, no delivery confirmation. From the lounge then, that chord from *Rhapsody in Blue*.

I got up and saw him. He was younger than at first I thought, just red, deep-set eyes.

"Is it OK?" I said.

"Almost impossible," he said.

"I like the –" I said.

He looked at me, as though something terrible had happened.

I looked into his eyes, curious to see if he really was blind after all of this. Maybe he was nearly blind, I don't know. My memory was not so good back then, not the short-term memory, anyways. It's worse now. He wasn't blind. I went to the kitchen, got the envelope out of the fridge, and paid him.

"It's wet," he said.

"It's all there," I said.

He counted it and then did a bizarre sort of bow thing.

I drank the cold tea and downed some of the vodka, as he went away, down the corridor to the elevator. I sat down at the piano and looked at it.

Waiting for Megan outside Senate House, the leaves near-gone from the pavement, the bare branches. The haemorrhoid-bloating wall. No obvious students to be seen – it's out of season now – just weary-eyed researchers with their transparent library carrier bags; the sabbatical professors hurrying in the direction of Euston or King's Cross; the diligent PhDs; the occasional library skeleton-staff nipping out for a smoke. It is a part of London not completely devoid of Christmas cheer – a tree twinkles inside, giving the place the feeling of a mini-Harrods for grown-ups – but outside this neighbourhood does wintertime like no other part of town.

I drink caramel chocolate from a Nero cup. The chocolate burns the mouth. The froth and sugar come, a perfect design for those who don't want to grow up.

Senate House looks like a shrunken Empire State Building. I walk into the foyer and look down at the fairy lights in the marble floor. I can't get any further. On the other side is Russell Square, empty and luminous. I want to go and sit in what's left of the leaves, back in the Senate House grounds, pull the leaves about me like sand, I don't know why.

A man walks past, ignores me; a long coat and a leather satchel. He stops for a moment to catch his breath – it's visible in the evening mist – and then trundles on. He stops again to look at a device which must have picked up a message or something and, still holding the thing, puts his head into his hands. He leans back, onto the stone, and types something into the device. He stays there, in the cold, for a time.

Just outside Senate House there is a red phone box: it just looks as though it should be there – probably for the parents of overseas students to photograph, as though by coming across the time-zones to London, they also traversed decade-zones. Perhaps

there is a phone still in it, I didn't see. It remains, like a closed pillar box. In its pale fire, old flames flicker: perhaps even there is something left of arguments, reconciliations, plans once made, affairs called-off, things once said now having been said.

And here the first London snows. In England the snow brings you outside. It's strange – it lasts only a few minutes – just a few drops of snow that don't quite make it to ground – they liquefy as soon as they touch the pavement. I turn my face up to the sky to catch the snowflakes on my face, to have them on my lips. It's like being in a Christmas card without Jesus or any of the wise men.

But I can see her up ahead and I duck back into the foyer; I'd know her walk anywhere now. She hasn't noticed me yet. As she walks she looks through me into the cold, pulls her hat down with one hand, adjusts her glasses, and shifts the bulky transparent carrier bag she's dragging along the air, from one hand to the other.

She's totally oblivious – her eyesight perhaps, or perhaps I should wear more colour. It is a calm place at the moment, almost emptied of people, Senate House is a work-in-progress, an outside, hollowed-out.

She pays people little attention: the security guards; someone collecting for charity. She takes a flyer and moves on, past me.

I say her name.

She turns about and smiles a little.

"I thought you'd be in the bar," she says.

"I wanted to wait for you here."

She pulls a face.

"I figured it'd be nice just to wait for you here, instead of in the bar. Like a surprise or something."

"How did you know I was here?"

"You told me you would be, remember?"

"No – oh yes, yes – I do remember."

I give her a hug and she kisses me on the cheek. She's been eating garlic again.

"It's been snowing," she says, "it's a bit early for that, isn't it? You know me, I talk about the weather. It's either that or horoscopes. Call me Mystic Meg and all that. I'm an air sign, apparently."

"Do you want some of my drink? It's still hot."

"Is it alcoholic?"

"No."

"All right then."

"Shall we get something to eat?" I say.

"OK," she says.

For a moment it feels like after a party when everyone's so fucked that they can't really communicate, but I can tell she's just tired and probably wants to go home.

It all started out just fine. We were in The Fox and Jim had bought some drinks for everyone. There was money to be exchanged, that's true, but it all started out just fine.

Megan was preoccupied with her phone and Ana was totally preoccupied with the deal in hand. It was as though she had become Jim's manager.

Nothing much, I never got the exact amount. It wasn't the sort of thing that'd mean going up and seeing Milton again. Jim didn't like going to see Milton. No one liked going up and seeing Milton but, like a weekly shop in Aldi in the suburbs, sooner or later everybody – almost everybody – had to do it.

Megan's hand on my leg most of the time. It was only when it kicked off that she withdrew it, possibly for self defence or whatever.

"So you've got what?" said Big Bob.

"Not much at the moment," said Jim.

"We have a direct debit coming," said Ana.

"Fuck this," said Henry.

I never really noticed this before about Henry, but he had a serious scar down his face. I haven't a clue why I never noticed this before.

"We'll have five by Sunday night," said Ana.

"Sunday night I'm in with the kids," said Big Bob.

"Fuck this," said Henry.

"Look, I'll get some more drinks in," said Jim.

He went to the bar and it was the six of us. Why the fuck did I bring Megan anyway? It'd hardly endear her to me. She just kept checking her phone and brushing my leg.

"So how're you finding London?" said Big Bob.

"It's OK," said Megan, "I don't get out much."

"This one does," said Big Bob, "you want to watch him."

Megan gave me a look that said, don't worry, I know he's talking shit. Jim came back with some drinks and a conversation was held.

"Let's go and stand outside," said Megan. Ana looked her up and down.

I went outside with Megan and we stood there for a while, looking at Wardour Street and its denizens.

"You all right?" I said.

She shifted a bit.

"Yes, I'm OK."

"Are you worried or something?"

"I don't much like those men. They remind me of the small time wide boys in Reading. They watched *Snatch*, and they were never the same again. It's all BMWs, Beck's Vier, and living with their parents."

She sort of smiled.

"Did you have those sort of people where you come from?"

"Yes, but I stayed away."

"I think it's harder to stay away for boys," she said, "it's less socially acceptable. Girls can ride their horses, sail their boats. We get whistled at of course, but somehow we cope – early onset resilience. Boys on their own are immediately gay or retarded. I use the word without irony. At worst I got labelled a lesbian. But at a girls' school like the one I went to in Reading, 'lesbian' doesn't really have the same ring to it as it did in the British International School of Bermuda. I never really liked girls. Boys neither."

"I never watched *Snatch*. That's probably my problem."

She squeezed my hand.

“And that’s why I like you.”

Jim and Henry and Big Bob and Ana piled out of The Fox, half-cut. I knew I shouldn’t be in this vicinity because of the whole thing at Murphy’s but with Henry and Big Bob about, I figured I was all right. It turned out we were going home.

“I can’t stick around,” I heard Henry say.

Jim had to sign in Big Bob and Henry and Megan, and Moonlight seemed quite on-the-ball about the whole process. I don’t know why. We all got into the lift and no one said anything. We got to the door and Jim dealt with all of the locks.

“It’s like fucking Fort Knox up here,” said Henry.

I figured fuck this, took two beers from the fridge and led Megan into my room. I shut the door behind me.

The quiet and the noise. The sound and the silence.

She whispered: “Why do you hang about with these people anyway, James?”

I said: “I don’t. Jim does.”

“Are you happy with this?”

“I’ve no choice.”

There were deals being made and knocks made on the table and I could hear Ana’s getting pretty shirty about something or other.

“Why don’t we go back to my place?” said Megan, “I went shopping last night and got some lovely stuff. Or we could go to The World’s End. They do food now.”

“Yes, let’s do that. Just as soon as they’re gone.”

She nestled her head into my armpit.

“It’ll be OK James,” she said, “you just have to find something, that’s all.”

And then I could hear it kicking off. You fucking this and you fucking that, and Ana's screaming and Jim going, "man, calm down dude, calm down," and all that sort of shit and, and something glass hitting the wall and *what sort of cunt do you think I am? You fucking yank cunt*, and, *you take me for a fucking cunt?* and the door slamming and Ana's crying.

"Don't go in there," said Megan.

"Like I'm going to," I said.

We sat there for a bit. I packed a few bits and pieces – new boxer shorts, sleeping pills, my netbook – and shuffled out. Ana and Jim were in the bedroom.

"I'm going out for a bit," I said. Neither of them said anything.

We took the lift down and got a cab up to Camden Road. Megan said it'd be best.

The night coming in, we didn't say much on the way. She kept kind of looking at her hands. We didn't tip the driver but I figured it was what he expected. Megan signed me in and we got in the lift.

"They're some funny old friends you've got there," she said.

"They aren't my friends."

"What about Jim?"

"We are mutually dependent."

"Wow. That's deep."

"Well, I need him."

"I think he needs you more. But those men you know, those blokes – they're not needed are they?"

"They're needed, economically."

She leaned her head back.

“So you’re a dealer now?”

“No. I’m a piano teacher.”

“Do you sell drugs?”

Oh yes I do.

“No.”

“Well, those chaps, cross my palm with silver, they are not good people. I’m no Delphic Oracle, but really, you don’t need that in your own house. Trust me. I know.”

“They never used to be like that. They were just quiet and – what’s the term? – passive-aggressive. Just like white van men really. But since Ana and her friend, I think she’s called Catriona, started to second them, things’ve been a bit hectic. Jim doesn’t really get involved.”

“Wise boy. I’ve seen drug dealers in their natural habitat – in Cancún – and believe me, the teleology begins with actions like Big – what’s his name? – Bob, and ends in gunfights. I’m not saying that that’s the way it is here. Just that you have to watch out. Actually, if you stay on the sidelines, it could be quite fun.”

“I’m on the sidelines.”

“Stay that way, Jamie. Stay that way. For me. Come and swim with me. You don’t need that shit. I’ll take you to the Hampstead Ponds sometime. That’s better than any drug.”

We slept for a bit and then watched a film on Meg’s iBook. Then we went to *The World’s End*. We didn’t talk about Henry or Big Bob, or Jim again, that night.

Lately there have been voices where there usually wouldn't've been. I mean, in the daytime, there always are voices in the building – there's a lot going on and everything. There're always agents and clients and people going in and out of the offices below. There's Enigmatic Ltd., which lives up to its name, but still people of all kinds are in and out. But these noises, they're not what I'm used to. They seem to be coming from directly below, or sometimes even, directly above. Or in the hall, which I understand is part of Jim's property. It's probably just the companies working late but it makes me walk about the flat and drink more and take more pills. Then there are the phone calls, constantly, on the land line. I would disconnect it but it's not mine to disconnect. You hear a noise in the street and you're sort of frightened to put on the light because then people will know you're in. And then you feel stupid and paranoid and figure you drink too much and take too many pills.

I wonder and fear and all just lying there. I miss Megan, and Jim's often over at Anaïs's. He hasn't said why. I keep thinking about it all.

Megan was always getting on my case for some kind of history. I used to say to her, what does it matter that I have no history? What could it do? It wasn't like she was going to come to a family barbeque or anything. Still she would persist. I said, look, I'm James, I'm from the country, and I'm half-Spanish: what more do you want? She told me a lot about herself but she said it was like a one way mirror. I knew lots about Megan, but to her I was a puzzle. Any passage into my life seemed always to lead back to hers.

One Thursday night she decided that the next day she would pick some stuff up from Reading. Her parents were visiting in Wales. Megan's mum was Welsh. Her grandmother used to sing, that sort of thing. Megan's parents had moved to Reading when Meg was young, to be close to London, for Meg's dad's job. This had been in the Major Years. That's how long ago it was. Aberystwyth was a memory now.

I tried to get a loan of Ana's car, I don't know why – I couldn't drive. Jim said it didn't matter with him. Ana was due to be back later that night, so Jim said to take it anyway. To his delight, Megan said she'd only ever driven a Saab, that that was the car that she learnt to drive in, and that she wasn't happy driving Ana's Volkswagen. Take the car anyway, said Jim, I don't give a fuck. Perhaps there was some issue with Jim and Ana that day, who can say? But all the same, I went with Megan's idea: it was nothing to do with the Saab. She said that because we weren't going to take Ana's Volkswagen, that we probably would have to stay the night and come back the following morning. It bothered me a little that this motion decreed that Friday night was under threat – between the ironic, tender ages of seventeen and twenty-three they number but 312, and only ten percent at the utmost are even fractionally better than staying indoors – but I felt that she needed me, so once more into my feet I put the nails of love (it is impossible to auto-crucify: perhaps this is an irony too far). She said that if it was a nice day we could go for a walk along the towpath at Henley, where she used to sail. Bring your big backpack, she said. OK, I said. And remind me to bring my AKGs, she said, the noise-cancelling ones. OK, I said. I figured her father would have some kind of stash of whiskey or whatever – dads always have a stash of something – so a little sail, a walk, a

few whiskeys, clean sheets, and whatever pleased Megan, would be fine: the best laid plans.

By the time we got to Paddington, it already was late afternoon. I had been hard to wake, apparently, and Meg told me she spent the morning reading, although, despite the open *Collins Robert* on the desk I figured she may just have been drinking. Even so I bought a half from a railway convenience store. She was swaying a bit by the time we got to the train. I hadn't seen her drink this much before, not during the afternoon.

At Ealing Broadway she put on her AKGs and mouthed the words to some song or other. She shifted, muttered, and scratched her arms under her jumper, as the train edged us nearer to Reading. Rain harped the window. She looked into it as though she could see out, the strings of rain presenting only her impressionist self. She held her hand up to the window and took a sip of vodka. I thought about calling Jim. I don't know why but whenever I felt unsure I always thought about calling Jim. I don't know why: the likelihood of his worsening things was high. We got past Hayes and Heathrow, past the wet planes trickling silently onto submerged runways, the blinking lights recalling dim aquarium lighting at the dentists'. I asked her if she was OK.

Eventually we arrived at the station and she blinked and smiled. The rain was pretty heavy outside. She took off straight in the direction of the taxi rank, dragging me as though I were on casters. She got into a waiting cab and I followed her in, putting my big backpack on the front seat. She muttered something about Whiteknights or wherever and the driver nodded. He switched on the meter and away we went.

We sailed past a park.

“That’s the Maiwand Lion up there,” she said, pointing to a statue, “they say that the sculptor committed suicide because he didn’t get the legs right. They said they looked more like a cat’s.”

I nodded.

“Lions walk differently, they say, with the fore- and hind-legs inversely to those of the sculpture,” she said over the engine noise.

“Inversely,” I thought – this girl I share a bed with uses words like “inversely,” in everyday conversation.

“I don’t think he killed himself,” she said, “people just like to think things like that.”

We went past a lake and a hospital and a school. I drank deeply from the vodka. The cab driver’s eyes in the rear-view mirror. We drove up a tree-lined road, nearly hit a coach, and then turned up into a long gravel driveway enfolded in trees. There was a pretty cheap-looking life-size ceramic figure that, I assumed, with the shield and stuff, was supposed to look a bit like Ares, but that had ended up looking like an advertisement for Cypriot wine – the ones with the basketwork around the bottle. The taxi drew to a halt; the driver looked around at the house and garden. Megan paid the driver and soon we were standing looking at the statue, and the gravel driveway. The rain trickled down the decking.

“Aren’t we going in?” I said.

The sound of rain on gravel.

“Just a minute,” she said.

The smell of rain on gravel.

She looked up at the leadlights. She pointed to the one on the far right.

"That's it, up there," she said.

"OK," I said.

I should have packed something Gore-Tex. We stood there, for a very long time.

"All right then," she said. The door rocked shut quietly, authoritatively behind us. We stood in the hallway. It smelled very much like polish and cooking. She stood there for a while. For a bit, I thought she was hamming it up. Then she swallowed and said, "OK, let's go and get my things."

And upstairs. Pictures of trains and aeroplanes on the stairwell. Advertisements for various model railway sets. One was for a Hornby double-O Pullman, whatever that was. The room was four doors down on the left. She motioned to me to sit down on the bed. Her room was pretty much bare. There were no pictures on the walls, no soft toys, posters, CDs, or anything. I never thought Megan would be fanatical about boy bands, but this was something for which I wasn't prepared.

"This wasn't how I left it," she said.

She went first for the dressing table drawers. Sure enough, there were her clothes.

"Here," she said, "in the backpack if you don't mind."

She almost was whispering, even though there was no one in the house. She passed me various items of clothing: scarves and socks, jeans and skirts, more socks and a few pairs of black or pink knickers; a pair of black corduroy trousers; a colourful Paul Smith shirt; that leather bike jacket. She passed the leather to me, then took it right back. Throwing it on and first *Zoolandering* the mirror and secondly turning angularly to me,

she said: "look, I can do rock too." She let her hair sand over the heavy shoulder-pads. She shrugged it off and passed it to me. It didn't really fit in my big backpack.

She sat down on the bed. It was getting dark already. Out of the window, the awful statue in the driveway. She sighed; breathed. I breathed. This was how her room was now.

"What was it like when you left it?" I said, immediately wishing I hadn't.

"I had a few pictures," she said, "and a few books and CDs and stuff."

"What were the pictures of?"

"Oh, you know. And my films as well."

"Shall we try and find the CDs?"

We located the books and CDs on Megan's parents' bookshelves and in a CD rack. They too, went into the backpack, in the side pockets.

"Look," I said, "*The Best of The Beatles*. Shall we take that?"

"Fuck the fucking Beatles," she said, disappearing into the kitchen. I flicked through what films of hers we could find: *Chocolat*, *Wings of Desire*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, that sort of thing. I asked her for a drink. She mumbled again. She came back with a bottle of Pouilly Fumé and to my surprise now, if not then, a bottle of Pétrus.

"These should do for tonight," she said, her voice even more R.P. than usual, "and they're not fucking cheap."

"OK," I said. She didn't seem often to swear like this. Maybe it was a Berkshire thing, for people sometimes become imbued with the sad dye of origin when plunged back into it; or maybe she'd just been around Jim too much.

"But," she said, "we'll have something cheaper for the journey," parting her blonde hair in the middle, adjusting her collar, and presenting, in mock-sommelier fashion, a bottle of *Tesco's Finest* champagne. She smiled.

"Was this worth the journey, Jamie?" she said.

"Aren't we staying tonight?" I said, considering the possibility of the paternal whiskey omnibus.

"No," she said, her smile used up, "we're not."

She called a cab and went to the bathroom while I hiked the big backpack downstairs. Through the floor she shouted, "oh for heaven's sake, they've got a fucking bidet."

I waited in the lounge and listened for her footsteps above. The cab took a moment to come and I thought I could hear crying; nothing big, just little sobs. The leather sofa was in better condition than ours, proper Nappa stuff. A Leicester Square plasma screen hung in the lounge. A Bose stereo system lurked in the corner next to floor to ceiling *Deutsche Grammophon*; *The Daily Telegraph* was still folded reliably over the magazine rack.

It had stopped raining from what I could tell, but still the smell of rain. Someone once said that rain undoubtedly happens in the past: this time it fucking did. Outside of the kitchen window, a garden. Although there were few flowers left, it was clear that horticulture was a priority in the Hunt habitation; Megan wasn't. Yet a little medal with the words "Senior French Prize" sat in a cabinet, with my friend's name and class in little gold letters, underneath: "Megan Hunt, 10E." I decided not to uncoffin old skeletons.

The champagne cork called like a coot and, as she sullenly plodded the stairs, I noticed that she was wearing very dark, thick eyeliner. This wasn't how she usually did things: she looked almost like Ana on one of those nights. I wanted to have her there, on the big bed. To make love to her; to exorcise her sixth-form loneliness.

A different taxi driver; the same indifference. We slid through the suburbs, the afterstorm pastels slipping under the tyres. I blinked twice – I'd never actually seen her use much make-up at all. It occurred to me only then that most days she didn't bother. Sniffing a bit, she said, "for old time's sake." She had been young once, old young once. Later I realised something else: she'd carved on the kohl so deeply that, if she cried, it'd show all the more. Therefore she had to try even harder not to cry: stiffening the eyelashes lends potentially more stiffness to the upper lip. I pretended not to notice that she'd been crying, as the eyeliner and mascara virtually trammelled up the tear ducts. But I felt like I'd seen something special, something sad and impenetrable; her childhood resonated through me like the strings through Bosch's harped damned. I wondered how anyone could ever ignore her tears so much that she actually elaborated ways to stop crying them, both in the austere corridors of her upbringing, and in the nethertime between her adolescence and old age.

By the time we got to the station we'd already started on the Pouilly Fumé. I decided to try to cheer her up so we went to the jazz bar around the corner and got drunk. Some tabloid darling was slumped in the corner, under a shock of false friends. I bought us a load of tapas, all calamari ("you're certain this isn't farmed Jamie, right?") and breads and that. When we got home we listened to some of her CDs. She put some old Indigo Girls album on and I held her tight and told her I liked it as the rain came

back. Later, Jim out and the television merrily flicking itself on and off, she opened the Pétrus.

“You’ve never had this, Jamie, have you?” she said.

“No,” I said. I knew she was drunk because – she’s drunk, she’s calling me, calling me, Jamie.

“Not many people have,” she said.

I didn’t know whether she was talking about herself or the wine.

The next morning, her mascara on my face and hips in the cracked bathroom mirror, I knew. Peering into my face again, I wondered if she had ever meant anything to her family; whether she once meant something and no longer did, or whether she meant nothing from day one and continued to do so; were it the first case, had she done anything, except for to grow up, to disinherit her worth, or, were it the second case, how could so-called grown-ups bring such a sweet creature into the world and not recognise any meaning in her, not even enough meaning to keep her own, old pictures up in her old own room, in a house with many? Perhaps that’s why she was so into other languages: she couldn’t find the words, phrases, even poems, in her mother tongue, to represent to herself what had happened to her, so she sought them in others. Perhaps, one day, the Spanish, French, or German languages would finally give her the thing that she sought: the ability to say, I am what I am: others’ opinions no longer substantiate me. I can scream in the middle of the desert, where only the flies and scorpions will hear me, and yet still I will hear my own scream. I will scream, and I am what I am, even if I am nothing more than this. But Megan never screamed. And whatever the case, I never got on her case for some kind of history; I already knew enough.

The next night, back on the cheap wine, she asked me where I came from. It really seemed as though she cared. It was as though she wanted to know something about me. Why the hell do people want to know about other people? I couldn't see why then and I still can't now. Even so, there seemed little to do with regards to getting out of it. Should I have made something up, a fiction? I was terrible at lying and worse at trying to be pragmatic. Here we go then, I said, if you really want to hear about it.

I grew up by the sea, I said, in a small town, not even a town really, just small enough for everyone to think they knew each others' business even though they didn't. I wanted to describe the small town's ineffable paralysis but I couldn't. It was a sublime disaster. Originally a fishing village, the sea now was fished to the limit. Not twenty years ago, the sea was brimming with plaice and haddock. But man had emptied its shoals and schools; now it was pointless setting to sea.

The boats decomposed in the mud. They ghosted misted winter dawns as though waiting for one final trawl. There were still little cockle-sheds, eking out the last residue of a squandered stock. Even after the sea's fish had been trawled down to a few eels and cockles, still man tried to do what it could to survive, out of other creatures' decrease. It was as though without something to plunder, the town itself would fade away.

Unlike the larger seaside towns, this one existed for little more than fishing. There were none of your Metropole shenanigans here. When the fish ran out, so did the town's lifeblood. In past times the townsfolk lived their lives, fishing ten hours a day, six days a week, coming back to shore with a full net. This was how things went on for a while, perhaps centuries. Now, people who had never been in a boat at all sat in the few pubs on the quayside. The town never even attempted to reinvent itself. It was slightly

too far from a large city to attract any weekend yuppies. It just gave up. A few people had jobs in shops. The house of worship and the hostelrys were well-manned, if disproportionately attended. The two schools were run by defeated liberals whose spectral Marxist hallucinations had solidified into Rotary Club enterprises. The lucky ones worked in the local job centre, providing a service to the rest of the community. The small town had inherited its own disinheritance.

Another result of the distance from any larger city was the prevalence of the homogenous. Like many English communities infected with overpowering self-loathing, it was very proud of its Englishness. While its Englishness had been its downfall – the sea is an unconquerable, uncolonisable Other – it was its only true identity. They were Englishmen and proud of it. After every world cup defeat, there would still be the strains of “football’s coming home” sung in taverns, long after the final whistle had cemented their sorry country’s place in obscurity and folly, yet again. England was the underdog, but never a giant-killer, forever snapping at its own heels. Football was not coming home. This adhesion to Englishness, to football and pop music actually obscured something else: the people were in love with their own suffering. Everyone else was to blame. It wasn’t that England played badly: it was that the other team played dirty. It wasn’t the men’s fault that there were no fish left: it was the fishes’. Neither was it the men’s fault that instead of trying to reinvent the town as a seaside attraction, they let the boats fall to bits: it was the town’s, the ancestors’, the city types’, the asylum seekers’ faults.

There probably were, it must be said, no asylum seekers for fifty miles of the town. *The Daily Mail* is a witness that cannot be sworn.

This wasn't enough for Megan. I had told her about the town, but what she really wanted to know about was me. I did my best.

Baudelaire would not have been very welcome in the small town. However, I never saw myself as particularly strange. I looked a bit unusual, I suppose: my Spanish blood saw to that. When the rest of the town would happily cruise the high street on a summer Saturday, boys bare from the waist up, white as the background of the St George's Cross, I hid my brown torso under my shirt. So too, when the rest of the town turned the colour of the cross itself, I hid my Mediterranean pelt away in my room.

This was not enough for her. I went on:

So I was different, indoors. The only reason, I said to myself, that people stared at me – and stare they did, and laugh, and occasionally spit, and throw stones – was because they must have thought I was new in town. It had nothing to do with a predilection towards black clothing and Greek stories about fabulous beasts and brave heroes. It was just otherness disguised as newness; I realised that they simply hated me fractionally more than they hated each other.

Winter was best. Fewer people were out. The beach usually was deserted, apart from the punctual walking of dogs at dawn and at dusk. When I was old enough to sneak out, I'd put on my mother's big leather coat and go down to the sea. I'd sit there in the sand, rain, wind, snow, and just watch the waves. I heard soft music coming from over the dunes and I do not know where it came from.

At school I had acquaintances. We were drawn together because the only thing we had in common was that together we each had nothing in common with anyone else. We were shit at sports, hated boy bands and girl bands, hated the television, hated being

born there, in the seaside town. There was Lucy, who played the clarinet and swallowed her own tongue; Steven, who was a mine of *Star Trek* information; Jimmy, who walked into doors; and Iain – he was half Scottish and had a Scottish accent, which earned him a few beatings – who locked himself, so it was rumoured, in his bedroom for a whole month, accepting only Shreddies and milk shake before venturing out pretending to be a French sailor. Oh yes, they were stranger than me, I cannot deny it. But none of us were ever really friends. The only thing that I ever really did for any of them was in school when Steven had made a poster of Captain Jean-Luc Picard from *Star Trek*, with the caption ‘*MAKE IT SO!*’ in a big speech bubble, and one of the Big Kids tore it down and guffawed as though it were the funniest thing in the world. I hit the Big Kid in his big, laughing, red and white face, with a chair. A small desk, designed to all intents and purposes for diligent, sober study, still was attached to it when it made contact with his big, sunburnt nose. He had to go to the nurse and I had to go to the headmaster’s office. “Why did you hit Reggie?” said the headmaster. “He laughed at Jean-Luc Picard,” I said. I had made it so.

I told her how when I walked down old streets in winter nights I could hear the boorish cackles echo: the boasts, accusations, judgments and diatribes, on my left and my right, night after night. I told her how, on that last summer night in the small town, things all packed and ready to go, I looked out over the sea from my father’s high windows, the foamed waves crashing up on the shore in a high wind, and knew that I would never, ever return.

“Tomorrow it will rain over Bouville,” she said.

Anaïs's early-warning some time back was justified. He'd taken to phoning in sick quite often. We'd be up until about seven, marching, and then usually people would leave. He'd walk about and we'd watch television. We'd listen to his old CDs or he'd route his laptop to the receiver in the lounge and we'd put it on shuffle.

After that, for days he'd be in his room, only coming out to piss or vomit or whatever, or on the rare occasion that the landline phone rang. It also was at this time the men started to come around. I recognised Big Bob, and his distinct lack of social skills, but the other men seemed even less sociable than Big Bob. There was an abundance of Boss leather blousons and Caterpillar boots.

When they came round they ignored me. Actually, no, sometimes they looked at me as though I were from another planet, and in a way that suggested that the planet in question was one which was at bitter war with their Earth as they saw it. Either way, I'd go back into my room and look out of the window at the fire escapes, or drink what was left of last night's spirits, or try to sleep, in vain. Sometimes I'd take a Valium.

Anaïs's absence coincided with the men's presence. On the occasions that she came round, she and Jim would make noises either of happiness or of suffering. After a while these noises seemed indistinguishable from one other.

He puked all night. Blood and shit on the bathroom floor. Coke doesn't do that to you; something else does.

Something was different. By the time I paced naked around the flat the next afternoon, there was no coke on the table. No bank bags. Not even a quarter-bottle of Bacardi. The flyers had been cleared up. There were no cigarettes on the window-ledge. Someone had

done the dishwasher. Even the flip-chart had disappeared. It was all pretty surreal in the sense that it wasn't surreal.

Anaïs ex machina.

She'd sit in bed with him for days. He didn't really come out of his room for at least a fortnight. She'd call him in sick each day. She spent all the time with him that she could.

And then, for some time there was nothing at all. Nothing. There were beers and Jim still would come by and drink beer, but there were no spirits. Anaïs tried to replace the blood-lightning with sex. The walls were like paper so it hardly was private. One Saturday morning I overheard Ana saying stuff to him: things which sounded like, *how long's it been?* followed by something that sounded very much like *come on and fuck me then*, but I don't know, it could've been anything else really. And I'm sure I heard him crying one Monday morning before she went to work and then her saying something like, *lie on your back my brave little boy*. He just kept on crying. For some time after she publicly referred to him as "my brave boy," and other such shit. If anyone laughed at this – me included – she would flare up like a staked witch. Anaïs was around, a lot, and her presence was clear.

