



Ellipsis Zine #7

She Cries Honey



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She Cried Honey, Ellipsis Zine #7

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Dial the number you found on the website—the one that took forty five minutes to find. Wait for someone to pick up. Open your mouth to speak but instead listen to an automated voice tell you how important your call is. Listen to voice tell you all lines are extremely busy at present; suggest perhaps you'd like to call back later. Listen to electronic music transmitted from another galaxy. Wait for inhabitant to answer phone. Listen as inhabitant with I wish I had another job voice introduces himself; asks how you are today; asks what he can do for you. Tell him you are trying to change the date you have booked for someone to visit your ageing mother who keeps falling down. Wait while he informs you he doesn't deal with schedules; asks if you will hold while he speaks to the intergalactic being who does. Drum fingers on your cat's head while you wait. Leap from sofa as cat digs in claws. Pull cat down from Venetian blind one-handed and shoulder juggle phone under your ear. Drop phone on wooden floor. Drop to your knees, scramble on floor, stretch for phone, shout 'Hello? Hello? Hello?' Listen to electronic music as cat climbs onto your shoulder. Purrs. Wriggle cat from shoulders. Cat free, lean against kitchen unit; congratulate self on grabbing phone in time. Drop head back. Put phone on speaker. Place phone on kitchen unit. Snatch phone to ear as an alien who sounds like she's eating space dust crisps makes her verbal entrance. Listen as space dust crisp alien tells you she has tried to connect with the intergalactic being who deals with bookings but could only speak to alien colleague number nine who picked up phone. Listen as she says alien colleague number nine thinks you need to speak to the super royal alien in the purple coat from the remotest galaxy in the universe. Tell her you would be delighted to speak with the super royal alien in the purple coat from the remotest galaxy in the universe. Freeze as space dust crisp alien's voice speeds past you; tells you that the super royal alien in the purple coat from the remotest galaxy in the universe is on annual leave for two weeks. Implode.

NERINE, I LOOK FORWARD TO THE DAY WE MEET AGAIN

A stutter was how I greeted you the morning we met. We crossed our paths on a forsaken beach - around us patches of garbage were sleeping in the sand like freshly dug out bones. You had your fingers wrapped around the stem of a flower I had never seen before and as you turned to face me, I felt the loud noise of something shifting into place below my sternum. I was only greeting you, yet it felt like the world had just been set in motion.

"The nereids were sea nymphs. They protected sailors at sea."

I listened to you, enraptured by the melodic notes of your vocal chords. A moderato of notions which I craved, while waves lapped at our legs, dissolving and then thickening salty crusts right under the hem of our trousers. Your hair a bundle of fluttering confidence. I prayed for the wind to blow some of it to my face, to help me keep the conversation going just a bit longer.

"Come visit me at my shop, I can show you more flowers."

The indent of your fingertips burned a hole in my skin, pounding its way into the right ventricle. That night I placed your business card on my night-stand and fell asleep with a smile draping my face.

SHEPHERD'S PURSE, I DEDICATE MY EVERYTHING TO YOU

Isn't it sweet how I kept staring at my phone? How I lost my job for the thrill of the umpteenth love message exchanged during a shift? My mother yelled at me when she got the news. My best friend, on the contrary, laughed and said good for you. A warm hand patting supportively right next to my collarbone.

Neither of us believed in God, still having a priest officiating the ceremony conferred it a somehow deeper meaning. An egotistical feeling of power budded shamelessly from the idea that we were forcing a deity to recognize us. Two women with no religion. Creatures tied together. I squeezed your hand hard when the sea spit some lather at our faces - the sense of belonging almost too much to bear - and a lone water freckle glimmered on the tip of your nose.

Later, your sister was the one to catch the bouquet. Arms taut and fingers splayed in the air, she snatched the ribbon with the fierce grip of a winner and pulled it towards her chest causing a cascade of chalky florets to disperse among the guests. You picked one from the folds of your dress and blew it to me, winking as if I was expected to know what you were thinking.

SPIDER LILY, NEVER TO MEET AGAIN

I never met someone with such cracked heels before. The crevasses in your skin ran so deep they made it look like your feet were painstakingly screaming for water.

One night, I dreamt that they were bleeding, spurring your thick life on a bed of grass and sand. For all that I was terrified of you leaving, the sight of the path you were trailing behind made me pliant. With their fiery tongues quivering under the wind, the most beautiful flowers sprung from the patches of exsiccating blood of your footprints.

You never came home that night, nor the following. I kept thinking you took a detour among the waves.

Three steps and then on the left.

Down under the surface and the sandy whirls.

"Her heels needed water. I'm sure she'll be back when they're properly hydrated."

Again, my mom yelled at me upon hearing those words and the sea rolled down her cheeks and soaked my pyjamas. It's not that I wasn't grateful for her food or the intense smell of fabric softener saturating my clothes, but I found her naivete rather unsettling. Really, why mourn you when everybody knows that sea nymphs must eventually return to the ocean?

HYACINTH ORCHID, WITH YOU FOREVER

Red spider mites. Aphids. Glasshouse white-flies. Mealy-bugs.

The little tag tied to the vase listed them all. Their names rolling ominously down my tongue. In my mind, I mashed enemies under my thumb in a cacophony of squeaks and stains, but a fake soil doesn't need care.

"It must be a really special flower if it survives on sea water only"

My therapist poked at the sod. At the surface caked with salty crusts.

"The Japanese have different flower meanings. Hanakotoba. Did you know?"

He shook his head, coolly, scribbling down scratches of notes - I knew he was going to research that later. He never seemed to believe a single thing I said.

I spent the tenth month alone collecting smoothed glass fragments drifting ashore under our window. One day a bundle of hair grabbed at my toes, tugging at the tender skin in between them. I picked it up and sniffed it but I couldn't remember your smell anymore.

LILY OF THE VALLEY, HAPPINESS COMES AGAIN

Each time the undertow washed away a tiny bell. They call them the cups of the fairies and can barely hold a drop of water - not that fairies need more than that anyway. I wondered if you'd shriveled up since you took a wander to the waves. Maybe you could have picked those flowers

and built a necklace out of them. Sport them as if you were their mother. A modern Maia. So beautiful among the Pleiades that even Zeus wanted to lay with her.

Thirty stems. One for each step. The distance between the shore and the first depth. My feet slipped on the submerged cliff and I went down, a fluttering mess of your hair wrapping around my throat and pulling.

I'm a sea nymph now - that's why I couldn't protect your shop from withering. I've got scars on my wrists where they've ripped the scales off.

A blue gown to cover my shriveling body.

And cracked heels screaming for water.

I've been following stories of the Birdman for months. When I stand on the cliff top, looking out, I imagine the exhilarating free-fall, the release of weight. But there's no possible way to achieve it. The Birdman's created his own balsa-wood wings and soon he'll be flying above me, above everyone.

Newspapers tell me of his daring, his increasingly successful attempts at wing-jump flights. Each time, he adjusts his method and each time he finds improvement. I may not know him but I sense he wants to fly more gracefully, perhaps yearns to be perfectly suspended high above the world. An escape from whatever reality remains beneath.

So on this spring afternoon, I'm standing with all of the other eager onlookers to watch the Birdman's next flight. My binoculars are clasped in my restless hands and my eyes are trained upwards for the plane's ascent. I hear the mechanical whirr; the hairs on the nape of my neck prickle. The hum of the crowd is building; their collective energy is enveloping me as we wait for the moment.

But the Birdman's descent is not quite right. He appears to be spinning away from us, manoeuvred by a surge of wind. Through my binoculars I attempt to follow his path but it's too rapid, erratic, and I lose him. He launches his parachute and relief cushions the crowd, but then, I know it's failed to open. I capture him briefly in my lenses; the vital cloth's somehow wrapped around his wings.

He's falling further away from the airfield, becoming smaller; a tiny orange blur against powder-blue. The vast crowd, as shock plunges through them, are hushed. I hold my breath; force one last look at part of the parachute streaming behind like a ghostly ribbon. Turning, I begin to forcibly push my way out through the throng. I cannot watch any longer, I dare not see, I will not stay.

There are thousands of people around me, horribly enthralled. I can barely remain upright as I lunge through the crowd. My vision's beginning to blur. With all of my strength, I wish to be away before this final flight ends. For alongside the amazing Birdman's dreams, my own have collapsed.

Dark words curled around Ruth's mind as she stood by her window watching her garden fade into the dusk. She only heard the voices at night.

'Gardening is my last passion, Barbara. I've lost interest in everything else.'

'Even your daughter?' said Barbara, not really listening; she was sitting at Ruth's kitchen table reading a magazine.

'Amanda doesn't need me. She's an adult now and a doctor.'

'Daughters always need their mothers,' said Barbara, arching her eyebrow.

Ruth stared at Barbara. It was difficult to concentrate with the incessant whispering in her mind.

'We never got on, Barbara, even when she was little. And Roger...well, he destroyed us. I should never have married him.' Ruth stopped and put her hand to her mouth as if she'd said an obscene word. 'I'm sorry, Barbara, you must be sick of me talking about Roger all the time.'

'Roger's gone now, Ruth, there's no need for you to worry about him ever again.'

Unsure of what to say next, Ruth turned her back on Barbara and continued her appraisal of the garden. Though she could see very little, she knew her Hippolyte roses would need dead-heading in the morning; the whole garden looked tattered and neglected. In the distant murk, she could see an uneven man-sized bump in the lawn. The low growling in her head grew louder. Not for the first time, she wondered who the voices belonged to. The word 'demon' flashed into her mind but she dismissed it immediately. She didn't believe in God; she didn't believe in the devil and she most certainly didn't believe in demons. She closed her eyes.

'He was a mean-spirited old sod but I miss him.'

'What was that?' a voice behind her asked.

'Oh ignore me, Barbara, I'm just talking to myself.'

'Barbara? Who's Barbara?'

Ruth whirled around. Her next door neighbour, Mollie, was standing at the kitchen door.

'I hope you don't mind, but the door was open and you weren't answering the doorbell and I knew you were in. Amanda rang me, she says you're not answering your calls. You

know, she's lost so much recently...after, you know...the least you can do is pick up the phone.'

'I know...I've just been so...'

Mollie stared at Ruth for a moment.

'I know it's been difficult, Ruth, but call your daughter, will you?' She turned and added, 'And get some sleep, you look exhausted.'

Mollie left the house with an unmistakable look of concern on her face.

'Wow, what a bitch,' said Barbara. 'Shall I make us a nice cup of tea?'

Ruth smiled gratefully and nodded. She sat at the table and watched her friend move across the kitchen. Barbara was tall for a woman so, as she walked, her horns scraped noisily across Ruth's Artex ceiling.

I see Olivia Clark kiss Andrew Cooper behind the garage. She knows I'm watching and she smiles.

When I tell Olivia I wish I were her, she laughs that perfect laugh, the one which starts off breathy, all Marilyn Monroe, and finishes as clear as temple bells. She tells me I'm pretty, swears she'd die for my perfect skin, would kill for my short dark hair—so classy, she says, so grown-up.

We go up to her room and I fetch Mrs Clark's hairdressing scissors from the cabinet, tell Olivia I'll cut her a fringe like mine. I ask her to shut her eyes, then I chop. I tell her I'm trimming the length too, and I cut the sides, the back, shorter and shorter, as fast as I can while her eyes are closed.

When she opens them she sees blonde hanks cascading into her lap. I tell Olivia that her hair is just like mine now, so she won't have to kill for it after all.

Mrs Clark's lips are the colour of putty, her words the hiss and splutter of a coffee machine. She calls my parents from the hallway phone, stands in the drive, arms crossed, as Mr Clark reverses the car.

When we set off through the dark streets towards my parents' house he puts his hand on my knee. And then I know it's going to be alright, because Mr Clark says I'm pretty too; he says I'm the prettiest of all the girls.

She's in the woods picking herbs for her mother when she spots him among the sycamore trees.

"Don't you know not to wander off the path?" the man says, hair like a red summer sun. Wicked smile and glinting eyes better suited to a trickster fox god.

Lisabelle locks ardent eyes with him. She lifts one foot off the packed dirt, then the other, wading into the wild grass. He reaches for her, and she falls into his arms, already imagining the scratchy pine needles against her naked backside, the rasp of lips, nips of teeth, fiery stubble burning her for days afterward.

The moon comes, but Lisabelle's blood doesn't. She becomes aware of the life growing inside her, barely the size of a breadcrumb. Soon, the germinating seed begins kicking obstinately as it takes up more and more space. She worries about fox teeth and claws, about being torn apart.

More intense is the fear that the baby will emerge with brilliant red hair under the strings of bloody mucus, and everyone will know who the father is.

Her mother catches her washing at the water pump behind their house, naked from the waist up.

She tears at her graying hair. Then, she grabs Lisabelle by the arm in a steel grip widows acquire through plowing fields for a living.

"We'll say he forced himself on you," her mother tells her once she's dragged Lisabelle inside the house.

"But he didn't."

Her mother's voice is a panicked animal, belly flush with the ground. "Girl, if you know what's good for you, you'll do as I say."

No, I won't, Lisabelle thinks. Outside the walls of her mind, though, she keeps quiet. In the fireplace, red-hot flames flicker upon the cracked logs like impish smiles.

She goes into the woods again. Not to meet the fox man, the married pumpkin farmer from the neighboring village, but to think without her mother's fear poisoning her.

