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THE ANSWERS (working title)

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

"I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning."

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I have received no substantial assistance from any source or person in the preparation of this exegesis as regards sponsorship, collection and processing of data, interpretation of results, and editing and word processing.

I acknowledge the use of a portion of Bertolt Brecht's poem, 'Questions From a Worker Who Reads,' as part of the funeral scene.

ABSTRACT

This is a two-part submission. The first, an exegesis, sets my creative work in a literary, social, temporal and stylistic context. The second, main part of this submission is a draft of the first twenty-eight chapters of a thirty-five-chapter novel, with the working title *The Answers*, which I have written over the last year. The exegesis explores issues such as genre, important authorial influences, such as the expatriate experience, along with authorial intention and how this intention differs from the resulting manuscript.

The novel is set in London, from the point-of-view of Ernest Shaw, a twenty-nine year old man with a somewhat dysfunctional and naive personality, who sets out to leave London in search of a new life.

It is a story about truth, memory and connections, having nothing and having everything, and the elusive happiness that lies somewhere in between.

‘Questing and Questioning’

Introduction

The objective of this thesis was to write the first draft of a novel manuscript, with the working title *The Answers*. The novel was originally conceived as a subverted Bildungsroman-type text, or novel of development, with a contemporary focus. The novel idea was conceived in London, and indeed is set there; however the story includes universal themes and motifs, therefore has relevance to other locations. This exegesis outlines the theoretical basis of *The Answers*.

In particular, I will focus on how my novel fits the genre to which I originally conceived it to have relevance, including the ways and reasons it diverges from that genre. I will also discuss my authorial intention and explore reasons that this changed during the writing of the novel, along with the authorial influences that contributed to the novel’s content. Among these influences was my experience as an expatriate New Zealander in London, to which I attribute the novel’s themes of alienation and exile. A further influence was the atmosphere in London during the lead-up to the global recession, where there appeared to be growing criticism of consumerism – something that I was particularly aware of in my work as a marketing copywriter. I will lastly explore two key features of the novel, these being character range and the protagonist’s passivity, and discuss the challenges I encountered with voice, style and setting.

Genre

Above all, my novel was conceived as a short journey in a dysfunctional young man’s life – his search for meaning and a place to belong – which broadly put it in the realm of the Bildungsroman genre. Most novels in that literary genre are historic rather than contemporary works, yet there are commonalities that lead me to identify my novel as within the genre, although I acknowledge that my novel contains differences from the “standard” Bildungsroman. The original form of the genre featured plots in which the individual’s economic and social advancement were linked to his (and it was invariably a ‘him’) moral, spiritual and psychological development, with Goethe’s *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* (1774). generally considered to be the definitive work. Later, the genre developed so that a state of inner cultivation was considered to be disconnected

from any social and materialistic progression, with English writers such as Gissing, Hardy, Bennett and Lawrence significantly reworking the Bildungsroman to a form which questioned the role of society and class. This had the effect of creating a more individualistic focus in the typical Bildungsroman and was most obvious in the sub-genre of the Künstlerroman, which typically featured an artist protagonist, and is often considered to have an autobiographical leaning. Alden suggests:

...these writers find only the possibility of self-betrayal which leads to disintegration of the self, an overwhelming sense of the powerlessness of the individual to effect his development, and a complete rupture between self and society.¹

This approach has its parallels in *The Answers* where the protagonist Ernest discovers that in seeking the approval of others, he loses his own way, and in the end betrays himself. His aspiration to improve himself is his motivator to leave London, the geographical distance being an analogue for the social distance that he feels unable to overcome. Though much of this is due to his overwhelmingly passive, sensitive temperament, his difficulties are also complicated by material obstacles, which is another characteristic of Künstlerromane. In particular, Ernest, similarly to with protagonists in earlier works in this genre, has “limited opportunities for education, a precarious economic situation which obliges him to take up unsatisfying work at an early age; contemptuous rejection by people with power and prestige.”²

Kontje ascribes the Künstlerromane to be “evidence of the continuing disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere and the attendant loss of the emancipatory potential that had been ascribed to art during the classical period.”³ Their relevance to that era is clear, yet in relation to *The Answers*, the question must be posed: why refer to this same genre in contemporary fiction? The most recent years of Western civilisation have seen a new focus on questioning the approaches of consumerism and capitalism, notably in the focus on the excesses of the financial industry, and alongside a related disintegration of the rational public sphere (for example, in the increasing tabloidisation of the mainstream media). In a similar way to previous eras, then, the Western world is

¹ Alden, Patricia. *Social Mobility in the English Bildungsroman: Gissing, Hardy, Bennett and Lawrence*. Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986, p4.

² Kontje, Todd. “Private lives in the Public Sphere: The German Bildungsroman as Metafiction.” Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992. p.12

³ *ibid.* p.12

undergoing a societal shift – this time with the disintegration of trust in financial institutions and the questioning of the belief that consumerism is a marker of quality of life. For instance, in *The Answers* Violet states in respect of Ernest's brother Reece, "He's a banker. What do you expect?"

Further, Kontje suggests that although the various Bildungsromane are a "supposedly exhausted genre...recent additions suggest we view [it] as a series of continuing transformation of a constant problematic, rather than the record of a progressive decline."⁴ In other words, the genre is constantly evolving, rather than static, and its developing forms continue to have relevance today. Buckley (1974), in regards to his examination of classic Bildungsroman, considered that no novel that ignores more than two or three of its principal elements – 'childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy' – satisfies the requirements of the genre.⁵ All these are potentially timeless concerns, and *The Answers* touches on all of these in some way, bar provinciality. With this in mind, I have positioned my novel as a loose type of Künstlerroman.

My consideration of the Bildungsroman genre would not be complete without the recognition of trends in Künstlerromane by women writers. DuPleiss states that often with women writers "the love plot and Bildung plot are fused in a particular narrative strategy, a figure emerging in a range of narratives from Elizabeth Barratt Browning to Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*."⁶ *The Answers* shares a version of this double Bildung plot and love plot, though does not have the female protagonist typical of women writers. However Ernest does exhibit qualities which are described by Fraiman as typically gendered female: "contemplative, unworldly, too earnestly spiritual."⁷ In addition, his 'dysfunctional' personality positions him as a minority in an environment that is overwhelmingly geared towards a 'normally' functioning majority – be they

⁴ *ibid.* p.17

⁵ Buckley, Jerome Hamilton (1974.) *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*. Harvard University Press, Carbonridge Massachusetts. p.18

⁶ DuPleiss, Rachel. (1985.) *To bear my mother's name: Künstlerromane by Women Writers*. In *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington. p84.

⁷ Fraiman, Susan. (1993) *Is there a Female Bildungsroman?* In *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development*. Columbia University Press, New York. p.63

women or men. Sceats suggests in relation to Rose Tremain that this focus on a marginal or outsider figure may constitute a ‘psychological rather than political feminism.’⁸

Other differences between my novel and the classic nineteenth century *Künstlerromane* are due to my reflections on contemporary society. First, rather than aspire to be an artist of some form, Ernest chooses an art termed more a ‘craft,’ the practice of gardening or landscape, which reflects his innate tendencies towards the earthy, the honest, the unadorned. In fact, rather than seek ‘high art’, both main characters aspire to a merger between their creativity and practicality, rather than take risks to pursuing art in its more pure form; for example: painting, literature, music. The dimension of time, too, differs. My narrative takes place over a short period of time, rather than over several years. A primary reason for this was to be able to address more of the interior mind of the character, and have a cast of fewer characters and employ greater depth. In addition, the use of back-story enabled me to depict my protagonist’s difficulties in childhood without the need to document them in linear time. Rather than consider these differences to be outside of the genre, they fall within the ‘continuing transformation’ previously cited that one would expect of a format readapted for modern use.