She took no shit.

"Clear that up after you James," she'd say, about ten minutes after I'd finished a pizza.

"OK," I'd said.

"And if you're going to drink, fuck off down Murphy's and do it," she'd say.

But also she had other ideas.

"So," she said one night after work, with the three of us watching nothing on the television, "you're *not* going to call Mary, are you?"

Jim looked down at his mineral water.

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, I've got news for you. She's gone back to Ulster. Her Dad was ill and that, and she's got a better job over there. Eighty grand. Eighty grand. What I could do with eighty grand."

"Oh," I said, thinking, I know what you can do with *three* grand, but I didn't have the guts to say it.

"I helped her move out last Saturday," she said.

"Oh," I said.

"She liked you a bit. I don't know why."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"No need, Jamie-Boy, no need. She's a real woman, you know, not some student-y girl. She'll live. You'd be happier in the long run, I reckon, with a student-y girl – or boy; that's my analysis. Hang about outside RADA. That's the place for you. King's is just down the road. Med students. People that like paintings. The Surrey girls in designer glasses and Monsoon dresses, the ones that that dress up in their lab coats with their sussies underneath on rag week. You'll love it. And those med student boys are hot too. You'd love them too. Nice bar at King's, as it happens. Views of the river and everything. Named after some religious bloke. You'd love it. You could talk shit all day to someone who talked shit all day."

"OK," I said, looking out of the window.

Anaïs looked at me. I'd let her have a go at me. I sort of smiled. Don't, I thought, I'm not Jim. For his sake. He just sat there, looking into his mineral water, and then up at the television, then back at the water. He looked very sad indeed. He looked at me, then back at the mineral water, then back at me, then stood up and went to the bedroom, gently closing the door behind him. Anaïs followed him. I heard him say something softly and then I could hear them arguing. I'm not sure, perhaps he was crying. The television turned itself off, then back on again. I tuned in to the live psychics. There were noises from the bedroom, sad noises. I went to bed and did not sleep.

Jim was beached in his room for some time. Every so often he'd come out and use the bathroom but that was about it. Anaïs came round, every day after work, and brought him some food. Pizza Hut, McDonald's, KFC, takeaway Nando's, that sort of thing. Perhaps she was trying to get some flesh onto his bones, I don't know. He had a doctor's note for the guitar store, and they seemed surprisingly tolerant. Anaïs would take him into the bathroom and bathe him. She brought aromatherapy oils and so on. In the early stages she even accompanied him when he went to piss or shit; I don't know why. He was on Librium for some time, she told me, and that knocked him out. At least it's not the methadone she said.

Sometimes after he'd got to sleep she'd stay over anyway. I'd get home about four, and Jim's bedroom door would still be open. I could just about see her dark feet peeping out from under the duvet. I'd have a glass of vodka to wind down – I kept this in my room now, out of his way: even though he wasn't forbidden to drink, it helped him to not have it thrust right in his face – and I'd watch the late night television. I even

started to read again, that *Elektra* book that I picked up in Camden. Elektra was my kind of girl: put-upon, defiant, impossible, perfect. Antigone also. I finished the book that night, with Anaïs snoring in Jim's bedroom, the crying having died down. I looked out into Autumn in Soho; the secrets of the haunted underground rivers and canals of the city.

"I've got to get some space," said Anaïs, "I've got to get out of here just for a few minutes"

"All right," I said.

"No, Jamie, he's asleep," she said, "come on, we'll go out and get a pizza or something. The pills he's on – he'll be peaceful for hours yet. And I need to get on home. I've got work to do. At least one of us has to keep our job."

"All right," I said.

So we ended up in the nearest pizza place, on Dean Street. Her face was still dark; her foundation was flaking a bit. She looked like a Madame Tussaud's waxwork that needed maintenance. We were shown to a table.

"Do you want to share?" she said.

"All right," I said.

She chose something to eat for us both.

"Starter?" she said. I thought she was joking.

"Not bothered," I said.

"Wine?" she said.

"Del Casa," I said, "don't care, white, red, whatever."

She sort of laughed and ordered some Chianti. The waiter looked at her as though he longed to commit some sort of glad, drawn-out suicide.

For a long time we sat there, watching the people outside. It was still light, but getting dark.

“We’ve got to look after him,” she said.

She sniffed the wine as though it were something special.

“I know,” I said, “I do my best.”

“He likes you,” she said, “he calls you ‘family.’ I’ve never heard him say that before. Not in a positive way.”

“Yes. Family. It’s an anagram of ‘my fail.’ I like him too. He took me in. He didn’t have to do that.”

“He knows more about your family than you know. He hates your father, I mean, really he *hates* him. And he’s slightly in awe of you,” she said, “as Mary was.”

I spluttered:

“Why?”

“Search me. But I think that he looks up to you. He sees you as a big brother. He says when he doesn’t know what to do, he thinks about asking you.”

“I give very bad advice, Anaïs, anyone can see that. Nothing stinks worse than bad advice.”

“You’re too modest.”

“I don’t know.”

She looked out of the window. I could feel her tiredness. It was like standing next to a fucked radiator in the middle of January. Her brunette roots were showing under the bleach and blue.

“Well, you’re wasted here.”

“I’m always wasted.”

She shifted in her seat and looked directly at me.

“Look James, it’s fun while it lasts. Sorry to play the big-sister card, but when you get to my age, or even Jim’s age – I mean look at him – if you’ve fucked up then you’ve fucked up. Poor Jim, he just fixes guitars. That’s all he’ll ever do. He’s lucky that his dad’s got such a big guilt complex, that’s for sure.”

“Why does my uncle have such a guilt complex?”

“I don’t really know. His dad was pretty nuts. He nearly got sectioned once. And he was – he is – a violent man. They’re still together, Jim’s mum and dad, so far as I can tell.”

The food came and she asked for another plate. The waiter had forgotten we were sharing, or else had assumed that we were going at it in the fashion of *Lady and the Tramp*. He apologised, took the food away, then brought it back, halved, on two separate plates.

I looked about me. People were smart and healthy. Media types, I guess.

I said, “it must be funny to be able to afford to eat here, you know, four courses, proper wine, that sort of thing.”

“I can Jamie, I’m just not that hungry. The main objective was to give me some breathing space and to get you properly fed. You can’t help someone get well if you’re

acutely ill yourself. How long's it been since you had a proper meal? He starves himself. I don't think he means to. Perhaps he does. We can't have two of the living dead lurching about the house, can we?"

The food was good and I ate it in minutes. I kind of thought about the whole self-starvation thing. It was like resisting yourself, a wilful hunger-strike against existence itself.

But I wasn't like that. In fact, I wished I'd had ordered a whole pizza.

"So what do you do," I said, "that you could afford to have the four courses if you wanted to?"

She looked at me. She raised her dark eyebrows.

"Didn't Jim tell you," she said, "I program computers. That's what I do."

"I thought you were a –"

"– I know: you thought I was a nurse. That's usually what Jim says. No. I used to be, but I retrained. I've got a degree in Computer Science, you know. Five years part time at City. I did an access course. I can do computers. C plus plus, all that. I'm in charge of a department of seven men, most of whom still live with their mothers, and one who has ordered a Malay wife, online. Love is in the air."

"No shit."

"Exactly: No shit wages. No shit shifts. No shitty consultants. No shit patients. And no cleaning up shit. A much better way to live. I thought I could make a difference, but bollocks to that. Screw the world and its dying: a woman's got to live her one, little life."

"Fair enough."

“But back to Jim,” she said, going all serious again, “I’m giving you a little task here. I need your help.”

“OK,” I said.

“Please, sometimes I have to have some time to myself – I have my own problems you know: my mother, who is not yet sixty, is in a nursing home, and my brother is in fucking Afghanistan – so please do your best to be kind to Jim. He’s not a well man and he does his best.”

This all was a bit sudden.

“So why did we buy a hundred grams of coke the other month then, if he is so ill? Why did you ask me to go over Brent Cross way with you then?”

“It was a Last Supper sort of thing. It was what he wanted. The idea was to sell most of it and just keep twenty grams for ourselves. That’s not the way it went.”

“More than you know,” I said.

She glared at me.

“I know more than you know, Jamie-boy,” she said, “I just choose not to think about it. I let a lot go. What was it this time then? Did he get pole dancers ’round? Or worse? Spend some time in a few little windowless rooms then, did the pair of you? Lube on the bedside unit, Hed Kandi on the crappy stereo? Was that what it was?”

“No, no, no, nothing like that. I promise. It all was very grown-up.”

(There was this tall girl. She was standing there, in the doorway, watching him fuck. And kissing her neck and her hair caught between my teeth, hiding behind her sharp shoulder-blades while she stood there leaning against the door-frame; and then

voluntary collapse and sitting on the floor between her ankles, reaching up as she stood there; and between her legs: a cataract.)

"I need to get some air," Anaïs said, "I need a cigarette."

She was gone for a while, and for a time I thought she was going to leave me with the bill. She just paced up and down outside. Someone asked her for some spare change and Anaïs told him to fuck off; I could read her lips. Soon she came back though, having done what she needed to do. Her black Berghaus jacket, baubled with rain.

She sat back down and looked me straight in the eye.

"Look James," she said, apparently having pulled herself together, "I don't mean to come across all interfering and bossy. There's a time and a place for that, and it's not here. But please, don't do any lines around him or smoke Thai or anything like that. He needs a safe haven. A little airport in a big electrical storm. That's what he needs. He needs friendship, and people he can trust. Those guys, Big Bob and Henry – and at the end of the day they're just Milton's bitches – they're not Jim's friends. And we can get through this: he's been worse. Believe me this is nothing. We can get through this. This is a small hiccup. The shit he's gone through. Every fuck-up, everything; you name it."

Her tone deepened:

"We've got to take care of him. He's on the edge. It could go either way.

Remember James, I was a nurse, down at Charing Cross hospital. I did some work on the psych-unit there. There's stuff there'd make your toes curl, and it'd make you never, ever want to get high again. It's the closest thing to being in a haunted mansion you'll ever get. You know those ghost-hunting shows, with pop bands and stuff? It's like that, but for real. I've seen it with my own eyes: I know what I'm talking about. People

talking back to the radio; chain-smoking teenagers with no teeth; physical fights, forced meds and restraints for hours, days on end; afternoon séances with plastic cups and incomplete alphabets in the smoking room – sometimes just ‘yes,’ ‘no’ and ‘goodbye,’ and they touch the cup and it zooms about the smoking room floor like one of those robot Hoovers – whilst listening to Bob Marley or Kiss FM. Sigils carved into the bedside units; removed mirrors, the screws still in the wood; suicide attempts every other night; and self-mutilation on a level you just can’t imagine: kids forcing Bics down their throats in the loo; burning their poor fucked feet with cigarettes. Actually just lighting fag-butts from the ashtray, not to smoke, but just to burn. You name it. And all the time they talk a language that none of us could ever understand. You hear the words and you recognise them, and sometimes they’re in the right order, but they don’t quite make sense. Imaginary friends; howls through the night. It’s a world you can’t imagine, Jamie. It’s a world that’s not quite real. It’s like being between-worlds: it’s fucked-up. Christmas is the worst, when the folks come to visit. We put on a spread. It’s like a sick party for autistic kids. And I don’t want my poor Jim going there. I know you think we have a weird relationship, but I love him.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“He’s a really good soul,” she said, “but lost.”

“We’ll get through it.”

“It keeps me up at night,” she said, her face and voice cracking, “I don’t know what to do. I wish we’d never gone to see Milton. I’m such a stupid –”

“– you did what you could.”

She stared down at the empty glass.

“He said he wanted one Last Supper before he went straight. He didn’t fool me: I did.”

She looked up at me with elderly eyes. We finished the bottle and I walked with her to Leicester Square.

“I’ve started the process,” said Anaïs, “I’ve done the hardest bit.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“I’ll probably have to do it again before long. But it takes it out of me.”

Another tiny kiss on the cheek. People pushed past and around us.

“Take care, Anaïs,” I said, hugging her tightly.

“Take care of him,” said Anaïs.

Something’s not right. You go down to the river and you breathe in the mists. There is something there on the bank of the river. You were drawn to water as a child. There’s only a vowel between “drawn” and “drown.” The thing there on the bank of the river. But you can’t get close enough. Blackfriars is not close enough, even as the whirlpools about the feet of the bridge gurgle. Megan said something about that book, didn’t she, people fishing for the dead; dredging for drowners and stealing their jewellery? Dead people’s jewels. They used to have ice fairs in centuries past and sometimes towards the end of the ice people would fall through it. In the night the river would refreeze. It never ices this year but it has, and oranges and rings have been frozen in the ice.

Now, in a drowned dawn, you’re drawn down to it. There is a voice in your head, an old woman’s wise, kind voice. Without thinking you take the District Line from Blackfriars to Bow Road, and then the DLR to Island Gardens. You’ve never been to

these places. It just seems the right thing to do. And you exit the DLR station and walk down towards the shore of the river. The *slap-slop-slop* of the evening rivertide.

You try to walk the Greenwich Foot Tunnel. The white tiles above somehow seem black. The strength of the water above you. You can hear voices calling out their wares in accents you haven't heard before. You see something or other in the Tunnel and turn back, but something keeps calling you on and you turn back about. You press on. Anyway, you figure, don't worry: there's the Thames Barrier up there, out there by Silvertown, the City to your right, while the river thumps the tiles. You are safe and ill. You are subterranean, the worm of the river; there's nothing to be afraid of.

An old woman: the voice is cracked and warm. Press on son, she seems to be saying, I'm here now. No – no – a young girl, can't be more than thirteen, her voice is warm and yet not cracked. She wouldn't hurt anyone, nor blight nor blind. But you get freaked-out – I mean, who follows a voice? – and turn back. You turn back again. Underground, this colony of the dead. You get out on the Deptford side and detour to a grocery store and get a half-bottle of vodka. You wrap it up in the brown paper bag and gulp back enough almost to induce vomiting. OK, if you must, the voice seems to be saying. She doesn't judge you. She'd done it also. You get down to the shore. There is something down there in the mud; maybe it's this thing. Maybe it's a young boy, you don't know. An invisible light. Over in the distance Canary Wharf is blinking, the HSBC sign, the world's local bank, particularly in Mexico, in which, allegedly, the corporation took laundered money.

Not another soul in sight. *Press on, son, press onward to me.* You're safe here, she says. The thing is old and it is young. You feel sure it is female but it keeps changing its voice. But down by the quay in Deptford, there are voices and there are wraiths.

And you can't quite see what it is, down in the mud. But the voice very nearly sings:

Don't leave me here with my cracked paint, among the Cortina radiators, the drinking dens, abandoned paraffin heaters, the mud-skinned signs, press onward to me.

You trudged into the mud. There was nobody to be seen.

Isse. Isse.

Press on to me.

Come in further.

"Where – are you?"

It's so long since I've seen you James, don't be afraid. Remember the days at the beach? Remember treading water in the Solent? The needles. The cable-chairs. Jumping the waves in Newquay? It's just water. It's OK. I don't judge you. I know you're an addict. Don't worry about all that mud. It's OK.

"I remember those times. But I'm not an addict. I've got a girlfriend and everything. She's really nice. And clever too."

You're not what you think you are.

This must be some sort of DT thing. Some sort of comedown. There are too many spirits.

"Please, please leave me alone."

Silence. You can breathe in water, you know. You get used to it.

“Let me go back home now. I’ve been through enough.”

Silence.

“Are you there? I’ll say goodbye then.”

And then I turn to walk to the DLR – I’m not going through that tunnel again – and I feel something on my back but it’s nothing just wind.

There is an old gull with one of her wings trailing in the mud, one shipped oar. She picks the cracks for little things to eat. She’s aggressive. She won’t go down without a fight. But she already has.

And this is what you get when you fuck with this sort of thing, believe me, I know, I’ve heard it, I’ve fucking heard it:

I will infect you with my ancient stain, I will have you in the Dagenham rain – I have to have you – the skeleton houses and the broken lamps, the stinking mud-flats and the knitted tramps, Surrey Quays and Mile End damp, let me love you; the Pepe jeans and the soiled blouses, the broken dreams and the burnt-out houses, the out-of-shot scenes and the Wapping cloud-spills, let me love you.

I’ve fucking heard it. **This is not fiction or metafiction any more.** You can believe what the fuck you want.

I know you, James, I’m there those dawns, you curse the day that you were born. I don’t care who you are [yawn] because I will have you.

My hag-dyed hair and my cracked-vein legs – I will suck you son, to your last dregs – I’ll have you till the wind cries and begs – leave him be: what’s he done to you? – behind the boat-sheds.

You were aborted when you were ten – it's a tough life son, and to be sure some then – but it's too late now to be flushed again – the fog has flayed each soul's placentas – I'm going to eat you when I remove my dentures – I'll be there when you shoot up in shopping centres – don't try to hide in a heroin rain – lie in my bosom of bitumen.

Grandad in a factory, six a.m., Mum on the game; our kid in Southend, but I've no interest in following them, so long as I have you. Look at my eyes now, look what they've seen, this isn't your past now: this isn't a dream. There's a new moon rising – you know what I mean? – wallowing in this swallowing quagmire of dreams.

A figure of dust and an unlucky number, a beast of fire waking from its slumber, shit, boy, you were a sorry lumber – you wish your mother had stayed on the Pill – and I'll have you still.

Your Da making Ma wish for her death; unborn brother laid out on mother's breast, and the visible darkness of the empty nest. You flew because they beat you, and I would too. There's no harm in doing the things that you do. There're people in this river would drown kids like you, but I'll have you still.

"Fuck you."

And I'm out of there. You can call me a coward. But the lights on the mud, the oil on the water, this bridge of sighs/signs: you can deconstruct this if you like. It's what cunts like you do. I've had enough of talking about it. These Iasiacal rites. I can't even speak it aloud. I want to talk about something else. I like boats. Call me Ishmael.

"I wish I could take you back to my old house properly, you know," she said.

"I guess."

"I mean, if my folks were away again. It'd be nice to play all those records we both know all the words to."

"I guess it would."

"I'd love to do that. On the original CDs and everything. Taking them out and putting them in. Or with the folks still at home, you know, downstairs watching *Question Time* or something –"

"– *Time Team*, more like, in my house. After a while it just was turned off. Permanently."

"But we'd have to stay dressed, and all that, overclothes, anyway. Knee-length Königsbrunn Penguins hockey socks and a short skirt. And I know you like that silly goth thing, so I'd do that for you too. And I'd put yesterday's knickers under the pillow, just to get you more *heiss*."

"OK."

"And we'd play all those songs that we know so perfectly we know the tunes backwards. All our old CDs and files."

"You could just import them."

"It wouldn't be the same. You know what I mean."

"I do."

"It'd be good to do it someday, but until they're dead, there's probably no chance. And after they're dead, there's no point."

"True."

"I bet we have the same tastes."

"I bet we do. Do you like the Velvet Underground?"

"Love them. I'm half-Welsh, half-German. I'm contractually obliged to. How about Edith Piaf?"

"Can't get enough of her. How about Penderecki?"

"I can play some of Penderecki. I love Penderecki."

"Exactly."

"Pity we'll never be able to do the going-back-to-my-place thing."

"Pity we'll never do the knickers-under-the-pillow thing. *Geil, meine hase.*"

"There're things that we always will want to do, Jamie, and that we can't."

"Why do you always wear that pyjama top?"

"I'm Welsh. We wear pyjamas."

Sonorous thumping. Dreamthumping, drumming, whistles. Falling off the edge of the world. Slamming of doors somewhere else – *no, here!* Pounding, arbitrary and dissonant, inside, *no, outside!* – the confines of sleep.

– James!

– Jamie!

Crashing and meshed in sleep. Binge and burning, Temazepam and tequila. Oh this. This thing again. *God* do I have to go through this fucking thing again? Great beast of mire rising out of the earth, demonagerie of shadows, enveloping all, a great, last sunset. Opening doors, opening cuts the colour of dusk, all red and brown. Bruises like salami. Screams, here. Sleep till death arrives in a dream. Indivisible darkness.

– what the fuck is that?

She stirs. It's morning. No, it isn't; it's dusk. Not light. Maybe it's not dusk.

Maybe it's morning. She stirs.

- what's going on Jamie?

- I don't know. I don't fucking know.

- You going to go and see?

Bad dreams. Should've taken more Diopothén. Half asleep. Minotaurs in mists.

Witches/girls burning; toenails like cinders. Teeth ripped out. Laughter, righteous at the agony.

- James, wake up will you -

Body quivering. Opening doors. Into the undream.

- James. She shakes me. It's Meg. Can't see her well but I recognise the voice and the pine of hips.

- I'm glad you're here. I like your face.

- But Jamie, there's something going on.

- There's always something going on. You don't know what it's like around here.

- No, I mean it, for real, this time. There's something going on.

- Meg? Meg -

And then the minotaurs. Frothing beasts of flame. The redeemed surrogate jack-o-lanterns in the corridor. Something is beginning to die.

- Meg -

- Check it out you've got to. It's not safe here. I'm no psychic but it's not safe here. We should go back to my place. It's only up the road.

– I'm afraid. I'm afraid.

– I know, but you've got to check this out. I know you're afraid. I'm right behind you.

– I'll take the baseball bat.

It's aluminium and reliable, good at mid- to long-distance. Louisville Slugger.

– Someone in the fucking place Jamie, are you going to sort it out?

There're more voices from the lounge. From within, distress and pity. I am being called. It's Ana, calling my name over and over.

– Jamie-boy fucking get in here will you?

And then:

– Jamie, *you've got to get in here if you're here.*

So I take the key to the padlock and sliver the door and, with the Slugger in my right hand, move into the lounge slowly.

Ana is bloodied. There is much blood.

– what the fuck –

– Yes, Jamie, it's as bad as it looks.

– Who did this to you?

She looks at me. It's not her blood. There's blood everywhere,

She's sitting up. She needs a downer. I pour her some gin and lemonade, and squeeze a 10 mg Temazepam into it. As I give it to her, she's shaking.

– Do you want a joint? I've got some cracking skunk.

She looks at me. She takes the gin and lemonade, realises that there's the jelly in it, and drinks it down in one go, jelly and all. I can make her out in the darkness now.

Sitting up in the dawn – or is it dusk?

– Are you going to go out there, she says. She tenses up. Her face looks old and she won't look at me.

– Do you want some Henry, I say, I've got some clean works from the needle exchange. Box-fresh.

She doesn't look at me.

– Something's happened, she says.

I say nothing.

She looks so old. Megan comes through. Her pretty hair is lank and knotted.

– What's happened? she says.

– Something very bad, says Ana, rocking.

She says to me very quietly, I want to speak to you Jamie. Ana looks at Meg.

– Do you want me to go? says Meg.

– No don't go, please. Just let me work out what's going on. And then we'll get some dinner, right?

– Breakfast. But take as long as you like. I'll just be waiting.

OK, she says, and goes back to my room. I half expect to hear her iPad starting up but it does not. I can hear her breathing. Deep breathing.

Ana looks around her, around the flat. She breathes out very slowly.

– This is worse than ever, she says.

– What is?

– Jim. I’ve just taken him in.

–Where?

– UCLH. He’s just up the road. He’s in –

– Not the psych ward –

– No. Not this time. He was beaten. With something. Just outside here.

– No fucking shit.

– About three-o-clock it happened. We’d had a row. He went off on one. I walked the other way. The next thing I know he’s on the ground, about fifty feet away from me. Someone had hit him in the head and the calf. Some kind of blunt object, I guess a bat or a crowbar or something. Something strong anyway. So now my darling Jim is lying in a hospital bed in UCLH, completely unconscious, while they figure out what to do with him.

– Fucking hell.

– Yes, Jamie-boy. Boyfriend in a coma.

There’s a slice of light underneath my bedroom door, my dear Megan; I don’t want her involved with this sort of thing.

– So what happened?

– Jamie-boy, the mistake we make is asking what happened. We should work more on dealing with it, being faithful to our fuck-ups. The ambulance took about twenty minutes to come for fuck’s sake, then they wouldn’t even let me hold his hand while we got there. The paramedics were nice enough – I told them that I used to be a nurse down at Charing Cross – and they were pretty understanding. But yeah, I couldn’t even hold Jim’s hand. It was really mad. He’s not in a coma exactly; he’s more just

unconscious from the wounds. He's almost certainly got a broken leg but they're not sure – that's just my analysis. The cerebral trauma will be the worst. He might never be himself again, really, it's hard to say.

– What do you mean, never be himself again?

– He could just be a – no Jamie, I can't. I'm his friend you know, his companion. We've had our ups and downs, but he's still my Jim. Don't ask me about that. I'm going to stay here for a few days, to be closer to him, so that I can visit him every day. It's only a walk up Tottenham Court Road. I'll take a few days off work. And you, you'll be here, I suppose?

– More or less. What the fuck should we do now?

– There's nothing we can do is there? He's not going to be well any time soon.

Not unless there's some kind of miracle or something.

– So what do we do?

– Not much else. We wait until things are better, we keep our heads down – don't you realise someone *did* this to him: it wasn't an accident. These boys don't fuck about. We just let the doctors do their work. But we won't let him get sectioned.

Megan went back to her room that night. She asked me to walk her to the bus stop. I waited with her – it must only have been about two – for the night bus. She shivered in her leather jacket and her eyes were all over the place.

“Why do you choose to live with these people?”

“Nowhere else to go. The rent's cheap. The hours're good.”

She shrugged and looked at her feet.

"My rent's cheap but I don't get this."

"Lucky you."

"I don't like it Jamie," she said, "I like you but I don't like this."

She looked right, down Charing Cross Road, to see where the bus was.

"It'll be here in a minute," I said.

People were milling around. Late night Up West. Cunts' night out. White limousines from Hornchurch, lads who you smell before you see.

"Just look after yourself," she said, "I don't want this happening to you."

"But I don't owe anyone thousands of pounds."

"Not yet, dear, not yet."

The N24 pulled around Cambridge circus.

"OK then, you stay safe," I said.

"I should be saying the same to you. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you, you know."

"No, and I won't let anything happen to you."

"Give my regards to the – to the lady that looks after Jim."

"Ana."

"Ana."

And then she's got her Oyster Card out and she gets on the bus, and I watch her pull away. She waves; her yellow hair. And I slowly but very slowly make my way back to the flat, past Moonlight Clive, who doesn't look at me, then up in the lift, down the jack-o-lantern skirting boards, unlock all the locks, and crash on the sofa. The television is on. Ana is nowhere to be seen, I look out into the night.

If I were sick, despite Anaïs's alleged – and truncated – nursing background, then I would not want her to care for me. You would not want it either. You get this with medics. Things like diarrhoea, vomit, and the stropiness that accompanies them, are everyday articles, standard effects. Shitting in front of people is not something that everyone embraces – although there are the elect – but medics, and nurses in particular, are immune to spectacle. Perhaps medics make good lovers on account of this, or perhaps they do not, for the same reason. Perhaps an element of the squeamish is desirable in a lover. German nurses are the worst. There you are, lying on a table with a fucked knee from being forced to play football and having fractionally more stupidity than skill, and they're trying to straighten your leg. You're ten years old and crying and saying nasty things in German, and you're being generally uncooperative, and they say, if you don't keep still then I can't help you. But you can't keep still because it hurts. It's like being forced to keep still during an orgasm – which has its merits, in certain situations – but the opposite. But pleasure and pain are one and the same when it comes to medics, and so are the bodily fluids that accompany them.

Ana had taken time off of work.

"I'll clear it up," she said.

I could've done without that announcement. I was thinking of putting egg boxes on the walls.

He wasn't finished yet.

It is funny, I mean, actually humorous, just how the sighs of pain are so akin to roars of pleasure. Megan's noise-cancelling headphones would've been useful at this point.

"Vomit in the sink or the bath, honey, come on sweetie, not on the floor. Please try."

She came in later and told me to run a bath. She said it had to be lukewarm. It shouldn't be cold, she said, that'd give him a chill – or worse – but it shouldn't be hot either, because that'd be a shock to the system. He had a fever, that's for sure, but he didn't have pneumonia.

"I've gone through this with him a few times," she said, "this time isn't as bad as before. Not yet anyway."

She stayed over for a while and the place smelled of bleach and blueberry bubble bath. There was a tub of Body Shop bubble bath on the side which had a monkey on it and then it didn't. He seemed to spend more time in the bath, with his leg up, than anywhere else, which for me confirmed beyond reasonable doubt that he was an amphibian. Sometimes he'd vomit in the bath and Ana would hose him down like a sick alligator. All of this made me wonder about their love. Ana would shrug and get on with it. I wondered if they ever had become engaged. They didn't seem like that sort of couple to me. Some people get engaged early, and soon the gold ring becomes collateral to buy, say, a television. Some are engaged late, say, after a condom splits, or a Catholic dream goes wrong, or simply because there's nothing else to do. There is a continuum of love, it seems, of things like engagement, marriage, parenthood, symbiotic loathing,

adultery; and then conservatories, decking, lawnmowers, and general and specific horticulture. Some flirt with religion in its various guises; others just flirt. But I never saw a ring on Anaïs's finger, nor Jim's. Perhaps they just had brandings or something.

But she was kind, in a manner of speaking. Her money and business sense were useful. She and Catriona took all of the coke and sold it up at St Albans in one weekend. She got Jim a new phone, five-a-day fruit that ended up looking like something out of Caravaggio, life-threatening degrees of takeaway food, and a rolling-contract broadband thing for his iPad so that he could view unlimited pornography. She also had the locks changed, at great expense.

I didn't see him much during this time.

About ten days in he started to move about the house. After her time off, Ana had to go back to work. I did everything I could. We played more video games. He particularly was keen on the Basketball game.

Every now and again he'd ask me to go out to get some Jack Daniel's. He said that while Laphroaig was better, Jack Daniel's reminded him of good times. No, I said. Fuck you, he'd say.

"Don't have anyone around," Ana had said.

I had looked at her.

"Not even your college-y girlfriend, what's her name?"

"Megan."

“Megan. Oh yes, the pretty one with the Chelsea accent. Well don’t have her over. Don’t have anyone over, no one at all.”

“OK.”

She had looked at me in that I-don’t-think-you-understand-me way.