A friend told Lisabelle about a doctor in the city, how he can pluck cells from wombs like seeds from mother earth.

She leans against the rough bark of a tree and slides down, not caring about the grass stains on her too-tight dress. She closes her eyes and claws at the dirt, tearing apart saw-toothed fern fronds with her restless fingers. When she looks down, she tenses like a fist. Fox tracks, in the dirt, little paw-prints circling the tree trunk, distinctive to anyone who knows what to look for.

"Little trickster," Lisabelle says, her hands fluttering to her stomach. The rustling leaves carry the sound of her laughter over the tree tops. Renard.

Her lips repeat the name, the French word for fox. For smiling gods of mischief.

Lisabelle picks herself up and heads back home. Both feet firmly follow the trail, both hands gently cradle her stomach.

Egg.

They find the girl writhing on the floor of the forest; her small mouth spilling gargled screams, enough for the whole village to scramble to the scene. Like hungry gulls, they watch as the girl's hands scratch and her soft legs kick out, pushing dirt, leaves, sticks, in hysteria circles. By the time her Mama arrives the girl's blue cotton dress is stained with soil, the material rumpled and rucked up at odd angles. Not one of them is able to calm her down.

The children, eight of them to be precise, are asked for answers. Each one feigns ignorance. They say they don't know what happened. That they were playing together in the forest. That the bees appeared. That they swarmed and stung.

Larva.

One of the men carries the girl in his arms. Behind, a mass follow. Some are worried. More are curious. Together they stride from the forest and through the village, marching on until they make it to the downtrodden outskirts. Mama begs them to leave when they reach her front door. She begs the man to fetch a doctor too.

It takes an age for anyone of medicine to arrive. The girl lies motionless and swollen on her Mama's bed, a far cry from the delirium of earlier. With steady hands Mama pulls the out black bee stingers and smooths spots of homemade salve across the nasty bumps.

"It's curious", the doctor informs Mama, after the examination. "I've never seen anything like it."

Back in the village square the children have been rounded up. There are whispers of foul play; a cruel game gone wrong. Bullying and the set of a trap. The denials are vehement. Parents quash any further inquest. Instead they make their case and claim a curse. A strange happening between the trees. An affliction. Perhaps a mark of evil.

"Mama is a poor unmarried woman", they say. "The girl, a strange bastard child."

Pupa.

The doctor had warned this could happen – "based on theory alone." Mama sits in her bedside vigil and watches.

It's the eyes that go first. Sea green to pink, purple, ending on shiny black; a cherry for each iris. Next is the skin, prickles of coarse hair push up and settle through the pores in tiny black clumps and yellow stripe patches. There are no new legs, no pierce of a stinger, it's not a total transformation, though there are wings, delicate as a veil and as high and wide as her Mama's hand on her back. The girl has stayed mostly silent since the stings; hazing in and out of consciousness, small calls for food and water, requests of cuddles from her Mama. Visitors are forbidden soon after.

It's not long before one of the children sneaks a look through the bedroom window.

As the sun sets the village marches. They want to bear witness. On arrival the girl is awake. At the first shout she screams so high honey secretes from her eyes.

Adult.

Disdain is dealt out in droves; Mama and the girl suffer at its unmasked hands. In the brazen light of day, a black mark is painted upon their front door. In the village store Mama is refused service, vital supplies withheld like rationing. She is fired from her work in the fields soon after and demands are made that girl is driven from her home – that they pack up their meagre belongings and leave.

In a bid to salvage herself and her girl Mama shouts in the streets for answers. "The children", she cries, "they're behind this. Damn your lies." The outburst only severs her cause. The succulent promise of a transformative curse holds far more interest to the villagers than the potential for truth.

Death.

Hidden in the safety of home, the girl hatches a plan. As the weeks bleed – shunned and seen as a spectre, she starts her practice. Mama observes with quiet eyes, cleaning residual spots of honey from bed sheets and bath towels, from bowls and the sink of the outhouse.

At the new moon – thin and fresh, they creep hand in hand from the cottage and out into the night, weaving from the village, past the forest and up to the hill that overlooks the dwellings, carts and animals. The girl's patch hair prickles – her senses attuned to the dark.

Mama lets go and steps back at the peak. She knows what's to come. The girl steadies herself and feels her wings flutter. She thinks of them below, tucked up tight in their homes – their cruel words and unkind actions, their absolution lies and scheming children. Thinks of her Mama too – scorned as though she has madness within her, as though she has cared for a beast.

Just as she practiced, the tears begin to pour. Down the honey slides, seeping from her eyes in streams, slipping and snaking, sticking everything in its wake.

She cries until the morning sun fizzles on the horizon – an awakening to a different dawn.

She cries, cries and cries, until the village has drowned in her honey.

She joins the family at the table under the terrace roof. They look out onto parched and tussocky grass bounded with a laurel hedge of sticky green. There are no flowers yet the air swims with fragrance. They don't offer her wine, or him. The grandmother leans back in the chair as he counts out her medication before they start on the salad. The mother, her fringe perpetually clumped with kitchen sweat, bobs up and down: a napkin dropped there, a forgotten bread basket fetched. For this family eating is *serieux*. So she does her best, with his leg beside hers and his elbows on the table mirroring his papa. She eats and smiles and listens in on conversations she can only partly follow.

He has a girlfriend. She is away on holiday. The mother likes her, she brings her name up a lot. He doesn't. At night, in the room his grandmother vacated, she lies alert in the shuttered mosquito darkness and feels her heart pulled tight with ribbons, her skin vivid with sun and scoured with sensuality. During the day, on the coach with all the others, they never sit together. By the river, at the beach, among the ruins, cameras clicking, giggling, swearing, pairings amongst unlikely people. She always knows where he is.

One night, after she has listened to him singing in the shower, after she has wondered if she could steal into his bathroom to find the name of the aftershave he uses, when the house has grown dark and silent, he knocks on her door. They push the moto down the midnight street and then she holds onto him as they fly bare-armed, bare-headed past lavender fields. She distils it all: the petrol heat and the engine's buzz, the white moon and his green shirt, the imprint of his body and the tears that trickle down her cheeks.

On the last night there is a party. She wears her best dress and make up, puts her hair up. His father whistles when she comes out but he mutters something she knows isn't kind. He ignores her all night. She stands against the wall as he approaches, his father's camera to his face, the lens adjustment mocking her. Someone takes a picture of him photographing her. She's not sure how she ends up with a copy or where it is any more.

The dusty sunlight pierced through a crevice between a pair of closed shutters, offering a semblance of brightness in the otherwise aphotic room, elegantly making its way across the work-worn bench and fixing itself upon Emilio's latest effort. Patiently, he prepared himself for 'l'esecuzione finale' - as his father had called it. He lifted the scissors, took a breath; a second breath and on the third; he cut. The wick stood tall in the light, nobly taking its place amongst the legion of others. Emilio sighed, relieved. This one had potential.

For the last sixty years he had sought to emulate the works of his father and for the last sixty years he met his reflection in the mirror with disappointment. At least youth had been kind to him; in the early days business had been good. His father's reputation preceded him, his grandfathers before that, his great-grandfathers before that, and so on for five generations. Every day townsfolk and country-folk alike would visit from near and far to purchase a much coveted Marconi hand-made candle each with its own unique tale etched within the contours of the wax. But, gradually the custom declined. The chairs in the north-west corner of the room, once weighted by patrons sharing their interpretations of the fiction upon their candles sat empty, impressed upon by nothing but dust and darkness.

He stared at the candle, preparing his carving needle, furrowing his brow over what story to tell. He knew this would have to be it; his Magnum Opus. It may not live up to the work of his forefathers but it would be his. He leaned his face in towards the candle, as close as he could, fixating on the point where the needle would meet the wax. With a measured hand, he carved. The shavings fell about the table, some to the left, some to the right, some made it to his feet. Emilio had not felt such peace in carving since he was a child.

For hours, he carved; spiralling his story through the candle: There was the boy Emilio, marvelling as his grandfather worked, being scalded while attempting his first candle without permission; the teenager Emilio who weaved a wax rose for the girl who would break his heart; the young man Emilio, whose ambition drove him to forsake the dream of love to emerge from his ancestor's shadow; then the broken Emilio, fighting in the dark to save a dying art in the face of lamplight.

He finished.

A beauty that none would know.

He removed the candle from the bench and placed it by the chairs. He took a seat and lit his candle. He stared, took a breath; a second breath and on the third he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

The first time I hurt someone, I was eight years old.

There were plenty of instances that came later, but they were all overshadowed by the first. That delightful *Snap!* as off came the branch, light in my hot, pudgy hand. My sister had told me to help with her leaf collection – I had laughed loud and shrill in her face, but the wind was fiercer, and carried most of it away, on the air. Just like it did with me, as I ran from her, wriggling free and promising with my fingers crossed that I would help. I had to, since we were surrounded by tall, imposing trees that had heads covered in them.

Instead, I won a prize. Shaking in my grip was an arm, ripped off by me, – who was always picked last in PE! Wait until Monday, I thought. I'd be the King of the playground, and this thing would hurt anyone who dared laugh at me...

It was then that I realised that my hands were wet. They were shining with a pearly warmth, a little off-colour, but I knew instantly what it must be – blood. The wind whipped around me, screaming, but I held tight and marvelled at it, my trophy, which was dripping in time with my pounding heart.

When I looked at it closely, severed and beaten, I saw a face in the wrinkled lines; curled, mocking, like theirs. Only this time, I had it in my hands. I had the power. Now they had to listen when I told them to leave me alone...

It was then that I went mad - bent down and dug into the damp dirt, like a dog, I clawed away at the clay in the ground until I was exposed to the other limbs underneath; they were almost pumping with it, the blood that I had spilt. Then I tore and cut, like a real doctor, until the pitiful body, broken and skewed, tangerine hair and all - fell to the ground.

It was rubbish – it didn't even make a sound. I heard another scream around me, louder - my sister, who pulled me up, forced me to stand there and look at what I'd done - like we were mourners at a slapdash funeral. She shouted, louder than the cruel wind, and asked me why.

I just pulled away from her, flying like one of her forgotten leaves, wild and free. I didn't look back, even though I'd dropped my stupid branch. I just couldn't bear the anger, buried deep in her eyes.

When I tell this story for the first time, five years later, my voice is as frail as a leaf. The lady

sat opposite me is scribbling at the paper and at my ears with her pen, ripping away the flesh as easy as my nails did, covering the ballpoint and my nails in blood. When she writes the next word, it's tinted red. When my sister pulled me up, the ground was splattered with it - my hands were aching...

The bruises there tell another story, one that I've been over far too many times - this one is better because it's old and new at the same time. Like when you see a tree with bright green leaves, the first set of the new year. Old and new.

The lady is quiet, her face is blank and drawn like she's at a funeral. 'Were you proud? Of what you'd done?'

'Yes.'

Maybe it's mine. I look down at my faded blue jeans. I should've worn black.

'What about this time? When you hurt James?'

'I don't know. I just - I just wanted him to fall.'

'What does that mean, Ben? To hurt?'

Amidst the blue and purple growing on my hands like moss, I can almost see the white of his eyes, dripping, then fading, as he lay still before me. The future flew by in those seconds. Both of ours did, all because of my ravenous hands, because of his cruel words. Now they're both gone, too.

Will I win? My prize will be prison bars. At least I can't leave them behind.

'I didn't want to - I just wanted to be his friend. But he wouldn't stop saying horrible things...'

I wonder if my sister will visit me. I wonder if the tree's still there, surrounded by others who completely ignore it, or if it's rotted away, alone and forgotten.

Will I?

There is an overstuffed Manila folder on the bed. You get a surge of adrenaline when you first notice it. When you left the house that morning the bed was freshly made and there was nothing on it. You gingerly pick up the folder and several items come pouring out, a few red paper hearts, a polaroid of you as a twenty-three-year-old, and then you see something that begins to solve the mystery. It's five years old, at least, a photo of you that he carried in his wallet for years. Now it has his wedding band Scotch-taped across your face. There's no good magic here, instead, an incubus must have snuck in to deliver this message. It disturbs you to think he broke into your house while you were away, came into your bedroom and did this. This, and who knows what else?

A wise man would have fought for you, but all he does is fight with you and then beg you to come back to him. You don't see him much these days, you don't want to, but he constantly says terrible things to you in his almost daily emails. One talks about what a waste his relationship with you was and it asks you how you can stand to show your face in the world, after failing so miserably at love. He works hard at being cruel, carefully chooses his weaponized words to do the most damage. He knows how to hurt you, he's had many years of practice. Sometimes it gets to you but mostly it clarifies things for you. The awful stuff he says shows how deeply he misunderstands you and how little he deserves your love. Almost immediately after some hateful email, he sends another message begging you to forgive him for all the horrible things he's said. He claims, "I would do anything...anything...to make you mine again, to end this nightmare." You think you would do anything to end this nightmare too, but he is the monster in your closet, under your bed.

Occasionally, when he seems less cruel, you let your guard down and he talks you into going for coffee or a quick bite to eat. Foolishly, you still hold out hope that one day you might be able to be friends again. You feel sure that once, years ago, the two of you must have been friends.

One evening over a hot latte on the patio of Thunderbird Cafe, he takes a sip and says, "Being out here with you reminds me of Paris. I love Paris." He sighs. You do too, but he knows that so you just try to smile. In fact, you're the one who took him to Paris the first and the only time he's ever been, but all of a sudden he acts like Paris belongs to him.