Authorial Influences

A particular influence on the writing of this novel was the time I spent living in London as an expatriate. I originally questioned the relevance of writing a manuscript set in London, about Londoners, when I had chosen to return to New Zealand to live. Only one character, Tiff, was born outside London, however her decision to reside in London makes her a true Londoner – London being that true metropolis where, to an expatriate, most people seem to be from somewhere else. (In fact, according to Wikipedia’s London article, the 2001 census showed that 27.1% of Greater London’s residents were born outside the UK.⁹ There were no statistics to show how many residents were born outside London, yet anecdotal evidence from my residence there indicates that even UK-born citizens who live in London have migrated there from other locales in the UK.) Yet as Morris (2009) states “...the expatriate experience and point of view, like the immigrant

⁸ Sceats, Sarah. (2005) *Appetite, Desire and Belonging in the Novels of Rose Tremain*. In *The Contemporary British Novel since 1960*. Eds: Acheson, James, and Ross, Sarah C. E. Edinburgh University Press, Great Britain. p. 174

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London#Ethnic_groups

or indigenous experience, continues to inform our culture.”¹⁰ Morris is not necessarily referring to writing books about elsewhere, but to the broader context that those of us who have been expatriates bring back home when (if) we return. Therefore, despite now residing in New Zealand, the story I have chosen to tell has relevance here, filtered as it is through an expatriate’s point of view.

An expatriate’s experience is multi-faceted and – whether one chooses to recognise it or not – vastly influential upon their work. I recognised comparatively late that my expatriate status in London had directly influenced the themes of the novel. Adler Papayamis (2005), writes, ‘ the category of place...is never a simple ‘objective’ rendering of expatriate destination, but rather a complex and unstable interweaving of desire, promise, expectation and materiality.’ ¹¹ Therefore London itself was always going to be more of a ‘character’ than a setting, and my characters themselves are responses to the expatriate state. Even Ernest, despite being a Londoner born and bred, has characteristics and experiences which clearly mimic those of an expatriate in the city. Again, Papayamis (2005) considers that typically, expatriate protagonists:

“‘live out their lives in a condition of lack, submission, and self-loss...(they) tend not to be married, and if they are, their marital relations are unorthodox by bourgeois standards...expatriate domiciles resist identification with domestic space; they are often hotels or single-occupancy’ dwellings’.”¹²

In *The Answers* Ernest not only experiences homelessness, poverty and submission to family and societal groups, he also has an unorthodox relationship with Violet and spends a significant portion of the story living in a hostel.

Acheson writes of the “discontented and alienated sensibility of the expatriate, the exile’s longing for home”¹³. Themes of alienation and exile come through strongly in *The Answers*, echoed by each character in turn and most obviously by Ernest himself, whose history of not fitting in marks him as a serial outsider, someone who has never really integrated with society through both psychological inability and circumstance. His

¹⁰ Morris, Paula ed. (2009) Penguin book of Contemporary New Zealand Short Stories (introduction), Penguin Group, Auckland. p.8

¹¹ Adler Papayamis, Marilyn. (2005.) *Writing in the Margins. The Ethics of Expatriation from Lawrence to Ondaatjie*. Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville. p.70

¹² *ibid.* p.27.

¹³ Higdon, David Leon. Unconfessed Confessions: the narrators of Graham Swift and Julian Barnes.” In *The British and Irish Novel since 1960*. Acheson, James (ed) p. 121

fondest remembrances are of when he was a child, when “everything had its place”, before his youngest sister was abducted and “everything went wrong.” While then the safety of the family was a refuge for him, once out on his own he struggles to find his way in the impersonal environment of a large city. This could be construed as translating directly to the experience of a New Zealander coming to live in London for the first time with no support network. Ernest’s nature, which bears similarities to someone suffering Asperger’s or an autistic spectrum disorder, is clearly not ‘ordinary’. Yet Madeleine describes him as ordinary, a nobody – not intended as an insult, but rather a way of comforting him, offering him some solace. In a sense, he is the archetypal fool, and his actions are sometimes characteristic of someone from another time, another era, not suited to a city. Alternatively, he could represent someone from a less-developed country. An encounter I had in my first year of being in London may have some bearing on this: I spoke with a conservative and titled older English woman, who, on hearing I planned to stay a few more years in London, said “Yes, once you’ve been to the city, it’s hard to go back to the farm.” This comment echoes that of Samuel Johnson’s “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life,” a pervasive attitude in the city. Exposure to this is likely to have contributed to the design of Ernest as a character who is, in effect, somewhat of an innocent. He doesn’t believe he is okay as he is (the first step to the loss of his innocence and also the first toward his downfall), and allows himself to be moulded by others. He desires acceptance, release from his psychological exile. All these characteristics could be said to echo, in some respect, the culture shock – the initial ‘fish out of water’ sense that an expatriate may experience in a new environment.

The exile does not finish with Ernest. Violet claims to be well-adjusted, comfortable and happy with her place in life. However, she has chosen a profession which alienates her socially and restricts her making real and honest friends. She has also exiled her emotions, regarding them only from a distance and only at the last giving in to them. In contrast, Amanda has chosen a ‘safe’ conservative role as a wife and mother. Yet she lives in a street in which she is patently not comfortable, and feels that she deserves more. She describes her neighbours disparagingly, in mocking sports terms, as having ‘nothing but net’ in their windows. Her domestic role defines her, yet she clearly resents this position and the loss of her previous expectations as being the ‘clever one’ of the family. She also mothers Ernest in a stifling way, as if hoping to see him

achieve something that she is unable to, while at the same time being unable/unwilling to let him do things on his own. Familial and societal pressure has exiled her from her ambitions.

In many cases, characters confuse exile with escape. Ernest naively wishes to escape to Vanuatu, seeing it as a simple way of life that would release him from his difficulties in being a citizen of the city, not realising that succeeding in his goal would result in a different kind of exile – that from his family and friends. Madeline appears at first glance to be well adjusted, an inspirational influence on Ernest. She speaks of having escaped to Vanuatu to do what she wanted, although does not see this as a form of self-exile – perhaps because she did not actually experience it, but imagined it instead. She does not speak of the daughter from whom she is estranged, and who Ernest becomes aware of only after her death. Tiff is the classic expatriate, embracing London and adopting a brave mask, while struggling underneath to cope with the isolation she is experiencing. She too confuses the idea of escape from a ‘small, restrictive’ New Zealand, with her new life in a large impersonal metropolis. She reminds herself that she is enjoying herself, has ‘unlimited options’ and ‘so much to do’, yet craves her lost support network.

Closely bound to this is the related theme of freedom. Each character is trapped in their own way, and freedom represents something different for each. Tiff has ‘escaped’ to London from New Zealand and now hankers for home without openly acknowledging it. She remains ‘addicted’ to Oddfellows as a quick fix, her way of ‘having a taste’ of New Zealand without leaving London – a Proustian sensory connection to her country of birth, asserting her loyalty without actually having to return, as to leave would be to admit that her ‘escape’ to London was an empty pursuit. For Ernest, it is undefined. All he is aware of is that he is trapped; he lacks the ability to reason his way out, and this feeling stifles his ability to think and reason. He is in effect imprisoned by his inarticulacy. Likewise, Amanda is trapped in a stifling marriage, unable – or unwilling – to leave the security she feels it provides. For Ernest and Amanda’s parents, their freedom is ironic; they choose to live abroad to be free of the foreigners in London. Meanwhile, Violet is stuck in a profession that, despite her claims to enjoy it, does not fulfil her. Madeline is trapped in an aging body, unable to turn back her life and do the things she always wishes she had done, now living in her imagination

or attempting to live vicariously through others. All are ensnared by big city life in one way or another, by their own behaviours and the expectations of what it means to be a citizen of the metropolis – a pawn in the game of success.

Alain de Botton criticises contemporary ideals of success leading to society viewing people as purely their own self-creation. Responsibility is total. De Botton in a talk on Ted.com¹⁴, echoes his previous book, *Status Anxiety*, in suggesting that this perception leaves no room for accidents – ‘the shit that happens’ – of either a positive or negative nature. We are self-made, whether we are successful entrepreneurs or part-time checkout operators. He contrasts the current attitude to the seventeenth century, when those at on the lowest level of the class structure were labelled ‘unfortunates’. Today those who are unable to attain the expected level of success are ‘losers’. De Botton suggests that this poses potentially greater levels of harm for one’s self esteem than if some events could instead be written off as unlucky twists of fate. In support of this is the proliferation of self-help books, which has created a society where there is no excuse for failure. Characters in *The Answers* are not immune to this, particularly Amanda. “His sister’s bookshelf ached under innumerable such books”. Tiff is the only one who really wishes Ernest to be successful and a valid member of society, yet is too overworked and isolated herself to be in a real position to make a difference to him.