“No one is to see him like this. The poor guy’s still got some pride.”

“I’ll make sure. I promise.”

But she had a point. He’d get up and hobble about the flat, looking deep out into the night.

“Look at that,” he’d say.

“What?” I’d say.

“Look at them man, the streets are full up with them.”

“Yeah.”

“I see my grandpa down there. He’s alive now. He loves Gene Kelly. I bet it’ll rain soon. He loves the rain. Dancing and singing in the rain.”

Ana had said: “Not even your college-y girlfriend. You see he’s been sectioned before. It’s naïve little girls like – what’s her name again?”

“Megan. I told you, her name’s Megan.”

“Megan. There weren’t any Megans on my estate. Not even in St Albans. Naïve girls like her’d say he’d be best looked after by carers. *Carers*. The state. Men in white coats. They pump them up with anti-psychotics. It’s easier. Anti-psychotics bring on the Parkinson’s symptoms; I’ve seem Jim in that state. I had to feed him because he couldn’t

get the fork to his mouth. Got it all over his shirt. No. Not this time. We're going to do this together, in the home. Together. You're involved, Jamie, don't you forget that. You were involved the day he took you in. He didn't have to. He's got no family. He's got us. He's got no family. Don't you forget this. You're involved. Don't forget that."

"I won't."

That's what we had said, that's what we said. She wasn't crying.

Ana must have had understanding bosses. She was around most of the time. She didn't put any make-up on – not that I could tell, anyhow – and seemed to hang about most-times in one of Jim's old bathrobes, the one with the hood and that. She never seemed to go out so much. Katrina or, rarely, Catriona would come by and deliver groceries when she was back from Cambridge and sleeping with Jim and Ana; or Ana'd send me out to the Sainsbury's on Tottenham Court Road or the Tesco down in Covent Garden to get stuff. Just stuff like pizza, milk, and things like that. She sent me down to Holland and Barratt in Charing Cross Road to get a whole bunch of shit, and I didn't understand what any of it did.

The painkillers knocked him out pretty much every night, and Ana slowly dispensed sedatives. She hadn't begun to reduce them just yet. The flat was pretty silent. We'd unplugged the television, but even then it had the habit of turning itself on in the middle of the night, and Ana couldn't be bothered with the radio. She'd text her friends, or fuck about with the computer or whatever, but it was very quiet.

I'm not saying we became close; that'd be ridiculous, but she told me stuff and I told her stuff and generally we tried to get on. She was a bit like that character in that

story we had to study in school by Raymond Carver in that she acted sometimes as though I were blind. But she talked, and I wondered why she talked, but she talked anyhow.

I'm not saying she made me uneasy. It's just that I've always felt more comfortable around other people to her. And from me that's saying something.

"Your curse was being pretty," she said, one night, "and you never take other people seriously. No one's ever told you you're pretty. And that's partly why you never take other people seriously."

"I take Jim seriously," I said.

"More than he does," she said.

"He does his best," I said.

"You're a smartarse," she said. "No one likes a smartarse."

She sat on the sofa, which still was crusted with a little of Jim's blood, and looked at the unplugged television. She still had her jeans on, thank goodness, and a chunky black jumper. I don't know if she thought she was playing the Big Sister card, but if she was, then it wasn't working.

"So," I said, "you got time off of work. He appreciates that."

"Yes," she said, "they don't really give a shit. I'm contracting at the moment."

This meant nothing to me.

"It means megabucks when you're working, and fuck all when you're not. You don't exactly get a Bupa plan. Like you and your piano lessons. If they don't turn up, or if you've got a cold, then you don't get paid. But it's good money if you can hack it."

She lit a candle on the coffee table. Things would have been better were there music.

“You’re taking good care of him, though.”

“Thanks.”

There is so much silence in the world, and the world is the better for it.

“But you used to be a nurse, right?”

She shifted a little and pulled at the neck of her jumper. The rustle of the wool on her neck was the loudest thing I had heard in a while.

“Yeah, back in the days when I wanted to make a difference. We’ve had this conversation, remember?”

I looked at her.

“You’re getting as bad as Jim. Yes, Jamie, once I did give a shit.”

There is music somewhere and there is light. There is little of one and none of the other here.

“Gave a shit?”

“Yeah, I worked in a nursing home, down in Bromley for a while.”

“Bromley?”

“Yes, it sort of wants to be in London – and it is in Greater London – but really, if we’re honest, it’s in Kent. A lot of people in Kent are like that, actually – they want to think they’re in London but they just commute. *The Garden of England*. Fuck that. The torture garden of England.”

She sort of laughed but it wasn’t much of a laugh.

“Sounds pretty grim.”

"You have no idea."

She took out a cigarette. Then she went to her holdall that she'd brought and took out a half bottle of gin.

She didn't need to say anything.

I got a glass from the kitchen after I'd checked on Jim.

"I went to a nursing home once," I said, "it was where my granddad died."

"The modern death," said Ana, pouring the gin, "the way we die now."

"It's better to die in a hotel fire or something," I said.

"For once we agree."

It was pretty fucking bizarre, talking to this person, who usually was so distant. I didn't like her and she didn't like me. She smelled of oils and sweat, hard work and boredom.

"I'll tell you what," said Ana, "I'd rather die in almost any circumstances than in a nursing home."

The things – the hallucinated things from memory, or meta-memory – seemed to prick up their ears at this.

"I told you that Bromley is pretty much in Kent."

"Yes."

"Well, most of the residents were from Kent. Some had come to live closer to London because that's where their sons or daughters lived and worked. Not all of them, but some of them, the ones with the good sense to get out."

"Like you from St Albans?"

"Exactly." She took a slug of gin.

And then she just went off on one.

“There was this lady. An old lady. Really very old. She was the one – or rather it was the others and the way she was dealt with – that made me give up nursing and go into L.T.

“She was this old lady called Elsie, and she was the kindest, sweetest old thing that you’ve ever seen. She had a room of her own, which wasn’t always the case, and I cleaned her room and she was very clean and very cool and, although sometimes a bit irascible – is that the word? – I made a mistake and began to like her; I became her friend: she was all good things to me.

“She had dementia. She held on to the things she could; she was really clever, apparently. In her room there was an old picture of some bloke with a moustache, in uniform. I learned about dementia for a while, and it’s a cruel way to go, especially if you’ve got family. It’s really harder on the family, the doctors say, but how do they know? They’ve never had dementia. It’s easy to say it’s hard for someone else when you’ve never experienced it yourself. So anyway, she had family – a son and his wife; a daughter and her boyfriend – but they couldn’t really care less. They’d come – out of duty and covetousness – is that the word?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, they wanted her big house. That’s why they were there. Every now and again I’d notice official forms.”

“I’ve heard it can happen.”

“They wanted her big house and they came along, at first once a week and then once a fortnight, and then, as she got worse, once a month.”

"That's commitment."

She poured more gin, saying: don't let Jim know. He'll relapse.

"No worries," I said."

"Towards the end," Ana said, "well, this old lady, she'd sit by the window every night. When others were trying to watch the TV, she'd just be off on one, just staring out of the window. Which was nothing unusual. There wasn't even much out of the window; just a tiny garden with a pond about three feet square and a few bushes. There weren't even any trees; just a fence. And all the others would be watching *EastEnders* and *Holby City* but she was just staring out of the window. She would sit at a table. It was her table, in her head, I suppose, but in real life it was anyone's table. Nobody's table. But to her, it was her table."

"Fair enough."

"But for most people, they just sit at a table, have a cup of tea, or Horlicks or something, and that's it."

"That's what my Dad does. Even Megan does it."

"That's the girl –"

"– yes."

Ana pulled her jumper down a bit more, down to her neckline, but it wasn't so hot in the room.

"She would sit by the window all night. Just one night a week for a few weeks, and then go to her room. Then, after a while, it was a few nights a week, and then every night. It was always at night. From about eight until about ten. It was summer then.

She'd watch it getting dark and she was getting to be in her own little world I suppose. I suppose it might happen to either of us, who knows?"

"But death can enter through ten thousand doors."

"What? Well, anyway, after a while, while she was sitting at the window at night, while the others were watching *Holby* or *Bargain Hunt*, and I was getting her medication ready and making tea, and this other nurse – Janie, her name was – was making tea for them and getting them their biscuits, I heard this tapping. And I thought something was wrong with the pipes or something, because it was quite loud. It started then.

"Then it was the whispering. Weird words I couldn't understand. They didn't seem to make any sense. Weird language like a spell or something in code."

"A spell is a code. And a code is a spell. Both are easy to make and hard to break."

"No one likes a smart-arse, Jamie; I'm being serious you dick. Save your smartarse shit for Megan, until she finds someone smarter than you."

"I'm sorry."

"And she was whispering these words and it was in this weird language. And all of this was while the others were watching TV and they were getting really fed up with it. All that tapping through their soap operas."

"No shit."

"And they'd shout out at her to shut up or whatever, or some of them would. When it got dark, she'd still be there, looking out into the window. But because it was dark – or near-dark – she couldn't see out. It must have been like looking into a mirror.

She had white hair. They all do. But she was looking out into the night and just getting her white hair and her wrinkles and everything and her eyes –”

“ – and her memories –”

“ – exactly – and her eyes. Just looking back at her.”

I stood up and looked at the window. I sort of got what Ana meant. Just my eyes, and my memories – and somehow the future – just looking back at me. I went to my room and got a bottle of vodka. Ana nodded and I poured. Ana added some tonic.

“She’d shout out random things. Numbers, usually,” said Ana, “all I could see of her was her face in the window, but it was almost as good as just looking at her face, because of the dark. She’d shout out random things. Numbers, places. I didn’t know what they meant at the time. And I asked the other staff what they meant, but no one knew anything or cared. They just got her to bed nice and early and she’d do roughly the same thing in her room. But she seemed to need someone to hear her.”

I told Megan about this later, when the summer came. She said it’d all gone a bit Alice Munro, but I didn’t know what she meant.

“As summer got into autumn – Jim’d call it ‘fall’ – she did it more and she was starting to really piss off the other residents. On one of the last times her son and his new wife came, he told me what it might be. At this point she could hardly recognise anyone; she was in her own little world good and proper now. She was like – how could I put it? – in a maze that she’d never find the way out of. Well, they told me about it and it turns out that in the war she was one of the women who worked for the WAAF. Waifs. Wives. The Women’s Auxiliary Air Force. She’d originally been to Cambridge of all places, and then in the war, she guided pilots by radio, and through Morse Code, working on the

southeast coast of Kent, places like Battle and Dover all of that, and she was guiding the pilots out of harm's way."

"Fuck."

"Well, that's not all. She got friendly with, and, as happens, soon married one of the pilots. It was a rush wedding; there were a lot of those in those days apparently, sometimes without proper – um – ceremony. He flew a Spitfire and – in her more lucid moments – she later told me that he was a bit of a flyboy, as Jim would say. A real sky captain. The Kent Downs are really beautiful, they really are, and the Kent coast, the cliffs, and just over the border, Beachy Head, it's gorgeous – where people throw themselves off – and all the rest in Kent, Whitstable, Deal, all these little places, they're really nice, and the downs and beaches must look great from the air. Can you imagine flying a plane over these places, and in wartime too? And this is the weirdest thing: she was actually guiding *him* – I'm not sure if she'd know it was him or not – it was likely kept from the women because they formed relationships sometimes with the pilots – yet it was possible – across the channel and all that."

"How the fuck do you know all of this?"

She shifted again, and took another sip of gin.

"Well, Mary and me, we phoned up and then we went to this museum in Kent, and then we had a look at some records. Mary was great with this. She's a real genius you know; she could do anything. You missed out there. And she's a great fuck too. Anyway it turned out this old lady wasn't making it up. I mean, with dementia, can you make stuff up? Can you even know the difference between fiction and truth? I admit it'd be the sort of thing I'd like to do, to make shit up in my last days, say I'd had sex with

Stephen Hawking or something, but can it be that way? But yes, it was all true. And she was one of the brave girls – she'd only have been twenty or so – who fought for Britain.”

“That’s a cool story. But why did this make you leave nursing?”

“Well, they actually got married. During the war. Can you imagine that? A war bride, but not to an American. And then, in the Battle of Britain, just as she was sending those messages, well –”

“– yeah –”

“He was –”

“– Yes. It was him up there. Firing at the Nazis. She could have been sending messages to him without knowing for sure he was dead.”

“Fuck that shit.”

“She actually could have been sending him messages thinking he was someone else, after he was dead, crashed, burnt alive in his fuselage. But then, six decades later, she was still tapping out and speaking coded messages to the airmen of World War Two, and her new husband, who never got to be old, sitting there old, in her nursing home.”

“Coding out to ghosts. Protecting these slurried marshes.”

“Well, if you must put it like that. But either way it was sad.”

“But that’s not the reason to leave nursing. Why go? Sounds like you were lovely.”

She crossed her legs.

“I am lovely. You’ll never know how much. You had your chance. I can’t remember much about it. But seriously. Something really horrible – Jim would say *fucked-up* – happened.”

I swallowed hard.

“Do I really want to know this? This isn’t the end of the story is it?”

“I don’t know, but I feel like telling it.”

The story of my life.

“Well, like I said she really was pissing people off. She started doing it at all hours, at the breakfast table, and in the afternoon during those property programmes and all that. She was tapping out Morse Code over breakfast, sending messages to dead airmen over her Cornflakes. But she was a feisty one. Even divided from reality she still kicked arse, and she got annoyed sometimes. So Hayley – one of the staff – and Janey started to wind her up.”

“What?”

“Yeah, they told her every few days that her husband was coming back to see her, and that he’d take her home.”

“For fuck’s sake.”

“Yeah. And that’s when I gave my notice in. I hit Hayley square in the jaw before I went and I poured a jug of boiling water over Janey. It seemed like the polite thing to do.”

“Nice one.”

“But I never really learned anything else about Elsie. I just remember her tapping out the Morse Code, speaking the strange language of the RAF, and looking out of the

window, and then every few minutes – and I mean minutes – at the door, waiting for her dead husband to walk in.”

“People truly are terrible things.”

“Yes. And that’s why I work with computers. They have no personality, not a byte of malice, nothing. I couldn’t stay there and watch Elsie go through with that, because, because of her disease, it wouldn’t matter what I said – that they were winding her up and that she was terribly abused – and it wouldn’t matter what I said to her son or her new daughter-in-law, because they only were interested in the big house. Each time she was told that her husband was coming back – it must have happened a hundred times – because of her disease, she believed it. And she sat there, each time, happy and waiting, just like in 1941, hopeful but scared what to say, but she was waiting for nothing. And all for a punishment and a trick that arseholes played on her. Just for a laugh.”

We sat there for a long while, finishing off the vodka. Ana took her jumper off. There wasn’t much underneath. We sat there again, for a long while. She had a mole just under her left breast, and a little birthmark above her navel. I’m off to bed I said. Me too she said. She went into the bathroom and I could hear her brushing her hair, then her teeth. She went into Jim’s room and I could hear her jeans falling to the floor. I heard her lie down next to him. He was sedated.

But Elsie’s eyes, just looking back at herself in the window. Not knowing where she was, in a delight or a purgatory of dementia, throwing her soul to the sky, the Royal Air Force safe as possible with her guidance, her eyes, her eyes, seeing her own eyes in

the window; her own, own other eyes, setting her soul ready to scramble a last time, to leave, to wheel, and to climb, and to leave this whore of an earth behind.

The city is in your blood now – along with the rest. Love and poison. There is blood and shit under your foreskin and the taste of blood and shit and come of all stripes, on your tongue and in your throat. The cystitis kills. Occasionally you clean your teeth but it's no use. Come clings to your teeth like no other substance. The come in your mouth, the fucking and the slipperiness, and the rimming and the slow release. You walk the streets as part of the streets, immanent with the machine of the city. Now you are part of the past, and of the vast, beating living cadaver of the metropolis, one of the last million ones standing. You have become part of its pestilence and its holiness. It is impossible to sleep and it is impossible not to sleep. Weeks go by without your noticing; moonlit days go by; you lie down in the days and in the nights in a peristaltic coma, a nuclear heaven of blood and sperm, scentless oil-free lube, Ulster incense and angel-feathers. Whole weeks pass without your ever seeing the sun. You share threadbare beds with anonymous ghosts, wraiths and seraphim who get dressed in the morning and can't wait to leave. They look at you in the morning like you're shit, like they can't believe what so lately they've done. You're a bad influence. The place smells of human shit. You cover up the mirrors for fear of what you will see, and yet you angle the broken mirror in the bedroom better to see the flesh, the down, the lips; and darkly to study the muscles tautening and tightening in the near-dark, the organs, dilating and engorging, and then releasing. Cries of happiness and sighs of sadness. You fuck all night long because the drug you're on will not let you come – your cooling sweat pooling like rain down a

window – or you try for half an hour to get hard because another drug renders you impotent and you end up using your fingers and your mouth. Either way you're nothing to write home about. The city is in your blood now and every morning you are sick. *You went down to the river and you made a pact.* That's what happened. Now there's no going back. You sit on the toilet and shit lava into the hideous bowl, and at the same time you vomit into the basin. You buy special toilet wipes because your arse is fucked-up. The shit isn't the way it used to be; it smells like old men's shit, end-of-life-care faeces. It's sticky and yellow. The whole apartment stinks like a cross between a brothel and a nursing home; Kleenex and spermicide. And you cough all of the time. Acid reflux, some Malaysian med-student girl told you, her beautiful black hair and her kind, disbelieving eyes. You asked her to fuck you in her lab coat and she laughed and told you to get a fucking life. Sometimes you have to cough just to breathe, just to get a half-lung-full of air. Your gums bleed like Dorset sunsets. You walk about the apartment each afternoon, as though it's possessed. There are bright green sparks along the corridor and you can't stand them. The apartment is haunted more and more; each day that the ghosts come by. [Someone once bleached themselves here, Moonlight Clive told you after he'd fallen off the wagon. The thing about security guards is they see everything. They've got CCTV, eagle-eyes, and they have nothing else to do but to listen and to watch. The girl was a dancer. A funny sort. Bulimic and beautiful. Apparently she had the most striking bright green eyes. She drank it. Like drinking a liquid moon. She must have hated her insides. But she changed her mind and got as far as the corridor, almost to the lift, then painted the town red, white, and then black. Through some miracle someone heard and called the paramedics. They came and all that was to be done was to

go to the freezer and to feed ice cubes into her throat while she lay there and died. It's probably bullshit. Don't worry, it's just a story. It didn't really happen.]

The apartment smells of sweat and shit. The buggery and the blood. Your own room, where most-days you sleep, smells like a champagne and oyster bar; but the champagne is cheap spilt Italian pissfuck; and here too, the shit and blood of Wednesday night sex inhere like dying and dead relatives. Poppers and GHB dilate your old soul; week-old condoms harden into seaweed on the floor. You eat and drink sex; it's all you live on. You are vivisectioning yourself. For you have become lab-rat, in these elliptical, ecstatic nights. There are blonde, black, and ginger hairs, and old grey blood, on the bedsheets. Each day you walk the apartment and it is haunted. You shit eight times a day. It's not post-anal gentleness, like after you make love in the arse; and then to the bathroom when your lover softly sits on your lap as you shit, and strokes your hair, and kisses you like when you were sixteen, and stares into your eyes.

Each day you puke. You shit blood. You puke come and blood. You watch the live psychics. The Saturday nights, the sodomy and the sweat. You glow like stars. The patient leaflets warn against coma: you court it. You weep each day. You ask Big Bob how much it costs to get a .22. It costs too much. There are ghosts piling up under the bed: broken families, dead relatives, the forgotten and the lost. The city is in your blood and the blood and mucus and semen are in your shit – you have made a pact with the river ghosts, a pact you won't forget – and, in this haunted apartment near the shore of ancient waters – as the river spirit told you, in her type-o-negative kohl and her dazzling halo of subaqueous stars – she wants you down there, down on her down there – drowning into the blue, becoming-treasure; becoming Gaffer Hexam's silk and pearls;

yes, it is true: here in your cell as it is in the arms of the river, there is poison and vomit, and blood, and shit, and ghosts.

We went to a Premier Inn on the South Bank and he'd got them 'round again. He got a disabled room because of his cast, with a special shower and an extra-low bed. I sat in the room looking out at the rain. The katana glinting in the neon, sticking out of the holdall. Music playing in the room, some electronic stuff, I don't know. I suppose the girls probably chose the music, I don't know how it works. Do the escorts choose the music or does the client? Maybe he chooses the music, I don't know and I don't care.

They were perhaps sixteen, seventeen, I don't know. A dark girl and a tall girl. Girls can look like women whenever they like, I don't know how old they were. A sky-blue tracksuit one of them, a Lidl mum; tight blue jeans, the other one. She had her hood up, stood there by the open blinds. Her nipples showed even through the nylon. The sodiums through the blinds cast bars over her young chest, stringing her like an instrument, caging her in light.

I paid good money for this, he said, come on Jamie-boy, it'll be fun. They were standing up and then they were sitting down. They didn't look much like strippers. Are you sure these are strippers, I said. Yeah, they're strippers, kiddo, he said, I didn't order pizza. That's Karen, and that one over there, that's Fiona. Yeah, that's our names, one of them said. They're from Glasgow, he said, well one is. One of the girls nodded. I'm from Glasgow, she said. You don't know me, the other one said, you don't know me. You don't know me, you don't know either of us, the other one said.

You girls want a drink, Jim said. All right they said. Me and all, I said. He went and opened the mini-bar and poured some whisky. It was a miniature. It's Scottish, he said, I don't give this to just anyone. The brunette laughed but the tall one didn't. You need to pay us now, before, said the tall one. All right, said Jim. He took out an envelope and gave it to her. She opened it and counted the notes. All right, she said. I sat down on the sofa. You're generous, Joey. There's more, if you're up for it, said Jim, giving them the drinks. This whisky is older than you, he said.

Will we use this table, the Glaswegian said. Whatever, Jim said, chopping up the line. She looked over. Johnny-boy, said Jim, sorry, Jamie-boy. I took a note and brought it in.

We just need something to do it on, she said. It was night already. You can do it wherever you like, Jim said, we don't care. They sort of had a quick chat. You're American, one said.

Can we use your bathroom then Joey, the Scottish girl said. She had a neck like an emu. All right, said Jim. Do you need some works, he said, I don't want your works in my bathroom. If you need works, I can give you works. Fresh works from the Exchange. We don't do that shit, the Scottish one said, we just need to go to the bathroom to change out of our clothes and do our make-up and that. All right then, Jim said. They went to change together. Both of them had backpacks. There's nothing worth stealing, Jim yelled after them, not unless you're into toothpaste and Toilet Duck.

Yank cunt, I thought I heard one of them say. I got the sword out of the holdall.

They were gone a long while and we drank more. Then they came out and they looked proper Achilles' shield shit.

You can stay if you like, said Jim, if you're good. His dark eyes under his hair. Neither of them said anything, just looked him up and down. I kind of started to feel sick. Let's rack them up again, Jim said. All right, I said. He sort of looked at me. The redhead looked up from her backpack. Maybe we should have some acid, he said, I've never seen strippers on acid. Watch them, he said. He went to his room and came out with another small bank-bag intended for pound coins. He very poured about four grams onto the back cover of a copy of *Guitar Player*.

Fucking hell, said the tall one, looking at the door. She wasn't Scottish; she sounded like she came from Manchester or somewhere like that. You want some of this, said Jim. Fucking A, said the tall one. He tried to cut the lines up with the sword but he wasn't getting anywhere – he cut his finger and the blood got in the coke – so he got out his American Express card and chopped up a few. There was an advert with a pink background and a girl with a pointy ESP guitar. Against the pink background the lines looked like vapour-trails over Shoeburyness at eventide.

They'd put perfume on and everything. Body Shop stuff – the bottle was sticking out of one of the backpacks, with the lube. I'm not having the one with your blood in it, said the Scottish girl. Fair enough, said Jim. He rolled up a twenty euro note and brought it in. Use mine he said.

And there it was, Jim and I, and two strangers half his age, Hoovering it up in the bright London winter.

Doing anything nice for Christmas, said Jim.

Yeah, said the tall one, family.

We watched a bit of television and Jim brought through a bottle of Glenfiddich, and about twenty minutes later when it'd really kicked in, one of the girls – probably slightly younger – said to the other, well, here we go then. She turned down the lights and closed the blinds. Then they danced, out of time and out of synch, to some Gwen Stefani song; and then they took off their clothes, until only their ribbons remained; and then there was all of the rest; and they didn't seem to mind so much as I did that Jim was masturbating. Afterwards, the girls so naked and so young, he chopped more lines up – oh God I can't, oh God please no – and they seemed almost happy. One of them talking nineteen-to-the-dozen about being a model and the other wiping her mouth, nose and chin, over and over, even after washing her face twice in the bathroom, and Jim said: you might as well stay, and gave them some more money. For the first time – no I can't say it, no I *can't* say it – no, I can say it – for the first time, I wanted him to be dead.

Her body like a ghost: cold, perfect, grey.

Yes, I wanted him to be dead that night, and I wanted to be very dead too, but I went to bed on the floor after they fucked us, and looked up through the invisible ceiling, thinking about Megan. I'll say it now, she was everything to me. Jim shouted from the bed, do you want some of this too, man? Do you wanna get some more of this, man, they're on me? They're good together man, better than the last ones; you're so fucking prudish. Come on Jamie, yelled the Scottish one. They can wash you know dude, you know, they can jump up and down in the shower; get me out of them; *they don't give a fuck*: you're so fucking shy, you're such a fucking queer. *In for a penny, in for a pound*. The Mancunian yelled something equally perfect. I pretended not to hear her or him, as the staged teenage giggles died down and the poor, circus elephant moans

came, pushing their irremovable ways, into the morning, as he had the pair of them again.

From the moment I came in and locked the locks, there was the strangest of noises in the flat. It was quite high pitched, random but repetitive, and sounded like something you hear on a rerun of a sixties sci-fi series like *Lost in Space* or something. I raised my head to look over the sofa, and there he was. His leg was propped up on a pillow on the floor and his crutch lay over to the left. His hair was tangled and flecked with psoriasis.

He didn't say anything.

On the coffee table there were two small JBL active monitors and a Boss recorder. It seemed to be looping something. I shivered a little.

The strange noise was coming from the monitors.

"You all right?" I said.

No response.

"Hey, Jim?"

I walked around to the window and noticed it was open. This was a new thing. I looked back at him and he looked like he was meditating.

"Jim, man?"

He looked up. He must've had help or something to get down on the floor.

"Jamie boy," he said.

It was a very bright afternoon.

"You all right?"

The noise continued.

“Yep.”

A green guitar was slung by a wide leather strap, around his bony body. Three empty bottles of Diet Coke lined the sofa. I'd never seen that guitar before. Previously he'd played classic stuff – Strats, and even the Les Paul – but this was different. It had a little hole in the body, like a carrying handle, and a huge recess at the bridge, as though some big cat had clawed away the wood. He wasn't touching the strings so much, but the vibrato unit was getting a lot of action.

“What are you doing, man?”

“Transcribing.”

“Do you want me to leave you alone?”

No response. Little whistles and whoops from the monitors.

On the coffee table there was one page of manuscript paper, covered in notes. But the notes weren't normal notes: there were numbers all over the place. Not like tablature, but actually on the notes, fractions and decimal places. Stuff like “[^]11” or “#.8” and stuff like that. I guess he used whichever system appealed to him at the time.

“What are you working on man?”

He didn't look up.

“Birds,” he said.

He stopped the Boss tracker. Then I could hear it, he'd opened the windows so that he could hear the birds. This far up there was still the roar of the traffic, but much muted. Up here, with the windows open, you could hear the chatter and cooing of the pigeons. It sounded rather like the loop on the tracker.

“Cool, huh?” he said, “you can hear the birds up here. I never noticed it. Imagine all the things in life that you never notice. It’s enormous.”

“I suppose so,” I said.

And then I looked down at the manuscript paper again.

“I opened the window in the bedroom,” he said, “and then I noticed –for the first time ever – these birds.”

“I guess. I’ve never really opened my window much. It kind of smells.”

He ignored this.

“So I just sat in bed and grabbed some paper, and transcribed some of it. I couldn’t really keep up with it so I recorded it a bit and then sat back and did a few minutes of it. It’s nuts what they say to each other. It’s like a little fucking language, man. It’s mainly aggressive or seductive – and sometimes both – but hey, all language is, isn’t it? That’s all language is.”

“I don’t know.”

“But I wrote it down and I couldn’t help it: I had to see if I could play it. The Strat wasn’t any good. I tried the slide, but I’m no bottleneck player. So I got this old thing out. Put some new strings on it and stretched them in. This Jem. Plays fucking great.”

He looked over at the notation and pressed a button on the Boss, and played what was on the paper. Most of it was with the vibrato, making the most bizarre noises, but they weren’t bizarre: they were just bird calls. He played it down to the end of his notes and then played a bit more, then looked up and almost smiled.

“There we go, huh, the language of birds.”

"Fuck yeah."

After looping it he played some chords under it. Big stretchy chords, ninths and thirteenths, like Andy Summers. Then he looked up at me like sort of embarrassed and said:

"Hey, can you help me up? I'm gonna get worse fucking piles if I sit here for another minute longer."

"Sure," I said, taking the guitar from him – the loop was still going – and gently placing it on the armchair. I put my arms under his and lifted him onto the sofa.

"Thanks man," he said, "I was sort of counting on you coming home."

I didn't tell him that, were it not for a night-class that Megan had to attend – yoga, I think – I probably would have been with her at least until morning. The thought of him pissing himself after transcribing the birds was a bit too much.

The buzzer rang and I thought something wasn't going to go well.

"Hey, is Jim there," she said.

"Yes, up to a point."

I buzzed her in.

"You look good," I said.

She took a look about the place. She had a small plastic bag from Cargo, and a smaller, paper one from Carluccio's.

"Is Anaïs here too?" she said.

"Not yet. She'll be here after work."

"OK."

She sort of looked at me.

"I brought a Christmas tree," she said.

I looked at my hands.

"It's nothing much but maybe it'll cheer him up," she said, "you wee bunch of atheists."

"But aren't you an atheist?"

"Yes, but let me pretend to be me."

I looked at my feet.

"Thanks for the Christmas tree," I said.