He starts to whine, "I'll never be able to go to Paris again."

You know he blames you for this because that's where he proposed to you. You think, good then I don't have to worry about running into you there. You say, "That's just silly, Marvin." He's so melodramatic these days. This is a new side of him he's only started showing to you since you left him.

Another night when he's wailing into the carpet in the middle of his living room, you lie down next to him, stroke his head and back. You pity him and his inability to either let you go or to make you stay. A part of you still loves him in that kind of way you'll always love someone you once loved. You consider kissing him on the cheek, kissing away his tears but you know it could so easily turn into a make-out session and much more. Sex was the one thing you two still had that was good in the end. It's always been so easy for you to hand your body over to men, men you don't love, to make them feel better. You've soothed many a heart that was broken over you this way. But it was so hard to wean this one, you're not about to risk even a kiss.

It will be years before you feel ready to look through that Manila folder. Inside you find almost eleven years' worth of sappy love notes and letters you once wrote to him, some of your emails he printed out, and photos you sent to him from Texas during that year he went to Kansas for grad school. Even though he returned those things to hurt you, to act as a physical expression of his rejection or his denial of your love—all eleven years of it—you're happy to have the evidence of it, to own the primary materials that documented who you once were and how you once loved so long ago. Most of all, you're grateful to have all those memories returned to you.

Together, we whittle away the long weeks of summer in Wellington Park. You have a nifty little electric fan, blue and pink striped blades buzzing a cool breeze onto your face at the press of a soft rubber button. I have an ornate bamboo folding fan, painted by a street vendor in Hong Kong and brought back to me as a special gift from my auntie's holiday. Because both our fans are equally exciting, we trade them back and forth without squabbling, free from the fear of losing out. Their unique qualities allow us to be gracious and kind; we say things our grandmothers might say, and we say them in our proper English voices, with our noses lifted and our hearts full of gooey generosity. Things like: 'Never mind me, darling! You must choose whichever you like.' and 'Goodness! I'm sure I don't mind which fan I carry so long as you are happy!'

Sitting on our patch of desecrated grass wearing crowns of wilting daisies, we share a slight panic that we are suddenly too old for our previously treasured games, but too young for the secretive trysts behind the tennis sheds with boys from St Marks that occupy older girls. We are adrift in a halo of sunshine, with only the hum and swish of our fans to break the monotony of this odd in-between season.

Probably because of this boredom our discovery of the hand is less troubling to us than it should rightfully be.

We find it by the toilets, palm-up, nestled in the hedgerow between a silver cola can and a purple pansy. The thumb hidden, tucked under the looping edge of a fallen oak leaf. You spot it first (though later I will pretend I did) and grip my arm until your nails leave little red moons on my clammy skin.

"Is it dead?"

(Tomorrow, when we relive the moment again, you will deny that you asked such a stupid question, and because you have given me first choice of the fans, I will agree that you did not.)

Staring down at the hand, I turn off your fan and you snap mine shut. We agree to do what we did the day we spotted a five pound note caught in the leaves of a rhododendron bush: we will walk to the ice cream van, loop round the fountain, and come back. If the hand is still there, it is ours. If it is gone... well... so be it.

We had used the five pounds to buy two sodas and a set of four glittering bracelets from

the cheap shop opposite the park, and as I guide you around the fountain, I wonder what we will do with the hand.

When we get back the hand is still where we left it, so I kneel down and consider how best to pick it up. It is not big or small. It is a medium sized with average fingers. The wrist is wrapped in blue plastic. It is very clean. You go to the ladies toilet to get me some tissue and while you are gone I consider how much more you can tell from the back of someone's hand than the palm of it. On the back of a hand you can see whether it is hairy or not, whether the nails are painted or bitten, whether it is old or young.

There was a lady at the circus who offered to tell fortunes for a pound, claiming she could see life laid out in a person's palms, but looking at the hand, I think it is more sensible to trust the shapes of knuckles and nails to love-lines.

You come back breathless and your hair is frazzling at the sides, curling in wisps like cigarette smoke. You look a bit pale and I ask you if we should maybe leave the hand alone, but thankfully you shake your head and thrust a thick wad of tissue at me. You squeal when I pick it up, and I tell you it is heavier than I expected, but really I hadn't thought about that part of it all and its weight is as unsurprising as your reaction.

You help me wrap the tissue around each finger, so that it is properly covered up, 'Like a gross old mummy!' you say, then catch my eye, and suddenly we're giggling.

We laugh until tears stream down our cheeks and we are clutching hold of each other to keep standing.

Later, as we walk home, you offer to carry the hand and I am flooded with relief because it really does feel like a job we should share and I had not been entirely sure you would be willing to do your part. We swap fans too, you press the button and your sweaty fringe slides back from your forehead in a cool gust. I peel open the bamboo diorama of cranes in flight and wave it back and forth in front of my throat, though I am no longer very hot. If anything I feel suddenly rather cold, bereft without the hand to hold. I watch you swing it along and it occurs to me that our summer of gentle accord may be about to end.

Back in my old life I would occasionally keep away from my ratpack friends long enough to sober up and wander around my neighborhood, and I would always end up on the back patio of my grandparents' house, six blocks from mine.

My grandma was a sweet lady who was never really all there. Conversations with her were vague and formless. She would start telling a story from her life and end up in a play she had seen once, or a dream. I liked her.

My grandfather had a lot of ideas about "being a man" and never gave up hope that he might impose them on me. He had been in the military doing something clerical, but still made gruff overtures about how the Army would "shave some sense into my skull." Of course his metaphor was about hair; he hated my hair. I grew it long in middle school on a bet. After my dad's brothers made it clear they didn't like it, I kept it long out of spite. It stayed in a greasy ponytail, out of my way.

Once, my grandfather, likely a couple of whiskeys deep considering how chummy he was acting, told me the story of a school buddy who'd had hair as long as mine. "Sonny" was a high school troublemaker back in the day, which I guess means he knocked over soda fountains and stole Jello molds from the mall or whatever counted as crime in the 50's. He was drafted when his birthday was drawn out of a bingo ball shuffler on the radio, and got shipped off to a training base in New Mexico where they shaved his head and taught him how to load a gun while the other teenagers whacked him with whiffle ball bats to simulate the horrors of war.

The recruits were occasionally allowed off base to go play pool at the town's solitary bar or bother women at the library, and during these outings Sonny would lean against pickup trucks parked behind the laundromat with men nobody knew and return to base laden with contraband: caffeinated chewing gum, lewd magazines, little painted figurines of elephants and kangaroos carved out of cactus husk that cadets kept in their duffel bags or mailed home to their sisters.

And he had fireworks—a fat rod down each pant leg like twin sticks of dynamite. These were never for sale. Instead, Sonny would stash them in his mattress via a slit that hid along the side pressed to the wall. After he was gone, the other cadets exaggerated this detail.

His mattress bulged, they said. It got lumpier by the week. He went to bed lying on enough gunpowder to level the mess hall.

Finally, on the day he turned twenty-two, he snuck the fireworks out of the barracks and planted them in the sand way out by the border fence and set them off into the desert sky. Every color all at once roared and clapped and some of the rods fell sideways, shooting sparks towards the storage sheds and setting a dead tree on fire. It scared the shit out of the higher-ups, some of whom saw bombs when the noise flashed white inside their eyelids, and most of whom wanted to know how so many explosives had been snuck in past the guards.

When they found Sonny laughing against the fence he said something along the lines of, "But it's everyone's birthday, sir," to which his supervisor replied something along the lines of,

"It's not my birthday, smartass."

When he was eventually allowed to go into town again, the pickup trucks of men no one knew were gone, and with them went Sonny's source of illicit goods. The other recruits lost interest in him, watching his antics with a mixture of amusement and pity. They whooped and cheered him on one evening as he danced suggestively on the lonely bar's pool table, but the dance went on so long that they stopped and had to look away.

The story petered out in a grumble as my grandfather disappeared back into the work of stuffing his pipe—yes, he smoked a pipe, like we were in a Christmas movie.

"So where's Sonny now?" I asked, feigning disinterest as I played with my hoodie strings.

"Nowhere good, I'll bet," said my grandfather. This interaction was the closest he ever got to telling me he knew I was gay. We didn't talk about Sonny again. Four years later, when he was dying of the plague, he blearily told me to take care of "my women" in his absence. I think he meant my mother and grandmother. They had both already passed by that point, but I told him I would.

The cubital fossa was my escape door in every room. The elbow crease was the point at which I could fold myself away. On my eighth birthday I surprised the magician by turning a yoga pose into a disappearing trick. I called it body origami, and it didn't matter because there were no children at my party and the magician was one of mother's friends.

Diagnosed with hyper-mobility, I was told that I could be a great gymnast, ballerina or pianist. My mother had no money for classes so expected state education to fill the gap. It was hard to imagine myself a performer when I preferred to be still, quiet and disappear. School wanted balance. I had to be there, go where I was told but not have a say. 'Children should be seen and not heard,' the Head said. Except when told to put your hand up to answer a question. I never did but was asked all the same. I would then, in appearance of defeat, lift my arm, elbow first, catch the lid of my desk, until it was over my head and there I would creep in, until the spotlight had moved off me. 'Out of sight - out of mind,' was another principle promoted by the school and one which allowed me to remain hidden for months, in corners, shadows, behind books and the silence camouflaged by chattering children. I learned all the proverbs at school but practice did not make perfect when there was an audience, except for my disappearing act.

My mother didn't care about the usual grades just PE, dance and music. However hard she tried to mould me into the gymnast, dancer or musician she never was I could not contort myself into the shape she wanted, a performer. Even an audience of one had me climb inside myself. When I learned the piano-accordion at school, my mother did not believe I played as I could not in front of her. I practised in a soundproof booth at school. At home, not allowed to make noise while she was there and certainly not when she had guests, I took to learning it in mime and imagining the music. She could not imagine it with me. I played out loud when the house was empty but if she caught me, which she tried to do, I would scurry away and hide inside the accordion's bellows until she was gone.

School holidays began with my mother reminding me that when a client or friend or guest called round that I should disappear. I knew the rule. Like when the rent man came or social services. I was to hide from the 'blood-suckers and nosey-parkers.'

Raymond was a new client. I knew he was not a friend or guest yet because he did not know the knock. He rang the bell and on my tip-toes I looked out the spy-hole and saw him

take his glasses off, tuck them in his chest pocket, leaving a red crease in the bridge of his nose. My mother came to the door, and I disappeared.

In the park, after tea, I saw Raymond sitting on the bench staring at his shoes.

'Hello,' I said, grabbing the umbrella which slipped from where it leaned against the bench as I sat.

He looked up. 'Do I know you?'

I gave him his umbrella.

'Hasn't anyone taught you about stranger-danger?' he said.

'Statistically I'm more likely to be hurt by someone I know. I don't know you so you're safer than my friends and family.'

He looked back at his shoes. 'Why don't you go and play?'

'What's wrong with sitting on a bench?' I said.

'It's boring...compared to...' He looked around. 'Swings. Why don't you go and play?'

'I can't push myself.'

He looked down at his shoes.

I didn't think shoes could be so shiny that you could see your face in them but his were. 'Can you push me?'

'Suppose I could,' he said, 'Beats sitting on a bench.' He stood up, putting his glasses into his pocket and stomped his feet. 'Pins and needles,' he said as dust rose and a thin layer formed on his shoes. He hung his umbrella on the swing's top beam, his jacket on the next swing and he pushed me until it got so dark my feet kicked the moon and his face was red and hot and wet and his shirt was loose and his hair was wild.

I was careful not to call him Raymond until he told me his name. We met in the park every Thursday after he called to my mother, first as her client, then guest and friend. I tried to ignore her perfume and her words on his lips. I concentrated instead on his aftershave mixed with the smell of axle grease from the top of the swings and the squeaking nuts and bolts, whining hooks, eyes and metal lines and the straining wooden beam. I waited for the plastic seat to rise and clatter on the final push, signalling time to go home.

When I got to know him better, I ended it. No longer a stranger he was a danger. So I left an envelope on the bench with his name on it. He left a reply, saying that he didn't know my name so it was ok because I was still a stranger to him. I watched, hidden in my elbow crease, my escape door a sliver ajar as he read my reply to his reply. I'd written that he was right, but I had to disappear before he did. He nodded and put his glasses away in his pocket and the line across the bridge of his nose, from where the glasses were, folded over and his nose with it, and then his head and his body concertinaed until it was gone.

Daddy always says to put things where they belong. Toys have to go back in the chest. Milk has to go back in the fridge. Dead people have to go in the ground.

The gun is heavy, and I have to carry it with both hands. I had to figure out how to work it, how to make the round part pop out so I could put in the bullets. Before all the bad things happened, Daddy said I was too little to shoot. He said it would knock me down. I hope I am big enough now.

I carry the gun into the family room where Mommy is lying in front of the TV. I don't want to look at her because I might cry again. I can't cry now. I need to be a big boy so I can help Daddy. There is blood all over the carpet, and there are pieces of Mommy missing, the pieces Daddy ate. I walk past her into the kitchen without looking.

Anna is on the floor in the kitchen. She was so little that she couldn't even run when Daddy grabbed her. It doesn't bother me to look at her, though. I'm sad, but I didn't love Anna the same way I loved Mommy.