De Botton’s position relates to the authorial intention I had for the novel, in that I aimed to create the story of ‘a pure soul in a corrupted (commercial) city’. While the novel as it now stands bears less resemblance to my original intention, there are still echoes of this in the text. This is a natural progression for the novel, with Krook distinguishing authorial intention from two other kinds, enacted and psychological intentions. She notes that ‘though the three might sometimes connect, they are commonly different.’¹⁵ Therefore, despite my original intentions, London has become more of an insidious character than a dramatic setting. Understandably, according to Nicholl, who writes, “modern London (is) a setting less riveting for inhabitants than that (which) impressed previous writers who set their work in the city.”¹⁶ The metropolis is

¹⁴ http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/alain_de_botton_a_kinder_gentler_philosophy_of_success.html

¹⁵ Krook, Dorothea. (1974.) *Intentions and intending: The problem of intention*. In *The Theory of the Novel: New essays*. Halperin, John (ed). Oxford University Press, Toronto, p 355

¹⁶ Nicholl, Lawrence (2005) *Facticity: the novels of James Kelman*. In *The Contemporary British Novel since 1960*. Eds: Acheson, James and Ross, Sarah C. E. Edinburgh University Press, Great Britain, p.

increasingly seen less as a place to find yourself, than as a place to supersede others in the battleground of commerce.

Material wealth and the related ability to purchase goods is only one definition of success, but one that is challenged most obviously by the novel. As a marketing copywriter in London, I spent my working days encouraging consumers to purchase a variety of consumer goods, including travel, a product that is unnecessary to survival and, moreover, damaging to the planet. However, in *The Answers* several of the characters exhibit a clear anti-consumerist bent. For example, Amanda defines herself by comparing what others have and she has not, coveting Tiff's Volkswagen Polo and envying others' material possessions. She is aware of brands and their cost, identifying Violet's bag as expensive, and spends her time looking back, or looking forward, not existing in the present – always regretting what has happened or worrying about what will come. Violet too, uses consumption as a means to validate her work (although she does state this to begin with, but when questioned is more forthcoming about her aspirations). Madeline appears to be without any of these concerns, speaking scornfully of 'Somebodies,' yet her family claim, and she does not deny, that she lived a very materialistic existence in a professional capacity for most of her life. Her stories of living in Vanuatu appear to be nothing but a fabrication to cover the fact that she has lived her life in self-denial. Ernest seems to be the antithesis of these material desires, proud of existing with nothing- indeed, comfortable with fewer possessions, "touching the earth lightly." He is at first bereft of any ambition, a drifter, almost not even worthy of being a protagonist, and seeks a simplistic escape – a fantasy that seems ludicrous, a projected utopia in opposition to London's dystopia . Yet ultimately the escapes that everyone else seeks become harder to attain. In the end, Ernest is the only one who gets his goal, though it comes at a price.

Form and Style

I chose to use the third person limited omniscient point of view, otherwise known as free indirect style¹⁷ for the characteristics of it allowing 'omniscience and partiality at once.'¹⁸ Writing from this point of view also allowed me to occasionally write in the

¹⁷ Wood, James. (2008) *How Fiction Works*. p.10.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.11

second person, such as someone might do naturally now and again. For instance, when Ernest says ‘up the stupid angular steps that made you feel drunk at any time of day’. A particularly challenging aspect was to keep this narrative style consistent – true to Ernest’s character – and there are some consistency issues within the manuscript. However, *The Answers* is a first draft, so issues of style will take further drafts to resolve. Smiley states ‘the more that one writes, the more it is possible to refine one’s own style.’¹⁹ And further, ‘it may take draft after draft to achieve a perfectly natural style.’²⁰ Therefore I do not claim that I have resolved this issue, but instead, it is an aspect of the existing manuscript that I will address in future drafts.

A further challenge was in the ethnographic distribution of the characters. Ernest is contrasted against a number of other characters who typify a cross-section of English subcultures, yet main characters are mostly from a similar, narrow, background: either working-class or middle-class with liberal leanings. In addition, despite London’s diverse ethnic landscape, main characters are either white or mixed race. Minority characters do appear but do not have major roles. I chose to do this primarily due to the observations I made while living in London. Though London is perceived to be a melting pot of people from many countries and backgrounds, the old class stratifications remain, and in general racial groups do not commonly mix outside work and educational groups, the exception being in the more creative professions. Whether Bengalis, Somalis, Antipodeans or Western Europeans other than British, most gravitate more easily to those from their own or neighbouring countries. There is also a wide mistrust of immigrants, particularly among the working class, as evidenced by the recent rise of the British National Party in typically working class parts of London.²¹

My remoteness from London in writing about it was additionally a problem, especially as I had been based close to the centre of the city, in the inner South-East. Though in one sense distance makes it easier to engage the imagination, it has been difficult to evoke the atmosphere of a wintry London while writing in a warm climate with the sounds of cicadas and tuis instead of sirens, football songs and crows.

¹⁹ Smiley, Jane (2005). *13 ways of looking at the novel*. Knopf, New York, p. 132.

²⁰ *ibid.* p 135

²¹ In the 2006 local elections, the BNP more than doubled its number of councillors, increasing the number to 49. The biggest gain was in Barking and Dagenham where the BNP won 11 of the 13 seats it contested, gaining 17% of the vote. More information can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_National_Party

Finally, a further difficulty that arose as the manuscript draft neared entirety was the complexity of the plot; various subplots remain incomplete. Daldry, echoing D.H Lawrence, suggests that there are two functions of the novel: ‘to represent human experience directly... and to structure that experience.’²² He notes that the two are in opposition, due to the ‘threat that narrative holds out to fiction of forcible control.’²³ Daldry goes on to write that a fictive voice “must abstain from the search for unity.”²⁴ In regards to *The Answers*, the fictional ideas threaten to be too much for the narrative to structure. The most significant two sub-plots are: (1) Ernest’s flashbacks (or flash-forwards) when he attempts suicide at the novel’s outset, which are relevant to his condition, and were intended as glimpses of triggers to memories he regains that provide some insight into his state of mind and (2); Ernest’s reading of *In Search of Lost Time* links with the previous event, but is not sufficiently meshed with the main plot. There is also potential to work in the possible repercussions of Ernest’s head injury from the accident – which can in itself provide delusions, and loss of episodic memory. These will take more analysis and work to resolve in a successive draft, and is why I have chosen to submit this thesis without the final seven chapters, which require more reworking to accommodate the subplots. My point here is simply that a year, while seeming a considerable length of time at the outset, has proved not enough time to do justice to the novel I aim to write.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Answers* is positioned as a contemporary Bildungsroman-type text, roughly using the Bildungsroman framework but subverting it in denial of the neat and tidy ending common to the genre. While not overtly political, the novel’s sub-text does raise issues such as the value placed on material success, the place of family, the notion of individuality, and the relationship between truth and memory. The novel is a product of various influences, yet I recognise that my expatriate experience has been a key formative – inescapable even – aspect of its production. As one author writes “Although every novel is not an autobiography, autobiographies and fiction are both acts of

²² Daldry, Graham, (1987.) *Charles Dickens and the Form of the Novel*. Croom Helm, London.p.12

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.* p.74

imagination behind which can be traced the residue of consciousness and unconscious choices whose integration forms a personality.”²⁵

²⁵ Tracey, Laura. (1988.) *Catching the Drift: Authority, Gender and Narrative Strategy in Fiction*. Rutgers University Press, New Jersey.

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The Answers (working title)

By S.M. Wills

Chapter One:

It followed on the heels of the news at ten. A few seemingly innocuous words from a lean, young man in a grey suit. Thirtyish, a fashionable graze of stubble on his chin. 'Expect a high of nine degrees, and low of five. Consistent drizzle all day, I'm afraid, with heavy cloud. And a light wind from the nor-east – it'll feel fresh, so wrap up,' he said. A brief tight-lipped smile to cushion the bad news, a slow blink, an incline of the finely-chiselled head.

Ernest watched him from outside a mansion block on the South Bank, feeling the words like a slow-spreading bruise. Stopped in passing next to the window of an apartment just below street level. It had no curtains, just an old blue towel hung up to block out the night – with only partial success. At the bottom, a mishmash of boxes was visible beneath the sill. A small gap on the left allowed a view of the television screen – which must have been blaring inside, for Ernest could hear it easily, even through the double-glazing. He had watched half the news and most of the weather before someone saw him, came and raised the sash. Yelled out 'You! Why outside my house? Go now! Or I call police!' Police said as two words – Po Leece. A foreign accent. Hungarian, or maybe Polish.