"Will I put it on the table?" she said.

"Sure, why not?"

She got the Christmas tree out of the small bag and put it on the table.

"Shall I plug it in?" she said.

"I don't know."

She took the plug and put it into the socket, and switched on the mains. And there were these little blue lights all over the plastic boughs of the tree. It must have been about half-a-metre high, something like that. But it looked pleasant, not unlike a cooling tower out east. In fact it sharpened up the lounge quite well.

"Maybe I'll get one for my room," I said.

She didn't say anything.

"I think that he's asleep," I said, "Catriona will be around soon."

"Is she your girlfr –

" – no. She's a friend, mainly of Jim's."

“Oh. I get it. But Ana’s’ll be –”

“– she’ll be here after work. Very soon.”

It was very dark already, save for the blue lights of the little Christmas tree.

“Look,” I said, “I’ve been working all day so I’m going to have a sleep. Make yourself at home. There’s wine in the fridge. I think it’s champagne actually.”

“Sure,” she said.

“Or Cava. Actually it might just be White Lightning.”

“OK.”

So I went back to my room and lay back. I took a pill and soon I slept. When I woke up about five hours later Ana was home, Catriona had come along, and Mary and Ana were in Jim’s room, and despite everything, it sure sounded like they were OK.

And then all the rest. She was silver in the dark. A ghost came by. Ana stared like she was trying to learn a language. After a divorce two of the things that people want to do is to get a haircut and to fulfil a fantasy – a threesome or more, a whipping, anything – they should’ve gotten it out of their systems before they signed up to the contract. Well these things, they’re not as good as they sound, and better. But at the end of it all, you just lie about, laughing, in a pool of sweat and all of the rest. And you hate each other.

The day before Christmas Eve a student came over and I taught him F minor and a few uses for it. We also had a look at some basic harmonisations. I wished him a merry Christmas and he seemed not to be too fussed. I told him that F was a bright key but

flattening the third and seventh made it pretty sad but not as sad as natural minor. It was sad and not so sad at the same time. Not everyone agrees on this.

I fall in love with the dying and the dead. I meet with them in dreams, in daydreams, in symbols and half-remembered visions. These grey mountains. London is supposed to be civilisation, but it's a cemetery of shadows and love. There is no civility in love, no civilisation in shades. I am part of this, part of that from which you look away. You catch me in the corner of your eye; you can't help but try to see; but I'm over the way, under the underpass. You half-see us. We're there in the circles left by your chilled glass; we're there in the rain on your little son's stroller. You don't want to see us lest you fall in love with us. We seduce ghosts. We speak in the falling waves. We're the shit under your fingernails and the spunk and piss in your underwear. No one living knows us. We are the silence beneath your refrains, the specks of dust in your webcam. You don't want us and we don't want you. You want us and we don't want you. You half-hear us. We're there in the dialing tone when your spouse doesn't pick up; we're there in the last moments of your lives, as you blink and gasp your breath away; as you tread the waters into otherness; as you try to speak but cannot. You are not in love with the dying and the dead. Watch these open lips, grasp this flaccid penis, for it is your own other, other-you, this otherness is your own other, your own self, mirrored, reversed, reflected, and reviled.

Jim came out briefly on Christmas Eve. He was kind of delirious talking about strippers and prostitutes but I told him to tone it down. Mary knocking about, holding Ana's and

Jim's hands as he ambled along in his cast and on his crutches. He shouldn't've been out in his cast, that's for sure. We went to the Borderline and Mary and Ana helped him down the stairs. Catriona and I looked at each other a few times. Some blues player was playing and we ate.

The office party crowd had all gone home now. Before this you couldn't move for the office party crowd in Soho. Not just the media types from Soho but the fucking bankers and insurance folk coming up West. It was a fucking nightmare, thank God I didn't have the money to stay long. Megan's place and the night streets were the places I liked best. I longed to be with her longer, I longed for that.

I longed for her. But she had to go back to Reading for Christmas. She said that there was no option. She promised me to keep it short. She said, quite cryptically, that she wouldn't be with anyone else. She didn't see the point in it. She said to wait for her until at least the day after Boxing Day and we'd make up for lost time, whatever that meant.

That Christmas Eve was strange. No father or mother. No Megan – it'd seemed like she'd seen in many Christmases and New Years' with me even though we hadn't. After me and Jim and Ana and Mary got finished at the Borderline, we helped Jim back up the stairs, under the portico, and into the lift. He wasn't really that drunk. He wasn't supposed to drink but Ana ignored it. He was a bit drunk. When we got back he saw the Christmas tree all blue on the coffee table and said: wow, you got me a Christmas tree.

"And that's not all you're going to get," said Mary.

I sat for a while in the lounge and then went into my room. It was Christmas Day now. I opened up my netbook and checked mails. Nothing from Megan. I took 20mg. diazepam and waited for Santa to come.

I got a text at about midday, waking me up: *Merry Christmas from Reading. God I wish I were dead.*

I went to the fridge, where most of the champagne was left, and poured it into a tea mug. I downed quite a lot of it, for now it mostly was flat, and texted back: *Come up. Come back up to London. I'm miserable here too.*

I took some more diazepam.

About six Mary knocked on the door. She looked kind of more duty than desire.

"You want some Christmas dinner?" she said.

I rolled over.

"Not really. What is it?"

"Nando's."

I rolled over again. Jim was yelling something at Ana and I couldn't understand it. Then my phone went again.

Skype me at midnight. Love, M.

Love? Well, that was a new one.

Mary sat on my bed. You can't trust anyone these days.

"You all right?" She said.

"I am as I appear."

"You always talk shit Jamie. Why can't you say what you mean?"

"I do. That's why I don't get along with people."

She didn't say anything.

"How's Ulster?"

She paused.

"It's Ulster. I have a good job. I earn good money. I rely on no one. I am happy."

"You like Ulster?"

"I live in Coleraine. I have a view of the sea, just like when I was in college. It's very nice. I have a dog now, as well. A wolfhound."

"Cool. I love dogs."

"He's with my da at the moment."

"Why aren't you with your family?"

She looked at me.

"But it's fun to be in London, like old times."

"Sounds like it."

She turned her head away.

"Sorry Jamie."

Then she got up and yes, she was perfect and I was stupid.

"Well, if you want some Christmas Nando's then it's waiting. Or I'll leave some in the fridge so you can microwave it or whatever. I'll be gone in the next few days but if you want to hang out - "

" - "

" - OK."

Her face is blurred. She moves like a ghost in a squall of pixels. It's nearly Boxing Day. For a while we don't say anything; we just look at one another on the screen. Every once in a while she'll look at the webcam on her netbook and it'll look like she's looking at something else. Sometimes she is looking at something else. I recognise the bare walls of her room, her big bed with the bars on the headboard, the little Sony stereo in on her bedside table, and her soft toy walrus that she has with her in London.

"Good morning, no: evening," she says. She shifts again, a smear of pink and white. She's wearing a vest-top and she's in bed.

"Merry Christmas," I say.

A silence. She stares into the webcam, stares into the screen.

"Merry Christmas," she says.

She is tongue-tied, almost silent, nothing like the girl I know.

"I have to be quiet," she says.

"All right."

"How was your Christmas?"

"There wasn't one."

"Christmas dinner?"

"We had Nando's."

She is a ghost on the screen, a Skype-spectre. She is a simulacrum Megan.

"Nando's?"

"Yeah."

"Eating meat's not good for you, Jamie."

"What did you have?"

“Dover sole. In a supposedly famous pub in Bray. The drive was torture. The meal was good, but much worse.”

“I bet.”

“I’d love to go somewhere like that with you sometime, Jamie.”

“Are you drunk?”

“Are you?”

She looks away from the webcam, as though someone else is there, but I know that someone else is not there.

“Champagne and diazepam.”

“That old Christmas classic.”

“Indeed.”

I look about the room and realise that I have no presents at all, not even a card.

Not that that matters.

“Come back to London, Meg, I miss you.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I really do. I miss you.”

She shifts and the pixels follow her. I can hear Mary and Ana laughing at some movie or other in the lounge. Mary’s up for it. But a virtual Megan is better than an actual Mary.

“I really do actually. I’ve never missed anyone before, in my whole life. Well, maybe someone.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” she says, over the Skype-link, “the halls are open; I paid for that.”

"I couldn't think of anything more wonderful."

"Well, maybe fin de siècle Paris, or eighties Manhattan?"

"Well, apart from that."

And she says goodnight. She looks very sad. I know I'm telling you this but there is no other way. She just looks sad, reaches over to the keyboard on her netbook, and logs off.

And it's about two in the morning and Catriona's asleep on the couch. Ana and Mary are in Jim's room and the lounge is silent. I stroke Catriona's thick red hair. She wakes up and makes a fist.

"It's all right. It's only me. Jamie."

"Oh, you. Hello."

"Want to share some lines?"

"All right."

"Not a word to Jim. He'll be in here like a fucking sniffer dog."

There is the little Christmas tree there, its blue lights beacons in the dark. We talk a lot, her about her dad and the way he hits her and that that's why she went to boarding school; and me about, well, nothing much in particular. I don't feel like crying. I put my arm about her. Then we're marching up and down the fucking lounge. Then we sit on the leather couch and then she sits gently, and then less gently, over me and her little purple skirt flutters like wings.

After.

"Why are you here" I say, "*here* at Christmas?"

"I so don't like being at home," she says.

Then she says she wants to kill her father. I say, why not?

The next afternoon – Boxing Day – there’s a text from Megan: *can’t stand this any more, coming up to Camden. Feel free to come, I know I want to.*

I text back: *where can I meet you?*

Paddington.

The train was late. Paddington Station is famous for three things, not counting the rail disaster. Firstly, the bear of the same name from darkest Peru, secondly, the gateway to the West and Wales, and thirdly, for infinite delays. There’s still a little cart there, at the end of the platform, where you can buy Paddington Bear soft toys. For the uninitiated – can there be any? – Paddington Bear was so named after being found lost at Paddington Station in 1958, with the written request, “Please Look after this Bear. Thank you.” Mr and Mrs Brown, of Windsor Road took him in. He had many adventures, this loveable ursine émigré, enjoyed marmalade sandwiches, and made many children very happy. Windsor Road, although purportedly off of Portobello Road, does not exist. Mr and Mrs Brown did not exist either, and in any case would be unfit to cope with a bear like Paddington in their old age, should he have survived them. Paddington Bear’s actual existence is yet to be proven, but in the late part of the last century, and well into this one, he is hugged and loved, in the beds of British children from Hong Kong to, well, Paddington. It doesn’t much matter whether he really exists or not; he comforts children and that is all that there is to it. He has a heartbeat, however imagined, and orange fur, and that is all that matters. There is a statue of Paddington Bear next to the cart. The cart

doesn't seem to get much custom, but it must do, otherwise it wouldn't be there. Around the corner is a Cancer research lab complete with animal unit.

At the end of the platform waiting for the 11.34 from Reading. Nothing much coming. An announcement over the PA about lateness at Slough or somewhere, but I didn't catch it. All the time, there were hoards of people coming out, from Berkshire or Oxfordshire and all that, all presumably up for the Boxing Day sales. All pushing and shoving their way to John Lewis, Selfridges, Harvey Nick's. Considering that they were about to treat themselves, I would have thought them more jolly. An hour later I recognised her. She had one of those bags on wheels things that tourists always seem to have, and was wearing a strangely outdated – or so it looked to me – ski jacket Gore Tex thing.

When people you recognise, and are beginning to realise you love, come towards you, your heart warms, but mine, while it warms, it always cools at the same time, and beats harder, because one day, they'll be getting on a train, or a plane, whether you're there or you're not, going away for the last time. For every greeting there is a goodbye, even if that goodbye is unsaid. It's inescapable. That's how it was – and is – when I helped her with her baggage, which seemed pretty generous, and I've never been able to receive someone without the negative image, the one of their leaving.

She was flushed.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, "delays."

"It's Boxing Day," I said, "all these flowing people, here for the sales."

"Got to get that Harrods bag," she said, and kissed me.

"I've missed you," I said.

"Well," she said, putting her hands in her pockets, "come on then."

We got the 27 to Camden, sitting on the lower deck because of all her stuff.

"So, not such a great Christmas?" I said.

She stared out of the window.

"How about we make tonight our Christmas Eve?"

I put my arm about her again. She snuggled up to me.

"OK then. How much do you have?"

I figured I best tell her.

"A couple of hundred turned up in my bank account this morning. I haven't checked who it was from yet."

"OK then. It's Christmas Eve."

The great thing about Christmas Eve with Megan – which was Boxing Night – was that she didn't have a drug habit to speak of. The small amount of money that I had wouldn't've lasted a night with Jim. It'd last a week with Meg.

I took her to the little Normandy restaurant which was decorated just like in Paris, and we were literally the only people there.

"So Christmas with your folks not so good, no?"

"No. Just mum and dad and me. No one else wants to know them."

"Why's it so bad?"

"Can we just not talk about it?"

"Fair enough."

Her top was unusually low. Megan never really dressed up but if she had then this would have been it. She stared at me through her glasses.

"Paddington was from Peru, wasn't he?"

She looked at me.

"As I understand it. A bit before my time. I grew up with – . Actually I never watched TV so I don't really know. We weren't really allowed TV, especially in that international school in Caracas. And back then we couldn't watch stuff on the laptops – streaming wasn't easy to do back then with the technology we had – so I just read."

"What did you read?"

"The usual."

"Well, I think Paddington was from Peru. Darkest Peru."

"Good for him. He came to from Peru to London. ¡*Ceded al nuevo impar, potente de orfandad!*"

"What?"

"Shouldn't you know? Something about orphans and exiles. It's hard to translate. Sorry. I've had a few glasses of this – what is this?"

"House white wine. I understood some of it."

I understood none of it. But she was happy.

"You're spoiling me. We'll we're here now aren't we, thank God?"

"Do you want desert?"

"I guess."

Jim phones in sick and plays guitar all day. Ana walks about in just a T-shirt with her rounded arse on display. I can't take this shit.

Wilderness city. I take the nightbus to Megan's at one a.m. because I've texted her and she's texted me back. Sometimes she's drunk but most-times not. I buy a bottle of white rum from the store on Old Compton Street.

The trouble with taking the nightbus is that you can't escape your own reflection. Escaping yourself confronts another. You switch off from the brainless banter of post-pub bragging speeches, and phase out of the dumb tunes on mobile phones. I think of her, in her tiny room, waiting for me to ring her and sign in, her arms about my neck the moment I get through the door. Her lips hungry. She'll be listening to Satie or something and be near-naked, standing among the street-lights. I'll put my backpack down and lie down with her. Nothing to remove, draw slowly down. But the wilderness city roads stretch ever on, above a dusk network of secret routes, underground rivers – the cursed Fleet below – and above it is flooded also, and yet barren. Towers of brick and steel and glass that reflect the N24 as it turns out of Tottenham Court Road. People puke even during the week and you have to move seats. I crack open the rum and knock a good couple of shots back. The luminous tarmac.

I get to the bus stop and there's still a five minute walk. I hit the rum again. She doesn't have any Coke, but she has water.

I sign myself in.

"Three nights only," he says, "you know that don't you?"

I nod.

"Where've you been my green-eyed boy?" she says.

The room smells of bleach and of her.

She runs her hand through my hair.

"I missed you," I say.

And again in the morning she's getting ready. Naked apart from that business shirt that she wore that first morning; she is a prism through which I see daylight; she stops the world being black and white. But then she's rustling about in the wardrobe, then pulling up her jeans again, putting on her jumper and leather jacket and slinging on her backpack.

"Thought there were no more lectures," I say.

"Library," she says.

"Isn't it shut?" I say.

"British. The proper library."

"Is that the one where you can't borrow books?"

"That's the one."

"Come back soon."

"You get some sleep, boy," she says.

Later the maid comes in and I pretend to be asleep and she goes out again.

Bob is ages and Jim keeps calling him. Fucking Saturday night Jim keeps saying. Jim folds a joint and we play some basketball on the console. Jim lays out the pills and plastic bank bags over the table, as though he's laying the table for a family gathering. It's going to be fun, he says, and it's about time we got our chakras sorted.

Ana and Catriona aren't long in coming.

"What's up, sluts," he says.

"Fuck you," says Ana.

"Yank prick," says Catriona.

"How's school?" says Jim.

"Fuck off," says Catriona.

"The TV is off," I say.

"I unplugged the fucking thing," he says, "it's got something wrong with it. I mean, really wrong."

He clicks on the Bose and there's some rock music or other. He bobs his head.

"We're really going for it tonight, aren't we?" says Catriona.

Then she says it again. No one replies. He pours a good two grams out, takes the samurai sword, gently this time – Jim could learn in those days – and cuts some lines.

Catriona's eyes are pretty wide.

"Voila," he says, "bring your own noses. Or whatever."

"We'll use our noses," I say.

"Ana, could you blow this up her ass?" he says.

"Fuck off Jim," says Ana, taking out a tenner from her purse.

"You'll lose your septum the way you're going," he says.

"You can fucking talk," says Ana.

"Do you like Thin Lizzy?" says Jim.

"No," says Catriona.

"Shame," he says, and puts on an old Thin Lizzy record.

And I bring it in again too, with hardly a sting at all. It's a slow come-up, and I think about plugging in the television again. I live here too, after all. A bit of ten-o'clock

Saturday night telly would slide us in nicely. But tonight it's seventies rock music all the way.

Catriona's looking good tonight. Scarlet little fringe and Courchevel ski-jump nose; little eyes and lips caked in green and red, respectively. [Her sitting on my shoulders at some show or other; she's so light; her in a tiny black skirt and fishnets; her pushing herself into the back of my neck.]

"We've got acid *and* E tonight. It's nostalgia night," says Jim.

"You're nostalgic for a time you can't remember," says Anaïs, "and anyway, you were in America. You're not old enough for this."

"You're not young enough for anything," says Jim.

But he pours a glass of water from the Volvic bottle and necks one after the other. He nods to me. Ana's looking over at Catriona. Catriona's looking over at me. I'm looking at Jim. He looks back to me.

"Señor García," he says, "wait for it."

I copy him. I always did. I know that.

The chalk's starting to hit – but so slowly this time – and I feel like talking more, but I rein it in.

Bob leaves and says he might see us later. He says Henry might be along too, and maybe even Milton, or whatever he's calling himself now. Catriona looks up in confusion and when they leave, starts talking nineteen-to-the-dozen about some shit or other.

I go into my room and uncover the mirror. *The skull beneath the skin*. I lie back on my bed and again the city surges through me and all of the ghosts of the people that

have come here. We should've stuck with Garfunkel's or something, taken in a show. I can hear Catriona and Ana talking and Jim grumbling and talking fast.

I go back into the lounge and nail some more.

"Watch it mate," says Ana, "you've got to be careful with this stuff."

I don't answer.

It's nearly midnight. Ana and Catriona kissing and cuddling, on Ecstasy again. Jim looking out of the window and talking about Fred Astaire. I can feel it starting to happen and I suggest leaving.

"Why the fuck not?" says Jim.

There are thumps of bass go straight through my belly, vibrating so greatly that it nearly hurts. Bottles and bottles of water. Jim is propping up the stage, dancing as best he can; Ana and Catriona dancing on the stage like decade-divided sisters. Ana's taken off some clothes and she's got green velvet nipple pasties; they look like stars. Catriona's whipping her hair about so that I can barely see her face. Dancing here in the strobelight underworld. And then the slow come-up; two tabs taken, of each, and however many lines.

This is the trip this is the trip are we having fun yet?

Soul sinking through the floor, supersonic rush.

Hearing the light and darks, the sigh of cries and hum of drums.

Monochrome skyline up there through the ceiling talltowers through city horizons.

And I'm laughing, laughing at nothing, laughing at everything.

Wilderness of silver and darks all over again glowing grey coruscancy of fires

The walls are just negative energy perpendicular to the sky.

The floors are dissolving slowly with each footfall. Drums of boots and cellos of thighs. Soon there will be no floor.

We'll be dancing in a belt of asteroids.

I feel the blood rushing through my body; I hear the beat of the corpuscles.

Everyone's so friendly, everyone's so friendly.

Jumpy vision everybody is up here with me we are together in this.

In Heaven there will be dancing like this but my guts burn.

I hear Mother's voice but I don't understand the words.

Voices – lyres – trumpets – castanets – choirs of angels – blue and green light like underwater – withered naiads – naked in the darklight, rosecream flesh. Toenails like painted runes.

In this ocean there is no seabed at all and the sky is where the water ends. I have one half of my body in the clouds, and the other half in the water. I can pull the hair of comets.

I walk through the walls and the floors of the place. Get a cold water, splash it on my face. Get a triple vodka, push it down my neck, use the ice for my eyes, and under my armpits. Fuck it: what the heck.

It's a while. There's Henry too, and Milton talking to him. And Big Bob and his wife, shouting at each other.

I pass into the white room. The corners of the room are vertexes of ice. Spirits everywhere, hardly any people. Hardly any of the living.

You went down to the river and you made a – I know, I know.

I see myself in peripheral vision. Every time I try to look at myself, I step away.

I collapse onto the floor for a bit and everything's moving. Jim is dancing now, he is become one with the cluster he is univocity of Being.

I feel the ghosts [physically] in the air. They breathe through core elements, metal and ore. Their hair feels like snow.

Everything's like cheap vector graphics like a videogame in progress.

Wings smooth as bones. I pass into something else, laughing, puking.

– James. *James*. Jamie?

– What?

– Are you OK?

I turn over and puke.

– sure, I'm – oh, it's you.

– James, what's the matter with you? How come they haven't kicked you out?

What've you had?

– A bit more than usual. I'm a happy camper.

Nothing makes sense. I look up and she is there, wearing much less than usual.

Look at those fucking legs. Like a fucking axis.

– I'm going to take you away from all this.

She takes my hand and helps me up.

– You have a coat or something?

– No.

– I'm going to get mine. You hold on to my hand.

I follow her through the dancing bodies. She queues at the coat-check, holding my hand all of the time. There are blue and silver auras just about everywhere, about everyone's heads. She looks as though she is being illuminated from behind; her head shines.

She's got her bike jacket. She puts it on.

– Come on, she says, try to walk. Let's do this with *some* dignity.

I look back, Eurydice in reverse. There he is, dancing, even with his injuries so new to heal, he's there, dancing, between Ana and Catriona – they're holding him up perhaps – and there he is, like a ghost, his dark hair glowing blue and gold like a gas-ring, dancing, ghosting into the real, he's away with it, on it, he doesn't see me, I can feel that; he is univocal, part of everything, transcending this, this cunt of a life, this nothingness, this waste of world.

– I can't afford a cab, she says.

– no bother, I say.

We stumble out of the place and she holds me up as we get to a bus stop.

– we'll get the night bus, she says, getting me a ticket.

We wait forever, the taxis rushing past us and the pissed-up clubbers whistling at her. Even with her jacket on, her skirt keeps riding up as she holds me.

– I love blondes, yells a man in an estuary accent, wearing a casual suit, as he jogs past.

– *Fuck you.*

Somehow the bus comes. The downstairs deck is full and I can't stand. We make it up to the top deck and I collapse again onto a seat.

- look, she says, it's London.

- I know.

Someone is whistling "Invisible Sun" by the Police and for days I won't be able to get it out of my head.

We go by the building with the mirror windows, up Mornington Crescent, and have to get out near the all-night Sainsbury's. The windows glow like deep sea fish.

- come on boy, she says, lean on me, darling.

- why are you doing this?

- because I am. Because I like you. I'm going to take you away from all of this.

5.

Don't do anything, she says. She signs me in and I'm not even there and she says, don't do anything.

Don't do anything. We climb the stairs and it takes forever, because they won't keep still.

The windows. That fucking ouija-board.

"Have you summoned any spirits in this room?" I say.

"You've got to be joking," she says, "there's no such thing."

I'm not convinced but I keep my head down.

"Where is it?"

"I don't know. I only had it to freak out the townies. I gave it to one of the gothy girls down the hall. They seem to like it. It's like an iPad to her. It works fine, apparently. It's like got a quad-core chip in it. The glass zips about the wood like a puck

on ice. Sorry, only joking. It's all bollocks. And anyway, I'm lucky: if I wanted to talk to my grandma, I'd phone her up."

"You got some water?"

"I got a tap," she says.

"Are you American?"

"Yeah. Pom-poms, the lot. We have a lot of that in Aberystwyth. It was me who introduced cheerleading to Reading."

There are cops out there, dredging the canal for teeth and toenails.

"Look," she says, "we can watch some TV or something."

She fires up her iBook and logs on to the college WLAN.

"Come on," she says, "let's watch something funny, something vintage and funny. I've got an account. What do you like? You can watch anything you like. *Fawlty Towers*?"

"Can I stay?"

"Jamie -"

"- can I -?"

"That's a given. Stay as long as you like. Now come on. You won't come down for hours. You might as well have a laugh while you're up. Fuck that paranoia. It's all in your head. The only thing to fear is fear itself."

"Will you fuck me?"

She looks at me like I'm stupid.

"Christ I will, you bet. I'm not a fucking angel, you know. Have we made love yet? You're like a present I forgot to unwrap. Do you think I just read books? We just

don't get the chance, do we, much, what with your recreational habits? Those drugs aren't good for your erection, Jamie. But we'll change that. Boys like you, all you need is a few weeks off the drugs. Do you want some wine? I have some rubbish Chardonnay left over. You could drink it in the bath. You need a bath. You need a lot of things. You're so pretty. A straight, sensible girl can't look at your face without wanting to sit on it. Oh yes, we'll fuck, as you call it. But let's get this shit out the way first Jamie."

I stare into the iBook as Basil Fawltly hits a car with the branch of a tree. The dinosaurs on the duvet cover are laughing too.

She says: "fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip into my bosom – such as it is – and be lost in me."

Living with Meg was nice, in a way. And while she had her moments, Megan was a kind soul, in almost every respect.

And the London snows came. From Megan's window, the glow. The luminous snow lay on the old lamps; snow shone softly above the Camden lights. It silently rugged the lower rooftops; it wrinkled the Victorian brickwork; it bounced soda-light up to the zinc sky; it lay faint, a soft asceticism; far into the night, it returned the stars.

I was an unofficial guest. I could never forget that. There were rules. Tenants could have guests for no more than three nights. After that, even if you were gone only for one day, even so you had to go. Three people – all postgraduates or post-docs – worked on reception. I'd have to sign in and if I hadn't signed out by the third day, then they'd come up looking for me, banging on the door, or worse, they'd send up Estates. Megan found ways around this. I imagine she easily could have worked for the CIA, had

she been born American, such was her dexterity; but as strawberries-and-cream as she was, she'd chosen other, less respectable avenues in which to ply her trade: she even once said, as shadows fell, that she wanted to be a writer.

It was her beauty – I don't use the word often, in fact I don't think I have before or since – that most made joy. Her angular, frail features cut the nights like a cake-knife. The sun shone from her; it never quite was night with her around. She had the body of a boy, and the appetite of a boy also. She never would be satisfied, intellectually, with what she had; always she had to go further, in learning, in speaking. When I was a kid, I would consume the books at the library: Asterix, Tintin, all that stuff. She never grew out of that. She was an explorer, and she explored most often in the confines of our living space, or otherwise, in the libraries of Senate House and Euston. The small room in which we lived our lives, in those months, was full of books: library books, second-hand books from Black Gull or from Skoob, or new books from Waterstones that she'd bought instead of three days' food. In many respects, books replaced food. I certainly had no appetite in those first weeks and, aside from what she ate at school, Meg rarely ate anything at all. And this is the way it goes sometimes, with some people, the people you don't notice: words replace cornflakes, punctuation replaces salt and chilli: the very fruit of life is text. This was the way in which my dear friend lived her life.

To start off with, she didn't speak much. After Jim's constant tirades the silence was welcome. She'd be comfortable in silence. Hours passed without ever a word. Whole days would pass without a single expletive. I'd try to read – whichever newspapers we could steal from coffee bars; even downstairs there was a common room with a television and certain broadsheets fresh each day – and she'd sit there, reading, or

looking out of the window, or writing, or something. Megan got me lots of magazines from the student shop, to help me. She got them for free because she edited the drama section of the newspaper. She'd go and review plays but I was too sick to go so she'd go alone. But she always brought me back the programmes, or the odd T-shirt, to go with the magazines about music and about films; and I enjoyed reading her writing, about Ibsen or some other cunt. She never read the magazines or newspapers; she just wrote them. A lot of the time I would fall asleep reading them, and I'd wake up under her arm, in her warm armpit, with her other arm holding some e-reader or simply a book. We both were on tablets. But she wasn't an ephemeral sprite: she had her needs and usually half-satisfied them while I lay half-asleep, her sitting on the chair in a Berkshire cricket sweater while she made notes for some presentation or other.

The first few weeks slid by without a great deal of conversation; her deep in her books, me plastered on the downers from the doctor's, no radio, no television, just quiet. If you want to watch TV, she said, put your earbuds on and watch it on the laptop when I'm asleep, I don't mind, she said.

I shivered a lot but it wasn't because of the snow. I sat on the counter in the kitchen both when she was at school and when she was working in our little room, and watched the snow. The snow on the beach, when I feared for my health, the bruises and mother's flying jacket. But here, safe in Camden Road, it wasn't the snow that made me shiver. I put on a few of her sweaters at once most-times. Her cricket sweater with a Berkshire insignia on it – pure new wool – seemed to do the trick, although it was a little itchy. It used to be ____'s, she said.

She recognised my need for music so we got a radio. It was pretty much the best thing that she ever got for me. I'd have to listen, most-times, on earphones or whatever (she had a cracking set of earphones that cancelled outside noise) but the radio was everything to me. I will be grateful to her always for that radio, and I still have it.

Considering we were just off of the Camden Road, it was quite serene. Sure, there'd be gunshots from time to time, or fist- or knife-fights in the street which'd have me wired up like Willard, but by and large it was unusually quiet. Every fifteen minutes or so the 43 bus would pass, and shine its lights over the halls, or there'd be the rumble of the North Eastern Line at Camden Road, but I got used to that. The night bus used to go past and we sort of looked forward to that, making up stories to go with the characters we imagined were on the top deck, their hopes and dashed dreams.