The basement door is next to the fridge, and it is open a little. I can hear Daddy in the basement. It sounds like he is moving things, heavy things, throwing them. I push open the door and look down the stairs. I don't like the dark, and I switch on the light. I have to stand on my tippy toes to do it. I'm scared Daddy might come up the stairs when the light goes on, but he doesn't. He is still moving around down there, making loud noises. It sounds like he is crying or breathing hard.

I walk down the stairs. I try to be very quiet because I don't want Daddy to hear me yet. At the bottom, Daddy is trying to grab Sylvester, our cat, but he is way back under the water heater and Daddy can't reach him.

"Daddy," I say.

Daddy turns around. He looks sick. His skin is gray, and his eyes are yellow. There is blood on his face and on his shirt. I know that blood is not his, and it makes my stomach hurt. He opens his mouth and yells or growls, like a monster. He doesn't say any words. I don't think he can say words anymore. I move up the stairs backwards.

"Come on, Daddy. Come out of the basement. Come be with Mommy."

Daddy follows me up the stairs and into the kitchen. I back up against the counter and hold out the gun with both hands. I aim it at Daddy. He walks toward me. His mouth is open

and black stuff runs out of it. He reaches for me.

"I'm sorry, Daddy."

I pull the trigger, and the gun jumps in my hand and makes the loudest sound I have ever heard. The bullet hits Daddy in the head and makes a big hole. Blood and yellow stuff, like oatmeal, splashes the wall behind him, and he stops walking. He stands there looking at me, but I don't think he sees me anymore. Then he falls down and stops moving.

I think it's okay to cry now.

It was easy to pick up Anna, but Mommy and Daddy were too heavy. I tried, but I couldn't get them outside. I got blood on my new shirt. It was one of my shirts for second grade. Mommy would be so mad if she knew, even though there's probably no school anymore.

I found the shovel in the garage. Digging was hard, and it took me a long time to make a hole in the backyard because I had to dig through the grass. I put Anna in the hole, and then I felt bad that she had to be in there by herself. I got Mommy's purse and Daddy's watch and the picture we took at Disneyland with all of us in it. I put them in the hole with Anna. Then I put the dirt in. I didn't want to put dirt on Anna's face, but I had to, and it made me feel a little better when I couldn't see her anymore.

When I finished, I went into the front yard. I can see the city, and there is a lot of smoke. Yesterday, or maybe it was the day before, I heard sirens, but now I don't hear anything but the wind. I wonder if other people will come to get me. I wonder if there are any other people left.

I go back into the backyard, and I lie down on top of the dirt where the hole was. I whisper, "Goodbye, Mommy. Goodbye, Daddy. Goodbye, Anna."

I remember what Daddy always said. Everything has to go where it belongs. Daddy, Mommy, and Anna are where they belong. I hope they go to heaven. I hope I go there too. I hope it is soon.

It takes him a full half-hour to prepare for immersion. It's a ritual, a dance, a procedure that has to be followed to the letter. A beseeching of capricious gods. The suit and helmet go on last, connecting it to the airline and filling it with air set to a higher pressure. He yawns and his ears gently pop. All he can hear is the hiss of the clean air and his own breathing.

"Control, Doctor Thomas Michaels, ready to go," he can't hide the apprehension in his voice.

The inner door cycles open. Disconnecting the line, he steps into the airlock. Disinfectant mists the room. The inside door cycles and Michaels steps into the examination room, connecting up to the airline by the door. It spools out as he walks, suspended from wires.

"Okay, recording on," he says into the microphone on his headset, "date is twenty-sixth of August, twenty-twenty." He studies the itinerary on the screen opposite him. "Please deploy study item one dash twenty." A hatch opens in the wall, and a metal conveyor slides out. A large object wrapped in plastic and marked with biohazard symbols is rolled down towards him. He reaches out and pulls it onto the table in front of him. Using a plastic knife, with the sharpened serrated edge recessed for maximum protection, Michaels cuts the seals and folds the plastic out. He hesitates when he looks at the item before him.

"Item one is a suitcase," he gulps the air, "approximately four hundred millimetres long, three hundred millimetres high, two hundred millimetres wide. Made out of rainbow coloured plastic by the appearance. Single handle, with a plastic latch locking mechanism." He glances at the screen, which is now showing an x-ray of the contents. There are a number of irregular objects inside, highlighted white in the image. "The suitcase belonged to," he pauses again, composing himself, "Patient Zero of the Cassandra epidemic and is considered a biohazard level 4 object."

He slides the case away from the plastic sheet and examines the wrappings for moisture or traces of dust. An ultraviolet light above the desk blinks into life, casting its own glow over the table. Michaels nods when he sees nothing fluoresce, pushing the plastic into the incinerator that sits at the end of the desk.

The lock is simple and opens with ease. Inching the lid open, watching for anything that is moved by the action. He drops the lid to the table, revealing the contents. "I can see clothing." Michaels sighs, "I'll proceed to examine for contamination." Taking a pair of

forceps, he picks out each item at a time, giving it a gentle shake to dislodge anything that might be hiding inside. He examines every surface, inside and out, depositing it in a plastic tray next to him.

Pink tops, size small, ankle socks that he picks apart, undoing her handiwork. His hands begin to tremble.

A straw hat, battered and crushed under everything.

Dungarees with a unicorn motif. The shaking becomes more pronounced until his hands can do nothing more. He steps back, breathing hard, allowing the hiss of air to fill him. He blinks the sweat away, which comes even with the flow of cooling air. Waits for his aching heart to slow.

"Clothing cleared," he steps forward again, "next stage is to examine the artefacts that remain." He looks down and takes a sharp breath. The teddy bear stares, one-eyed and accusing. He clutches the edge of the desk.

A voice breaks through his earpiece, "Doctor Micheals, are you alright?"

"Yes, yes I'm fine," Micheals looks up at the camera mounted in front of him, staring back at him, "just give me a moment."

He pushes himself away from the desk and picks up the forceps again, places the soft toy to one side, unable to meet the glassy gaze.

Below it, there are photographs. She loved her birthday present of an Instamatic camera. He'd forgotten.

The first is of the ruined castle. Old news. There were no clues there, no answers. He places it to one side. The second is of the cave. He can hear the waves hiss as they're sucked away by the tide. *It'll be a good place to explore, there may even be bats.* The tests had been inconclusive, nothing hiding there that could reduce so many to rotting meat. Trembling, he places this with the first.

The last makes him gasp. She stares at him, eyes shining, gap-toothed smile. It's enough to wipe away the last image he had of her. Almost. He blinks away tears which run unchecked down his neck, into his suit. He consigns the image to join the rest.

He's reached the bottom of the case. He checks it for debris, desiccated insects, moisture. There's nothing. "Suitcase is clear, I recommend swabs are taken of all surfaces, then -" he hesitates, "incineration."

He turns to Barney the bear. *He is my hero, he'll protect me.*

"I'm sure he will, poppet," he replies.

"I'm sorry Doctor, we didn't catch that,"

Look, daddy, Barney's got his very own sword,

He picks up the toy. It's worn and patched, seen better days, an existence of rough and tumble. There is something pushed into the fabric in the bear's paw. The forceps won't catch it, he abandons the tool and uses his gloved fingers.

"Doctor Michaels, what are you doing?"

It's coming, just a little more. A black and shiny fragment of rock. Just a little more.

"Doctor Michaels, please be careful,"

The sharp edge slices through the latex. He stares at the drop of scarlet on the unexpected spur. At the tip is the dried stain that was the beginning of the end.

His blood meets his daughters' and mingles.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

They'd covered it in Modern Studies last year. Détente, Mr Crawford called it. She'd recognised the phrase as French from the way he'd thrust out his jaw and given the word that springing sound absent from the Scots language. Détente. Both sides content they could wipe each other out if they wanted, but never actually doing it.

The alert wasn't long started when Miss McGill – Lexie to the pupils – made a redundant announcement over the tannoy: they'd all known from the siren's first plaintive uplift. Her speech was all stiff upper lip. 'My pupils...proud to have been your headmistress...etc.' No-one listened. No-one moved.

After what seemed like a lifetime, her teacher Mrs Wilson had snapped to and, with a clap of her hands, began escorting the class to the big gym hall. Like that'd make a difference. They'd shown footage of the test blasts at Bikini Atoll on TV. Whole islands got obliterated and that had been a fraction of what was on its way.

Her mind flooded with thoughts of her family. Mum, a fifteen-minute bus ride away at home. Dad at work, a full forty minutes away. Graeme, her big brother, in his second year at Uni in another town altogether. All too far for the mere four minutes they'd just been given.

Plastic chairs scraped on the tile floor. Mrs Wilson was reminding them to leave bags, coats, everything, to just keep moving in an orderly fashion. With her encouragement, the class formed an unlikely neat line filing towards the door.

One class bled into another and the white-walled corridors soon came to a virtual standstill. The massed students remained strangely quiet. Even the drama queens she'd have expected to scream and howl and grasp for that last bit of attention just shuffled along with the herd. Fat tears ran, without fanfare, down ashen faces.

Silently they squeezed tighter and tighter, comforted by the closeness, the fading feel of human solidarity. Pockets of friends clung to one another. Some of the cool girls held the arms of their boyfriends. She'd never had a boyfriend, never even been kissed. A late bloomer, her mother called her. Too late.

The red frizz and blonde page-boy hairstyle of her best pals, Diane and Alison, had surged beyond her reach. The collective dream of last moments spent huddled in the arms of family and loved ones now evaporated in the cold reality of an end in the company of

schoolmates and strangers. A cloying smell of sweat and cheap deodorant filled the air. Teachers, standing tall against most of the throng, were scattered through the crowd. Mr Adams was urging everyone to keep calm and move slowly, while tugging constantly at his hair. Mrs Wilson was quietly reassuring those nearest, her face also streaked with tears.

The shuffling crowd moved forward in inches and came to another stop, wedging her against the glass pane of a door leading out to the playground and football pitches. Through the mesh squares of the reinforced glass, she watched the upper branches of the trees round the red ash pitches waft in the gentle autumn breeze. Fat pigeons waddled across the yard or pecked at the flattened remnants of recess snacks on the concrete. Bright blue sky hung like a protective shield above it all. How could extermination come from something so benign and familiar?

She pushed the fire exit bar on the door and it clunked open. A quick glance back at her peers showed heads facing forward or down; none looked her way. She slid out and immediately a shell of cool crisp air replaced the warm fug indoors.

The door fell closed behind her and she took unsteady steps towards the trees. Their rustling leaves could just be heard over the constant rise and fall of the warning. In the distance rang a cacophony of other sirens. She thought of her mother standing at the window of their front room, her face a knot of pain, waiting, hoping, praying her daughter at least would make it back to share those final seconds. Each one alone. A small tight sob broke from her.

'Want a bit?' A male voice. Gary somebody, a tall gangle of a lad she barely knew from Chemistry was standing beside her, slightly stooped with the awkwardness of his years, a hormonal tapestry dotting his features. He was holding out a bar of Dairy Milk.

The chocolate was soft from the heat of his blazer pocket and bent as she broke off a chunk. In the dryness of her mouth, it sat, unmelting and sticking to her teeth and tongue.

A squadron of starlings flew overhead as the two teenagers tramped the lush grass up to the trees. At the foot of the largest horse chestnut she turned back to look at the school, and Gary reached for her hand.

Then came the light.

Lilah sits on the house-deck under a blue umbrella. The Sunday sun makes a sapphire of her. She says I look tired.

We don't talk much. I tell her to put some clothes on. Please. I apologise for shouting. I tell her I worry, is all. I worry in new ways that don't seem logical. Lilah crimps her lips into a sad smile, as if that's what she'd expect me to say, as if I've missed the point. She pulls a Cats-Against-Catcalls t-shirt over her head. It's the one I dithered over buying for her that day in March, from a kiosk outside the main entrance to the station, having time to spare on my commute home. We stare out over the beach with all its bare, intact flesh and I wonder why any of it matters.

Lilah is often on the deck at dusk when I come home. She doesn't ask me about work. Whether going back has been hard. Why would she? She needs rest. She needs the anaesthetic of the breeze needling in from the ocean. She won't tell me what's troubling her, why she's here instead of at her mum's, revisiting favourite haunts with her old school friends. She's doing well with her studies, so I guess boy-trouble or some such thing. I could ask her mother. We're still friendly, relatively speaking. But it would feel like a betrayal. Sometimes my mind wanders and I find that Lilah has switched off the news. She shows me paper-chains of solidarity curling across the internet. Tells me the world is changing.

Lilah says the kids from the beach asked her for Selfies. She swipes through a procession of charmingly contorted faces on her phone. I feel like I'm accelerating backwards. I need her to stop. Her hand is on mine, stilling it. "This is a happy place," says Lilah. This blundering backwater, lolling around its own tiny axis.

Final Tuesday of the summer holiday I'm home earlier than usual and Lilah's not at the house. I scan the dimming beach and see her, folded umbrella in each hand, carving a train track into the sand behind her. She and the ageing beach attendant shimmer like ghosts as I squint. Her laughter fills the crevices in my chest. I think she must be mending. "Do you do this every day?" I ask.

"Most days," she says. "Duncan's sweet. You should talk to him."

Lilah serves us pancakes with honey and raspberries from the just-opened deli. She's

tidied the house again and bought new tumblers. A parting gift. To replace the ones I dropped; shattered in an explosion of fruit pulp and shrapnel, a consequence of unreliable fingers. She carries the last pulse of the day's warmth in with her. The last wringing out of the summer. "Thanks for letting me stay," she says. "We'll Skype next week, ok?" She wears optimism like her mum. Outside, the beach chorus has faded to a grumble.