He'd seen enough by then, at any rate. It was a forecast for a particular sort of non-day; the type that sits on London like a vast piece of sodden gauze. A sullen day with a hangdog expression, one that comes in listlessly just before eight AM, lies about glumly until around four in the afternoon, making no time for even a polite *how d'you do*, then trudges off into night, leaving a great dirty smudge of foul moods in its wake. Weather that were it a friend, you'd give it a shake. Tell it to spark up a bit, look lively. Come back when it's sorted itself out.

A day most anyone would rather avoid.

Especially Ernest Shaw, 29, unemployed, technically homeless, bereft of money, romance and umbrellas. For him, it was the last of many reasons to get out. The cheerless forecast was like an omen – an enormous exit sign. If he were one to believe in omens, that is.

Why had he waited so long, anyway? The grey, sighing city with its mangy pigeons and arrogant statues. Innumerable pieces of rubbish scuttling along the footpath, into corners, down alleys, tickling at the buildings. Buildings impervious, long-suffering,

standing staunchly against the traffic fumes. (*We bore the wars, bore industrialisation and we'll bear you too.*) Its citizens: head-down heat-seeking missiles, rattling from home to tube, tube to office, office to sandwich bar, sandwich bar to office again, then office to pub, before a fortified rush home at 7:30pm. And him, existing on the edges, not wealthy enough or brave enough to throw himself into its maw and see where it would take him. Not ballsy, as his eldest brother Robert would say. Not ballsy at all. Although Robert was in prison, so look where his balls had taken him.

Head down, he hurried off towards Waterloo, veering towards the river, taking the long way past the waterfront for what would be the last time. A quick look back to be sure that Angry Hungarian Man wasn't following at his heels.

To his right, across the Thames, the Tower of London sat squat and dour. On his left, City Hall, a blob of a building leaning drunkenly away from the water, as if it were afraid of getting wet. Past H.M.S. Belfast dozing in her dock, old granny destroyer with steel grey skirts. Then along to London Bridge, up the stupid angular steps that made you feel drunk at any time of day. Around a thin puddle of vomit, and onto the bridge itself. Across and over the road, down the steps on the other side. There was an alternative, faster route under the bridge but it involved walking through a tunnel.

On his left now; Southwark, his favourite of the London cathedrals. Less decorative than Westminster. More humble than St Paul's. Though all three sent his hairs standing to attention. The vast spaces like old libraries. Their high windows, echoed voices. Bone-numbingly cold, every one. His Nan had been a dutiful Catholic, towing her grandchildren off to church whenever she had them to stay. He still couldn't see a church without thinking of her.

Back then, it was the scale that impressed him most. Along with the strange smell of mould, of decay. An idea in his over-imaginative head that it was the souls of dead people, gathered in the churches beneath the floors and in the walls, along with the bishops, donors and statesmen who were buried there. That, he'd surmised, was what the old, stale smell was. All those ancient souls piling up under the stones, and seeping out over the centuries as fine, mouldy dust. These days, of course, he knew that couldn't be true. But it was not enough to coax him back inside. Not unless forced. So from the age of 12, he admired them from the outside only; their vertigo-inducing spires, great carapaces of stone and brick, black-and-whitened by pigeon-shit and traffic.

Around the corner through Shipman's Lane and back to the river. A Thursday night. People stumbling out of doorways, listing at two-o'clock but gripping pint glasses rigidly upright at twelve. Some singing. And a few young women wearing small skirts and no stockings despite the cold. He looked at their legs. Once they gave him pleasure, legs. But it all seemed rather pointless right now, sneaking a look at legs – nice legs he would have once thought, not too much calf and just enough thigh – but these days it was like looking at paint samples. All much of a muchness. He went through the motions, ran his eyes from Achilles tendon to quadriceps, but his heart wasn't in it. Hadn't been for a while.

One woman was sitting on the cobblestones, legs splayed awkwardly, making a sort of snorting, hiccupping sound. Laughter? A cigarette in one hand while her friend tugged ineffectually at the other. 'Come *on* Emily.'

A little further on, a pigeon sat huddled on a high wall, a string tied around the end of one wing. Blinking rapidly, almost with regularity, head pecked clean of feathers, it reminded him of his father. A regular discussion they used to have. 'Why do so many pigeons have string round them, Dad? (*Sometimes people do it.*) But why, who? (*I don't know, Ernest.*) How do they catch them? Do they lure them with food? Part of a sandwich? If I caught a pigeon, do you think I could train it to take messages for me?'

London pigeons would eat anything, his father said. Swore that it was a city thing. That in rural France the birds were much more fussy. Would not stoop to eating human vomit like London pigeons, but only the best stale baguette, or day-old ham and cheese croissant. His father, the Francophile, unusual for a grocer. He'd left Ernest's mother a few years before; packed up and gone to Toulouse with a French cleaning lady several years older than him, his own crusty round *bâtard*. No one in the family had heard from him since.

Ernest slowed just past the pigeon. Felt the cool cobblestones nudging through his thin soles. Stopped. Turned back. He leaned over, touched the cold stone of the wall; inched his hand along towards the bird. 'Coo-roo', he said softly. Pigeon talk. Whatever. Who cared if anyone heard him, saw him. Let them think he was an idiot. Who cared what they thought of him now. 'Stay there. I'm going to remove your string so you can fly away.'

The pigeon blinked. Clacked its beak and shuffled away, eyeballing him with unease.

He lunged.

It half leapt, half fell, off the other side of the wall, flapping uselessly into a beer garden. He heard a squawk – human – then shouting. ‘Fucking pigeon immabeer!’

Wasn’t supposed to happen. Damn pigeon. Only trying to help. Ernest poked his head over the wall. Ginger-blond hair almost the same colour as the blocks of stone. ‘Sorry, I was trying to...help it. Untie the string. The string – around its wing’ He felt like some bad poet.

‘Mate.’ Said with teeth showing, hands splayed. Not one of those happy drunks then. ‘It’s a fucking *pigeon*!’

Confrontation was not Ernest’s scene. He’d never been able to grasp the dance of argument, the fluid ordering of thoughts and actions to persuade the other person of his point of view. But now, this moment among so many others, when he was trying to do something to help, make things better, soften the city on one imperceptible edge – this small thing, such a small thing.

Energy welled in him. *One one-thousand, two-one thousand*. He didn’t, couldn’t hold it back. Jaw muscles turned to anodised steel, words and thoughts eliminated. He reached for the first thing to hand – an empty plastic water bottle on the ground – and threw it.

Hit the man directly in the centre of his forehead.

Both stopped for the briefest of moments. Identical expressions - Ernest with the slightly wider eyes. In his shock, registering a faint glow of pleasure, which edged the anger out. He’d never been one for sports. Not a time to hang around and celebrate it though. ‘Bullseye!’ he yelled, and took off. Running again. Not looking back this time. But hoping that the pigeon had managed to find a quiet spot under some tables where it could unpick the string using its beak. Trying not to think of what the rats would do to a ground-bound pigeon.

Around the corner he slowed to take in the bulk of the Tate Modern, its heavy industrial bottom topped with an angular luminous hat. Strangely quiet at night, without the groups swirling about outside and on the balcony high above. A few minutes to sit, catch his breath, take a mental snapshot.

Nan's old building.

The council flats overlooking the river where his grandmother had lived were now desirable apartments. Fought for hungrily whenever a rare one that had passed into private ownership came up for sale. For the rest, he had heard that there were those in the council who could arrange for you to have one, for the right amount of money. But who in need of a council flat had the money for bribes?

And just round the corner, the undercroft of the National Theatre. Not strictly a sight to tick off, but it was a highlight, deserved its own place on the map for the wheeling, scraping, jumping that echoed off the concrete. No BMX riders and skateboarders at this late hour, just the bright graffiti. Urban art.

He strode on faster now, though his arms barely left his side. His stiff gait drawing a few looks from people spilling out of the building exits, flushed with culture and plastic-cupped wine. Up the steps, down the steps, under the bridge and round the back, avoiding the creepy tunnel with the holograms. To the station. Last on the list. Home for the night, in a spot a few streets over, in the doorway of a bookshop along Lower Marsh. He had slept there four nights, after he was evicted from his flat. No money for the rent after his job finished. 'Sorry mate. Orders have dried up. No more packing work until we get more business.'

- His coat from the locker, draped over his arm.

- A cup of milky coffee from the machine, extra sugar.

- One of the firm's complimentary calendars for next year, featuring images of various British beaches, all the skies photo-shopped the same electric blue.

- His week's pay, plus thirty pounds extra, in an envelope in cash.