She did her best to help me. In the first two weeks, she bathed me every night. We'd James Bond it to the communal bathroom, and she'd run me a bath, really hot. After a few days I told her that it was too hot for me, and without saying anything she simply ran the cold tap and swirled the water about the bath. She put oils in the water too. Most often it was Fenjal. It makes you smell a little bit like an old aunt, she said, but it makes you feel clean, and waxy, and nice. It's calming, she said. Other times it was stuff from Europe or South America. *Hamam* was one she most liked: she said it reminded her of Munich. Swirling the Turkish-German spa oils about the bath-tub, kneeling down in her Debenham's T-shirt, while I tried to stop the spasms in my feet, she really was the most beautiful thing. Her shoulder-blades and meteor-tail of hair, almost fluorescent in the dark of the bathroom, really was, and is, the one thing that, as I die, I long to see again.

Her single bed was not large enough for a single person. Still we lay in it, together. At the end of the bed was a desk, and at the desk a plastic chair. This is what a university education gives you. She would be at the desk quite often. Sometimes she would sleep in the chair, a blanket over her, so I could sleep in the bed. Given the sleeping arrangements, this worked out OK. We hardly ever made love in the first few weeks; we tried but, no, I can't say it. Soon the room was fresh with spring air, Sure deodorant, and occasionally garlic, from when Megan had eaten pasta or soup or something at the Eat canteen.

Candles were forbidden in the Halls, but she had these nightlight things that you turned upside-down to light. She had got them in Munich.

"We didn't have much stuff of our own in that school," she said, "we had to share rooms with someone else, so bath-time was nice. It was the only time I got to be alone. I never really liked being naked around my roommate. My roommate was from some sleepy suburb of Düsseldorf. She really liked boys; she constantly smelled of boys' deodorant. I got dressed behind the wardrobe door. My roommate never read a darn thing. Her family owned some vacuum company. It went international and they bought a golf course. She didn't have to do anything at all. I mean, she never had ever to do anything in her life at all. I think she's a semi-professional golfer now. If she got bad grades her dad'd be on the phone to the school and next time the grades would be better. Teachers got in trouble, I think, for giving her bad grades. I remember her crying in class once – she was eighteen – about some grade or other, her extended essay or something. The look on the teacher's – Mr Heine's – face: it looked like someone had walked over his grave."

But the baths that Megan ran for me were nice. She'd turn on the taps and lock the door. I'd take off my clothes. She looked at me with kind, pale frankness. The nightlights ran on little batteries. The batteries seemed to last forever so the lights must've been pretty well-designed. Meg would turn one upside down and it'd light: a little blue or white or pink light. Then she'd turn the big light off in the bathroom, and after a few minutes or so the fan would go off. It was very quiet. She'd help me into the bath, and I'd just get clean. Back in those days – and especially at night – I sweated a lot, so she helped me to stay clean so I didn't get yeast infections around my thighs or cock or balls or anything like that. Also I would shake a lot so she sat in her chair and held my foot. Reflexology she called it. Search me.

The shit was the colour of piss and the piss was the colour of shit. She got me some milk thistle and some artichoke extract to stop me ____, and tons of natural downers like passiflora and stuff like that. Shit I can't remember what it was called. Holland and Barratt made a fortune out of our misfortune, that's for sure. I kept hitting the Temazepam from the doctor, although it never seemed to last. Megan scored me some cheap weed from one of her friends, but she sort of rationed it and after the first few weeks she said she couldn't afford it any more. All right, I said.

You know what, I don't want to go too much into what happened that first few weeks.

After about a fortnight I started to watch TV. I didn't watch the live psychics any more because Megan would be using the computer at that time and there's no point to psychic shows if they're not live. But the on-demand stuff I watched, cop shows,

movies. Things with Bruce Willis in. All the time she'd be holding my foot, the psoriasis.

She was drunk again. In the falling Camden light she was drunk and hungry. She held the wine in her left hand, poured some of it into a glass.

"It says on here," she said, "to avoid this if I'm pregnant or trying to conceive."

She pulled down her jeans and took a mouthful of the wine from the bottle.

"I'm not pregnant," I said.

"Are you sure?" she said, kicking off the tiny waistband from her ankles.

I looked at her. A sylph in hiding, a good friend.

"And we're not trying to conceive, are we?" she said.

"Fuck no."

"You curse too much. But it's OK this time of month. We can try *not* to conceive. We can try *nice and hard not* to conceive. Remember I told you, after you got better."

"I feel a bit better, actually. And you – you look wonderful."

She stretches in the late light and someone, somewhere, would want to make a wildlife documentary about it.

And there is the light and there is the sound – just – of the traffic outside.

And then, now she unfolds her steeping thighs, the most divine thing, leaving a Milky Way over my chest, lips, and all the rest. Then I eat and eat and I can't get enough of the post-piss smack, softness, seafood, sea-blood. I will smell wholly female for days: scent of sea-grapes, the tang the float and the brine of her, the channel and wrack and

brack of her, and when she is at school I will have lines, signs salting, mapping my body, marking our course, letting me follow her like a seabird. I never want to wash. I want to crawl inside of her and refuse ever to be born again. And yes, yes: it is a good afternoon.

You'll only have me, she said. That's final. You can leave if you want and if you do then that's your business. If you want your S&M girls, your ball-separators, your swingers, and your emo girls, then that's your business, but I can't be doing with that. I can do the dressing up if you like but I'm not into some of that stuff that obviously Ana's into. I got that out of my system before the age of consent. It's not that I'm really a one-guy-girl; I just can't be bothered with lying and playing stupid games. Most grown-ups stay children, through sex. I can't pretend I'm still a girl through sex, and I hope you're the same – although you're not a girl – much – (have you ever even tried on a dress?). Sex isn't some ruse to convince yourself you're not old, any more than it's an act of resistance to convince yourself you're not young. You know, I have an uncle, who owns a small boat shop in Shanklin. But his life is no fun. You want to know why? His wife will only fuck him after she's been with her lover. In a hotel in Shanklin or on his – her lover's – boat. I'm not going to make any judgement on that. Only: why should I know this? My cousin told me. They live on the Isle of Wight for crying out loud. It's a beautiful place, with the UK's largest borstal. But who told my cousin? It's common, fatal family knowledge. Aunt Maud will only have sex with her husband *after* she's had sex with her lover; her lover simmering inside of her for a few hours. Twenty-four hours later and he'll just have to wait. I have really sensitive olfactory glands; that's why I get migraines. I pity the poor man. His whole life is a migraine. I mean, not being able to

refuse her, after she's been with her lover. Her full of his come. I mean doing something that's an instinct, against one's judgement. That's what adultery is. Kantian evil. Yet I'm not making judgements about this. I just resent being told, that's all. They told me this – this narrative – when I was about fifteen. Why must people tell each other narratives? Narratives are terrible things. Well, I'm not like that woman. I'm a straight-ish girl trying to live a straight-ish life. My mum and dad, they're still together. Don't ask me why. They're never in the same room. My dad has a lawnmower. One of those sit-on ones. He mows the lawn – and you've seen it: it's like a damned football pitch – every other day. He sits on the mower and he mows the lawn. That's what he does. He does it in the rain and he does it in the spring, until he has to get the thing repaired.

It's not that I don't believe in marriage. Some work. I'm not Shelley. When I find the right chap – or girl, I'm not in a position to pick and choose – I'll be kind. Who knows, maybe it's you. You're a nice boy. You're a bit rough around the edges but we ladies love a bit of that.

She came in laden down. Something was on wheels like at the airport.

"I've got everything," she said.

"Everything?"

She motioned to the bags.

"I did it on my own," she said, "I was going to ask Alexandra or Julian for help but I thought that this was something that I should do alone. I don't want to leave a trail."

"Did you get my –"

"I – Jamie – I'm sorry, you don't like being called that I know – I got everything. I've even got your fucking Yoda, that green thing, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I got you your stinking horrible Burger King thing too, you carnivore. Don't I get a thanks?"

"Thanks."

All of my things, so lately filed neatly in Jim's office drawers, now were in my old backpacks, and had found home in Megan's Wenger suitcases. All I had to do was to get them out. Or leave them in.

"How did you get past Moonlight?"

She looked at me. Ignored the question.

"And anyway, he knows me. I talked to him about horses for a bit. Told him my mum used to ride. True and false at the same time. Aristotle."

"Jim at work?"

"Apparently."

"No Ana?"

"That was my worst worry. But no. No Ana, thank God."

I sat up, naked in bed, and saw her, and all my things, all brought to me, thanks to Megan. Christ she was an angel.

"You look nice," I said.

"You look hungry," she said.

And this wasn't another coming-off-drugs-sex thing; she'd brought me some serious junk food and I ate it like there was no tomorrow, like a dog who never knows the certainty of its next meal. In effect it was my first.

"It's 'Ave Maria,'" she said, "my friend Caroline lost her virginity listening to that song."

"Avez who?"

"'Ave Maria.' It's devotional. She could play it on cello, viola, and piano. Music usually is on when you lose your virginity. Either in the room or in the car. Did you have any music playing when you lost yours?"

"I don't know," I said, "and why do you want to know?"

Kati.

"Just curious."

"I think it was 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.' Either that or Nine Inch Nails."

"Now you're just being silly."

I don't know if I was or if I wasn't.

"I lost my virginity to a musician – no, a music teacher, which means a failed musician" I said, "she didn't have very good English."

"So far so good."

"She was in her thirties. She had stretch-marks. She went skiing but that couldn't save her."

Megan giggled. Her hair was beginning to reach her shoulder blades.

"You don't like people very much, do you?"

"No,"

"I'll tell you a secret: neither do I."

"She taught me a Chopin prelude the previous week. Asked me to practise it. I did that. Then the following week I did it for her. I mean I played it. She criticised it. Heavily. And then she – you know – on me. On the Persian rug in the music room."

"She gave you a Persian," said Meg, "well, that explains a lot."

"I thought we were being serious."

"We're not being serious."

She is sitting on her windowsill in the rain, dangling her legs over the side.

"Meg, come on, you know that that's dangerous."

She kicks her legs: I can hear them on the wall. It's four flights down.

"Come on Meg, come on in."

It's thirty metres at least to the bottom.

But she's off on one.

"Full fathom five my father lies, of his bones are coral made."

"Come on Megan, let's get something to eat."

The vodka bottle is half-gone on the desk. Her writing is smudged with something or other.

"Come unto these yellow sands," she sings, her blonde hair in her hands.

"What're you on about?"

"Those are the pearls that were his eyes. Nothing of him that doth fade."

It looks like she's swinging her legs. She rocks.

"But doth suffer a sea-change. Into something rich and strange."

I lie back and listen to her sing. It doesn't sound very modern.

"Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell. Ding dong bell."

"Come on, you know it's dangerous. Let's get drunk some other way."

"Ding dong bell."

Weeks passed and still it was cold. We worked out a system where she could smuggle me in. I entered via the fire escape each week when they tested the fire alarm. That way we could get around the three-day rule. I think the security guys knew the score but they didn't seem to care.

Megan cared though, about some aspects of the arrangement.

"Are you actually going to call Jim," she said, "I mean, just to let him know?"

I had just woken up.

"I'm gone," I said.

"But he'll worry, won't he?"

An unironic laugh is a rare one, it's true, but mine was an honest one.

"Jim won't worry about me. He doesn't care about anything."

"Well, maybe he does. Maybe you should text him. Send him something. Even an old-fashioned letter."

"All right. You said about going to Brighton or Whitstable. I'll send him a postcard from there."

"You're a funny boy," she said, brushing her hair, "you really are."

"Absence is absence."

"No. Absence is virtual presence. Always. To everything its supplement."

I didn't know what she meant.

"So what do you say, when it gets a bit warmer, we'll go down to Whitstable or Brighton or somewhere and check in to some shitty B&B or whatever, and have fish and chips. You eat fish, don't you?"

"Yes, I eat fish. Not farmed fish though. We'll have to check. And we'll have to make sure the chips aren't cooked in goose fat or anything like that. Although it's usually sunflower oil now, especially if we go Chinese. Or we could have Japanese, I'm OK with that."

"Fair enough. I'll wait until my inheritance comes through."

"I haven't even been paid from *Woman and Home* yet, or *Grazia*. I'll save it up."

"Fine."

"But you're missing my point. You're not going to tell Jim you're gone?"

"When the time is right. And what do you mean, absence is virtual presence?"

"Work it out for yourself."

We sat there for a while. It had begun to rain.

"What about your father: did you tell him you were going to go?"

"No. Of course not. I took everything I could find – I even sold a few family antiques while he was away in Istanbul – and left."

"No note, no nothing?"

"*Niente*."

"You're a dark horse aren't you?"

"I needed to leave. He was attacking me. Most nights. I needed to."

"And Jim?"

"Jim is just – Jim."

She sat for a long time and said nothing.

In one of the bars opposite the Stables, she swayed a little. But then she felt like talking and that was good with me.

That night she said, "my mum once ordered me a mirror. A full length one. Not Argos or anything; I think that it was John Lewis. When it turned up, it was cracked. I looked into the mirror and my face was a triptych."

"All right. Did you send it back?"

"Of course, and we got a new one. But I never could look in it."

"So?"

"Do you think that it was bad luck? Soon afterwards my mother got breast cancer and had to go for loads of treatment and stuff. Dad got made redundant. But he ended up getting a better job anyhow. Mum's fitter than she's ever been, the old cow. Was it bad luck?"

"I don't know."

"But if you don't really break the mirror yourself – but you receive it – is it like being born with a monkey on your back? Is it like pestilence, like the Greeks used to say? I don't know whose sins I'm suffering for. Maybe they're mine."

"Before I left Soho, when Jim and I were a bit ill, we covered up all the mirrors."

"I hate mirrors. I don't even have one in my bag like most girls do. It's just a way of reversing yourself."

"I had a similar experience – fright, you could call it – when I first moved in to Jim's."

"Yes?"

"I saw the sun setting in the east, in the mirror."

She smiles and nods, "yes, it's bad luck. Ancient Mycenae. The sun went backwards across the sky. Apparently that's not a good thing. Bad things happened, so I've heard."

"I know. Thanks for that."

"Don't be silly. It's folk tales, that's what it is. Read your Derrida. A mirror reverses what it reproduces. It makes you a spectre. You're there and not there at once. And then your dead lover turns up behind you. One from years ago. Ever tried to jump through a mirror? Don't; you'll get cut. If time were reflected in a mirror then we'd get older and younger at the same time. That's why we see ghosts in mirrors."

"Thanks for that."

"Have you been to LA? The land of the setting sun. That's what they say about LA."

"No. I'm OK with the setting sun. This is where we live. This is the sun going down."

"LA's no fun. It's called the city of angels but it's not very holy. The weather never changes, it's a police state where the police have absolute control, and it's one of

the porn capitals of the world. I lived there for about six months. Dad was doing something there.”

“Porn and capital. Appropriate.”

“Yes. There’s even a journal on pornography now; can’t say I’ll write any papers for it. I mean there’s only one thing worse than writing about sex, and that’s writing about writing about sex. And there’s this girl at UCL doing a dissertation on hardcore. You think I’m a feminist? She certainly is. She’s working on Catharine MacKinnon. This friend of mine, not that I really have any, wanted to get some ideas from me about semiotics and deconstruction and she had me watch this porn film once where some poor girl got fucked over and over by twelve men in a boxing ring. Apparently if she didn’t get through to the end she wouldn’t get paid. By the end she hardly could move at all. Just paralysed on her back on the canvas. Her knees were bleeding and her arse must virtually have prolapsed. There was blood. That’s the sun setting in the east for you. I don’t ever want to watch porn again; it pisses me off. It’s anti-erotic. How Ruth can write about it I don’t know. Me, I can’t switch off, apart from the television. Sometimes when I close my eyes I still see this girl. I’m not a prude; my youth was not quiet; but there’s a difference between a fun little threesome, and a thirteensome.”

She motioned to the window and there were the masseuses going to work and the big men standing there.

Megan shook her head.

“That is no country for young girls,” she said.

From April to early June, an unbroken chain of spring dawns. It was not quite spring, and neither was it summer. The mornings got lighter, earlier, as they had to – they had no option – so gradually I became less nocturnal, up to a point.

Megan would work on her dissertation or whatever she called it, until late, and then we'd go out and get some food, either on the money that I'd made previously by foul means, or through her father's money or what was left of her loan. It would be about ten-o'clock. It would be dinner for her and breakfast for me. The sleeping pills kept me sweating through the bright sunshine or the overcast days, and I would wake up crying or in a fit of fear. She held me, calmed me down, put a cold, wet flannel to my head, and then, sometimes, gave me a hand-job. Such, such were the joys.

The mealtimes were quite regimented. She liked routine. We'd take a right and then another right into Camden High Street and go to the place by the canal. Just get some crêpes and some cheap, very cheap, house red wine. She'd sometimes talk about what she was doing and sometimes I'd tell her about my life, in which she seemed hopelessly to be interested. The owner and the staff were very kind. They were from Normandy, so we got lots of apples and calvados and stuff like that, and they respected that basically we had fuck all and we couldn't really tip much. Those nights, looking out at the drug dealers, thinking about what Megan had to say, Badiou or Baudrillard or whomever, the floor a book-thick deck.

And after dinner, or breakfast, we'd go back to the halls for a few hours, and then she'd write some more, and then, about two, she'd say, come on James, let's go for a walk. And we would walk. We'd go walking, walk the streets, the North London streets, sometimes until it was light. Those starlit walks – oh that's not right; there was much

more than starlight, except for on the Heath; the halogen- and soda-light, across the empty streets, it was more than just moonlight – where we became invisible to all but each other. Sometimes we'd walk right down to King's Cross from Camden Road. Even the stray dogs, the straggling students, drunks, drag queens and prostitutes couldn't see us, so wrapped-up were we in our symbiotic solipsism. We married our navels to each other as though our umbilical cords had been left dangling from birth like kettle cables, and we wrapped them about one other. We were in our own little bubble. Other times we'd walk up to Haverstock Hill, or right over to Hampstead Heath, just to watch the sun come up over the city.

Have you ever watched the sunrise over Hampstead Heath in spring? It rises to your left, as though under water. On spring mornings, in twenty-five minutes it's almost green. Most of those mornings it's scumbled with clouds, scudded with mist. In the next twenty minutes it runs through the cool shades of most of Marks and Spencer's underwear, under cloud like a solitary garment hung on a washing line. The grass-blades slowly, one by one, catch fire. There's the odd fox or squirrel, very occasionally a badger, and of course the birds will have started to echo about the Heath.

Sometimes we talked on these walks, and sometimes we'd hold our silence. I haven't a clue what she must have been thinking about, but it didn't really matter. Maybe she was thinking about her writers or something, or about sex: those seemed to be the things that most interested her, in fact nothing much else seemed to interest her at all. Occasionally she'd say something I understood, but not often.

"Do you think that evolution goes on after death?" she once said.

"I hope so."

"So we can evolve beyond our bodies? After we've been carbonised?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"Some people – mainly men, like Emerson and Thoreau – in the nineteenth century certainly seemed to think so."

"Good for them."

"I just don't see how it can happen."

"Would that mean we'd have to be reincarnated?"

"Not really. Just that our souls go on evolving after they don't need the flesh any more."

"I can't picture that."

She laughed.

"That's the point."

"But," I had said, "wouldn't this mean that people wouldn't go on making the same mistakes? Wars and adultery and other trivia?"

"Not really," she said, "just that people get better at them."

"Or that ghosts'd get better at winding people up or learn to spell better on a ouija-board?"

"And suddenly you get all serious," she said, "and enough about my Egyptian luck board. I gave it to someone; I told you. She can have all my luck."

Another time she asked me about Jim.

"Not that it's any of my business," she said.

"No, it's not," I said.

I signed on and brought what I had back home. It's funny how far money goes when you're not spending it all on pens and rulers all the time. We made love some of the afternoon and then went to the place by the Lock. It was Wednesday. There were no tourists. Soon the place would go out of business, but tonight it was open. It was open but it may as well have been closed.

I got us some proper wine this time. Megan only drank white wine if it was really good – you can get red wine and get by for a small charge – but that night we had a bottle of proper Pouilly Fumé, and instead of just the usual *galettes*, we had some proper food. The owner told us – her – about his beloved Normandy, and I understood very little.

I got her some dessert thing, some sort of stuff with pears or something, and I finished off the wine and got some calvados. I don't know, maybe it is alcohol, you can never rule it out, but her knee touching mine – despite the fact that we'd seen each other naked over and over again – the closeness, the kindness. Like I said soon the place closed down.

On the way back, she was a little too drunk to walk so I held her up. I asked her about the conversation with the owner.

"Exile," she said. "It's a French thing. And a Welsh thing. You English and Americans don't have it. When you're French, you leave but you can't really leave. Family problems. Same with Spain, with Italy. Something to do with origin."

"I don't get it. I left. I hate where I came from and I'll never go back. I loathe my family. Even Jim, really."

"Even Jim? He was nice to you."

"Well."

"But then again, he wasn't."

But she had something to say, as usual.

"It's like that with the Welsh too, I think. You leave but you can never really leave it behind."

"So you're completely Welsh now? Thought you were half-German."

"Well. I was born in Wales. 'The land of my fathers. And they can fucking keep it.'"

We walked for a bit.

"And it's a language thing too," she said.

"Can you speak Welsh fluently?"

"I can't really. I can understand some. You learn it at school and it's in your bones. In most schools you can't escape it. Especially in the North."

"But you're not from the North?"

"No," she said, Aberystwyth, me. I don't like going to Wales much. I understand too much of the language. Late at night, in the pubs, after what used to be closing time, there's some Welsh spoken. It sounds nicer than Gaelic, I don't care what you say. But while I understand some of it I can't really speak it. Mind you, that's what I liked when I moved about a lot. I mean, in Argentina and that, and Turkey, LA, Munich. I'm not happy with being familiar. That's something we've got in common: whenever we get comfy, we always want to move on."

"I've never been comfy."

“Perhaps not. But language can – does – make you a stranger. Always. Sometimes even to yourself. You start dreaming in Spanish and it’s like it’s someone else. In Wales I’m only half a stranger. That’s not enough for me. Don’t get me wrong I love the place, in a way, but when – if – I go there, I’m one of the *merched Cymraeg*, especially with my name, even if some of the girls take offence to the way that I don’t live there any more. If you don’t speak a language you have an excuse for being ‘other,’ for always being on the outside, and just looking in when it suits you. In Hong Kong, for example, I’m a ‘ghost.’ People talk to you. You can always say, ‘I don’t understand.’ What are the first words you always learn in a language, if you’re English? ‘Hello’; ‘do you speak English?’; ‘I’m sorry, I don’t understand’; and ‘excuse me.’ You know what James, I’ve never been at home in a country in which I can speak the language. Actually, while English is my mother tongue, sometimes I feel like it’s a foreign language. I fear being understood.”

A bus ploughed past.

“Well, you’ve nothing to fear from me,” I said.

“You know, the best thing about living in other countries,” she said, “wasn’t the culture or the food or the climate. I mean, who wants to live in Caracas for the climate? The best thing about it for me was that as soon as I learned a little of the language, my mother couldn’t understand a word I was saying. A friend – for want of a better word – from school would call me on the handy, and I could have a perfectly reasonable conversation with them and my mother couldn’t understand a thing. Not a bloody word.

“It was like a linguistic condom. My dad, he could understand business language, and because English is the lingua franca, as they say, most of his clients spoke English.

He couldn't be bothered to learn Spanish or whatever. He was sort of forced to learn German but he could never get his head around it. These languages were my safe houses, my panic rooms."

We got back to Camden Road and I helped her up into the lift. The security man didn't even look up.

The corridor blared bleach. Soon everyone would go home, except us. I put the door shut behind us. We worked through the vodka quite quickly, her drinking more quickly than me. But she wasn't finished yet.

"And even back in Reading, when I was a child, and a little later, I'd find ways of saying stuff to my mother that she wouldn't hear, even though I'd said it. You see, in Whiteknights, you're right under the Concorde flight-path. I know it doesn't fly any more, but back then it did. And just at the point when it went supersonic, you couldn't hear each other talk. And we'd be sitting there having a late breakfast or something and the plane would hit its stride, and literally for about twenty seconds, you couldn't hear what each other was saying."

She was swaying a bit.

"And that's when I used to tell mother what I really thought of her. Fucking old bitch, I hope you get Cancer, I used to say, in the space of the sonic boom. I used to read a lot of grown-ups' books. The library in Reading was nice and I spent most of my time there. But it was as though as the plane hit the sky I could say what I wanted; when I think of the stuff that came out of my mouth even at age thirteen, I feel almost embarrassed. But I suppose if I ever were forced to go back to that place, I'd miss my old ally, Concorde."

“You could always say it in another language.”

“Believe me, the things I’ve said to that woman in foreign tongues. I’ve cursed her in everything from Latin to Afrikaans.”

I took off my jumper.

“I never got on with my dad,” I said.

“And your mother?”

“She’s all right.”

She seemed to have had enough of talking and she started kissing and I pulled off her jeans and knickers and was about to take off her long-sleeved top but she stopped me.

“You like the sea, don’t you?” she said, “well, I’m like a sea animal: come and see. Come and kiss me. Kiss me properly.”

She sat on her desk again, as she liked to do, and I sat on the chair.

Later, we finished off the vodka and I helped her to piss into the sink – she was so light – and then get into bed and, as she was drifting into sleep, she said, “you know, there’s really no safe house. There’s no real safety.”

And then she started mumbling, dreaming perhaps, and I couldn’t understand what she was saying.

Our walks were getting longer. She would want to start walking at just gone midnight.

Her work was almost over and she had more time. She seemed almost to like my company. I don’t know why. We’d start walking at just gone midnight. On weeknights.

On the weekend we’d stay in until four or so and then go and watch the dawn.

Sometimes we'd go right upstairs, climb through the window, and sit on the roof. Good midnight, morning, she said. The sunrise and the moonset.

We didn't go south quite so much now. I wanted to keep out of Jim's way and didn't exactly relish the thought of meeting Ana. Megan seemed to want to get away from UCL and Bloomsbury and Soho and all the rest of it. We rarely could afford to go West but sometimes we did. The East, don't talk to me about the East. So north we went.

There were two routes. One was along the Regent's Canal to Little Venice, and the other was over the Heath.

The storm hit and we ducked for cover under a bridge over the canal. The lightning splintered the night as though stapling the sky to the earth, cutting the horizon vertically like a tazer. She shawled herself with her hoodie. Look, she said, I look like I'm going to steal a television.

I can't. No, I can't.

She looked at me.

It's like it happened tomorrow.

I fucking can't.

Hush. Hush. No more of this.

It's like – it's like – I don't know what it's like.

And we make it back.

Sober and soaking, we show our passes and go to the lift.

"We're not supposed to use the lift in storms," she says.

Halfway up the stairs, as though to prove her point, the power goes. Little battery lights come on at each corner, but Megan's corridor is in darkness. We're holding hands. This doesn't happen much.

"This happens from time to time," she says, "it's not like you think."

"Is it all right to be scared?"

The paranoia is kicking in. I've seen spirits; she hasn't.

"No, it's not."

We negotiate the corridor. Jim, those men, those injuries, that bad shit.

She gets the key swiped and because we've left the curtains open, the moonlight sweeps the room.

"I suppose we'll have to wait for that cup of cocoa," she says.

"Let's hit the fucking vodka," I say.

And we do: it's easy to locate, on her desk from last night, at least three quarters of a bottle left.

"I don't usually drink out of bottles," she says.

No I can't. *Get the fuck out. Get the fuck out of my head.*

From the window the storm is in full force.

The storm's woken people up. Candles begin to flicker in the windows opposite.

What do they think's going to happen?

"Have you got any candles?"

"No."

"What about those electric candle things?"

"Out of batteries. As is my Rabbit."

"Do you think we could ask any of the girls down the hall?"

"What?"

"No, that's not what I meant."

"No. They're probably back home now, anyhow."

We sit there, the lightning hitting the vodka bottle.

She says: "One of the pony-girls on my course once told me that last time there was a storm, she told her boyfriend, *storms do things to women, you know.*"

I can't see the expression on her face but I know she's smiling.

"What did her boyfriend do?"

"I don't know. I dread to think."

A flash of lightning and a simultaneous drum of thunder.

"Storms happen in all clichéd narratives," she says, "Hardy, Lawrence, *The Shawshank Redemption*. And it's happening in this one too."

"This isn't a narrative."

"That's what you think. And its ISBN number is unlucky. Thirteen's supposed to be bad. And that silly boy you told me about with the tattoo that you could only read in the mirror? That's nothing."

"Did I say that?"

"You say a lot in your sleep. If you said any more you'd be walking."

And then she gets up and sits on the window-ledge, just as she did a few weeks back. But this time no songs.

"Why don't you hold my legs and I can lean back out of the window?"

"All right."

"Wait a minute."

She gets a couple of towels and puts them on the window-ledge. Then she pulls off her jeans and knickers and undoes her bra and takes off her top, and sits on the ledge, and I hold her legs. She leans backwards out into the storm and I can see the rain in the moonlight on her face and breasts. The lightning strikes again and her tight stomach-muscles ripple in the rain. She's laughing and generally making a commotion and I figure security'll be up in a moment, but they don't come. I guess all that gym and swim thing does her good, and now I'm holding her legs while she leans into the storm, her yellow hair dark in the rain and all white when the sky lights up. She laughs and she cries and eventually she pulls up and says, that was fucking great.

She sits on the window-ledge again and there're her nipples in the moonlight, and she's laughing and I'm laughing and kissing her and then I sit on the chair by her desk and the lightning comes again and it's like the office angels are photocopying her arse and I'm just there feeling alive for once.

The first moment in time it happened it was like seeing a dead bird for the first time. You know the way it is: you don't see them very often, nature makes short work of itself; but inevitably you see one, when you're three or something, with the flies and the wasps all over the wings and the feathers, and the eyes gone to the insects, and the poor beak and throat full of wood ants, and you're never the same again. You want not to have seen something which you lately have seen. It was like that, but worse, that first time.

I sat on the little bed on a spring afternoon waiting for her to wake. Watching her sleep was so lovely, really it was – like watching a still pond, knowing that koi are just beneath the surface, knowing how much like a sea creature she was inside. Her breast rose and fell; her snores were light, her movements like a child's.