I walk her to the station and we say good-bye, our voices echoing around the waiting room. Lilah hugs me. I think she'll be ok. She has good friends and more sense than most.

I stop by the deli on the way home and buy ham. The woman absorbs my attention, the care she takes over wrapping the meat. I tell her we've needed a good deli. That I'm glad she's opened up here. She grins. "I'd wanted to do this for years," she says, "and then one day I thought, if I wait any longer, it'll never happen." I watch her hands, remember the kindness of other hands around those hastily bandaged figures on the platform. The young woman whose leg I was directed to press down on, through a folded cardigan, to keep the blood from fleeing her body. The knife wound that sometimes still gapes and grins in my dreams. The woman's mobile phone like a startled eye, staring out from the dust; happy family faces trapped behind its cracked cornea. The distant tease of sirens. Someone saying pleasepleaseplease. Realising it was me.

At the beach I ask Duncan does he need any help. He seems to be expecting me. "You can help me drink these," he says, handing me a bottle of stout.

We sit on the last of the old deck-chairs. "Aye, she's a real gem, your step-daughter," says Duncan, as if I've asked a question.

The still-warm sand feels good under my feet, like a safe memory. "To Lilah," says Duncan. We clink our bottles and watch the waves polish the shingle clean. I hold my beer steady. I haven't spilt a drop.

It was the day of the delayed MoneySnorkel meeting. Liza sometimes set herself the challenge of seeing how far she could get through a meeting without the client understanding she had no idea of what they did. The whole way, it turned out.

MoneySnorkel were a fintech start-up with a mission to ‘disrupt the disruptors’. As far as she understood it — and really she didn’t — they were cloud-based. They did something ‘as a Service’ that had never really been done before, and certainly not ‘as a Service’. It sort of involved taking all the other finance apps and folding them all into a single uber-App — though don’t ever compare them to Uber, for god’s sake, they were a ‘generational paradigm on’ from that.

Anyway, it all meant that you got a frictionless user experience with total visibility over everything and all sorts of benefits and efficiencies, thanks to a ground-breaking API protocol something that enabled something something.

MoneySnorkel had an inspirational global ceo that everyone referred to as Kadge (his full name was Kajaliinsky). Kadge was not in the room, of course, but they were lucky enough to have Kadge’s Number Two on Earth, Vincenzo (whom Liza quickly rechristened Intenso), who was joining by a new collaborative meeting platform something something.

It transpired that Intenso *loved words*. He wanted to talk about *voice*. He wanted to get *into the reeds*. Anyone who wrote for MoneySnorkel needed to know that in the past there had been an issue with too much *passive language*. Also, *too many adverbs*. If you wanted to provide branded stories for MoneySnorkel, you needed to be across *the whole adverbial thing*.

Then of course, there was the issue of how — and whether — the MoneySnorkel tone of voice should flex across different touchpoints. Intenso was keen to hear different inputs on this, he said, but first it would probably make sense if he drilled down into his own view. ‘We’ve got the blog up and running now, and I’m adamant that this will be the central messaging and education piece going forward,’ he said intensely. ‘But we’re also excited about getting some MoneySnorkel words on places like Medium and LinkedIn? And I’m wondering whether tonally we want total continuity across these venues — or whether it

would be interesting to establish some clear blue water voice-wise between them?’

‘To your point...’ Liza began to speak, but Intenso did not want anyone else to speak. ‘And I’m thinking that, if it’s the latter,’ he said, ‘then maybe adverbs could be one of the markers with which we establish that clear point of difference.’

‘The thing is,’ Vincenzo’s sidekick Arjay put in, ‘People love our software. They have deep visceral feelings of a sort that SaaS platforms simply never normally provoke.’

Liza coughed politely, but Intenso ignored her; he was still articulating his vision. ‘I think of the blog as a bit buttoned-up – the board-room conversation, as it were – and the Medium posts could be the place where we loosen up a little – the coffee-shop chat.’

This was too much for Arjay. ‘Do you think buttoned-up could ever really be us, though, Vincenzo? Do you not think it’d be more, the blog is the coffee-shop and Medium is maybe... the pub?’ (Later Liza googled the meaning of Arjay’s name. It meant ‘powerful, complete’. But of course it was no match for Vincenzo, ‘conqueror’.)

Intenso was not keen to be corrected. ‘Thanks for that thought, Arjay. Yes, maybe. Or maybe it’s a Turkish sauna versus a street-food stall. Or a night out bowling versus a karaoke bar. Or noodles versus, you know, chorizo?’

There was a pause while everyone silently deferred to Intenso’s obvious requirement to take ownership of all catering-related metaphors about the brand’s messaging style, and then another pause right after that while everyone tried to work out which one was chorizo.

‘These are just the half-formed thoughts at the back of my mind,’ said Intenso, breaking the echoey electronic silence. ‘I just wanted to share with you some of the ideas that I’m meditating on for a future time.’ At first Liza thought this was a disarming display of humility. But then she realised this was actually Intenso’s way of saying, *Even my shittest ideas, random half-baked things picked out in an instant from the bits of fluff that accrete in the arse-crack of my mind, are actually far richer and more interesting than your very best ones – the ones you spend weeks researching and workshopping till they’re as good as they could possibly ever be.*

In her notebook, Liza wrote down the words, ‘Right now I am mostly writing down this sentence in my notebook.’

The baby is swaddled in my mother's arms.

She gazes down at her cherub face, the light catching the downy fuzz like that on a perfectly ripe peach.

Then she glances my way and declares, "She has your nose, and Ronnie's eyes!" She's enthralled, captivated by her granddaughter. We are three generations now, sitting here on my sofa, and I can see the bond develop before me, between my mother and my child. Perhaps this tiny bundle will repair us.

My mother doesn't look at me, full focus on the baby, a second chance for her to get it right.

My lounge is bursting with flowers, balloons and cards. So much pink it tints the light. Ribbons and bows around teddy bears' throats; and unicorns spreading their magic.

Aunty Val sits next to my mother; she's itching for a hold; her arms craving the weight and warmth of a baby to quench those maternal yearnings. She twists to face my mother and says, "Your first grandchild Liz, you must be so thrilled". My mother's chest swells, she's stuck for words but her broad smile speaks for her. I think she's filling up; her eyes are watery, her cheeks flushed with pride. *I* have made her proud.

The baby stirs, a tiny whimper. My mother adjusts her position and coos a stream of soothing sounds that float like chiffon ribbons, dissolving around the baby's ears. I watch as she shifts her hand and, with finger tips, gently strokes the baby's flawless cheek, caressing the creamy velvet skin.

I have felt those hands on my cheek too, I was fifteen. It wasn't delicate finger tips but your flattened palm delivering the sting of anger. I hadn't made you proud then had I Mother?

"Come on Liz, pass her over," Aunty Val has broken Mother's trance and so she rotates her body around, elbows high, and reluctantly hands over the delicate bundle. Aunty Val exhales deeply and pulls the baby tight to her chest.

My mother twists back round to look at me, and then she asks, "how are you feeling love?" and then it's *deja-vu* and I am back *there*, just a child myself, grieving and hollow.

"Phew! Someone's filled their nappy!" Aunty Val is chuckling and wafting air. The baby has kicked away her blanket, skinny red legs fighting through the waffled cotton. I lift her up and the blanket falls away, pooling its gentle warmth across Aunty Val's lap. I watch my mother's smile slip at the sight of the baby's feet encased in tiny blue socks, slightly faded with age.

The baby pulls her knees up, she is now a tiny ball against my chest, her feet out of sight. I leave the room and *you* Mother; to remember that she is not your first grandchild. The first one, my baby boy, you made me give away.

She is peeling potatoes when I come in, her back towards me.

I have heard the news and have come to tell her that I have a plan, I know someone who can help, a lawyer. But the room feels wrong so I say nothing.

"He died," she says, still peeling, the knife slicing through the thin skin in short, even strokes.

"It was only a tin of soup," I say and her shoulders move in what may be a shrug, maybe not.

It doesn't matter how trivial the crime, I should know that; the regime permits no mistakes. No explanations are heard, no defences accepted, no mercy. There is no law but the new law and that changes every day.

A thick silence hangs between us, his loss a hole too dark to look into, our impotence a pain too deep to face.

I go to her side and reach for a knife to help with the peeling, but she stops me with a hand.

We won't be needing as many as usual.

Leaves, motionless yet falling. Oranges and reds in the late sunlight. I suppose it's some sort of art intended to lift the spirits. I walk dutifully to the panel by the stairwell.

Yes, it's art. The words of oncology patients acid-etched into silver ovals, then pigment rubbed into the scars. Stupid choice; silver tarnishes and the transformation from energetic shine to dead matt has already begun.

Oh, apparently that's the point. The installation will change as it ages and eventually the messages will disappear. If that's your idea of an appropriate metaphor then Fuck You, Artist.

I lean over the rail. Several leaves at eye-level read: *Thank you*.

For what?

Higher up: *To my brave little soldier*.

As though this private journey is a shared battle whose outcome is dependent on courage. I am not responsible for my destination; my body chooses its path with no regard for my valour. Or my cowardice.

I can't read any more. Maybe it's the metaphor at work, maybe there's something wrong with my eyes because they're weeping.

Leaves, motionless yet falling.

I am motionless yet falling.

She is a template: a black dress that is both sober enough for the office and slinky enough to be evening wear. Make-up in neutrals with reddened lips. No jewellery although she might have slipped it into her bag. Her fingers tap a keyboard, eyes fixed on the laptop's screen as she sits in a corner table in the cafe you've found yourself in. You're free to picture her as if she is a doll you could dress up with an elaborate choker, perhaps pin her brown hair into a bun and imagine her lips sipping from a flute glass and mentally swap her tights for stockings. Or perhaps you want her hair loose, neck free of adornments as she rises to kiss you.

For a moment, you glance out at the city. The night is still fading, the day beginning to warm up so the light's still grey. There's a street of shops, mainly chain stores, you'd see in any city. A breeze teasing the fast food wrappings and discards from where they were tossed. Buses spew uniformed workers, the earlier shift who unlock doors, fill printers with paper, boot up computers and ease offices into the coming day. The workers walk across the paving slabs, choreographed to avoid collisions and muted by the thick glass of the cafe's windows. You sip your coffee and can't remember what you ordered. It's brown with a white froth poured to look like the shape of a leaf. The only leaf you'll see today. It has a coffee flavour but no texture.

You feel as if you're being watched, but the barista is setting out sandwiches, the till assistant straightening the cake display. She still types. You reach for your phone as if to check for a message and toy with the idea of taking a photo of her. As far as you're aware, she's not looked in your direction once. You see there's no ring on her left hand. Shortly, you'll have to leave and will feel those flat paving slabs under your feet, the breeze blow over your cheeks as you pause to join the flow of pedestrians. You decide against a photo. Memory will do this time. Your fingers would relish smoothing over curves instead of caressing a cold screen or hard, square buttons. You slip your phone back in your pocket, drink up the last of the coffee and put your messenger bag over your shoulder. Even when you stand up, she still types.

Outside, the sun threatens to break through the cloud. You lift your phone to check the time and it shows a reflection of her computer screen. You take a photo, zoom in to read, "There was a man in a charcoal suit. Too smooth to be last night's. An indistinct tie, generic black shoes, no jewellery, regular haircut, blue eyes. A template."

Driving. Driving all night. A blond-haired young man in an open-top Porsche, following the full-moon beam of the headlights. His eyes are narrowed to slits, his gaze faraway. From time to time he glances into the rear-view mirror to check the pooling shadows behind, then switches his attention to the highway ahead visible only in the twin-tunnel shafts of bright white light as he drives and drives and drives.

At last, night lifts into a dull-grey dawn, a disillusioned teenager of a dawn that sulks into existence like it can't be bothered with light or dark or colour. He runs a hand through his fifty's quiff, rolls the match he's been chewing forever from one side of his mouth to the other, and pulls over. A strange rain is starting to fill the air, only just rain, almost mist really, a thin drizzle of tiny droplets floating suspended. He flicks the headlights off and climbs out, runs a hand along the silver chassis of his superstar car, a classic built for speed not distance that sits low on the empty road. He walks to the trunk, pulls the convertible roof forward and snaps it shut, wipes the palms of his hands on the back of his faded denims and zips up his blood-red bomber jacket. It's intensely red that bomber jacket, shockingly red - like arterial blood - set as it is against the monochrome dawn. He dips back inside the car without a second glance. There's nothing to see bar the thin drizzle floating like ghosts over the flatlands - no plants, no trees, no thing alive. He turns the key and the car spurts forward leaving a misty spray in its wake.

Driving. Driving all day. Until the air starts to dry and dust replaces the rain. He stops to pull back the roof again, then sets off at break-neck speed, raising a hand to catch the wind. It feels thick and fleshy between his fingers. And so it continues, mile after identical mile until he reaches a crossroads marked by a wooden sign that points in four directions. A woman's silhouette billows out of the dust and a trickster wind catches the full pleats of her white halter-neck dress. The skirt ripples high over her ivory thighs and she smiles, pushing it down two-handed so her breasts swell forward.

He stops the car.