He used the calendar pages to line the doorway, help keep his clothes clean. Picked them up again each morning, stacked them neatly, put them in his bag next to the blanket. He didn't want to look homeless, even though, technically, he was. Scrunched in his pocket was the calendar's curly metal binding, just in case he needed it. To tie something maybe, or for a weapon against muggers, although not sure what he'd do with it - flick them with it across the face; twirl it into their hair and twist it into knots perhaps. He didn't think he could bring himself to put it round their neck, even if he was desperate.

Ernest laid the pages down methodically, overlapping each by precisely two centimetres. Boscombe Beach, near Bournemouth, for under his head. He would re-do them several times during the night, each time he woke moving them back into their rightful positions from the haphazard mess they slid to while he slept. Restoring some kind of order to his clapped-out life. Tomorrow at least, it would be over. Tomorrow he would collect up the pages for the last time and put them in the recycling bin before setting off.

He spoke with his cousin several years ago. Ovarian cancer eating her from the inside out. ‘Do you think about death?’ he’d asked. ‘Do you wonder what it will be like? Are you worried?’

‘Not at all’, she’d said. ‘I think about life. What I’ll miss. My family sometimes. I’m a bit sad I won’t get to see my nephews grow up. But mostly it’s the stuff you wouldn’t expect. The everyday stuff. Like when I see a trailer for a good film that won’t come out till the end of the year, and I think, *I’m going to miss seeing that. I won’t get to see it and it looks really good.* It’s that, that makes me annoyed. Thinking I’m going to miss that film, miss that tree coming into flower, and miss seeing what the new building down the road’s going to look like. Even though I saw the tree flower last year, and I know the building will probably look like most of the other ones on the high street – grey and brown and glass. And I’ve seen other great films, and heaps of excellent trailers that turned out to be rubbish movies, and this one might be great, or could be shit, but I’ll never know – I’ll never get the chance to decide. To stay till the end, or walk out in the middle. I won’t get the choice.’

Then, Ernest had thought it a strange outlook. To be bothered by the little stuff, the mundane things that changed and moved on and went away. Didn’t figure in the larger scheme. Films for God’s sake. But perhaps it was about choice, after all. He, who was about to choose death, both the time and method of it, did not feel annoyed about the prospect of missing parts of life. If anything, he felt relief. Relief that he had decided to leave London, relinquish the battle to stay afloat and face more grey days, grey people. Sort of a settled, heavy feeling, that dragged his limbs down, and yet, at the same time, pushed his heart up somewhere round his throat, made him short of breath, like his lungs and heart were moshing, jostling all a-quiver, trying to get out.

He dreamt of giant rats, vast crowds of them upright as people, their front legs gesticulating madly as they walked and talked on mobile phones. He tried to join the throng, but around his leg was tied a heavy pink rope, weighing him down and, occasionally, tripping him up. Meanwhile the rats whizzed past him on individual tracks, into office blocks, department stores. Noses turning up at him. Whiskers curled like tiny metal bindings. Eventually he was left alone to the sound of them squeaking to each other in the buildings. And woke to the squealing wheels of a vegetable cart being dragged into its allocated place just opposite by an energetic market vendor.

His watch said 6:55am. Still dark – it wouldn't be light for another hour yet. The sky faintly moving with clouds, a few darker patches connecting him to outer space. In one, a thin fingernail clipping of the moon showed briefly, then the clouds hurried it away out of sight.

His whole body ached; his neck was stiff; his right side felt bruised by the cold ground. Again, a poor night's sleep, but it wasn't as if he needed the Zs where he was going. He shuffled the calendar together; packed his checked orange blanket into his bag. Ran a hand through his morning hair, loose curls – *fucking girls' hair, that's what it was* – and was on his way.

At the corner of the street he stopped at a recycling bin to dump the calendar. St Ives the last beach to take the leap onto the pile. Then dropped by a lump of clothing and paper under the bridge. Faint notes of alcohol and urine, hardly discernable breaths – but they were there. He had met him four days ago. Martin? Mark? Ernest had not deciphered his name, muddled as it was by whiskey, or perhaps a swollen tongue getting in the way of speech. One who had long ago taken the slippery slide from novice rough sleeper to irreparable homeless. Devolved back to hunting and gathering, near the bottom of the pecking order. Just above urban foxes.

The lump was out cold. Ernest took his blanket from his bag, left it folded on top. Martin/Mark could use it, sell it, swap it for beer – it was all the same to him, as long as it didn't go to waste. Better that someone got use out of it.

Left in the bag was a carnet of bus tickets. Two left, though he only needed one. Also, his wallet. In it a Southwark library card, £3.72 in small coins, a couple of coffee receipts. And at the bag's very bottom, the last of the toiletries from a lucky discovery. A disposable razor and toothbrush, two small tubes of moisturiser, a small soap. He had

found them behind a hotel, spilled out of a bin, most likely. The moisturiser not for him, but for the few women he had seen on the street, some not much older than girls. Though of the ones to whom he'd offered the gift, most had rejected it, thinking that he was offering it to get sex, a blow-job, something else. They had yelled at him, screamed to bring the streets to a stop. When, for him, it was only about helping, not seeing things go to waste; his Nan's transmuted Catholic guilt. On those occasions, he'd ended up throwing the tube of cream at them, then rushing off before the police could come, accuse him of lechery. Yesterday he had been too slow, was roughly handcuffed by a wiry policeman, who pushed him to the ground and hauled him off to Bermondsey police station. They kept him for the afternoon and into early evening, just long enough to discover the woman would not come in, give evidence, could not remember him anyway. Then released him late, for him to walk along the river, linger in windows and watch the news.

He left 52 pence beside the blanket, raised his hand to the lump in recognition, stood a while. Thinking of other goodbyes he should probably have said. His father. Impossible. Somewhere in Toulouse with the *batârd*. His mother. In the south of Spain with his Aunt Becky, running a pool-cleaning business. Elder siblings, comfortably insulated in their own lives on the fringes of London. Reece in Surrey. Amanda in Finsbury Park. Then Robert in Holloway prison. And Louisa, sixteen years in Walthamstow cemetery, next to his Nan.

80 minutes till his train. A creeping lightness in the sky to the east. But still plenty of time to clean himself up and wash off the night. He paced the 300 metres to Waterloo and into one of the big chain cafes, gently humming with the half-awake.

Ernest had been coming here the last few mornings. If you looked clean and tidy, and had the money for a coffee, you could use the bathroom to have a wash and a shave. Not that they encouraged it. Or knew. He always took particular care to clean up afterwards. Sometimes took a little too long. He spent his last £3.20 on a latte and took a table in the middle. Eight customers besides him. A board on the wall proclaimed *Today's blend: Ethiopian fair trade*. The last *i* absent.

It was his favourite part of the day, this half hour without interaction or expectation. Just sitting and drinking and watching and enjoying being alone. Alone, yet belonging, in this fragmented group of people, some going to work, a few coming home

from work and the odd one, like him, in-between work, you could say. It was a kind of empty time: a pause to add fuel, a brief plateau to gather themselves before beginning the day. Camaraderie in torpor.

Opposite him was a middle-aged man in a high visibility jacket. Some kind of maintenance crewman – maybe a tube worker? Near the window at separate tables, two young men both reading the Financial Times. And at the table next to him, a couple around his own age talking in loud whispers. They made him uncomfortable, like he was watching a show we wasn't intended to see. He drained his cup and made for the bathroom.

In the toilet, he swapped his underpants for the cleanish pair in his bag, washed here in the basin yesterday. The damp cotton clinging to his skin like cold plastic film. Then, at the sink, he rinsed off the echoes of his dream, the feel of his unforgiving sleeping-place. Combed his hair with wet fingers and noticed that it needed a cut. He brushed his teeth facing away from the mirror so he could not see the foam. Shaved under the still-running tap. In the order he always did it. Now just one thing to do before he left the café.

'Excuse me. I just wanted to let you know that Ethiopian is missing an I.' The words dropped out of his mouth like rough stones, lay heavily on the counter.

'Sorry?'

'On the board. You've left the I out of Ethiopian. Before the A. After the P.'

'Oh. Right'. The girl at the counter – early twenties, scraped-back pony-tailed hair – glanced at the board, wrinkled her forehead and looked at him from under her eyebrows. Taking in everything from his hair down to his shoes, and back up to his face again. 'Thanks.' She did not move towards the board.

'Aren't you going to fix it?'