Infantilising a grown woman. What a cunt I was.

That first afternoon though she lay next to me and hugged up to me. There was a bottle of vodka by the side of the bed; we'd finished that off yesterday. She just cuddled up to me. Jamie, she half-said, I miss you, I'll miss you when. And then as she came to consciousness she began to cry. I held her and stroked her hair, stroked her down into my chest to comfort her. She sobbed and sobbed. What's up, I said. She didn't reply, just kept sobbing and crying. Did you have a nightmare, I said. No, she said.

The spring through the net curtains now – grapefruit sorbet light; a screen of amber on the wall.

I didn't have a nightmare, she said. I've woken up.

That's the problem, she said.

I looked about me and there were books and papers, a *Wengermesser* and some other shit. Still she sobbed. It didn't seem as though she ever was going to stop.

Sorry, Jamie, she said, I'm so sorry. Here pass me that water there.

I passed her the water.

She kept crying and I held her and rocked her, kissed her cheeks as the tears came like condensation on single glazing. She kept crying for a long time and she didn't say anything much but I held her as the sun kept creeping in.

Later we went to the crêpe place down by the lock. It was Tuesday so it pretty much was deserted. She seemed to enjoy the food, and we had a few cups of wine. I didn't ask her about it.

She gets me a blue ice slushy. It's a grape one. I drink it with her, suck it up; she lies back on her bed and I drip it into her mouth; I take it into my mouth and trickle it onto her lips, her folds. That's lovely she says, I love you. *Megan darling, I love you too.* She turns over and I paint her sacrum and her arse blue. She squirms. Now she is a sky in which I long to fly. The blue ice melts over her back as she draws up her knees.

But the crying attacks became frequent. It was as though she'd let me into a secret without telling me the secret itself, and without wanting to do either.

Sex certainly helped. Sometimes, on these particularly bad days, after a little bit of watching something on her iBook, some Wim Wenders movie or something which she insisted watching without undertitles, we'd fuck. She'd almost always want to go on top and I have to say that to this day I've never known a fuck like Megan.

There. *There. I've said it.*

She'd ping her suspenders and giggle. Who'd've thought it from a nice book-girl? Your face looks good to me, she'd say, I'll get on it; and then her blonde hair against my chin or nose until she made noises which neighbours must have thought had come from the Zoo up the road. She smelled like an animal and sounded like an animal. This all was perfect, so far as I was concerned, apart from the crying beforehand, and to

think about it now makes me want to go out and jump in a course-running river and search the bed for her.

A few hours after we had made love or something a couple of times we slept. When we woke she'd lie there in just her Thomas Pink, reading something or other with the window shut, and her knickers over the radiator; and the sun warming the tiny room – it was still April, but a warm April. Had we opened the windows there would have been things in bloom – but we squashed up on the bed, her hair on my stomach. Because of the tiny bed, Megan would lie with her ankles drawn up to her knees and her legs quite open, and as I drifted in and out of consciousness the whole room became scented with our happiness, the very air suffused with her tears, and our joy.

Sometimes it'd happen in the night too, on the rare occasions when our body clocks synched. She'd sit on me as it got light, or I'd take her over her desk, in the blue light, with the musk of her arse in my nose and on my tongue, Camden Road waking up outside; the council, the overground, people on their way to Camden Town tube; and then other, later people hurrying along as she sat on the desk with her legs around my neck. There's the 43, she'd say.

Sometimes this'd happen on a cleaning day and Meg would freak out saying – inexplicably – in a heavy French accent, *non, ne pas the chambre* today! When she panicked the languages mixed. She was house-proud in her own way, and sprayed Issey Miyake on the light-bulb. I guess also that the maids had seen enough of this eccentricity, in this place, over the years. They worked very hard for very little. They cleaned and they gossiped and they were gracious. They had had enough of people who never had been allowed quite to be girls; nor women neither. The staff were lovely to

me, but always looked at Meg as though she was from another planet, looked her up and down. One even called her *mademoiselle*: I don't think that she meant it unkindly; it was more a silly joke. Meg ignored her and the maid said it again. Meg called her "*puta*" under her breath. For once I understood but I'm glad the maid didn't.

Megan said, I'm going to keep my knickers on for this. Otherwise I'll get carried away and it won't be so good for you. I'll do my best.

She went to sleep early that night. But I stayed up, drinking the vodka really slowly, mixing it with the Badoit – doing it the Greek way, Jim used to say – and outside was black and I could hear her breathing and slowly the sun rose, all milk and honey to the world, and like Megan before, I stripped off and paddled the air outside of the window, hearing her voice in her breath – everyone breathes and snores in their own voice – and as the morning came, there were some sirens, the buses, and the spring air.

"How clean are you now?" she had said.

I hadn't had anything except Temazepam for months. The doctor was getting a bit shirty about that. It was nearly summer.

"Clean as I'll ever be," I had said.

"Good," she'd said, "we're going to do something you'll never forget. A little congratulations present with a warm Welsh smile. Or German. Take your pick."

She didn't quite smile but she did her best. It was more of a *you're sort of going to like this but I might like it more than you will* kind of smile. Anyway, the use of *smile* in her understanding of it wasn't lost on me.

I sat on the bed, just in my T-shirt.

She looked at my jeans on the limited floor.

"OK," she said, sounding slightly more German than usual, "you've no hair on your chest have you? Come on, pull your top up then, let's have a look."

She was right. I had almost no hair on my chest.

"Right then," she said, "we're going to have some fun this evening. Well, tomorrow morning. The weather forecast is really good. There might be a storm but it should be about fourteen. Obviously this being the bloody UK it'll be colder at night, but the morning's what we're after, ultimately."

"What's the weather got to do with it?"

"Never you mind."

Her books were closed and her arms looked like raspberry ripple ice cream. But still she utterly was beautiful.

"I'm going to go out for a bit and I'll be back soon," she said, "have you got our Oyster card?"

"Yep. It's in my wallet."

"You go to sleep. You've only had a few hours' sleep. I was up all night reading that thing."

She pointed to a book called *Tristram Shandy*, which I'd never heard of and I've never read.

"Don't let anyone in."

"Duh."

The heat soared. There was some bread in the fridge and some marmite on the counter, and I made a sandwich. I gave almost no thought at all to what Megan had in mind, although now I know what she had in mind, I give much thought to it.

*Full fadom five my mother lies;
Of her bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were her eyes:
Nothing of her that doth fade.*

I sat on the window-ledge for a bit and then nearly fell out into the road. I lay down on the bed, masturbated, and drifted off.

But she came home sooner than I had gone to sleep and sat on the bed. She had a Marks and Spencer's and a Superdrug bag and sat them on the bed.

"Morning sleepyhead," she said. I was getting tired of her saying that.

"Hola."

"Right," she said, "some of this might sound a bit weird, but we're going to have some fun."

"Alright. You're not going to lean out of the window again are you?"

"No. It's better than that. I got you some stuff. Thing is, I'd really like to have a minimum of questions. The more questions you ask, the less fun it'll be."

"For who?"

"For both of us."

"Are we going deviant? I thought you didn't like that sort of thing."

"Not exactly. But you have to do what I say. I promise you'll love it. It's the sort of thing though, you wouldn't want to tell your friends about."

"I have no friends. No damage done."

"First we're going to go for a shower, right?"

"*Viel Spass.*"

And so we went for a shower. Then Megan waxed my legs. You go near my balls, I said, you'll fucking regret it.

"Don't worry boy, your balls are safe with me."

It didn't hurt much. Mind you, it was only my legs. I wouldn't fancy it around my arse, that's for sure.

"We're not going to some TV club, are we?" I said, "I've had enough of all that."

"Nope. We're *undercover*, like in Shakespeare. We'll get some sleep. It's an early start."

We wake up almost naturally, at the usual time. It's still dark. A night bus shimmers the walls. People aren't beginning to move about much. It's just the real hard-core city boys, and the girls coming back from the massage parlour, in their trainers, and their high heels in their Tesco bags. She wakes up slower than I do. She takes time to come around. Her contact lenses are on the side. Her glasses too. In the desk-lamp light, I notice a photo I never noticed before. Megan standing at the side of the road outside what appears to be an American diner. It looks like it's in the mid-West somewhere. She's wearing a Panama hat and a little dress. She looks about seventeen. She's even got

a tan. Not red, like I thought she'd go: an actual tan. She's standing there as though hitchhiking.

It's not very light.

"Meg?"

"Darling?"

"Time to get up. Like you said."

"Did you take your sleeping pill?"

"No."

She's not quite with it.

"Oh Jamie, that's so sweet."

"What?"

"You didn't take your sleeping pill. Just for me?"

"Yes. I'm awake now. You waxed my legs, remember?"

She sort of smiles.

"So I did. Well. Let's go out and walk the city. *Let's take a ride and see what's mine.*"

My legs are smoother than they ever have been. It's a nice feeling really. When I touch her leg with mine, or when she runs her hand gently over my thighs and all the rest, it's really close, really nice. It's not for everyone, really, but it has its benefits.

She puts on a skirt and a T-shirt and puts some stuff into her backpack. She boils the kettle and makes some green tea.

"You want some of this?"

She pours some Volvic into the green tea to cool it down and sits by the window in the dark. The city is waking up. I down some vodka.

"You want to go for a walk?"

No one's about as we get down the stairs. She's got her backpack on; and me in my shorts and hoodie. We turn right, up Camden Road. Past the mega-Sainsbury's and up Camden High Street. It's Tuesday morning so it's not as grungy as usual, not so full of Styrofoam and KFC cups. Still it's quite dark. Electricity crackles along the road and it doesn't explain itself.

We carry on up Chalk Farm Road, past the Enterprise and the gelateria, and climb Haverstock Hill. It's a steep climb. We stop outside Belsize Park tube and the paper guys are opening up their stands. Megan has a half-bottle of gin and we get some of that down. She puts her arm about me and winces – the cuts – and I touch my forehead with hers. By the time we're at the junction of Downshire Hill it's pretty light, and it's warming up.

She says fuck all about Keats's house, but at East Heath Road she says, "my great great great great Grandfather used to hang out here."

"That's nice," I say.

"Leigh Hunt," she says.

"Who?" I say.

She looks kind of frosty.

We take a path into the Heath. Sitting on a bench, she takes off her backpack and says: "well, to make this work you've got to put this stuff on."

"What?"

"This."

She takes out the Marks and Spencer's bag and gets out a pair of women's swimming trunks and a black negligee-type thing most suited to fifties automobile commercials.

"Are you having a fucking laugh?"

She closes her eyes.

"Trust me. You'll thank me. You'll remember this for the rest of your life."

"I've been trying to forget about the rest of my life."

"It's the dress code. Look, I've got a swimming costume under my shirt and T-shirt. I've got these huge towels, and we're both going to be girls."

Well, we'd come this far.

"You have more feminine hair than most girls," said Meg, "it's almost down to your arse. We can pull it off. And this is a swim you'll cherish forever. It's not sex. Not yet anyway."

The clearing light.

"And, I'm sorry," she says, "but there's more."

"What?"

"We want you to look as feminine as possible. Men have been known to be beaten up for Peeping Tom shit at the Hampstead Women's Ponds, let alone swimming in them."

"We're going swimming, at seven a.m., in a women's-only outdoor pond?"

"It'll be like Hylas and the Nymphs."

"Who?"

"You'll be glad you did."

So I put on the swimming gear – vintage as it looked – and now I realise why we'd done the waxing. In fact I realise the whole damn thing. And then Meg puts some subtle eyeliner on me, and a bit of lip gloss.

"There," she said, "you look more feminine than I do."

"Why are we doing this?"

"You'll see. I'm doing this for you. You used to be an addict. I'm going to show you there's more to life than that."

And we go to the women's pond on Hampstead Heath and the lady at the ticket stool doesn't bat an eyelid. I pass for a woman just fine. The lady – who's at least fifty – figures we are eccentric friends.

And we slide into the cold water.

Swimming now there, there are ducks, grebes, and coots. We glide by their nests, we see their small chicks. Meg takes off her top, leaves it at the side. The clothes don't fit me; I'm bigger through this. But it is near-light now, blue dawning the pond. Nests made of twigs – and there, there are eggs – the moorhens are used to this sort of thing: and lovers here share in the pure morning light; I look about me: naked girls swimming by; glad and glowing in city *gegensein*. Meg and I kiss, and the lifeguard acts blind. Meg's breasts so smooth on my wet negligee, the night most has gone and they all think we're gay; and I can't be sure – with these nymphs all around – that ever again will my feet touch ground.

"I told you it'd be fun," she said.

She was kicking her feet up to the sky as Hampstead Heath got warmer.

"It was. It was fucking fantastic. Those ducks and everything."

"You got to be Hylas but you didn't get drowned."

"What?"

"And the girls. I wanted you to see the girls."

"Well, I don't know why."

"There's more to life than drugs Jamie," she shouted, across the heath, and the people walking their dogs ignored us.

"Yes, there is."

"I love you Jamie."

"I love you too Megan."

We stayed there for a long time and fucked on the Heath and she was soaking wet, and then we walked down the Heath, down Pond Street, picked up some pastries from the deli, and made our way back home. When I got back I looked into the mirror and the eyeliner had run and that was because I was happy.

It must be a joy, yes, a joy, to drown. To breathe in the water, freshwater for preference, but salt-water if none other is available, and to fill one's lungs with brine or quiet, dimming, drawing water. After producing so much salt-water in one's life, it must be a joy to bring it all in, through one's nose and throat, to take back what one so lately has given, and so freely; buoyed up and bluing, purple for preference, bloated with gratitude and bravery, with joy, sheer joy.

But it was very nice, and now she sleeps.

He woke, and wondered more: for there she lay.

And our sleeping patterns are different, there's no doubt about that. We are out of synch. I'll start moving about around midday; She'll wake perhaps at four. And I'll sleep round about two thirty; she'll be up until dawn most-times. Effectively this gives us about three hours each to be out of one another's hair, one of us being awake. Do people get that much solitude, usually? Also it means that we spend on average about ten hours awake together. This arrangement works well; she can write her essays or whatever they are while I sleep or read, and I can stare into space or walk the hallways while she sleeps. Have a bath or something. I can't –

As I drift asleep into the *see*, the quiet waves lap over me. And yet also as she types on her little laptop, the gentle tapping of the keys is the rain on the skylight in my old bedroom, or on the glass roof of the *Wintergarten*. As the rain falls in my half-consciousness, words form from her fingertips. She makes something from nothing.

You would swim early in Ravenna, the cool Adriatic a smear of stars. After the bancos had long closed it was like stardust in the water. You were looking for something out there in the water. But in another country also you could see the stars from the Wintergarten, lying back on the sofa. When it rained the stars smudged across the

ceiling, just like they were when they're reflected in the Adriatic. Either way the elements mixed: a sad and lonely syzegy.

Sometimes when you're in one of the bars, very late at night, almost everyone gone, it seems as though you're watching yourself. And when you swim and you look back at the shore it seems like you're there too. And then it is not you, it is simply your other. And perhaps another.

The sea is quiet and it's incredible to imagine that anyone ever could drown out there. It is impossibility here, to drown. You could try if you wanted to. You could swim out as far as possible, until you haven't the energy to make it back. You could time it, plan it, take a weekend's worth of sleeping pills about twenty-five minutes previously, and then knock back a half-bottle of Italian vodka, and then swim out. But this sea will not drown people. Even that time someone was washed up, near-dead, coughing brine and blood into a paramedic's towel, still he was not dead. This is not the sort of sea to swallow a body.

And you stand on the shore, and you're swimming in waves of stars, but it's not you: it's your other; and you're watching yourself, your own other; on the outside of yourself, and perhaps another, perhaps a loved one.

And dear Megan keeps tapping away, at the edges of my consciousness, writing her story, or writing about other people's stories, or writing about what other people have written about other people's stories. What was it she had said about writing about other people's writing? It seems so long ago now. Something about percentages or something, like back at school, getting grades. Never being good enough for yourself.

She's out there now, paddling with you in the – it's not the Adriatic now: its the Bodensee – her hair salty and her lips chapped, and it's raining, and there's rain and stars on the water and you are not naked and it is not sexual, and the old see rocks you slowly together, as though never to drift apart.

She always stayed awake. She never slept. I couldn't work it out. She'd go to school, or spend the day with me. Sometimes we would walk to UCL from Camden Road, and after we had eaten – or in her case, not eaten much at all – we would come back to the room, sometimes a little drunk, and I would sleep, while she would just be up all night, or most of it. She was reading and writing and God knows what, at her desk. Sometimes her feet would be up on the writing surface, her bare thighs and vested torso casting an acute-angled silhouette backlit by the University of London regulation desk lamp.

This wasn't just on the off-day. This was every night. Even when she had no schoolwork to do – and at this point, her exams pretty much over, she would have none – what *did* she do? She'd just be up all night, and all day long. She was awake, suffering alone, trying to find stuff to fill her time. She was applying for so much stuff, that was true, from Aberdeen to Exeter, from Munich to Avignon, so I guess that's what was going on.

I asked her once.

"Apps," she said, "and writing. I still write for *Woman and Home*, you know. Someone's got to pay the rent."

"Yes, I know."

"It helps."

"What do you actually *write*?"

"Whatever they want. I think I better write to *Cosmo* soon. Or <<Psychologies>>. They like a bit of young blood. Perhaps I could do a sex tips feature."

"That you could."

"Well, I was joking. But my nymphæ crave you. And my other parietals do too. Not everyone has a body like mine."

She pulled up her vest and flexed her pectorals.

But apart from this, I knew little of her; and of the little monster – that iBook – that took up her time.

She had, from time to time, those which she would term her "especially bad days." She'd always be very apologetic about them, particularly at the time of their coming, and later – albeit without so much terror – in the aftermath.

It would happen sometimes after we'd been drinking a lot, or at certain moon-phases, or at her PMS time or whatever was going on in her life, or when again she'd resolved to take fewer of her pills. I felt for her. I wasn't female. It's bad enough not having to take pills, but since I had the same trouble sometimes, so I understood. I could see that, when she was taking the pills, along with her contraceptive pill, that she really didn't want to take them.

Over and over, her moods changed. I could hear the silence of her trying to reason with whatever demons were there. She would sit there, often shaking a little, and

I would embrace her and sometimes there were eddies of tears and sometimes she'd lash out at me. She tried to withdraw from the pills from time to time, and she'd end up being really fucked-up and then it was my turn to be the carer. We'd get drunk, which probably wasn't recommended on the patient leaflet, but we'd get drunk anyhow and it'd help until it didn't.

Well, it was one of those particular early spring days when the sun gets pretty hot and makes you want to sleep. We shut the curtains and opened the windows. The curtains blew open from time to time, on the light wind. I slept but it seemed that she didn't. I woke up and held her. I held her from behind, nuzzled my nose and mouth into the back of her neck and I knew that she was crying. She cried every day, but today she was really crying.

"I'm sorry," she said, "really it's all right."

"It's not all right if you feel like this all the time."

She still was crying. I reached about her slim form, embracing her stomach.

"It's not all right," she was saying.

"Things'll get better."

"You're joking. You should walk away from me. If I could walk away from me, then I would."

"I won't."

Slowly she stopped shaking.

The birds were singing in the trees and I could hear them very well because although the curtains were closed the window was open.

She kept crying. Letters would come and she'd not open them. She never looked at her emails. Her phone constantly was off. She stopped applying to places. Perhaps it was me. I bring bad luck to people, I can tell you that. Even this text, as you read it, trust me, it will bring you bad luck, but then, if you didn't have bad luck to start with, you probably wouldn't be reading this text.

She still read most of the time. She'd be out on one, on another planet. Genet, Proust, you name it. She still got the little websites with all the prose and poetry in them. She was far from impotent. And still she fucked as good as – or better – than before. I figured she just was going through a bad time and that it'd end soon.

She'd wait until I was asleep to do it. Sometimes she'd fuck me and then tell me not to forget to take my downers and I'd drift into sleep as soft as angels' wings. In the morning there'd be blood all over the sheets, not menstrual blood. At first I thought it must be menstrual blood but it didn't have that smell about it.

That morning her legs were covered in cuts, the colours of a stick of Southend rock; but, no: no comparisons can do it justice. There are some things that should never be talked about and this is one of them.

Love makes us speak when we have nothing to say, said Megan one afternoon.

I can't stop it when it comes, she said. I can't stop it. It's like a big fucking wave or something, just unstoppable, like that Japanese painting. It actually feels pleasurable

when I do it. It gives me so much release. It's like – it's not like – an orgasm, but it's like something like it. The trouble with things that we can't understand is that we try to define them in things that we do. The trouble with things that we don't understand is that we try to understand them within the milieu of our own understanding. Or we describe what we can't describe in terms of things that we can; we can't describe things we don't understand in terms of what we do. It's never going to work.

I love you, I said.

I can't stop it when it comes though, she said, and it's getting worse.

I won't go away from you, I said.

She nodded.

And I won't go away from you, she said.

I don't like you doing what you're doing, I said, but I understand why you do it.

I want to go to see the mists over at Brighton, or Whitstable, she said, like the way they come up in the morning. Have you ever gone to Brighton and got up in the morning and seen the mists roll in, in summertime?

No, I said. Jim has.

We should. One afternoon I was on the beach – obviously in a skimpy bikini reading *Bridget Jones*, and eating chips – and the sea-mist was so impenetrable that you couldn't see more than about four feet away. I could hear kids playing under the pier, but I couldn't see them. People took advantage of it. It was as though I was alone in public but that's the way I always feel. And it was like a sublime version of *The Tempest*. We could get the train down from Victoria. It's the loveliest thing. I'll buy fresh underwear and everything. Stockings, like you like. I know you like that sort of

thing. I promise you I'll make you happy. We'll make love on the beach. I saw that once, two lovers at about six in the morning, making love on the beach. She was sitting on him, the way one does sometimes. Her dress was pulled up. They couldn't've been more than seventeen. I sat there and watched them make love. I hope that's not creepy.

That's not creepy. Well, maybe a bit.

When she was finished on him she lay beside him and all you could hear was the foam of the sea and the cries of the gulls. While she was finishing on him she was crying out, it was so lovely. I wanted to hold her as she hit her final strokes, the last thrusts, guide him into her, even – don't think less of me for this – lick his balls for him, and her sixteen-year-old asshole. I got pretty turned-on, I'll admit it to you. Please don't think less of me for it. But that's the voyeur in me for you. I'm always behind glass. Always on the outside. Always on the backside.

Megan, you're still bleeding.

I went to the Sainsbury's and got tons of Savlon and covered her with it. She winced as I did but I was as gentle as anyone ever could be. She lay back and I gave her one of my sleeping pills and she slept.

The next day I went to Boot's on Camden High Street and got some of their wound gel. That worked much better because it meant that she could bathe. She'd take her book in and bathe for hours and there'd be other residents knocking on the door needing a shower but she didn't give a shit.

I thought about taking her to Brighton with the little money I had left.

You are sitting in the huge room overlooking the sea. The sea is loud this afternoon. It is late summer. He won't be home for a few days. It is late summer and you are sitting by the huge window overlooking the sea. The sea soughs, souches, hushes. The photographs and postcards are from another time – although, to be fair, isn't everything? Only this time – which now has passed – is from its own time. It's unusually bleak and bright today. When you were a boy the sea never scared you. Sometimes – so occasionally – you'd have so-called sleepovers and she would be scared of the sea. Worried about her old horse. She'd cry and you'd say, look, we can go and see your horse and make sure he's all right. It's just a quick drive, we can drive there in your car. She was over the limit but it didn't matter. That's the countryside for you. There is something, is there not, about horses in the sea, drowning, or something like that? But the sea never bothered you. Perhaps that's what happens when you grow up by the sea. It never bothers you. Anyhow, you had[ve] relatives at the bottom of the sea, full fathom five.

Meg had travelled to many cities and she knew people's minds. That was for sure. But she got me just slightly wrong, the way mediums get it just slightly wrong sometimes. But I am not easy to get right. Lasting relationships involve emotional clairvoyance and I'm not a reliable spirit.

You are sitting in the huge room, next to the large window, overlooking the sea. Sometimes he comes home early but not often. She doesn't come by very often any more. The sex might've put a stop to that. And when you told her about the older

woman, the lady from the former East Germany, maybe that's what it was. She doesn't come round very much now. You have to see to yourself, that's the way of it.

The photographs and postcards are from another time. But everything is. Except now, which is not, strictly speaking, what we're talking about. Pictures – often black and white; who does that now? – and of people old and young from another time. Eighties and nineties fashions, quite ridiculous really.

Hush. Hush.

She's pretty, even though she looks a little silly. She's smiling. Not so much a smile. Not a smile. But not not smiling. Quite ridiculous really. Out of the photograph, the sea's imperceptible muscles fill the room. Not the sea as you can hear it now, but the sea as it was then. The very moment the shutter clicked. The sea as you can hear it now, not much different but different. And he is old, even then, in the picture, proud from the War and helping to win it. Standing by the tank, his medals and so on. What would he think of you, what would they think of you? Would they upbraid him, would they talk to him? She was not hit that day. The moment the shutter clicked she had not been hit. Maybe that's what business does to a man. You have to be hard for business. Just imagine it for a moment, getting up, every weekday, and most Saturdays, and having to look your best, a fresh shirt, a new tie. Pressed trousers and a clean shave. It must fuck you up. Maybe it's easier than it looks. It's all right for you, you're something else, something other. Maybe you're a marine biologist or a Spanish teacher. Maybe it's harder than it looks. But getting up, every weekday, and most Saturdays, when most people are having a fry-up, or playing for the local Saturday league, the pub team or whatever, it's a tough call. It might make you become like him.

The net curtains weave the huge room. The wind has its music. It has little pity.

The net curtains wave the room. It's like being underwater. The sea has its pity.

You only need to fill your lungs thirty percent full of sea-water to drown.

There is pity there, amongst the waves, and yet it is terrifying.

But the photos and the postcards, and a boy with dark eyes. Standing there at a wedding or something, hair black as squid-ink; suit like something out of *Goodfellas*; face as scowled as Rimbaud's. He stares out of the picture. The ghost-eyes gleam and scowl all at once. This glowering child, he will never grow up, and he will take me in, he will take me in his eyes.

They're scattered across the floor and you are awash with tears. You loot the house, go through his suits, jackets, wallets and credit cards, source the PIN numbers from the bureau, and get ready to go.

I want to take you to a Travelodge, one in Gatwick or Luton. We could have fish and chips in the restaurant and talk about anything else but to do with our lives. Then we could have Death by Chocolate or a Classic Trifle or something like that and maybe have a little kiss. You'll be wearing red – but not too red – lipstick, and I'll wear a Marks's jacket and jeans. Before we order the bill we'll kiss and you'll laugh because I'll have the shade of red on my lips, despite the guarantee on the lipstick packet.

We'll walk about the foyer with the clocks set for Paris, New York, etc. – as though you need a different clock for Paris: it's only one hour ahead – and then we'll go outside to take the night air and perhaps get a taste of the aeroplane benzene. I'd like to hold you, in the night there, and pretend we can hear some temporally distant jazz band

play, and as Frankie and Benny's is shutting down, or the Chef and Brewer or Yates's Wine Lodge are kicking out their final punters, we'll hold each other as of old, as when we were young. The complex is far from the city so we should be able to see the stars. We'll hold each other tight – perhaps you'll be wearing that dress that you wore for your cousin's wedding, all silk and demure – and we'll pretend we can hear the theme tune from Beauty and the Beast or something, between the PC World and the Maplin, opposite World of Leather and Carpetland, and we'll kiss and hold each other on the asphalt, ready to go up, and order a couple of Bacardi Breezers, and try to fit into the small bath together.

It'll just be the stars above, like an American motel but without the neon light, and we'll hold each other in bed, the croissants ready outside the door already, and we'll touch our foreheads together – the closest parts to the cerebral cortex – and laugh and sleep.

These nights punctuated by twilight and twilight. Days are nights for us, it's the way of things. In the evening, which is morning, I shower; when I wake up she's usually asleep. But not this time. As I come back she's sitting with a drink in her hand, gin and lime by the look of it. Sometimes she sits up half-sleeping, but not this time. The remains of sunlight score lines across her chest. White skin and scarletbrown nipples. Arms on show and their scars like volcanic ash. Staring all into nothing. I lie on my side beside her and breathe with her, let my breathing sequence in with hers. She says nothing, sits there so, just right there. Sitting, the cars below, my hands almost on her. As dark comes we share a quiet room. As though things that are yet to happen already have happened.

The telephone rings.

Her toned legs, her hair against the blue light, the shadow in the blue.

She talks for a bit. I can't quite hear what she is saying.

She walks off into the corridor, the bleach smell flares from the tiles.

As dark comes we share a quiet room, night dimming, remote with stillness, touching and not looking, listening and not talking. Evading communication.

And the phone rings again.

Her words are heard but not listened to. They are as meaningless as music.

The ceiling is dissolved by dreams. This ceiling dissolves dreams.

The phone rests hard, raw on the table. For a moment it's shattered and then it's not.

- Fuck it.

I can't say anything.

- Fuck that fucking cunt.

I can't say anything.

She walks up and down, in this tiny space, in her vest and her socks.

- That fucking prick.

She shakes.

- Bitch. Hate you. Damn you. *Damn you.*

Without bothering further to dress, I go to the kitchen and get some ice cubes. I get back to Meg's room and pour her a huge vodka. She downs it in a couple of gulps. She coughs and I figure she's going to vomit but she doesn't.

- I can't believe this shit, she says.

And now I really need to know.

- What's this shit about?

- It's. It's. It might sound stupid.

The lines on her arms are fresh, slow-running raspberry juice, the kind that attracts wasps.

I put my arm around her. She sort of shrugs it off. She sits there rocking to and fro. I listen for clues.

- They.

I can't ask her. I don't know why. I just can't ask her. There still is that glass on the window-sill.

- They.

- Come on Meg, what's the matter? What's this shit?

- They.

All the hope I could pinch. All the faith I could muster.

She is shivering slightly.

- They don't want me back.

- What?

- My parents don't want me back.

- What problem? You don't like them. You sort of hate them don't you?

– That’s not the point. There’s no secure base. But there never has been.

– I know. I know how you feel.

– I know you do. He was shouting at me, the prick. He was shouting at me. She was saying shit in the background, goading him on. Loading his meagre pistol. Smug fucks.