She's beautiful - carnelian lips, short blonde curls framing an angel's face, wearing the same slit-eyed expression as the young man. They sense the connection. She moves forward toward the car trailing a manicured finger over the metallic curves then climbs inside singing softly - a nursery rhyme perhaps, in a powder-pink voice – about pretty things

like diamonds and girls and best friends.

Driving. Driving all night, the beautiful couple in the rock 'n' roll car, when they catch a movement up ahead in the place where the sun should be rising. As they draw nearer, they see a figure sitting propped-up against a crossroads sign. They turn to each other to share a memory but by the time their eyes meet it's already slipped away. The young man brakes hard, but his dirt-dry boot hits the pedal too late and they overshoot, releasing a powdery cloud into the already pallid dawn. As they reverse, the woman turns to look at the stranger, holding a hand over her eyes as though that will help her see. The stranger struggles to his feet, dusts himself down, climbs into the bench-seat in the open back. He's thickset with wide sideburns and black hair brushed high over his forehead. It might have shone bluish-grey, that hair, if there'd been enough light to catch it.

'Thank-a-very-much,' he mumbles, trawling the words together in a deep, southern slur, curling his top lip into half a smile. The woman turns to take out her compact mirror to redden her lips, noticing as she does his reflection behind her – white shirt open to the waist smattered with rhinestones that catch an impossible glimmer from who-knows-where. His blue eyes catch it too, scintillating sadly like hers, like the young man's. She looks round to see where the light is coming from, but by the time she snaps the compact shut she's forgotten what it was she was looking for.

Driving. Driving forever. Three immortal superstars on the road to nowhere, oblivious to the hordes of ordinary dead moving through them, and the bright white light that only mortal souls can see.

Christine looked younger than Nicholas had anticipated. True, there were streaks of grey in the auburn hair, but she was nearly 60, after all. She doesn't dye it, he thought. Of course. He should have expected that.

He stood as she approached the table, wondering whether he should offer a handshake or go to kiss her. How many years was it since he had last done this? What was appropriate, at their age and in these circumstances?

She rescued him, clasping his proffered hand with her left, placing her other on his upper arm and air kissing him. He felt her breath wisp his cheeks.

"Hello Nick," was all she said, as she stepped aside and took her seat.

Without asking, he poured water. He hadn't ordered wine, unsure whether she would want to drink. It was lunchtime, after all. Different rules applied, at least here in town.

He fiddled with the knot of his tie. Too formal? At other tables, suited men – presumably talking business - sported open collars. No, she would have expected a jacket and tie. Had she dressed up for him? He tried to study her clothes without being obvious. The dress wasn't new - he could see tiny signs of wear around the tips of the collar – but she would surely be aware of how it flattered her.

They skimmed their menus while scrabbling for ways to begin the conversation. Yes, she had found the restaurant easily; no, he hadn't been waiting long; no, she didn't need to be away by a particular time; yes, he'd have a starter - if she was going to.

She would have some wine, thank God. He suggested a Sancerre; she agreed.

"Small or large?"

"I booked a taxi from the station. Why don't we share a bottle?"

He felt the coil in his stomach unwind a couple of turns. It was going to be all right. She wanted this to succeed as much as he did.

They ordered and began to put flesh on the bones of what each already knew about the other's life. Home for her was a converted barn - chosen because the huge windows flooded it with light for her paintings, some of which had been sold through a local gallery. There were dogs, cats, even a horse; she grew vegetables and played violin in an amateur quartet.

He lived on a modern housing estate, a functional purchase when he had been tossed into civilian life at 55 and needed somewhere with enough space for himself and three

daughters, should they all choose to visit at the same time. He kept himself busy with the neighbourhood watch, the bowling club committee and the Conservative Association.

As they began their main courses, he brought up the wedding, a little over a month away. Nicholas wasn't entirely sure about his daughter's choice – a bit lefty for his liking – but everything about the day still had to be perfect.

"Organising it all reminds me of being back in the service," he said. "Emily isn't at all interested in the details but, as I say, if you fail to plan..."

"You plan to fail." Something flirtatious about the way she caught his eye as she finished his sentence made him uncomfortable. He didn't want to do or say anything inappropriate.

"I suppose all those years of moving soldiers around the world have come in handy, then."

"Exactly. It's essential that everyone knows where to be, what to do and when to do it."

She smiled, teasingly. "No room for a bit of spontaneity?"

Nicholas looked away, discomfited. Being spontaneous 35 years ago had led him to propose to a flame-haired beauty he had met only a month before. She had captured him with her free-spirited passion for self-expression; he had imprisoned her in the claustrophobic cage of the army wife.

"You should always be prepared to be spontaneous," she said, draining the last of the wine. She took out a tissue and dabbed her lips. "Another glass?"

She caught his slight hesitation and looked at him questioningly. "Are you worried that I'll misbehave?"

There was a long pause before he replied. Memories flooded him: married quarters devoid of children's voices; wardrobes emptied of clothes; a regretful note propped up against the kettle.

"No," he said softly. "The girls say your days of misbehaving are long past." He smiled as he spoke, trying to reassure her, but stopped, seeing dampness at the corners of her eyes.

"Sorry," he said. "That was clumsy of me."

Christine patted her eyes with the tissue. It was shredded at the edges; he hadn't noticed her wringing it as he spoke.

"Are you sure you want me at the wedding? Since you're paying for everything."

"Of course I do. More importantly, Emily does. All the girls do. That's why they arranged this, isn't it?"

She smiled. "Well, it sounds as though they're not being allowed to do much of the organising. Emily is taking me shopping, though, to choose an outfit."

"Well don't pick anything too flattering," he laughed. "You're not allowed to look more beautiful than the bride."

He cursed himself. He hadn't meant to say anything like that. But she was beautiful. Still.

She smiled away the compliment and steered the conversation back to his schedule of ushers' duties, seating plans and food. The care with which he approached even the smallest detail, the love that it signified, reminded her why she had first been attracted to him. They drained their glasses and, with a conspiratorial chuckle, she called for two more. This time, he didn't hesitate.

When she got up to leave, he stood too and this time took the initiative, kissing her on each cheek.

He sat down, gesturing for the bill, and watched her go. As she walked away, he ached for her to look back towards him, just once. But she didn't and, finally, after 25 years of thinking about this moment, he understood that she never would.

When it comes to family, I've marked each disaster with TV. That time Polly came home and told me that she didn't have a boyfriend, that her new fella was a married man and their relationship was, how did she put it...*strictly about shagging*. Standing right in front of me, she was, her back straight. Staring me down. I turned away, went into my room and pulled out my *Downton Abbey* collection. I've got the complete series. 1-6. Blu-ray DVD. David got me the player, a few Christmases back. He buys me nice things. Making amends, I suppose, for not visiting his Mum and sister. Though at least he has that, a sense of what's right. I never reckoned on our Polly turning out like she has. But I tell a lie. I knew it from the start. A strawberry-faced angel, she was, sown from a bad seed.

I'd been watching *Magnum P.I.* when she was conceived. Her father had come home late. After work drinks or squash with Tony or clients to entertain or... So I'd watch the telly. I liked the American series, *Knight Rider* and *Miami Vice*. And that charmer from the *A-Team*...like golden syrup, his smile was that handsome. Before Polly was born I'd cook for two and then eat alone, wondering where he was. All that gravy made from homemade stock, potatoes cut and peeled by hand. But he was hardly ever there. So after dinner I'd sit with a cuppa and watch those programmes because in Miami and Florida and Hawaii, the sun always shined. Tom Selleck was in bed, wearing nothing but a smile. A woman lay next to him under sheets, running fingers through his chest hair. And then I heard a key in the door, heard it turn...heard familiar feet shuffle on the mat. He walked into the room, shirt untucked, tie hanging loose at an angle. He came over, smiling, sat down next to me. He stank of booze and I couldn't hide my repulsion. Placing a hand on my cheek he tried to coax me, return me to face him but I recoiled, and grabbed his hand. There was a smell. Pungent, bacterial. Unmistakeable. But I had to be wrong so I inspected his fingers, the dirt under uncut nails. Then I sniffed them. I stared at him, his glazed smile not waning. I smelled his fingers a second time. They'd been up some woman. So much for squash with Tony. He hadn't even bothered to wash. And now he was home, wanting some. With my second sniff his smile broadened. He was reading it as a green-light. Foreplay, perhaps. I didn't know what to say...so I said nothing. He laid me back on the sofa, gently, unbuckled his suit trousers and climbed on top. He didn't undress me or kiss me. He found what he wanted, entered with his eyes shut and kept them closed. One hand was propping him up,

another pressing down on my breast. He wasn't comfortable, a leg kept slipping off the sofa and he soon gave up on my breast. He seemed far away, like he was searching for something, a memory just out of reach. He convulsed, grunted and rolled off. Naked from the waist down but with his shirt and tie still on, he negotiated his way to the staircase. I stayed lying down. It felt like someone had just spat inside of me. Bringing my knees up I covered myself with a blanket and returned to Tom Selleck, now atop his lover. A saxophone was hitting high notes and I remember thinking, '*...is she going to come up for air?*' But the scene cut.

Lady Sybil Branson, daughter of Robert and Cora Crawley, the Earl and Countess of Grantham. I've got a soft spot for her. Caring, beautiful – but bloody-minded. Just consider.. a woman during the War years, with her status, and running off with a chauffeur. No-one else in Downtown could've pulled that off. And my Polly looks like her, a bit. Different creatures inside, though. Because you can come into money, get educated, live in a two-up-two-down or an English country estate. But your essence - that don't change. We're tied to it. An invisible line, holding us to our centre – our beginning. And sometimes we can roam far and wide, that line giving, elastic. But it always snaps back. And Polly began with her Father, trawling city streets after hours, sticking his fingers up some goodtime girl, and then coming home to dump his seed in me.

My arms encircle you.

‘You don’t have to do this, you know?’ you say, like it’s a simple, binary choice.

What if I don’t? If I don’t help, if I don’t live here? I could spend winter in the Canaries, summer in England, write all day, eat and drink in restaurants, meet someone else, a happy healthy someone who’d walk and talk beside me and I’d enjoy her company and we’d walk until we were tired and then stop at a pub and take a room and make love together and she’d be able to do that, be physical in that way, as you once could, then afterwards we’d talk and I’d mention our children and she’d ask about you and I’d be quiet and she’d ask what was wrong and I’d lie and say nothing and she’d be sure there was something but wouldn’t say because it was all too new but later she would and then there’d be awkward conversations and arguments and then one of us would leave and I’d wish I’d never met her and all the time, all the time, I’d think of you and want to see you and wish I’d never left you and I’d wonder how you were coping and was someone else doing what I did for you and who were they and were they treating you well and...?

‘I don’t mind,’ I say as I lift you again, like I say every time. Every time I choose.

Omar Hussain

I am genesis. I am control.

The night waits in ambush. The relentless monster, brutal with silence and blindness. Patience binds me to my apartment. The clock ticks midnight. The room glows with flashing images from the TV. It's muted. It's better that way. I grab my keys. My jacket. The door to my apartment swings open and the opera of the night greets me. The falsetto of the stars. The baritone of loneliness.

I shred three blocks of sidewalk by foot. By focus. Hot white neon lights temporarily remove darkness. It's a gas station. I stop and linger in the shadows. To survey. The deafening hum of nothingness drowns my senses. There are no others around. There is no witness here.

I am the fever.

The early morning tide sloshes in the distance. White water bubbling against rocks. I head in that direction. To the beach. This is Carmel. This is Monterey. This Pacific Grove. These are the towns everyone dreams about. The towns real estate agents never stop experiencing nocturnal emissions over. These are the towns featured in shitty little shows like Big Little Lies. It's a vacation destination. It's a retirement pipe dream.

I am the city's uncontrollable disease.

Between the ocean and the vacant streets are tall, looping sand dunes. Mounds rising and falling with each slope. A camel's back. The perfect barrier.

I slog the incline. One foot sinking into sand after the other. Bits of grainy earth hop into my shoes. Molest the bottoms of my feet. I ignore it. I reach the top. The summit. I turn back around and stare at the Monterey Peninsula. The glowing homes of Seaside. Everyone too tired and too afraid to press into the night. To see what lurks on the other side. To stare the monster in the eyes.

I move down the backside of the dune. The ocean growing nearer. The cool breeze turns into a midnight wind. Ripping and clawing at my ears.

I am nothing.

My legs carry me down the beach. The path is lumpy and uneven. The moon the guiding light. I'm getting close to it. My special little spot. My devious little secret. Where I hide my favorite toys from the world.

I wrap around the north end of the shore, past the signs warning about dangerous rocks. Climb them anyway. Ocean reaches up, splashes me. Reminds me of the cold abyss. A meager hop and I'm on the other side.

Here it is.

Goosebumps crowd my arm. The rush of lust and fear spring up my rectum and through my stomach. It's the cave. It's the infinite black. I head in. I pull my phone out and activate its flashlight. With each step, I hear it. A murmur at first. Then a muffled cry. A roaring plea. The light on my phone catches his shoe first. Then his jeans. His brown belt. His plaid shirt. The precious binding still intact. He wiggles. He writhes. I kneel next to him. I run my hand over the electric tape atop his mouth.

"Now, little toy," I say. "How should we spend our time together?"

I am my own God.

I reach for my knife.

"Hello, my name is Sarah and I'm –" The swishy Rossetti girl gripped the chair and finished the sentence with a conscious heroism that made Naïla's lips curl. "An Instagram addict!"