'Well, not right now, obviously. I'm busy.'

Ernest looked around at the eight other people in the café, sitting quietly except for the couple, who had now moved on to discuss groceries. He looked back at her.

'Just because there aren't many customers doesn't mean I'm not busy.' She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and put her hand on the counter in a proprietary way.

He would not get angry, he would not get angry. Not today. He could feel her eyes on him as he turned and walked out.

7:40am. Time to catch the bus to the station, one of several on the line between London Bridge and East Croydon. Suburbs filled with Victorian terraces – sometimes even semis – divided into flats; the leafy southern suburbs, where trains stopped less regularly than the inhabitants liked, but then they also paid less for their houses. Slow trains only, the dot-to-dot, heavily punctuated journeys that stop-start-stop-start in and out of London. And the express routes did not stop at all there. Just went through. Fast.

It was a short walk to the bus stop, then a fifteen-minute ride to the station. He knew it well, had taken the same ride many times.

But things were suddenly less straightforward. Above him the predicted grim day was far from making an appearance. A high wind had swept most of the clouds away, leaving the sky a pale apologetic sort of blue. Not at all what he had counted on. At this point, he was supposed to be seeing a struggling winter sunrise being capably restrained by some thick burly clouds. So he could think, *that's me, that's life. And today I will end it. On this fittingly grey note.* Instead, there was this blueness. Frail and rather pitiful, but there. His supposed last straw had turned out to be not a straw at all, but more like a lively puff of helium, a spiteful mischievous trick of fate.

Despite it, a plan was a plan. And Ernest had always been one to follow the agreed route, even if the route-master was only himself. Anyway, there would still be dark days to come. This day could even turn ugly; fulfil the promises of its forecast. Turn on its axis and swing in the space of an hour, revolving from gold to gloom. Yes. That could definitely happen. Well, probably.

He walked slowly to the stop, his resolve weakened, but still intact. But worry dogging his step, wrapping itself firmly around his middle as the bus arrived, its tentacles reaching up his neck to his head. Gripping him tightly as he boarded, easing into his pores as he made his way down the bus to the back, then starting to nibble and gnaw at him from the inside out.

He rode the bus for what seemed like a hour, although it was only fourteen minutes according to his watch. His heart feeling faint and ineffectual in his large frame. Every time the bus stopped for passengers, Ernest bent his knees allowing his body to

sink down so he could check the sky. Every time the same blue. Sickly, milky, elderly blue. But still blue. And still there when he got off.

There was nothing to do but go through with it anyway. He didn't believe in omens. Not good ones, anyway. There were some things worth taking notice of. Others that when you noticed them they just got in the way. And today the only thing left on his list was death. To do. Or to undo. There was no room for anything else.

Outside the station an old woman sat on a collapsible stool, selling the Big Issue. 'Nice day for it, love!' A shock went through him. Had she read his mind? But no, she meant getting out and about. Didn't she? He fished out the last of the moisturisers – proffered them in his left hand. She laughed at him, a huge wide grin studded with surprisingly perfect teeth. 'Think I want that stuff at my age, love – nah, keep it.' Waved him off.

His Nan had a cat named after this station. Brockley, the last in a long line of distinguished station-moniker cats: Angel (aka Izzy), Wandsworth, West Ham, Victoria, Bermondsey and Willesden Green (named for the colour of his eyes – although eventually he'd gone blind and they'd turned a cloudy blue). Ernest had only known the last two, had seen photos of the rest. But it was not why he'd made this his chosen spot. It was more to do with the number of people here at this particular hour. Part of the plan. As much as you can plan throwing yourself in front of the fast train from London Bridge to Gatwick, which is supposed to come through at 8:45, but on his watch has been known to come through anywhere from 8:45 to 9:52. Not that he was a *trainspotter*. Just appreciated watching them, seeing what time they came through some days, that was all. Again, his Nan had introduced him to it. She would take him out after church to her chosen station, timetable in one hand and bag in the other, stocked with a thermos of tea and some sandwiches, usually filled with some kind of cold vegetable, meat – if he was lucky it would be corned beef – and pickle. There was always pickle. Ernest would carry the binoculars, notepad and pen.

Today he walked to the end of the platform, stationed himself there well away from other people. Waited. Tried not to look at the sky. In front of him was a billboard advertising the Philosophy Foundation. '*You too can study Philosophy. £120 for 6 weeks. Every second Tuesday, Bayswater Road.*' Bowed his head to the ground, blocking Philosophy out. Concentrated on his toes. His tired trainers. The lace that was

beginning to come undone. Ernest waved his foot to see if it was secure. It wasn't, and disengaged itself from the rest of the knot, lying on the platform like a cotton tapeworm. He fixed it.

8:45 came. 8:46. 8:47. 8:48. There was no use looking at the board. His train was not mentioned on it. All he wanted to hear was *'Stand well back from the platform. The next train is not stopping at this station.'* But it didn't come. And didn't come.

There were announcements for other trains. *The 8:55 from London Bridge to Brighton is delayed by ten minutes due to leaves on the track.* And the rest.

By 9:05, he was more worried about the lateness of the train than the colour of the sky. What if he had missed it? What if it had come through early? What if his watch was late? But no. His watch was the same as the station clock. They couldn't both be wrong – could they?

Fifteen minutes later he heard the track start singing a warning. He'd moved to a bench to rest his legs, meditate a bit to calm his mind, re-tie his shoelaces – again – in preparation. A little fine-tuning. Halfway through the laces of his left trainer, he heard the announcement. For the *other* platform. Ernest whipped round, lurched across like some sort of rubber man, and half tripped, half leapt in front of the train.

Then everything went white. And grey. And finally, a painful, throbbing red.

A pink plastic raincoat hanging on the back of a door, shining with tiny droplets

A hairy dog leaping up on him, leaving muddy pawprints on a light pair of trousers

The smell of some tropical flower. Sweet, heavy, a smell with substance, not a perfume he knew. A backdrop of yellow.

A letter, written on both horizontally and vertically, so the writing could hardly be read

The taste of Madeira cake; crumbs on a white tablecloth, marked with pen

Clumps of auburn hair on a pillow

He recognised not one.

Chapter Two.

Lucky the train wasn't going faster, they told him. Or it might have killed you. Never thought we'd see the day when leaves on the track would actually be useful, they said,

but it worked for you. Someone was looking out for you, all right. Each one wielding the same exclamations like accidental jousting sticks as they passed the bed. Unaware that every bare-skinned comment battered him a little more. No idea that Ernest would have preferred to be unlucky.

He didn't tell them the truth at first. Just sat almost-mutely in the hard hospital bed trying to come to terms with it himself. Feeling strangely and terribly afraid of this unforeseen result: all his body parts present and correct, a small headache, nothing more. Asking now and again, 'What time is it?' because they had removed his watch.

12:50pm. 1:20pm. 1:30pm. Times too precise to be true. He was sure they were rounding up.

At 1:50pm – actually, 1:48pm – they moved him to a bed where he could see the clock for himself. Putting him at one end of the long open ward. Walls the colour of cooked cabbage; ceiling a glossy off-white; easy-wipe surfaces as far as he could see. Perhaps 10 other men were laid out in the room. It was hard to tell the exact number – a medley of curtains blocked the way. His curtains had been pulled aside, the better for him to see the clock and, probably, for them to see him.

Nurses buzzed around efficiently, issuing short, firm smiles, asking him if he wanted water, occasionally checking his eyes and reactions. *How many fingers? Do you know what day it is today?* Seeming like white ants in their clean uniforms, bent on duty for a higher purpose. Though Ernest knew that for some it was all an act. He'd once flatted with two nurses – one from Southampton, the other an Australian from Geelong – who seemed to party more often than they worked.

One night when sleep evaded him, as it often did, he went to sit in the kitchen for a while, away from the unbearable ticking in the walls of his room. He was listening to the radio, hands wrapped around a mug of tea, when they had come home hyperactive, smelling of alcohol, sweat and cigarettes. It was early on, before they'd told him that he had to move out, that they had a friend arriving from overseas who needed his room.

He had sipped his drink, stared into the mug. They poured themselves some red wine – there was always some in the house – and lined up two neat rows of cocaine on the table next to him, not offering, as if they knew he would refuse, and talked him dizzy in ten long minutes.

'Oh my god, can you believe we have to work in three hours!'

‘I know!’ Screaming and laughter.

Ernest, puzzled. Fascinated. ‘Will you go to sleep?’