The night is on us now. This low country.

– I try, Meg, I really do, you know.

She looks at me like I’m trash.

– They want me to stay in London. Or anywhere. Dad always said there’d always be a place for me in Reading, but now he’s going back on that. I should have known, really. But they’re not funding me any more. No more bank transfers. They say I’ve got to go it alone because they’re buying more property. It’s *her*.

– But we’ll manage.

– I don’t want to manage. I wanted to do other stuff. I wanted to go on.

– You can. We’ll get jobs.

She looks at me.

– You can’t get a job. You can’t hold down a job. It’s not something you can do.

– I will, I swear. I’ll do it. We’ll get a flat together or something.

She starts to cry again. We both know that that’s not going to happen.

– The bastard was shouting at me. Just like the old days.

– Well, it’s when they start punching you that you have to start worrying.

And that’s it: she shouts for perhaps the first time ever.

– And you think that if he had been here that he would not be?

I keep my silence.

– Some people have said I've got a temper. Well I got it from somewhere. You should see my fucking father. He broke my mother's nose. And he's getting worse, it seems, although I can't be certain. And she stays with him. When he beats her. Or maybe he doesn't much now, I don't know. He smashed the fish tank with a golf club. And then he beat her for making him smash the fish tank with the golf club. They were floundering, slapping on the lino, the poor things were squelching, so I went into the kitchen and got a bowl and I was scooping the fish into the bowl but they were tropical fish and the water wasn't right and they were starting to die and swim funny they were swimming all funny and they started floating to the surface of the bowl and swimming funny and I was saying to Mum, we've got to save these fish, Mum, but she wasn't hearing any of it and they were just floating to the surface of the bowl one by one. I was scooping them into the basin, trying to get the temperature right and I don't know maybe they were salt water fish or something I don't know I was only six, but they needed me to help them and I didn't know how. And don't get me started on the chickens. My dad should not have animals, that's all I'll say. And she stays there. With him. She fucking. She fucking stays with him there. Stays there, while he humiliates her, derides her. I had to put up with him too. Coming home from work at seven every night, like a god, in Reading! I used to stay in my room all the time. I remember hearing his footsteps every night, and being afraid. I asked him where he'd been once, when he came home at about ten with a Chinese takeaway and a big I'm-a-family-man grin on his face that my mum ignored, but I said something wrong or I hadn't done my homework or something, and he just kept slapping me, my face, over and over again. I'd just had

my wisdom teeth out. Over and over again. They still make out they're so fine, the pair of them. They didn't want a child, they wanted a tick in a box. Well, I'm their heart-shaped fucking box, but I was never the tick. And still they make out we're all so fine. With their dinner parties and their charity fucking fundraising. So. I.

– Meg, come on. We'll go for a walk.

– I can't go back Jamie, I just can't. You know the way it is.

– My father hasn't even tried to find me. Even though I took everything I could.

– You know what? We're orphans here. London is a great big orphanage. The word is not too strong. It's where you go when you don't have anywhere else to go. Why'd you think your cousin came here? He could have gone to New York, Seville. But he came here. Because Mother London takes in anyone. Even us.

– It might've had something to do with Uncle's office space in the Square.

– No, he would've gravitated to this place sooner or later. It's where old souls come. Old, lost, lost fucking souls. And now I have to get a job – a proper job. And Mum and Dad can go and choke.

We sit there for a very long time, not saying anything. We don't make love for a long time either, days on end. The B-Roads on her arms slowly turn into A-Roads, and she looks out of the window for a long time. She cries and she writes and she cuts her arms. She starts cutting her legs. Later, when I lie between her legs in the morning – which is our evening – the deep marks show.

That early summer wasn't long enough. In the nights sometimes we'd lie there untouched. It rarely was quiet. Afterwards my heart still pounding, and my trying to

breathe deeply to slow it. That early freak heat wave, the street-lights oiled us; the fluke of heat; the kisses and silences. We wouldn't say anything for hours. The stale air of the room. The smell of her and I, and sometimes of us. Some people would say it smelled like a whorehouse, but no: they smell like lube, sweat, nylon, cheap after-shave, Vaseline, and Body Shop perfume – not salt, zinc, and sea-fish. I would glance over at her: her perfect profile and her eyes – polished stones just beneath half-closed eyelids – I imagined she was staring half into the starless ceiling as would I, sighting the slim shade down. She'd put on some little fairy lights shaped like stars ("Liberty, you know: none of your B&Q stuff here"). She'd sit there a few hours after we'd made love, her legs open again, perfuming the room with love.

I told her about the songs I used to hear in the sand dunes after it all. She said I probably had PTSD or something like in *The Tempest*, and that I probably was hallucinating. I told her I didn't sleep much in those days. There you go, she said. Other times she'd put on her iBook or whatever it was and we'd listen to something or other or watch some old film and it'd throw ghosts of dim light across the walls and over her thighs. She couldn't get enough of Wenders. It was like being in a film, but then isn't everything? For a second once I figured I saw myself from above in her loosening arms, her lips going blue as the screensaver changed colour. It was too hot to touch but not too hot to fuck; and all of this with her belly a jejune wetland, her fingernails a shoal of blue fish, her hair a tangle of sand, and her sex a soft coral. And later, Megan on her front, her heels grazing the dark, her thighs, back, and the mattress a triangle; the moonlight and computer-light across her back beaded with teardrops. We lay there for nights on end,

through unnavigable time-zones, dreaming and talking about the places we had lived and nearly lived – the smell of girl and the taste of gin all about – but washed up on sand-sheets, somehow going out to sea, not drowning, ghosteyes and the ticking of her Tag Heuer, and the moon somewhere out of sight.

Sometimes she fucks up what she's trying to say. Most often, as we decide what to eat after the day's drinking, she'll fuck up "eat" and "read." She says, in the Tesco Metro looking at the quiches or the readymade pasta, "yes, we could read that tonight." That sort of thing. I get the impression of her looking hard into her tagliatelle, looking for alphabetti letters to read. I get the impression of her eating a few pages of Lorca, a bibliography from Irigaray. You are what you eat.

Even I cried a lot in those nights in April. I mean, I cried a lot, because of the pills – it was a side effect; and you don't cry for nothing – even if you are crying just as a side effect, it still feels like real tears, make no mistake. Sometimes I just couldn't stop myself. We were in Sainsbury's in Camden Town at about one in the morning, buying pasta and wine and beer, and there was this Easter egg. The egg was in this box as Easter eggs are. The egg itself was actually part of the picture. It protruded from this mother dinosaur, and the mother dinosaur was holding the egg like a child. It almost was as though it were part of her. The marketing team had done a good job. The cartoon was imbued with precious care, the illusion of childhood. Yes I got really sad. Megan held me outside of the huge Sainsbury's. Hiding in her neck, her cut arms around me.

And the crying didn't really stop. Megan had this book. It was a children's book so I have no idea why she had it. It was about a duck made out of material. The pictures were very nice. I don't know if it was really a duck because it was made out of material, but in essence, it was a duck, it was a duck made from cotton, polyester, and some sort of filling. It must have been a side effect of the pills, it must have been a side effect; I'm not usually like this. It was a duck though, in the book, that was no mistake. The pictures were really good and the duck had friends, like an owl and a lamb and all that sort of shit. The stitches in the duck, and the other animals, were visible, making it clear that these were artifices of human creation. I figured some kind old man or woman, in the middle of a wood – aren't witches supposed to live in woods? – would be working at it, slowly, blindly perhaps – aren't toymakers supposed to be blind or is that prophets? – taking time over it the way they take ages to age a guitar over at the Fender Custom Shop? A toymaker is a mirabilist. Who makes the stitches in us?

Take a glass sponge and excise all of this. Rub it off. Let it not be *sous rature* – ~~is that~~ possible? Don't tell anyone you heard it. Fuck it all.

We went to see a play down by the river. I do not know what the play was, or who wrote the play, or who was in the play. I do not know really what the play was about. I understood very little. But it seemed to animate her, up to a point, that's all I can say. There was a man and there was trouble in his life and the trouble got worse and he made a mistake and his wife was much distraught and he made another mistake and this led, much by turns, to his death, which in some ways was, and in some ways wasn't, his

fault, after which the other characters seemed to gain a sense of insight. Many of the audience apparently were moved by the protagonist's death, more so perhaps than by his wife's survival, by his children's confusion, by the asphyxiation or whatever. I don't know. These people in the play weren't that rich and the protagonist had tried a few means of death prior to the one that brought him success. The people watching the play seemed not to be short of income. I was more in the dark when the lights came up, but others pretended not to be.

Afterwards we had a few drinks and shared some pasta – *Lady and the Tramp* style – on the South Bank. The bar brimmed with tourists, each seeming to be giving their own little criticisms of the play, or some other play, or some concert or other, or some such other thing. We headed out to the tables in the open air.

It was drizzling slightly and, as this was England, little effort was made to shelter us from it. Hence there were few people around. It was still a little cold anyhow. We found a place in the corner, only just sheltered from the drizzle. She, silent.

We were out of earshot of everyone else, but still we didn't say anything. Me because I had nothing to say, she because – I don't know why because. I think that the greatest pain is to be perceived to be. The fewer people who perceive you, the closer you are to oblivion. That's fair enough. I asked her what she thought of the play. Shit, she said, a waste of time, I've seen it all before. She was only twenty. I still had one-and-a-half grams in my coat but she wasn't into that sort of thing. Let's get a decent bottle, I said. All right, she said. All the same, it was nice there, sitting by the river. It wasn't that cold. It must've been April, quite early in April, that's what it must've been.

The drizzle got a little thicker. Soon we'd be able to call it rain. It was a little cold, but not terribly. Megan looked a little cold, but not terribly.

"Well, at least it was free," I said.

"Got to write three hundred words on it tomorrow," she said.

"Was there an aftershow?" I said.

"Not tonight. We missed the press night. You were paranoid, remember."

"Yes, I remember."

Megan looked like she had lipstick on even though she didn't. Your lips are very red, I said. Celtic gratuity, she said. The bare bulbs swayed in arcs over the bank. I think I'm getting a cold sore she said. The bare bulbs there, swaying. The wind was getting up, whipping the drizzle under the awning. The choppy Thames.

"Shelley once called the foam of the sea a 'chaos of stars,'" she said, "and then he drowned. Byron never quite got over it. But if you go boating, you take risks."

We walked back along the South Bank. It is not like that now. There is no peace to be had there. We walked past the London Eye and there were climbers up in the spokes, like flies trapped in a web. They shimmied up and down and yelled down at what crowd there was. They looked like blips on a radar.

The dull clanging of Big Ben and we took the tube. Dull bells. Back at the sea dull bells easily could be heard if the wind were in the right direction. And guy-ropes against the masts, like wind-chimes. They all could be heard from the huge lounge overlooking the cliffs, at the old house. Like voices sometimes they were – no really, they were: they were like voices. Your head plays tricks on you when you're a child.

Smugglers' tales and the like. Underneath the bridges the lamps lit by smaller bulbs.

You can hear the waves as they lap the shore. Hush. Hush. That's what they said.

She squeezes my hand. You OK, she says. Yeah, I say. She kisses me. Her jeans, which I can't wait to get off.

So early to wake. And there she was with the knife and the flesh and everything.

The late spring morning and the songs of birds.

Don't look – don't fucking look – at – this – don't fucking look at this – don't look at this fucking thing – don't look at this Jamie, it won't do you any good, don't look at this don't look at this don't look at this fucking thing.

I'm not looking at this I'm not looking.

Don't look at this don't fucking look at this. This isn't for you to look at this this is not for you to look at don't fucking look at this.

I'm not looking at you I haven't looked at you my darling. You're beautiful. I don't need to look at you to see that.

Don't fucking say this don't fucking say this I'm beautiful don't fucking say this. Don't fucking say this I'm this beautiful thing don't look at me I'm not beautiful I'm not doing this.

I'm not looking at this I'm not looking at you.

Don't look – don't fucking look – at – this Jamie, don't fucking look at this don't fucking look at this.

Don't look at my – them – don't look at them.

[And I saw it already, her running the blade over her arms and her wrists, like a credit card over an old style PDF machine, like my dad used to run his American Express card over the device, before he signed the receipt to check out of the hotel. Her studying her arm to swipe it, then closing her eyes, a drawing of breath, then the swiping it over her wrists and her poor, sick arms.]

Don't look at my arms don't fucking look at them. I hide them from you isn't that enough. I suffer too. You wear your pain on your sleeve. You never shut up about it with your drugs and your sickness. I hide it all under my fucking shirt sleeves.

I'm not looking at your arms I love you please don't do this to yourself. I love you please don't do this to yourself.

I do this to myself. It's all I've got. Please let me do this.

Please don't.

Please let me do this. It's all I've got please let me do this it's my body not yours.

Christ you look fucked-up. You're not like Jim please this thing this thing.

Please leave me alone you cunt.

Please let me help you.

You cunt leave me alone.

I love you please don't do this.

You cunt leave me alone. Just don't look you don't have to fucking look you don't have to fucking see you don't have to fucking look you don't have to fucking see.

I don't mind to see I just want you to be OK.

OK? I'm not OK. I'm not OK.

But I want you to be OK.

But I'm not OK. I'm never going to be OK.

But I want you to be OK, and I want to be with you.

These old arms. These don't mean much. I'm never going to sift potatoes on a potato farm. But please don't judge me. This isn't something I want to do but it is something I sometimes need to do. I love you too Jamie, but don't judge me on this, please don't judge me on this. These old arms don't mean much.

We'll go on holiday somewhere.

Yes, we'll go on holiday somewhere.

Worthing or Margate, or Whitstable or something.

Yes.

Her arms never healed. When they started to scab over she'd pick them again. Soon they'd be opened up again and it would start all over again. The skies, in Margate, no doubt – as Turner might evidence – are quite excellent.

What is it? I can tell you I don't know. It is about people who have fucked up their lives, often by their own fault, and yet you still feel very sorry for them even though it's their fault. Other times – this is the more classical way – they are respectable people who make a very wrong decision. That leads to it. Down to it. They fuck their lives up, that's what they do, and there is very little otherwise that can be done to save them. And we feel for them. Because we ourselves fuck up our lives, only by degrees. We don't kill ourselves or tear out our eyes, but we fuck up our lives even so. That's what we do.

I wake. Can't remember my dream or my name. Maybe I had none. This time it is 05.40. it's getting light out there, we forgot to close the curtains again. Ghosts. Not the normal ghosts – they're just a pain in the arse – but real, sick ghosts. I need to drink – so thirsty. I pull on my jeans and go to the kitchen. The green corridor, smelling of bleach. It's like a fucking hospital. The fire door slams behind me. Student halls are like old folks' homes. The wind is calmer now, calmed, or did I dream it wild? Did I dream it, that night when she lay back into the storm nearly naked? The prettiest thing I've ever seen. A bottle of Volvic in the fridge. I take it and shut the fridge door. Some poster of some film star with his shirt off. I leave the light on and walk back down the hall. That bleach. Female names on the doors: Becky, Charlotte, et cetera. Megan never bothered to put her name on the door. It's almost as though no one lives there. An abandoned refuge. But the smell of disinfectant, the bleach, as though the place is trying to cleanse itself of its young inhabitants.

Soon no more of this.

I return to her room. She is sleeping. She is blameless; she hasn't made the mistakes I've made, despite her life. She is sleeping. She never sleeps. She is snoring. Her breast rises and falls. I accidentally kick over a bottle of something or other but it doesn't spill or break. It is getting lighter. Why must there be mornings like this? Does this happen to everyone? Lines of shadows, the rain and the mist outside. People gearing up for work. Fuck work. Fuck this life. Her breath, the smell of our lovemaking; her little toy walrus. The dinosaur duvet. The bottle of lube on the side, the empty Highland Spring bottle, the pills next to it to prevent cunts like me from reproducing.

She has taken some sleeping pills, otherwise she'd notice when I pull the duvet aside to see her. She begins to wake as I kiss her. Yes, Jamie, give me some of you, she says.

I hold her in my arms, she drifts back off. She smells like a wonderful sea creature.

If I could tell you I would let you know. If I could tell you how this feels then I promise you I would.

Language is only good for unkindness and covetousness.

This is a building where people who learn things eat and sleep and watch television on their notebooks. Sometimes they invite friends over or some such stuff. I can hear them laughing and I can smell the cooking that they do. Which of them will stay and which of them will go back home? Little more than children who think they're grown-ups, quitting the nest for their chosen subjects. *There'll always be a place for you here.* Home is an abstract concept to me. Home is where the heart isn't. *We want you to be happy, you just can't stay here. Well, you can kip on the sofa if you like, but it's temporary. Everyone must face their responsibilities. And anyway, we've turned your old bedroom into a study for Dad. Dad needs a study you know – he's had to take a lot of work home with him now / please try and understand.*

/// please try and understand.

In the communal kitchen the people cook dead things.

Megan and I haven't eaten / anything hot / for weeks.

We stink of gin and sex. She showers sometimes but not often. Sometimes she showers and doesn't wash her cunt, just for me.

I didn't make it to the toilet in time the other night and there was shit /
everywhere.

This is hardly London any more. This is hardly anywhere any more. *This is no
place; this takes place.*

Her hair is yellow and I love // her.

The stink of TCP and Savlon.

Where shall I go where shall I go?

And anyway, we've turned your old bedroom into /// please try and understand

You vomit every / night.

She holds your / old / hair.

She considers shaving her head and her pubic hair. I talk her out of it because I
figure it's a variation on her compulsion for self-harm. Later I am sedated and she waxes
her vagina.

She can speak seven languages. [Soon she will get a scholarship to Queen Mary
University and a full AHRC grant, but neither of us know this yet.] She is beautiful and
kind. There is nothing like her in the world. But she is sick and I know I am the cause.

Later she is sober: fuck my arse again she says, I want my arse fucked like I
fucked yours with the Cava bottle the other afternoon but I want to feel it more and I
want the rest of me to be fucked I want all of me to be fucked by you my darkeyed boy,
she says, sober as fuck.

You think I'm such a good fucking girl she says / what would you prefer on your
brioche this morning, my fresh woman's shit or my virtuous menstrual blood? Just
Listerine after, otherwise you'll get halitosis.

I am making her sick. She was not like this before me. She was funny and kind. I have made her sick. It's the pestilence. My father passed it on to me and I can't go on passing it on to her. She is relatively innocent. I must leave. I can't leave. I can't leave. I must.

The low light hangs over the late spring. She sleeps; maybe she dreams. I have dreamed of women like her and now she is here and now I must leave. I can't go on making her this ill.

You went down to the river and / you made a pact.

Don't forget this.

You never eat.

Baudelaire looks down, so approvingly. There. Before the syphilis. In his tie. There's a fucking adverb in a pentameter for you. She'd been reading Sade and I couldn't blame her.

How's university? Got yourself a boyfriend yet? Auntie Anita's pregnant you know.

You'll have a new cousin! We'll get him some Cath Kidston stuff!

I couldn't've done this. I'm not man enough for this. I couldn't've done all this. Look at all those fucking books. Most of them aren't even in English. I never had the brain for it,

never had the talent for it. I waited for things to come to me. My shyness and arrogance will be the fucking death of me.

Drown me let me drown.

Drown me let / me / drown.

The brioche tastes good, the preserve like salty jam. She watches me eat it. You have free will, she says.

Let me fucking / fucking / drown.

Some boy used to spy on Meg when she got dressed, or so she said, from across the street. But looking at her sleep, who would not, had they the chance? Who would not, as I have done, watch her pull on her jeans, put on her Gossard or Triumph bra, even put on her thick knitted jumper, in the freezing dawn? Who would not, given the chance, touch her, to feel that she wanted to be touched – sweet sufferer – by clean hands? To touch – that oldest of languages – to read the lines the hair the flesh the bones the muscles – who wouldn't? As in dawns, I watched her dress. Pulling on her tights and pants. O Tomboy goddess. And yet it felt like I'd made things worse for her. She wrote language on her body: she made a body a book. She makes her body a text. But books must be kept out of the flames. Yet love lives on fire; without fire, love chokes and dies. And you must live it out, but to live out is to outlive, that's for sure. And there, lying, breathing, the only sound in the morning the ticking of her watch, looking down at her, for her, searching for her in the dawn, trying to look through and into her, then – now – her hair tangled down her neck to between her sharp shoulder blades, grown now from so long ago, night, and day, this polar hour, I realised how far she was away from me, how far

she had strayed, because she had to do so, orphans, that's what she had said, the both of us, unable to speak, unable to comprehend, touch, see, hold, both of us, despite all of the shared sadness, the divided soreness, it is all too much to tell, too much to address, it's all failure, we can't tell, we can't explain, why do we bother even to try, you have to be there, and here, I mean there, in her little college room, as for the first time in ages I watched her sleep, something came over me, I'm not sure what it was: helplessness, despair, folly, self-loathing? We both had hoped for more than the world can give, if I'd known it was going to end this way then I never would have started, that's the way it always is, but the cruellest thing is that you start again, even though you're sure of its forspilled punch-line, you do it all again, even though when you're finished, or rather, it finishes itself, you wish you'd never started. If only you could get home, get home. All the sadness of all the world, it's here in a second of silence.

I put all of my things into my backpack. She is sleeping. The room is so familiar now, too small. I have lived here, as I have lived in other places. She is waking up. She says, where are you going? Back to Jim's I say, I might not be long. You're leaving me, she says. I'm going back to Jim's, I say. Back to Soho. She is not crying. She leans on her left elbow. She knows I'm lying. I will not come back.

A little closer to the silence. Fill up the void with words, however inane, in fact, the more inane, the kinder.

I'll miss you, I say.

The duck book. The Easter egg.

Don't cry, I say to myself.

Don't cry, she says.

She's sitting up now. Her breasts pale monuments to moments.

Next door someone is listening to Middle Eastern music.

She there naked.

Don't come back, you bastard, she says, don't come back, you cunt.

Her contact lenses in the little tub. Her eyes, her true colours, are violet.

I took the tube south and stopped off at the off-licence along the way. No money for food. Jim and I would down the vodka.

Moonlight Clive faithful as ever. He waved me in without really looking up. So much for security. That corridor. The green sparkles. I'm being watched. Deserted flat; very tidy lounge. No pieces of tin foil on the table. The television gone. Just a lighter and a tea light, that's all that there was. Very neat. Someone must've tidied the flat – probably Ana. I knocked on Jim's door and there was no answer. I pushed the door slightly and he wasn't there. I never really had been into Jim's room before. There was a picture of Ana beside the bed. In the picture she was naked, apart from some leather. Ana was smiling and her ___.

Blood on the bed, faded to grey. I didn't want to hang about in Jim's room any more.

I figured Jim had gone to work so I sat down on the leather sofa. The sun was pretty bright, not setting in the east. Jim would be along soon so I started to work out what I'd say to him. I can't stay in one place for long. I can't trust people. That sort of thing. They sent me to the shrink when I was ten, took my IQ and the psychologist said a

few things to my dad and I never really understood what the point of it all was. It was a fucking waste of time, I remember thinking; such bad language for one so young. I can't trust people easily – that's what I'd tell him. And that I was sorry.

I leave, that's what I do. I can't stay put. Home is an abstract concept. Parents are liars. Security is an illusion.

I looked out into the city like when I arrived. I drank some of the spirit, felt the difference.

By six he wasn't back. I called his mobile and he didn't pick up. I left it a while and then tried again. Nothing.

Now this takes guts: I called Ana.

"Anaïs?"

"You prick."

I guess she had the right to be angry.

"Ana, I'm moving back in with Jim but he's not here."

"You selfish prick."

She hung up.

I paced about the room for a bit and then called again.

"James, you've got your university girl – what're you calling me for?"

"Ana, I'm not well. I broke up with her. She –"

"I don't give a shit, James. Look, Jim's – well – meet me."

A bit of a change of heart, I figured.

"I thought I was a selfish prick."

"You are. A smartarse selfish fucking prick. If you really care about him or anything then meet me. I'm in The Fox at the moment. I'm not drinking though. I've given up drinking. I'll tell you about what's been happening while you've been abandoning the guy who hasn't abandoned you."

"OK. I'll be there."

Obviously they'd had another fight.

It was nearly summer. The bottle was nearly finished by the time I got the guts to go and see her. I walked briskly. I tried not to but I couldn't stop. Past where I used to work, where that guy got that bottle in his face. It was his fault not mine. I paced and paced and at last gave up and ran, ran. The unblurred realism of the streets, Carlisle, Dean Street, through the passage of St Anne's Court, straight through to Wardour Street. I rushed along the road; the sharpness of the streets ripped my arms.

She was sitting alone, as far away from the window as possible. The usual Anaïs: black microskirt; black tights; black T-shirt. Perfectly crayoned lipstick and eyeliner.

"What do you want to drink?" I said.

"Let's just walk," she said.

We walked down into Chinatown. I stopped off in Brewer Street and got some whiskey. We were at the gates of Chinatown, with the grand golden animals, along the street and the bilingual street-signs. She said nothing, didn't even look at me. She brushed her thumbs along her fingers. I knew the answer and she knew the question.

"You know, don't you?"

"Yes. I think so."

And that's how it happened then. I laughed at first, no, no, and then she turned to me and her eyes were full of tears and I knew that she had loved him. Perhaps she was the only person who had loved him, and the Chinese kids were playing about us in the early night, around the red and golden gates, our bench; one child put their hand in and out of the stream of the blue fountain, and Ana's cheeks were wet and she clutched my hand and it probably was because she had no one else, and the kids were playing all over the street and the Chinese guys were making their deliveries for the night and the dead animals were hung up in the restaurant windows and the scents of cooking mingled life into death.

I had the feeling again of speaking a language that no one understands, hardly even me. Like Megan, being on the outside of everything, watching things happen, even to myself.

"How?" I said.

She gripped my hand tighter.

"Pure cut I think. Or definitely stronger."

"Pure cut?"

"I think. I wasn't there that night. If I had been then I might have saved him. We'd had a row. Someone must've really hated him to spend that much. The police aren't even investigating. They couldn't give a shit. Mind you, there's nothing really to investigate. Someone overdosed. Another junkie down the drain."

"He carried it off well."

"Not after you left."

The sun was still quite warm and it wouldn't get dark for a bit.

We were carrying him home in the snow. He was too drunk to walk. Every night was New Year's Eve, back then.

The children were rushing around, splashed smiles in the fountain.

I hugged her in the middle of the street, pushed my forehead into her breast, and she put her arms around me and I hardly believed it was true yet I'd always known it like it had happened once or twice before all the memories the sadness. It was snowing in May.

A crazy numbness, the voice of horrible silence, the wordloss. Over and over, the numbness washes away in embers of memory. A few images, piled up, the jumble sale of the mind. The funeral – no, it was not time to think of that, his beautiful black hair growing still in the darkness of the coffin – I would think of him as alive once. Poor Ana, it was she who discovered him, grey and cold. Apparently it's a painless death. I wondered if she just told me that. I wonder if drowning is painless – it can't be, can it, they torture people with it, suspected terrorists and such like? It can't be and yet it is the only real temptation. I hope he died with the smack-buzz, with a church-candle lullaby, a hymn of flame, the warm-womb sigh of life threaded into death. Piled up image upon image. Playing pool with him all afternoon in The Good Mixer. I never beat him. Piled memory upon memory. Words are becoming redundant. *Hush, hush my little one breathe the whispers*. Hush. Is death the only remedy for this cunt of a life? All the tin foil about the flat like stars. Already I was talking, as I am now, of him in retrospect. Is this a love-letter? Go and work that the fuck out for yourself.

Ana said she needed to go. Not London tonight. The city finally had got to her. I've some friends in Essex, she said, they live in the country. Come with me you can't be in that flat not now not now I've told you not for a while. We went out east, near where Mary used to live and it still was light. Down the A13 again. We could've gone to St Albans she said but I hate it there. She was driving like a maniac. I remembered Megan's parents' big house and the suburbs. Death suddenly seemed to be something that only happened in the past; life seemed deathless. Death is something that only happens to other people. We all are too young to die.

We stopped off at a petrol station and Ana broke down a bit in the car – I can't fucking do this, that sort of stuff – but she got herself together and we drove on. We drove out to a little lake in the suburbs, some kind of nature reserve. It was getting dark.

We said very little. Platitudes, mainly, like how good a musician he was. Squirrels ran across the path, their tails like fir-cones. The sun was sinking. Planes carved flumes across the purple. *We're having an Indian summer.* I asked her what she was going to do. She said she'd go to work in the morning, but from Essex. She didn't ask me what I was going to do. I put my arm about her. I said I might stay at the flat.

And this of him: his eyes his face – almost expressionless – when high, not as though he was rushing; just that numbness, not like the nitre-sharpness of amphetamine, not like the pretend euphoria of ecstasy. Just a dark-womb sigh where spirits fear to tread. The white horses on the water. The candle burning like a tree light, the baubles full with blood; the call girls, and the samurai sword. The emptied space, glove without hand to hold, wine without the bottle, spaces, gulfs of emptiness. Nobody sleeps. *None shall sleep.* Not here. Like the tongue of a dragonfly Jim's straw at the foil amber.

Where shall I go? Garter belts, pretty faces, chilly dawns, nibs of pens, jade on the bar, candles on the table, the sharp moon, the sun behind the mountain, the smiling effigy, the gleam of thighs, the blue desert blood, the arid smiles, the electric danger of unprotected arse-fuck, the red canyons of longing, the loneliness of kitchen knives – and Jim was all of these. I never really knew him.

Hush. Hush.

The shadows all are one. Waste of sky. Silent here.

Language is evaporating. It uncovers yet nothing but nothing.

Perhaps you dreamed it; perhaps you

dreamed

you were alone in the darkness the unremitting darkness. dreamed.

perhaps you were high perhaps a bad trip perhaps you are not alone perhaps there
is someone on their front alone no not alone beside you, applescent breath, breasts like
or navel, where no mixed wine is wanting.

she is beautiful alone, crying out perhaps, no –

– no not crying out.

alone and beautiful.

It is very night.

wash // like / waves.

Cool cool wave / dip your feet in they won't bite. Waves caress they don't cut.
Sometimes they look they're made of glass, like a mirror, but they're not. You can run
into them and not get cut.

feel the cool ocean, toe the water, wash and Lethe it all into nothing.

wash like waves, this drug this dream.

drug me kindly, o dream of life. i meant you no harm. drug me kindly.