"Hello, Sarah" chorused the circle, smiling, none more widely than Naïla. It was the kind of thing that got you bonus points with counsellors and a better report when your mother came snooping. She knew the ropes, even if it was her first day in this new nuthouse. The wretched lot here you could have picked randomly from any social media addiction group in the city: a counsellor, smiling with a forced, vague sweetness; a pasty-faced boy with impossibly green eyes and a stammer, a jumpy child in black, a blue-jeanned boy, and Sarah the Rossetti girl with Righteous Resolve writ large upon her face.

"Soon, I was posting pictures of all my food. Like, literally all of it. Then – I was lunching with my best friend and I almost threw up because I'd taken a bite of my fries before taking a photo. So I – She made me realize I had a problem."

"Thank you Sarah. Would anyone else like to say something?" The counsellor was looking pointedly at Naïla. She stared woodenly back. They could hint at and nudge and worry her, but their own stupid rules forbade them to actually make her do anything.

"H-hang in there, Sarah" piped up the pasty-faced boy – Alain? Good grief, what a name! – with his painfully eager smile, and Naïla rolled her eyes. Of all the fools – couldn't he see the Rossetti-girl was with the blue-jeanned boy? Naïla slid her phone from her pocket into the sleeve of her gown, and began to scroll her Twitter feed. New counsellors always were dead bores. Oh well.

From the woman's glare as she said, Dolores-sweet "Yes, we're all here to help" Naïla knew that she knew about the Twitter, but this did not worry her unduly. She was here at the insistence of her mother and for no other reason. To have a little peace in the house, that was all. Like every other counsellor, this one would back off in a couple of weeks.

Now it was the girl in black who was speaking "Hi, I'm Alicia. I can't stop checking my gmail. I write – stuff, and I've sim-subbed – simultaneously submitted – my thirty-three poems to ten magazines each, and now I can't stop checking my email, because I'm scared I'll get an acceptance."

"Eh?" That did draw Naïla out of 'Ten Natural Tips for Removing Pimples' posted by a visibly spotty woman. It seemed to have had much the same effect on the others: everyone

was staring at the furiously blushing girl "I mean – like – if two of them accept the same poem before I've had time to notify one and then that one blacklists me and they tell all the other journals, then I'll never have a poem published and I'll die with everything unread, and no one will ever –" She buried her head in her hands.

There was no thank you chorus this time. Even the counsellor looked bemused. Naïla realised in some exasperation that it was as usual left to her to state the obvious. "Look, I don't think you have an addiction to checking your email. If you submit each poem to ten places, obviously you'll have to keep track! And if that's bothering you, send each poem to fewer magazines, okay? Someone is bound to publish them sooner or later, right? Even the most complete drivel gets published these days, and besides, you're not even that good –"

"Naïla!" That was decidedly more rattled-homeroom-teacher than perpetually-chill-addiction-group-counsellor. The pasty-faced boy smothered a giggle and tugged his collar straight. Naïla smirked triumphantly. But then she saw Alicia gaping at her with the uncomprehending pain of a snared rabbit in her twitching face, and something very like compunction smote her. Shamefacedly she googled and tweeted the 'before you say something, ask your self is it true, is it kind etc.' quote, fiddling with the vowels to make it all fit into one tweet. Once she could be fairly sure Alicia could not answer because the blue-jeanned boy had started talking about his Facebook feed-scrolling habit, she mouthed grudgingly, "Sorry". As for him – funny, she could have bet he was a Tweeter too.

Her battery died with a ping that drew his listeners' eyes to her, and in spite of her defiant scowl it sent a flush creeping up her neck. Interrupted by their straying eyes, the blue-jeanned Facebook-boy looked up. His thumb twitched as though scrolling, and Naïla choked back a laugh. What a dork. She dodged the counsellor's glare by fixing her eyes on the dead screen of her own phone. There was no feed there, only her right thumb, moving absently upwards like a wind-screen wiper –

No. Oh no. It was true then. All of it. Everything her mother had said, and her friends – when she still had three friends 'irl' and only a hundred followers. But it was the memory of her brother's face when she had snatched her phone from him that morning that made her yawn elaborately to give her a reason to wipe her eyes. And so, as they were all chanting the next thank you, Naïla decided, quite seriously, that she would stand up when Dolores next asked who wanted to share. And later, she promised herself, she would buy her brother a huge box of chocolates to say sorry and spend the evening helping her mother with chores.

But the hour was over, and the counsellor, revived by the end-of-session beep, was already summing up. "If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to text or email me, or post them in our closed Facebook group. Remember, I'm always available. Those of you

who are new or haven't done so yet, please don't forget to follow us on Twitter and Insta for updates about our next session ..."

He collects her from her house. The car, small, green, with dust streaks along the metal, smells like Doritos. His belly rests on his thighs, the clipboard rests on his belly.

‘Where’s Mike?’ she asks.

‘Sick. I’m Kevin.’

They should shake hands, make it an official meeting, but his hands are stained orange with flavouring.

‘Reverse when you’re ready, we’re going down Mallibar then right onto Tannes.’

She finds the gear, her feet light on the pedals. The freedom churns below her. It has been her dream since forever. She is ten years older than most learner drivers, but she will appreciate it in a way they never do.

His directions give her time to prepare. His presence is more calming than Mike’s, and he makes small comments as they drive.

‘Those folks should trim that hedge, it’s a visual obstruction to the driveway.’

‘I lived here when they put in that roundabout, bloody nightmare.’

‘My ex had a dog like that. She was a dog like that, ha!’

Twenty minutes and they’re in her old part of town. Her high-school is up ahead. Up the long steep hill she used to pace when her thoughts were bigger than her bedroom. Once, boys yelled at her from their humming car. It was the first time, and it made her thoughts crash. She was fifteen, wearing a baggy fleecy jumper. She was sure they were the grade above her at school. She wondered if they recognised her, or would tomorrow.

‘Turn here, at the jacaranda.’

The purple flowers flood the street corner every year, and car wheels turn them to mush the colour of fake wine. The street leads to the local shops, which were recently renovated to include a public square. Engaging the public was very important, the mayor said. Her first job was in one of those shops. Her grey-haired colleagues stared fixedly at any female customer wearing tight clothes. The first time someone touched her ass had been in there, and he laughed at the tears of shock in her eyes.

‘Slow here, those pedestrians will get there at the same time as you.’

She slows. The woman with the pram, the man with an arm around her shoulders. He raises a hand in a wave of thanks, nodding at Kevin, man to man.

Once, while crossing those white stripes, a man yelled out the window at her. 'Come sit on my lap, darling!' The car stopped in front of her, heaving with the masculine laughter of his mates. She walked behind it, aware of the mirrors that showed her cowering.

'Keep an eye on your mirrors.' Kevin makes notes on his clipboard. Every time she brakes he watches her legs.

'Pull into that car park, we'll do some reverse parking.'

She wants to say no, not that carpark. She never looks at that carpark. She has never found the words to think about that carpark, although the sign hanging from one of the buildings produces memories without shape. Memories of smell (skin, smoke, bourbon) and pressure (on her head, thick fingers tangled in her hair).

She brakes too suddenly, and Kevin makes a note on his paper, a scratchy sound like a cross.

'We'll do a normal reverse park first. There's a free one up there.'

It is next to a Prius, small and black. And quiet. She remembers how quiet it was, when she sat in the passenger seat and he drove her home. So quiet she wasn't sure they were moving, except that the lights outside were blurs that made her stomach swirl.

She creeps the car forward, and Kevin makes another note on his paper. Too cautious, she imagines him writing. The car lurches as she tries to make up for it. She waits for a jeep to pass, its music a steady hum of bass, before shifting into reverse. The gear stick is suddenly obscene. It doesn't need to be that shape, it shouldn't require that grip. She swallows and checks her mirrors. No one is coming. It is just her and the Prius.

'When you're ready,' Kevin says, pen tapping against his clipboard.

The car inches back, her eyes are on the Prius. She will not hit it. She will not hit it. When she got out of the car that night, he didn't look at her. She had barely closed the door before the wheels crunched and he was gone. The next day at university he laughed when someone made a joke about how drunk she had been, and someone asked what colour her vomit was. She didn't remember vomiting, but it explained the stains on her dress when she got home. She laughed. He had taken her home, that must have meant something.

'Stop!' Kevin's foot jumps out, slamming his emergency break. 'There's two cars there, remember, park between them!'

On the other side is a hatchback, like the one her grandmother drives. She didn't see its chipped yellow sheen.

'Sorry.' She grips the gear stick, trying to find first gear, but her palm is sweating. Kevin puts his hand over hers, all orange flavouring, and she is going to be sick. They are facing the wall with the sign on it. Dark, dull letters waiting for night to fall.

'You're not ready for this. You can pick it up next time, with Mike.'

She is incompetent. She might break his car with her distraction. He gets out, so she does too. As he takes the driver's seat, he mutters something. She will never learn to drive, will never feel the hum of freedom from an empty car on a long road. If only she could crawl into the car that looks like her grandmother's and wait for an adult who knows her, but doesn't really know her, to take her home, back to the side of town that is safe from these old lessons.

Wonderful, wonderful Copenhagen: their first weekend away together. They've been 'seeing' each other for four months which is a phrase Mariella finds apt. Yes, she sees Kevin, and as he's six feet tall and scandi-liciously structured, she likes what she sees, but it's seeing into him and beyond him that's the issue. In the glare of this new city, away from the turmoil of London where even the most audacious behaviour can go unchallenged, her senses are hunting-dog keen. She shoots sly glances his way, noting how he reacts to these unfamiliar surroundings, ears straining for subtexts in his exchanges with strangers and his conversations with her. Even the tiny shifts and sighs of his sleeping are suspect when nothing belongs to either of them and the opportunity's wide open for breaking all the rules.

Can he be trusted? Is he who he seems?

Thus far, she remains optimistic, though at thirty-seven disappointment has led her to be fatalistically reserved. In the past she's survived so many relationships that started so well and ended so badly; a plethora of suitors fallen at a multiplicity of hurdles. After each, a painful period of reflection, regret, and dispassionate forensic examination leads invariably to the same conclusion: an absence of authenticity is the greatest shortfall of all.

On their second morning, his suggestion that they get away from the main tourist hotspots finds them wandering past a small parade of shops in a quaint residential neighbourhood that's as hushed as a museum. Points for that, she thinks. It speaks of an adventurous spirit, though to a degree it's countered by the knowledge that he's been to the city before.

She doesn't care to ask him who with.

In this city, her already fragile self-esteem has been knocked by how inadequate Danish women make her feel. "Come and see my home, Kevin," she can imagine some blonde, tanned Agnethe proposing. "Come and be happy with me here."

How can her chubby, freckled, Celtic-infused looks compete with that?

Determined not to abandon hope, she suppresses her insecurities and doubles her efforts to be fully present. He's here with her, after all. Thus it is that as they walk through the neighbourhood, they're so deep in conversation that they fail to notice the woman who steps out of a shop doorway in front of them until she's blocking their passage ahead.

"Would you like some cake?" she asks. Her English is fluent, her voice low, she's clad in

that angular Scandinavian fashion that ought to be boring but which Mariella finds thrillingly contained.

"Oh," they say in unison, taken aback. Would they? – they've only just had breakfast.

"It's free. A wedding has been cancelled, and there's nothing else I can do with it. Take some, please."

They follow her into the shop, a bakery/patisserie studded with a few tables and chairs, and she indicates the cake - a huge, three-tier edifice, all pastel buttercream and flowers – so far untouched.

Silently, the woman folds a cake box then takes a long knife and confidently cuts two large slices. As she presses down, Mariella thinks of the bride and groom who should have been performing the act.

"Was the wedding today?"

"Yes," the woman shrugs. "Shame."

She ties the box with a length of gold ribbon and hands it to them. "Wait," she says, and they stand, like children, while she fetches paper plates, plastic forks and napkins and puts them in a bag. Adds a bottle of water. Her generosity is astounding.

"That's enormously kind of you," Mariella says. "Are you sure we can't pay you?"

"No need, it's already paid for; I just hate the thought of waste."

"Well, we were heading for the park, so we'll have a little picnic with this later."

The woman smiles vaguely. "Enjoy."

Later, as they sit eating the cake, which is delicately flavoured and moreish, Mariella watches Kevin and wonders if he feels as delighted as she by their unexpected windfall. It was a random act of kindness that she knows she won't forget, but maybe he sees it as no more remarkable than a supermarket free sample.

"Good?" she asks.

He nods and sighs. "Sure. A box of indulgence tied up with kind-heartedness is pretty hard to beat."

Her heart stirs a little. "But isn't it kind of immoral, feeling so good as a result of someone else's misery? Don't you feel guilty?"

"Not really, we played no part in that. And probably no wedding was the best for them - who knows?"

Mariella laughs. "Right now, I doubt that the couple would see it that way, but it's a shame, even so, that they don't know the pleasure they've given us."

"Actually, it was the cake shop woman who was generous, not them. Though perhaps

she does this often as a way of encouraging business.”

“But we’re tourists, she must have known she had nothing to gain.”

“True. Then it was pure altruism, an extraordinary thing.”

Later still, on their way back to the city centre after hours of strolling, he suggests they return the way they came. For a few moments, horrified, Mariella wonders if he might be hoping for more free cake, but as her feet are tired and she has no appetite for disagreement, she doesn’t demur.