‘Probably not – maybe for an hour or two. But I can cope! Done it before! I’ve got a system!’ Everything an exclamation, if she were on a West End stage, rather than in a Mile End kitchen with yellowed and scratched Formica benchtops. Eyes shining, a long way from sleep.

‘The secret’s in the saline.’

‘Yeah, it’s the saline *solution*!’ They laughed like animals.

‘What happens with the saline?’ Ernest hesitant, wanting the answer, but afraid it would come by a circuitous route.

‘Well!’ An expansive wave of the arms, a shifting in her chair, as if she was getting ready to spring up onto the tabletop. ‘Saline re-hydrates you, right? So when we get to work, we pop ourselves on an IV drip for a while. 20 minutes will do it. And Robert’s your father’s brother. Hangover hung out to dry. Of course you’re still tired, but there’s coffee and other stuff to help that.’

‘A quick dose of pure oxygen.’

‘Yeah, that’s the business. Good old O2.’

Ernest had rarely been hung over, did not particularly enjoy drinking. There was the first pleasurable burst of freed-up speech, the disappearance of tension in his neck and back, but then he would say things – do things – that he couldn’t control and often couldn’t remember. It was as if part of his life had been removed from him, thrust into a washing machine with something dark, then returned to him stained, somehow smaller and unrecognisable as his.

As he had watched the nurses flick back to talking about their night, Ernest felt himself standing on the edge of a movie set, a groupie without being a fan. He returned to bed, his ears ringing as if he had been at the club himself.

He was on a drip now, the evil needle biting into the back of his hand, strapped on with tape. The bag almost empty, its contents inside him diluting his blood. Ernest waved over a friendly-looking nurse – one of the calmer, less vigorous ones. Short, round, with feathered blonde hair. A slight overbite above a dimpled chin.

‘Excuse me. Can you take this off? I don’t like needles. Actually, can I go now? I’d like to leave.’ He reached for the needle himself, but the nurse put her hand on his

arm, held it firmly against the rough sheet. The pressure stretching some of his arm hairs taut.

‘Now Mr Shaw. Ernest. You have a grade four concussion. That’s serious. And there are a few other things we’d like to keep an eye on, too.’ She listed Concussion’s fellow gang members: Shock, Anaemia and Dehydration. She did not mention Suicidal Intent.

He felt the curtains looming over him, the oxygen leaving the air. He suddenly regretted calling her over; wished the attention could be rewound, that she would apply her interest to somebody else. Less of the thorough concern. Back to the quick pit stop.

‘I meant to do it, you know. I wanted to get hit. I wanted to die.’ Awkward, odd-shaped words that tore as they came out.

She blinked slowly, breathed in, seemed to hold her breath a little before the reply. ‘Ernest. A grade four concussion is severe. We don’t expect you to remember everything about the incident.’ One of those smiles reserved for the very young, very old, or very stupid. ‘Your brain will take some time to recover. Maybe a month or more. You can’t trust your memory at the moment, especially about today. It’s only natural that you’re confused.’

He insisted.

‘I’ll get the doctor to come and have a word.’

It was the Indian-looking doctor with the short, shiny bob who came over eventually. The one whose name tag said Dr Wood-Highsmith. She sat down to his left on the green hospital chair, instead of standing like the others. Rested a folder on her knee and shifted herself forward on the seat. The small rip in the vinyl undoubtedly now directly underneath the part of her body that Ernest would not allow himself to imagine while she was there. He shifted his legs; brought skin in contact with the sheet, the physical sensation enough to expel the thought. Then flicked his gaze to her name tag, focused on that instead. And restrained the urge to ask why it was not Dr Highsmith-Wood – to his mind, that sounded better.

‘Ernest. How are you feeling? I hear you have something you want to talk about.’ A voice like a guinea pig, the Es elongated and shrill. A bit out-of-breath sounding, as if she had run to get to him, although she was not sweating or flushed.

He repeated what he told the nurse. The words now carefully rehearsed, rolled around and polished in his mouth, as if that should make them easier to say.

“Well. Is that so.” Dr Wood-Highsmith clasped her hands across the folder in her lap, and gave him her breathy, squeaky version of the morning’s events.

No one had thought it anything other than an accident. A few people on the platform noticed him tying his shoelaces moments before. They assumed he tripped on a rogue lace, and fell by accident into the path of the train. Step. Trip. Crash. It had been so convincing that not one of the twelve witnesses had thought he meant to do it.

Somehow his trip had propelled him a little too far for a direct hit, so instead he had glanced off the front of the train onto the adjacent track. And all it had done was to concuss him rather badly. *Lucky*, they said. A sort of miracle, although Ernest recalled that similar things happened virtually every week. A car sliding into a house, where the child escaped injury from its habit of sleeping with its head under a pillow. A tractor running over a man in a field, who was unhurt, saved by the soft mud beneath taking him in. And the last one, on the news only last night; a Finnish man who had slipped below the ice in a frozen pond, but was rescued and resuscitated half an hour after they had given him up for dead.

In every instance, Death on a tea break, leaning on his scythe, a cuppa in one hand. Watching when he should be working. Picking at his fingernails while life went on.

Ernest repeated himself a third time. ‘I meant to do it.’ His grey eyes focused firmly on her chin, not meeting her persistent gaze. The words falling with the others in a cairn on the bed, while the unsaid hovered near his back teeth. *And your name is back-to-front.*

Now a different response. ‘I see. Hmmm.’ A shift in tone from *hey, you’re alive*, to *here comes the paperwork*. She nodded at him slowly, a precise movement bearing little energy. Then a smile that drew her full lips thin and stretched; a slight roll of her shoulders as she left.

As he watched her move off down the ward, Ernest felt the prickling of a slow realisation. He had told the truth, yet was now worse off. He didn’t want to lie – truth was one of the only things he had, could really hang on to – but somehow he had stepped across a line, interchanged his status, swapped Miracle Man for Loser. Now the glare of it, like a torch shining full into his face. *Can’t even kill yourself successfully.*

In this city of high achievers and do-it-for-yourselfers, there was no place for failure at ordinary things. Working, loving, living. If there was an area you were weak in, there was a book for it. The understanding that if you read the book, you'd be okay.

His sister's bookshelf ached under innumerable such books. Amanda had books about winning, finding friends, making friends and cutting bad friends loose. Finding lovers, keeping lovers, breaking up with bad lovers, pruning them off like gangrenous limbs. Stopping smoking, starting exercising, keeping marriages going when they run out of steam. Books on how to be happy, be rich and be confident. Cures for all kinds of psychological ailments. Like walking into the supermarket, buying red meat to boost the iron in your blood. There was no excuse for failure; the cures were all right there on the shelf. Although none of the books seemed to work well enough to stop her buying more. Amanda said the only book she was missing was *How to Cope With This Fucking Useless Government*.

It was even possible to buy books for accidents. Coping with the death of a loved one. Coping with head injuries, the loss of limbs. Accidents were okay. Even accidentally dying was acceptable, understood. But what about accidentally living? How to cope with that?

There was another thing that bothered him. Besides still existing, that is. Those pictures, feelings, the bits and pieces as he died, or, rather, didn't die. Like memories but without the sense of remembrance. Images from a strange album. Sensations that weren't his, yet felt like they should belong to him.

He unpacked them from his brain and went over them again. *The raincoat. The dog. The flowery fragrance. The letter. The cake.* And lastly, *the hair*. His mind feeling over each one hopefully, poking and worrying them to give their secrets up.

Nothing. Not one leapt clearer into focus. Okay. So all together then, as a group. What were they?

The first option was that they were lost moments – things that he might have experienced and then forgotten. Shavings of time from the few occasions he'd been drunk. Could they be stolen memories whisked away by alcohol, pocketed in a time capsule of his mind, to be opened at a later date? But no. It didn't fit. They floated loose, un-tethered to anyone or anything else, without the tie-dyed feeling of drunken recall.

Onto option two. The thing was, when he got knocked out, initially he thought he must be dying. Had believed no other explanation for it. His life flashing before him and everything. Well, bits of *a* life. Just not one that he remembered. Although it *seemed* to be his. He felt a connection with it – a tender, attached feeling that was yet loose and disembodied. Not real. Certainly not unpleasant. Felt like touching fog, a warm, steamy mist that seemed to disappear now when he thought of it. A bit like the floaters in his eyes that swam in front of him against the stark curtains, but if he tried to look at them directly, they slid off into the darkness at the side.