Waste of sky this

the rush of clear water near the Meuse delta ah all colours in the sun all prism. //

Blurred sight.

There are fathoms of sky there. You wished to drown up there one day, a sunrise,
kicking at the heat-mist. Or in Lake Geneva, diving into the stars.

The harbour lights rim the ocean, if you'll pardon the expression. The summer breeze
was like a young girl's bright hair, as she let it fall onto your face into your eyes your
dark hair.

All is true.

a basin of shadows unbeginning.

the old rains falling on the dunes, the falling rain on your face. She is out there, in the
waves. The fresh whip of the sea wind on the water, sea water on your face. She is out
there. Under the stars in the waves.

Bright

silverfoil moon

you remember her, yes you remember her // her sleek slippery thighs //

sometimes she'd dress up – yes, and God knows, she could carry it off – the silver and
darks, the suspenders and boots, licking her boots as the sun came up, eating her as she
came; her silver skin in the moonlight as the moon went down, her open like a _____ –
and all the rest, her breasts and neck, her smell and breath. You wish you could feel her
softness. She used to leave yesterday's knickers under the pillow. She must have done
well, despite her agonies. Her name was Megan.

Death come dare. It's boring here.

This is the wide world we're travelling over. Walking on the darkness. Ancient
impenetrable darks. Snakes ambered. Veins of coral gulfs of poisonous dark. You
thought that there were neons in the high window. Vasts of candles you cannot be lonely
with all these candles. Silver and dark

Silver and darks.

Iron filings in your eyes.

So alone here darkness o darkness.

The shadows came for the woman who you trusted.

In the evening, you would hear voices. Here the ghost-voices speak in dead languages, voices like wind, the wind in the dunes, calm, old voices.

Hush.

Hush.

And they whisper and crackle like autumn fires, and gleam and curl and fade into embers and are lost, traceless, in carbon, as though unspoken.

the ghost-songs, sad and arcane, tender and dead. The songs are alive; the singers are dead.

That's the amphitheatre up there for the old, in the dunes up there where the old tunes sing. They echo the caves. You would go there when you didn't know where to turn. Bruised and terrified, singing to yourself, mother's leather coat with the wool on the inside. You were living with a man twice your size in a big old house by the beach night after night. You are alone and his face is in your mind his angry face. You want to spit in it but your mouth is full of ash.

Let us begin again.

[...]

there are stories to be told. Perhaps new ones. You know these things. You tried escape in the deathdepths of the riverbed. Ancient hands.

// the pills the // silence.

You are a pinprick of rust. City of sadness. Lush dust of lust in your sandy hands.
You are in the dark –

[Hush]

[Hush]

– ness.

Into something rich and strange.

Superfine hush. Only an infinite sadness which concludes itself only by self-propagation.

Death, where is thy sting?

It is here.

It is here.

One night you fucked a whore. The lights stayed on.

Not just the one night.

The

Zero

You are in darkness

All is lies.

Zero

Soon you think, soon the sun will rise again on another morning and you'll walk the dusty city. But night. But night and burning visions burning darkness heat without light – *regards from the angel* she will come again hold on long enough – the ancient waves waves on the dead dead sea beads of shingle whispers, whispers.

Hush.

Hush.

London. Bangor. Brighton. Berlin. Canterbury. Helsinki. Paris. 2010-2013.

Regards from the Angel: Loss, Event, Representation

1.1. Aims, focus

Regards from the Angel is an attempt to dramatise a number of conditions and ideas related to being “lost.” Many of these necessarily encounter disjunctive dynamics. These conditions include irreconcilable psychological problems; broken families and other causes of abandonment issues; bereavement and its “opening-up” of psychoses and hysterias; the dynamics of melancholy and mourning; the idea of the event; and the relation of language to representation and being.

Loss is twofold here: it denotes the loss of the subject, and loss on the part of the subject. In the latter case, loss is not confined to actual bereavement, but instead denotes absence or irreversible decline. Freud’s idea of melancholy and mourning, Derrida’s response to it; and Bowlby’s theories of attachment, all are useful here. So too, in these terms, the subject is lost: to be divided from oneself, lost to oneself and others, has significant causes and telling symptoms, the kind of which would seem as appropriate to a literary text (character) as to a clinical study (subject or patient).

The subject is affected by events. Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, and Badiou all have different slants on the event. Each of these ideas informs the extra-ontological significance of events in *Regards*. These thinkers correspond on the notion that at the time of its arrival, the event arguably is beyond presentation, let alone representation.¹

¹ “Presentation” here refers to the intellectual faculty of presenting an event to consciousness; “representation” is a more specifically aesthetic term which includes narrative. Badiou’s understanding of this is different. See Pluth, *Badiou: A Philosophy of the New* (51) for a lucid explanation.

The event is extra-ontological. It demands we rethink time: narrative time; consciousness of time; and time qua time. It irrupts under sublime conditions: there is a rupture between what we feel and what we can know. The event also is linked to language. How then, can a novelist give a sense of the event? How far can we “push” language towards its “outside”? How can the writer produce singular effects in language?

1.2. Contexts and influences

The contexts and influences of *Regards* are quite clear. As an anti-*Bildungsroman*, it addresses dysfunctionality in youth. This necessarily incurs J.D. Salinger, Sylvia Plath, Bret Easton Ellis, and others. The abuse of the Proustian/Beckettian dynamic of memory however,² differentiates James’s narrative from Holden’s and Clay’s. The self-satire of *Regards* would be impossible without the benefit of synthetic narrative hindsight. The present-day James realises that his former self was overexcited, over-serious, and unwise (“I was so young, so stupid” 27). Here two perspectives are in play. They are supplemental to one another: they contradict but cannot cancel each other, causing an interpretative disequilibrium.

² See Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* (59 and *passim*). In *Malone Dies*, Beckett mirrors the Proustian anti-hero, who is not simply reminiscing, but dying.

1.3 London, psychogeography, supernatural

London is rich in folk tale; here topography and history combine to assemble a psychogeography. But is *Regards* a “London Novel”?

Sinclair and Ackroyd loom large both in terms of research and aesthetics. Both Ackroyd’s and Sinclair’s work owe something to the “father of situationism,” Guy Debord. He defines psychogeography as “[t]he study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals” (“Introduction” in Knabb 5).

Can a city somehow insinuate itself into one’s self? How far do significant contributing factors to consciousness nourish one’s psychological experience of a city, and how much of it is “there” already? As with many pseudo-sciences, psychogeography is inconsistent. It depends on the belief that previous events – those that have happened to others – might influence our experience of present, personal ones. There are two implications of this, which depend on pre-knowledge: either one’s knowledge of certain events at certain geographical points produces a predisposition to hyperawareness to stimuli; or one’s ignorance to these events does not preclude awareness. In the first case, say, visiting The Globe, or a field in Rettendon, might be self-fulfilling prophecies (popular “ghost-hunt” television shows capitalise on this); in the second, perhaps there is something beyond understanding, however vague. Indeed, even in his definition, Debord enjoys its “pleasing vagueness” (5).

We might conceptualise the psychogeographical schema less vaguely as having two primary constituents: the horizontal plane and the vertical plane. The horizontal is

the geographical condition: the longitudinal and latitudinal point on a map – but also the present state of a geographical location. The vertical constituent covers the psychological-historical condition. For example, over some years I lived variously in Bethnal Green, Whitechapel, and Mile End. Horizontally, it is an area of growth. Vertically, it is the multilayered site of many London (hi)stories: the Blitz, the Blind Beggar, Jack the Ripper, et al. – names of events, places, and people, which stand for narratives. As I was walking to university, I passed the tube station in which Londoners sheltered during the Blitz; I passed the Krays' birthplace; and as I completed my walk back home, I was aware that the Ripper practised in a similar, localised darkness. In all of these cases one most often is predisposed to "feel" a certain way. It's precisely because of stories that this is so.

London abounds with myth. Myth has significance for Sinclair (Baker 42). Myths merge with superstitions and events to produce unique effects. Ackroyd analyses the past's intrusion onto the present, the vertical into the horizontal. For example, here he is, on the myth of the Thurrock Fiddlers:

The river at [St Clement's] is also known as Fiddlers' Reach, as a result of the legend that three fiddlers were drowned here and that their musical improvisations still cause the water to be restless and choppy....

(Ackroyd, *Thames: Sacred River* 445)

Ackroyd's Fiddlers story finds its way, via Lakeside shopping mall, Essex, into *Regards* (192). James has heard the folk tale (or perhaps he hasn't); he is paranoid. The tropes of

music and drowning in the novel provide an index of a romantic uncanny. There are several other instances where Ackroyd's work has influenced the text,³ particularly my section on the Stables Market:

We choose to head here because here we are closest to hidden. We feel the catacombs beneath the market, long before we know of them. Below the jewellery shops, "global street food" stalls, and Claire's Accessories, there are skulls and teeth, stacked up one upon the next, forming the bedrock of the Stables Market. Stand on the east side of the High Street, just past the bridge, just before the Morrisons, and look into the walls. I cannot tell you what you will see.

(252)

Contra to the examples on the A13 and from E2, in NW1 there is no "cluing in" or pre-knowledge of any "story" or "myth." *Regards* rarely indexes vertical predisposition. James does not know about the mass grave below the Stables Market until later. When he addresses the reader explicitly it is the benefit of hindsight that allows him to do so. We might call this the psychogeographical sublime: the experience of a threat to the intellectual faculty of presentation directly derived from an intuition caused by a site. Something is out of joint: either it is the subject or the object; in the first case we encounter a manoeuvre of characterisation, and on the other, an awesome spatial-historical phenomenon.

³ See Ackroyd, *London Under* (7). The narrative is based on my own experiences at this point. Each morning I would wait for the 24 bus, which stops opposite this site. Waiting with me, a friend often would remark to me that they felt uneasy. But on balance, this was in the morning.

Events leave traces and Jim's flat is a site of traces. In this half-hallucinated supernature (the television turns itself on and off at will; a suicided dancer appears one morning; there are green flickers along the hallway which represent her green eyes) there is a hybrid of the uncanny and the sublime. Part of writing fiction is taking something that is coincidence and turning it into something that isn't.

Sadness is the root of all haunting. As "the angel" says:

It's all right. It's all right. You're all right here with me. But don't stay here long.

It's a sad place. No wonder you're sad. If you're in a cold place you get cold.

The same is true of sad places. If you're in a sad place sometimes you get sad. It takes a special kind of person to kick against the pricks. This place and Jim are sad. (208)

Events are subtracted, leaving empty semantic spaces which the reader is dared to fill.

Whatever haunts this psychological Room 101, it will have happened – almost – in Jim's habitat.

Many instances in *Regards* are based on real events. There really was a dismembered body in the Regents Canal in the early part of this century.⁴ Fiction is haunted by, and haunts, the real. But these things did, and didn't happen, in London. It would seem then, at least by exhaustion, that *Regards* is a "London Novel."

⁴ The Regents Canal is a popular depository for dead bodies, and indeed as recently as a year ago, another was weighed-down beneath the surface. I really was asked by a plain clothes police officer to move along, as the crime-scene was photographed. This murder was a witchcraft-related incident. This will subsist in the collective unconsciousness of many Londoners. Out of taste I shan't reference the event here; its details are easy to source.

London is the stock-market of psychogeographical capitalism, and is the site of many “ghost walks.” Most nights in E2, tourists meet at a supposedly haunted site and are entertained by actors and pop-historians. This accesses the stimulus of presence: the conduits of suggestibility. It seems to the subject that an event never could have happened, had it not happened at a certain place. The site of the event is inextricable from the event itself.

In *Regards*, through alterations of consciousness, effects might be experienced due to a *perceived* irruption of the past into the present. The motivated subject provides the sensation. What is “not there” is far more open to subjective speculation than what is. (Jack the Ripper’s identity of course is unknown.)

The “Regards from the Angel” section narrates problems of reference; but it may be a supernatural encounter (hence the trope of feathers). *Regards* is not a “drug novel” any more than a ghost story.⁵ Narcotics and the occult both enter upon similar psychological spaces. In enacting a London-centric psychogeography, *Regards* addresses a topology of supernature and erects an architecture of imagination and intuition into whose liminal site the rational may not enter. The rational and the irrational haunt and supplement each other. Conclusive closure is deferred: it is this which shoulders the liminality of reason (form), and triggers a frisson of belief (effect).

⁵ Perhaps the weakness of so many novels of “lost” youth (*Less than Zero*, *Trainspotting*, *Morvern Callar*) is that these psychological dystopias depend heavily on narcotics. Addiction is just one symptom of “lostness” in *Regards*, although the usual causal/symptomatic symbiosis eventually crystallizes. But ghost stories tend to focus on childhood and middle age. In a sense, ghost stories are for people who don’t believe in drugs.

2.1. Loss and lostness

I have identified a condition of multiple loss (1.1.): this comprises loss, mourning, and the condition of being “lost.”

In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud advocates “getting it out,” going through the process of mourning eventually to regain health. Derrida replies to Freud through refusing to mourn. The work of Bowlby also, shows us that loss, for those who have no real security, is devastating.

2.2. Loss, mourning, and memory

Spectres stalk me I tell you. They did then and they do now. You think you will see someone again and sometimes you do and sometimes you don't. Sometimes you see people who are there and sometimes you see people who aren't.

Sometimes people who aren't there see you.

(*Regards* 65-6)

Stories always concern memory and often deal with loss. Not everyone can get over things; perhaps some things are impossible to get over. How many times have we heard expressions like “[person *p*] was never the same after [event *e*]”? How do people deal with this? In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud theorises “normal” and “abnormal” mourning. In the former, “the ego is left free and uninhibited once again after the mourning work is completed” (*The Penguin Freud Reader* 312), while in the latter case,

one cannot or indeed refuses to get over loss. It is interesting that Freud calls this second kind of mourning “abnormal” while Derrida, on the other hand, advocates it:

...[T]he impossibility of completing one’s mourning and even the will not to mourn are also forms of fidelity [...] I cannot complete my mourning for everything I lose, because I want to keep it, and at the same time, what I do best is to mourn, is to lose it, because by mourning, I keep it inside me.

(Derrida, “Dialanguages” 152)

Freud’s clinical idea of “getting it out” of oneself is at odds with Derrida’s notion of fidelity in and to mourning. As Bennington notices, isn’t the “normal” Freudian model very much in “the service of the self, the ego?” (“In the Event” 29). To keep the lost thing “inside me” is to refuse to externalise and thereby “get over it.” It seems at once quite natural, and an act of love, but also it is self-destructive. Admitting death accesses a will-to-death.

How can we mourn in Derrida’s paradoxical sense, and how best might we depict it in fiction? In *Regards*, I impart a sense of futile retrieval (“all the long night nothing” 5). And then there is the confrontation of loss. In this sense, have we got a choice but to mourn? John Milton seemed to understand this all too well when he wrote: “I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night” (*Shorter Poems* 302). Memory, desire, and loss all demand some sense of time, yet a sense of time admits its own other.

Breuer and Freud write, “*hysterics suffer for the most part from reminiscences*” (*Studies in Hysteria* 11, their emphasis). My narrator is the casualty of memory. Proust

works through this: the Proustian dynamic is a re-enactment which insists immanently and differentially. Deleuze's work on Proust can help us better to understand this:

Involuntary memory seems to be based first of all upon the resemblance between two sensations, between two moments [...] But this is the characteristic of involuntary memory: it internalises the context, it makes the past context inseparable from the present sensation. At the same time that the resemblance between the two moments is transcended in the direction of a more profound identity, the contiguity that belonged to the past moment is transcended in the direction of a more profound difference. Combray rises up again in the present sensation in which its difference from the past sensation is internalized. The present sensation is therefore no longer separable from this relation with the different object.

(Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* 60)

Internalising the difference between past and present produces singular effects. When places and people "rise up," we are confronted with a differential sensation which precludes closure. It is close to a muted, Freudian hysteria.

In "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through," Freud revises his ideas of memory and the unconscious which previously he formulated with Breuer in *Studies in Hysteria*. Freud's original model theorises trauma as banished to the unconscious and which, through analysis could be dissipated. Through putting the unconscious

codification of trauma into words trauma can be “got out.” Freud reassesses his previous technique:

‘Remembering’ took a very simple form in these hypnotic treatments. The patient reverted to an earlier situation, which he appeared never to confuse with his present one, conveyed the psychic processes of that earlier situation in so far as they had remained normal, and in addition conveyed whatever resulted from translating the unconscious processes of that time into conscious ones.

(Freud, “Remembering” 392)

Soon afterwards, Freud describes his new technique:

...we may say that that the patient does not *remember* anything at all of what he has forgotten and repressed, but rather *acts it out*. He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he *repeats* it without of course being aware of the fact that he is repeating it. (394)

This argument has something in common with Deleuze’s reading of Proust. But Derrida’s work on mourning also is close to the literary aesthetic enacted by writers such as Proust. There somehow is an inability to let people, places, and experiences go, and this inability is crucial to *Regards*.

2.3. Attachment and the Secure Base: Bowlby

Why are some characters so insecure and why do they act the way they do? John.

Bowlby conceptualises a “secure base” in his work on attachment theory and Borderline Personality Disorder. In *A Secure Base* Bowlby presents his study of maternal deprivation and its effects in young children. Through Freud’s work on mourning, Derrida’s response to it, Deleuze’s idea of memory, and Bowlby’s pragmatic empiricism, we can work towards an understanding of the condition of loss.

Dysfunctional subjects are hindered by instability. Sometimes they find it impossible to commit or to reciprocate love. Due to traumatic experiences in childhood, a vicious circle results: the child is father to the man. Bowlby’s term for this condition is “insecure attachment.” In children as young as ten, this results in “incoherent stories, no resolution of sadness” (in Holmes 115). Bowlby found that children will seek out their “secure base” at times of threat; in many cases this is the mother. For adults often the same holds: the subject needs someone to trust. Trauma or abandonment may render the subject unable to trust others. The mother is central to Bowlby’s thesis. On a motherless childhood, he writes:

All the cuddling and playing, the intimacies of suckling by which a child learns the comfort of his mother’s body, the rituals of washing and dressing by which through her pride and tenderness towards his little limbs he learns the values of his own, all these have been lacking.

(Bowlby, in Holmes 40)

It is a spoiler, of course, to say that James's mother is dead, although of course the implication is that she has died when he was somewhat older than Bowlby describes here.

My character James aligns his relationships with women with the loss of his mother. In a disjunctive assemblage of past- and present-tense narrative, James relives being with Megan:

...then, now she unfolds [...] I never want to wash. I want to crawl inside of her and refuse ever to be born again. (375-6)

His wish to remain unwashed reflects his fear of the loss of the sexual trace of Megan's body. The floating signifier "her" denotes both Megan; and James's mother. The inclusive disjunction of "then, now" enacts the impossibility of the time of the event, and the Proustian dynamic. The reverse-birth trope signifies not just James's wish never to have been born, but also his desire to die. His arrested emotional development manifests itself in wishing Megan to participate in an ultimate, impossible act of surrogate motherhood.

In contrast to the psychogeographical ideas above, there also is a lack of geographical base. Whereas both Jim and James each express or imply a desire to "get back," in truth there is nowhere for them to get back *to*. It's precisely this condition which provokes the desire to depart. The lack of a secure base demands that one cannot stay put. One leaves.

There is a sense of loss, and a labour of mourning in all of the main characters in *Regards*, be it for a denied childhood, premature loss of innocence because of a sense of abandonment, or through loss. James's mother is dead; Jim's parents abandon him in London; Ana's parents divorce and use Ana to get at one another; and Megan's parents ignore her to the point that they appear to try to erase her from their lives. There is loss in the sense of lost health and the ability to "cope," lost security, or even the loss of the illusion of security. To return to Bowlby then, via Derrida, we can conceptualise a fidelity to loss, even in the loss of an illusion: there is no secure base, or even the illusion of one.

3.1. The Event

There is a mystery. There is writing and there are events. There is a gap between word and event. Representation is impossible. We can *tell* what it's like to burn oneself on the grill by accident, or to shave, but we cannot *show* it. How might we account for events? The event is out of reach. We can touch an orange but we can't touch a thunder storm. In *Regards* a character leans backwards out of her window, naked, during a thunder storm (397). No one can capture events. But mystery haunts figurative language.

While language never can account for the event, singular effects might be produced which give an impression of something happening or something having happened.

Let us then consider three aspects of the event: language, time, and what we might call “truth.” Post-Heidegger, three major thinkers of the event are Lyotard, Deleuze, and Badiou.⁶ Lyotard can give us some ideas towards a writing that will allow figural language to produce singular events; Deleuze’s concept of time and event is useful in understanding the “atemporality” of events. Here though, I will concentrate on Badiou. He overhauls thinking through the event, love, and the ethics of fidelity.

One of the few things that Lyotard, Deleuze, and Badiou seem to agree upon is that the event cannot be grasped at the time of its irruption. Events for Deleuze, instigate a new spin on the pre-Socratic philosophy of time. The event always seems to happen in the time of *aion*: “always past” and “always already to come.” For Deleuze the event happens in the “*pure empty form of time*” (*The Logic of Sense* 165). Here, “[o]nly the present exists” (5). This is the time of the event. This is the time of “Becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 158).

How can we ever hope to narrate such events? H. Porter Abbott states that “narrative is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time” (*Narrative* 3). Porter Abbott refers to mankind’s stories, myths, and sacred texts. Time in Porter Abbott’s use of the term seems inextricable from what happens *in* that time; it is not an attempt to conceptualise time qua time. Narrative is an invention to make sense of events. This fails. Any narrative of the event is impossible.

What do we say following a wonderful or a traumatic event? Usually it is something along the lines of “I can’t explain.” Often the subject will list plastic and

⁶ Deleuze writes “I’ve tried in all my books to discover the nature of events; it’s a philosophical concept, the only one capable of ousting the verb “to be” and attributes” (*Negotiations* 141). Lyotard writes “I have always tried, under diverse headings – work, figural, heterogeneity, dissensus, event, thing – to reserve [...] the unharmonizable” (*Inhuman* 4).

empirical stimuli: "all that blood," "his beautiful eyes," etc. What is beyond these *things* is the event. Blood and eyes are things that *are*: events cannot be said to "be" in this way; they are extra-ontological phenomena. Can the writer show this *beyondness*? An interesting technique towards this is to foreground that narrating the event always already must be impossible. Almost-framing the impossible foregrounds the impossibility of framing. *Regards* concerns the thrill of the city, and its eventual effect on the subject:

I step around nothing to invert the window in the mirror; a specular deixis, spatial transfer: widdershins reflection of a spiral of steep steps. Opening it will wah the roar of street, admit the stench of burger onions, couscous spices, the refined piss and beer tang. Overcast dust, layered on the latch. Iron fire-escapes ivy across the opposite block. I am describing how it looks to try to describe how it feels: have I failed? (19)

Here, the ironic "have I failed?" satirises the incommensurability of language and event. The rest of the passage is deliberately empirical. Each of the five senses is present, or at least implied. This is extended through the neo-surrealism of "[a] carafe of pigeons." It undermines the representational dynamic: the implication is that the carafe is knocked over, and hence its contents escape, like a flock of pigeons taking to the sky; the kineticism of the image is withheld to demand more of the imagination; hence the metaphor is a comic risk. Here I intend to foreground the inscrutability of the event and the inadequacy of narrative discourse. This has something in common with the

Lyotardian sublime, in which “feeling” exceeds the capacity of presentation (*Inhuman* 136). To combine Lyotard’s sublime with Badiou’s multiple (a situation of which both doubtless would despair), the sublime excess leads to epistemological subtraction. But we must write.

I try to rethink expressing events. Narrative and event are incommensurable; language is inadequate. But we need to use it. Thinking through the event in the last hundred years begins with Heidegger. He finds a concern with the awareness of *Dasein* (*Being and Time*). Taken further, the *Ereignis* or event pushes us into a transcendental state in which we are aware of Being qua Being: Being reveals itself in presentation. Heidegger’s work resituates ontology as a primary concern of human understanding, ousting – up to a point – the Enlightenment preoccupation with epistemology. Post-Heidegger, with the establishment of poststructuralism (*The Logic of Sense; A Thousand Plateaus*), deconstruction (Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context”), and postmodernism (Lyotard, *Discourse Figure; The Postmodern Condition*) as dominant philosophical conditions, research into the event turned to language. But the event is as strongly aligned to ontology as it is to epistemology and language. It is this post-Heideggerian situation that we will consider being and event.⁷

In *Being and Event* Badiou argues that the *Parmenides* of Plato has been radically misread, and uses this standpoint to recast western ontology.⁸ In short, Badiou asserts that being is pure multiplicity, and that this never is reducible to the one.⁹ This is

⁷ For Heidegger’s translators, “Being” (from *Sein*) always is capitalised. This no doubt is partly because the original German is capitalised. Recent work on being and event is not. I have tried to maintain consistency with this. Hence when Being is capitalised here, it refers to Heidegger’s *Sein*.

⁸ Badiou, *Being and Event* (23); see also Ling, “Ontology.”

⁹ Incidentally, this is the crux of Badiou’s disagreement with Deleuze, whom he accuses of returning being back to the one: the univocity of being. See Badiou, *Deleuze: the Clamor of Being*. For an interesting reassessment of this, see Crockett, *Deleuze Beyond Badiou: Ontology, Multiplicity, and Event*.

because what *is* always is pure multiple (to give a very simple example, the body is not reducible just to the one; it is made up of many smaller parts). Moreover, we only have access to presentations of what *is*, rather than being able to present what *is is*. We only can give examples of being; we never can present it. In this way, being “inconsists.” If being is inconsistent, then nothing consists, hence the one is not. This is what leads Badiou to suggest that nothing *is*, because there is no ultimate consistency or unity to being in itself. We can see here how Badiou disagrees with Heidegger.

This problematises any notion of explaining what it is to be. Epistemology helps less than we might have thought: the Cogito only gives a motivation to believe we exist, rather than explain what existence is. Whereas a presentation of being can be consistent, being never can be presented. This poses questions both for thinking and for writing being. But the event makes things still more problematic. For Badiou, the event is extra-ontological: it occurs as a momentary fracture in the logic of being. Hence at the time of the irruption of the event, we lack the intellectual tools to understand it; after the event, the tools towards that understanding – such as they may have been – are out of date. We cannot think through the event at the time of its irruption.

Consider the event of love. We do not know how to account for how we feel when we begin to love somebody. It leaves a hole in knowledge. As Dante Gabriel Rossetti so beautifully puts it: “Nor know, for longing, that which I should do.” (158)

We know less about the world having fallen in love than we did before. We can think through the being of the beloved’s body, for it is a “forced” presentation of the multiple (eyes> retinas> cells). But we cannot think through the singularity which comes as a radical departure from our experience of the world prior to the event of falling in

love. Rather like a lightning strike, the “being” of lightning – the charging of particles, energy, etc. – is multiple, but crucially, the event of a lightning strike is an extra-ontological phenomenon which comes momentarily as a subtraction from knowledge

For Badiou, after the event we can work through a “generic procedure” to try to think of the pure multiple as unified, but this never can present the irruption of the event at the time of that irruption. Is this really what the writer hopes to do? How then is the writer to account for being and event? What’s the point in writing about falling in love? It’s inexpressible; yet we write about it.

The writer might begin with the admission that being and event are too much for narrative. Beckett was one of the first to do this explicitly: he asks who could “nothingness in words enclose?” (*Watt* 247), which almost is a reflection on the breakdown of language. But this “nothingness,” when aligned with Badiou’s deduction that nothing *is*, is useful towards understanding the relationship between language and event. If the event is a *subtraction* from knowledge, then precisely it is “want” (“lack,” “lessening”).

But what sort of events are there in *Regards*? Perhaps the first is obvious: there is the event of sex. It’s undeniable: there’s a lot of sex in *Regards*. From the Deleuzian point of view, this is a meeting of bodies, an (ironically) incorporeal effect caused by an encounter between two corporeal forms (*The Logic of Sense* 4-5). From Badiou’s standpoint, it is extra-ontological (*Being and Event* 179; 184). From a Lyotardian perspective, it is beyond expression (*Inhuman* 111).

Badiou stresses an openness to events. This is how the event of meeting Mary differs from the event of meeting Megan. Mary is every heterosexual young man’s ideal

real. She is beautiful, open-minded, and charming. Upon seeing her, James fantasises about her (although this is not stated specifically). The hours that lead up to James and Mary sleeping together are full of militant, anti-masochistic anticipation: But James is starting from a conclusion. In the event, complete with deliberately "faulty" imagery (the aeroplane, *Regards* 89) it is an inevitable anticlimax. Afterwards James realises that he has been idealising something that he cannot have. It is underwhelmingly excessive.

In contrast to this, James cannot even remember how he came to be in Megan's room. Megan is quiet, eccentric, unglamorous, and direct; she deliberately resists fluency in clichéd femininity. James's experience of Megan is limited but he is enchanted by her. Much is concealed; with the more glamorous, more obviously experienced Mary, little is concealed. James and Megan slowly learn to be with each other: love overthrows practicality, poverty, failure, and pride. Only at the end, when James realises that he is making Megan ill, does he leave. James refuses to harm Megan: he has grown up. He does not leave because he does not love her, but because he does. He is faithful to the event.

Whereas *Regards* undeniably is desolate, there is an ethics of sorts to it. This is in the sense that the characters are open to events. Each is open to possibility. Perhaps only loss can nurture fidelity.

4.1. Conclusion

Regards is an attempt to address the inexpressibility of events, and to explore the conditions set out above (1.1.). There are many ways to express, in vain, the inexpressible. It's what keeps us writing. But London never will be exhausted; and the body will continue to inspire, to awe, and to demoralise.

My novel is aimed to narrate loss, but also the thrill of love. Like Badiou's multiplicity, neither loss nor love can be reduced to "the one," to an item for presentation. Even if this extra-ontological or incorporeal condition could be expressed, language seems the last medium through which to do it. Being and event are evanescent in *Regards*: half-glimpsed, mesmerising, and singular. I only hope that – bypassing all the above philosophical, psychoanalytical, and occult small-talk – it achieves that.

Paris. 2013.

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