When they reach the neighbourhood, he stops at a florist, tells her to wait, and strides inside. Flowers? Mariella’s heart twitches. Unlikely, but how romantic if so. Eventually, he emerges with a single cream rose, simply but impeccably wrapped, and with no word of explanation, goes straight to the bakery where they’d been before, two doors down.

There, wordlessly, with a small formal bow, he presents it to their benefactor, turns on his heel and leaves.

In the seconds before he re-joins her, Mariella allows herself a smile. Her heart is warm, her senses – despite her exhaustion – tingling with anticipation for the evening ahead.

Yes, she thinks, this man will be mine.

Once Bert had finished digging the hole in the garden, he shouted for Karen to make him a cup of tea. When he'd drunk that and washed the dirt from his hands, they sat down to enjoy their evening meal. They spoke about the hole, the plant that would go in it, and what it would add to their lives.

"We shouldn't tell anyone, not until the first flowers have started showing," suggested Karen. She thought of the ladies at the school where she worked. Their whispers already kept her awake most nights, while she fiddled with the dead skin on her thumbs and attempted to drown her thoughts in Bert's snores.

"I agree," Bert said. Karen took a long gulp of her white wine – they were celebrating, after all – and stared longingly at the garden. It was dark, so she couldn't see the hole now, but she could still imagine it. Waiting to be filled with life.

Over the next few months, not much happened. Bert had placed the plant inside the hole, and the two had again celebrated by finishing the rest of the wine. Bert went back to his busy profession, Karen back to her not-so-busy job, and the couple had placed the progress of the plant to the backs of their minds.

By month four though, Karen was beginning to worry. It wasn't that the plant hadn't grown, but it wasn't exactly what she had expected. She'd seen the TV advertisements, the posters on the side of the buses - thin stalks, bright green, luscious leaves. Finally, a pink flower for a girl, a blue one for a boy, or a yellow one if you had opted for a surprise. Some rolled their eyes when the adverts drove past - 'Unnatural', 'unethical' or 'just plain fucking weird'. She was still keeping her growing to herself, and she was sure that Bert hadn't told anyone either. The flower hadn't come yet, it wasn't time.

Karen wasn't deluded - she knew the plants didn't all look like that. After the adverts had hooked her, she had gone on a frantic Google search then joined every Facebook group and Reddit thread that offered themselves as a 'Planting Support Group'. It was mostly women, but there were some gay couples too, who Karen preferred as they posted the most pictures.

Every stalk image that appeared, every flowering photo that pinged onto her feed, Karen analysed. How thick was the stalk, how dark were the leaves? That flower is more red than pink, but it's OK, the baby girl had turned out just fine anyway.

However, Bert and Karen's plant was unlike any of the images she'd seen online. The stalk was thick, veiny and dark. The leaves were large, but there weren't many. And there was no flower. Karen knew that by now, there should at least be a bud.

"Where is it?" she asked Bert one evening.

Bert shrugged his shoulders and removed his dirty boots. Karen ignored the mess.

A crash woke them that night. She shook Bert awake and, after a grumble, managed to persuade him to go and see what the noise was.

She waited in her bed and listened as his footsteps went down the steps two at a time along the hallway, through to the living room and continued out to the kitchen.

"What the fuck!"

Karen ran downstairs, pulling her dressing gown on. In the middle of the room stood Bert and next to him, a fully-grown man, naked but for a few leaves and roots, twisted around his ankles and tangled into his hair.

The man faced the bewildered couple and thrust out a hand. Instinctively, Bert took it, giving it a firm shake. They both smiled.

Bert and Karen welcomed the man into their home with just as much and warmth and kindness as they would have a new-born, and they began to consider 'Manny' a crucial part of their odd, little family. For, although Manny looked and behaved much like a grown man would do, his knowledge of the world around him was just as undeveloped as a child's. He asked questions about the different coloured people on television, begged Karen to explain to him how it was that he arrived here in this world, and managed to persuade Bert to let him have a go in his car – admittedly while it was parked in the drive and the keys were safely back in their bowl in the hallway.

To their friends and family, Manny was a cousin, whose peculiarities they explained away with one-too-many encounters with narcotics. They asked few questions, and smiled when he said strange things over tea. They neglected their social life anyway, as well as their jobs, and even themselves. One day, Karen realised it had been a week since she had brushed her hair.

Bert spotted the notice on the way home from work. It was pinned up in the window of a Family Planning Clinic. The red warning symbols had made him pause to read it:

PRODUCT RECALL

GROWN-YOUR-OWN BABY – SERIES 7

ALL PRODUCTS MANUFACTURED BETWEEN JUNE AND OCTOBER 2045
MAY BE FAULTY – REPORTS OF GROWTH MALFUNCTION
PLEASE CONTACT PLANT INDUSTRIES FOR INFORMATION ON HOW TO
RETURN YOUR PRODUCT

By the time he got home, he was too late. Karen was in tears, hunched over the breakfast table, arms spread across the marble, hands dangling limply over the edge. The house was quiet apart from the sounds of her sobs – Manny was gone, some people in a black van had taken him that afternoon, shoved him into the back and slammed the doors in Karen's screaming face.

Bert picked up a piece of paper that was lying face down on the floor – a refund claimant form. He grabbed a pen, took up a bar stool next to Karen, and began to fill it out.

I look down at you, unconscious on the floor of this shabby Berlin flat, and I remember everything.

I remember the fireworks bursting as your mother dragged you away and the millennium began. Your father had left a note behind, explaining his reasons.

That year we hung a Communist flag on your bedroom wall. We spoke about rich people with silly, teenage violence. Later, we rejoiced when planes crashed into two buildings in New York. My mother cried in front of the television. Unlike me, you felt no guilt.

You were expelled in the first year of sixth form. I remember the fatal tinkling of glass falling into the head teacher's office, and the hush surrounding thirty pupils holding placards for Iraq.

Your mother asked me to help, but I fobbed her off.

When I saw you after that it was by chance, in pubs or at parties. Your band was too loud for me. You drummed poorly.

We argued before I left. I remember fresh bandages on your arm as you pushed me away.

I read History at Leicester.

Rumours about you trickled in sometimes: you'd moved to Germany; you lived in a squat; you lived on the streets. I could've visited your mother to find out, but I didn't. I studied.

My political beliefs were inevitably reversed. I forgot about the passions we had as teenagers, and I forgot about you.

I didn't think of you once until a month ago. I was leading a discussion with my pupils about the 1980s. Most of them were detached or distracted. But a few were incensed. They hated Thatcher, and one of them even shouted down another student. He was utterly zealous and completely uninformed.

I swallowed my pride and saw your mother.

It took a month to find you. I saw a few gigs in Kreuzberg. I asked around for an English drummer. The breakthrough came last week, when I met someone who knew this place.

I realise now we haven't been in a room together for ten years.

I haven't any detailed plan for when you wake up. I'm not even sure you'll be pleased to see me. But looking at you on the floor, remembering the fireworks bursting as you found out your father had left, I know roughly what I'm going to say.

'I'm taking you home. I'm taking you home. I'm taking you home.'

As I filled the hot water bottle in your absence, I considered moving the kettle—just a small adjustment—so its scalding flow would consume my other hand.

I didn't do it. It was only a fleeting thought, and my problem isn't a lack of feeling, a need to feel—it's that I'm feeling too much. More than a person should be made to or capable of feeling. Boiling water would only be a pin prick.

Another thought pops into my head: a cat-piss-soaked bed and me, twisted in an attempt to stay dry as I try to sleep and cry instead. From frustration at first. Frustration at my cat, at myself for neglecting to shut the door and leaving him unsupervised. At law degrees that lead to nothing but existential crises. At hostile immigration policies. At Theresa May. At pixelated Facetime conversation. At six-hour time differences. At the earth's continual orbit and the sun's eternal rising.

Then it's 2 a.m., and I'm crying not from frustration but exhaustion. It is 2 a.m., and jet leg is a purgatory. My phone screen in the dark pierces my eyes like eagle beaks, but staring at the ceiling leaves my mind free to wander.

At three, I am still crying. Deep, voiceless heaves from purging emotions of ineffable weight. Not even god knows where the water continues to come from in my dehydrated body. It's not frustration or exhaustion.

Now I'm thinking of a river boat, moving back and forth, never docking. Its journey is endless.

I'm thinking of a letter, written by candlelight in a hut in the woods after a long day's toil. It speaks of a stronger fire. An inner fire. One that can never stop burning now it's been ignited. Each touch was a clash of flint on stone.

I'm thinking of a cold stable in December; a park bench draped in a grey blanket, overlooking a setting sun; a secluded beach made of stones, accessed by kayak cutting through liquid blue glass—of sun and salt on bare skin (of witch hazel applied to purple knees). I'm thinking of sofas and kitchen counters and armchairs and showers and beds, so many beds. Including the one I'm lying in now, writing this.

I'm thinking of how it may be the last one I hold you in. The last one I wake up beside you in. The last one I kiss your sleep-puckered mouth in, shut down the laptop, an episode of Peep Show unfinished, turn off the lamp, kiss you again, say I Love You, hear you groan it in return, before settling into the universe of your back. There, I am warm. There, I am safe. There, I fear I may never be again.

I have finally run out of tears.

My head throbs, pleading for water. I fill a pint glass to the brim and down it in two gulps. It doesn't help. My mouth is made of sandpaper. I run a kitchen knife through a blue flame and then through my tongue. There's less blood than I thought there'd be.

I stand before a mirror, which is also a canvas, tongue in hand like a Sovereign's Orb. Witch hazel won't help the purple under my eyes. What do you do when love is forced to end? When human constructs are pulling the weave apart, threads fraying, threatening irreparable damage? What do you do when love must end when there is still love? So much love. So much love you feel you might stop existing without it. What do you do. Would that words were sandpaper, that they may scour the mind.

Jude Higgins

They'd been talking about hedgehogs, the way they hadn't seen any for years. And, she said, not even squashed on the road – it comes to something when you want to see road-kill. There were badgers dead on the verges, sometimes a deer, but no hedgehogs. She said she missed the nest of wasps in the wall outside the front door, the way they chased the postman down the path and bothered them at breakfast outside, dug into the apples and ruined them. He said, there were fewer woodlice in the wood pile. He used to brush them off the logs so as not to watch them curl up and sizzle in the stove. She said not too far in the future, people would long to be stung by anything, even a mosquito. They'd deliberately go to Scotland in the insect season to have clouds of midges hanging over their heads. There'd be coach trips to witness the last of this phenomenon. Tourists would show off their bites. At home, instead of Tupperware, there'd be infestation parties. Women would turn up wearing their moth-eaten cashmere like a badge of pride. They'd admire the holes and say, what you still have moths? Where do you live? They'd long for the tickle of a moth on their necks in bed at night, long to see them clustered around a naked light bulb, long to scrape squashed moth bodies off the car windscreen. Because if they did, at least the air would be alive. They'll even like blue bottles, he said. Want to hear the drone around the kitchen. Want to see them walking over left-out food, want to see the bluebottle maggots on the rotting animals in the fields. And what about the bees, she said and they were silent for a while. Once last spring, she said, she rose at dawn to hear the chorus. Still loud, still that blackbird lording it over every other bird. The bumble bees were motionless on the lavender, as if they were dead. But when she put a finger on the furry back of the biggest one, it grumbled like he did if she woke him up too early. Technically, he said, bumble bees shouldn't be able to fly. Physics says their bodies are too big. She remembered the slow buzz of the bees on the comfrey last year, the lazy way they dipped in and out of the blooms. Their wings flex, he said. That's how they do it. They don't flap them up and down. Perhaps being flexible might save them and us in the end, she said. Maybe, he said. But they were silent again. And outside even the sparrows had stopped their chatter.

As custodian, I'm responsible for keeping a meticulous archive of dust-free pieces. Every day, I begin with the pickle jars, always in embryonic order – egg specimens, fetuses, complete preserved creatures. Next, medical instruments and tools, followed by curios and, finally, taxidermy.

I am not to touch the apothecary cabinet, nor should I allow anyone else. She's fastidious about that.

I rarely see Miss Englebrecht – she's always cloistered in her attic apartment – yet when I arrive, new pieces wait for me with hand scrawled notes of instruction. Today, I was held up by the woeful bus service – getting soaked-through waiting – and as I wrung out my hair in the hallway, I noticed a whole stack of parcels. The attached note suggested I shouldn't leave until they were fully archived and displayed as requested.

Cursing, I made tea. On rummaging for a biscuit, I discovered another note in the tin instructing me curtly to purchase my own.

Furious, I marched into the wunderkammer. Though I felt vengeful, I couldn't bear to harm the precious collection so, without thought, I yanked open a drawer of the apothecary cabinet instead. It was empty, so I opened another, then another, each one devoid of a reason to keep me out.

When the light bulb shattered, I paid little heed.

When the curtains billowed, knocking a filigree clock to the floor, I assumed the window was left open.

It was only when the taxidermy lion head began to roar that I realised what I had done. I began slamming the drawers but they resisted and the maelstrom grew. A cacophony of decades-deceased creatures filled the room, ivory horns clashed, an ancient spear impaled the cabinet.

Explosions of glass temporarily silenced the hoards, releasing a potent torrent of vinegar and formaldehyde. When the preserved snake unravelled itself from the flood; the vampire bat took flight; the brains grew spinal cords, I knew it couldn't be stopped.

I only just managed to shut the leaden door behind me as I fled.

I'm on the thirty-seven bus now. Was a biscuit really too much to ask?

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