Glimpses of things that he thought he should remember. How to describe a memory, after all? Impressions. Often pictures. Sometimes words and emotions. And occasionally smells and feelings linked to places. Although smells could not be called up on demand – not really, anyhow. Only revived if you smelt them again. Then they could bring up another memory, or sometimes a chain of them, like one of those never-ending magicians' handkerchiefs. Even now his grasp on the fragrance was gone, though he remembered experiencing it. Tinged with – what was it? – excitement. His real memory of the mystery one was pale in comparison. Reflection compared to real life, but the reflection with extra clarity.

The problem was that not one of them could be connected to any time – any event – in his life. Could it be that he had crossed wires with someone else dying? Someone else who'd thought of Pinky the bull terrier, licking his knee one day after he crashed off his bike. Checking eggs for blemishes, sorting them into grades in the first job he had after he left school. The pleasing ovoid shapes in his hand, cool to the touch, occasionally decorated with chicken bum fluff. Had someone else remembered Melissa from the fish and chip shop handing over a packet of chips (closed, vinegar and extra salt, please), which upon opening revealed a note to him, greasy with chip fat and smelling of cod. Or the day with his Nan feeding the fish in Hyde Park – illegally. Watching a tadpole nibbling at a slowly sinking bread-crust, then a large carp coming up from the depths and swallowing both the bread and the tadpole in one go – almost choking on it, flipping over in the water.

Had someone else died instead of him? It seemed too preposterous. Some sort of God blunder. Universe blunder. Whatever. He hadn't heard of such a thing, but if you were dying, surely with all that drama, souls could get a bit mixed up.

Although the other possibility he had supposed at the time – if you can call it supposed, that sinking into unconsciousness where his thoughts seemed to have no power of their own, dropped in like small skydivers on a wayward breeze – was that he was experiencing the call of the afterlife. Senses of happiness that had so far escaped him. Multicoloured promises luring him on at the point of Almost Death. *Come on, go all the way. You can do it.*

Yet the doctors seemed to think that he hadn't come that close to death at all.

He once asked his mum about heaven, not long after his grandfather died. He was nine, maybe ten. She, a lapsed Catholic, had quite definite ideas. 'Well, there are meadows, that's for sure', she'd said, halfway through an enormous stack of ironing. 'Filled with wildflowers all year round. Everyone's in the prime of their lives, walking through the flowers, chatting. All grudges will be forgotten. It will feel like spring, constantly. Not too warm, not too hot. Sunny, with broad oak trees to read under and picnic and relax. There'll be a library of good books, where the book you want is always available. Everyone will wear the same smart-casual clothing. No one will ever be over or under-dressed.' She stopped in the middle of ironing a pleated skirt and enjoyed this egalitarian image.

To Ernest, it all sounded rather like a shampoo ad or maybe that film Woodstock, without the sex. 'What about the bees?' he asked, in all seriousness. 'Wildflowers mean bees, right?'

His mother put down the iron with a hiss. 'Don't be a smart arse', she said.

They had called her earlier, but she wasn't coming up from the south of Spain. Said her health wasn't the best herself. They broke the news to him as she'd probably said it. Matter-of-factly. He could imagine her saying it. 'Well, that's as it may be, but I can't very well up and leave my home here and hop back over when one of my children needs me. They're all adults now. Tell him I send my love.'

He couldn't really blame her. She had probably seen the weather forecast on BBC World News. The one that was the opposite of the way it had eventually turned out.

Chapter Three.

He was watching a television programme about ancestry when the old lady walked up and sat down on the end of his bed. The remote, which was also the speaker, was held to his ear with his left hand. It was 7:17pm.

‘I wouldn’t bother with that if I were you,’ she said, in a voice scratchy, but still strong. ‘It’s all about dead people. They don’t matter one jot. It’s the live ones you want to be interested in. Dead ones are dull. And the deader, the duller. In my opinion, if you ask, and you look like you won’t ask, but I’ll tell you anyway, people are most interesting at the beginning and the end of their lives.’ Here, she leaned forward as if she was talking to a camera, allowing him to see the blackheads on her nose.

She took the speaker from him gently and turned it off. And continued before he could say a word. If he had even wanted to.

‘You start out interesting, because you’re like a small pool, filled with knowledge but empty of stuff. You actually already know all kinds of things, important things, but not how to speak about them or express yourself. It’s the purest you ever get. Living in the moment, not looking back or forward. Actually, the Japanese have got it figured out. They say that before the age of three, you’re a little god. An Okosama. Child god. Then as you grow older, you become boring. You learn how to do things - too many things – placing too much importance on the wrong ones, and usually, you talk about them too much. You’re a balloon full of your own hot air.’ She poured herself a glass of the water beside his bed, took a sip.

‘One day, age catches up with you, throws you on its back, and that’s it – the doing is done, the thinking is on again. By then, the things you’ve done and know are stacked up inside you like in an enormous warehouse. But no one wants to hear about them any more. Especially the people still doing things. The other trouble is, by that stage, you often don’t know how to get to the most interesting bits of knowledge, so you keep reaching for the same ones over and over again – dragging them out for show like cheap jewellery. But in reality, it’s just that you need a bit of help getting to the right shelves. Because by that point you’ve worked out what’s important and what’s not. It’s gold on those back shelves, if only you can reach it.’

Her words fell around him like fireworks.

‘Actually, I know,’ said Ernest. ‘That sounds like my grandmother. You just had to ask her the right questions.’

She fixed him with a bright look. ‘Well. You sound like quite a wise young man. Remarkable really, as you appear to be at a particularly boring age.’ She thrust a thin, veined hand at him. ‘I’m Madeline.’

A surprisingly firm handshake. Warm too. She seemed misplaced in the orderly ward. He found himself appraising her, looking for injuries, some sign of frailty, but saw none.

‘This?’ She waved her hand at the ward, then motioned to her hip. ‘I had a fall. Hurts like hell, but if I stay lying down I’m going to die in here. The only way I can persuade them that I’m well enough to leave is to get up and pretend I’m fine. Nothing broken anyway. So I go for walks around the wards.’ Then whispered. ‘But sometimes it gets a bit much.’

She had on a green cardigan with shell buttons over her hospital gown, and straight grey hair tied back in a messy ponytail. When he straightened up, he could also see that she had long feathered slippers like exotic birds.

Not like. Actual stuffed birds, with the heads on and everything, upside down, lying on their backs.

‘Macaws,’ she said when she saw him looking, leaning back and kicking up her feet to give him a better view. ‘I used to keep them. Bloody noisy things, but they were great at guarding the house. As soon as they saw someone coming up the path, one would squawk, ‘Who goes there?’ And the other would scream, ‘Name yourself!’ My husband taught them that, but they never seemed to learn anything else.’

Was she bonkers? She made his head spin. Or was she absolutely the most interesting thing he had seen all week – no, all year, years even. He reached out to stroke the left slipper, the bright feathers hard and uneven under his hand. Like turquoise, emerald and amber sticks. They must have been beautiful once.

‘They’re a few years old now’, Madeline said. ‘Especially that one. Riccardo. He died first and then I had to wait seven years for Fernando to pop his clogs to get another slipper. In the meantime the rats got to poor Ricky and chewed his tail half off. They almost didn’t let me wear them in here, but I told them I didn’t have others and I’m allergic to the hospital ones. An old lady needs her slippers, you know.’

Still unsure where to place her. Not really thinking. 'Yes. Slippers are good. I like yours.' Fuck, was that all he could think of saying? He didn't want to make the wrong impression. It wasn't as if he'd ever owned a pair of slippers. If your feet were cold you just put on a couple of pairs of socks, until you were about forty; then your wife probably bought you some, like his mum did for his dad. Then when you got old you never seemed to take them off. No laces, he supposed. Difficult for old fingers.

'Now you're just being polite. The correct response is *they're interesting*. You don't need to like them. In fact it's better if you don't. Love and hate. They're all that matters.'

'Nothing in between.'

'That's it, my boy.'

'Why hate though? Love I understand. But why hate?'

'Same thing. Positive negative. Both will move you in some direction. Just bloody have an opinion. Don't just be okay with everything, or you'll never get anything better than okay.'

Still not sure. Possibly bonkers. Definitely interesting.

'What's *your* name anyway?'

He realised he was staring. At her, the slippers, her eyes – for once it was easy to make eye contact – the faded blueness of them almost the same colour as yesterday's sky.

'Ernest. It was my grandfather's. He died before I was born.' The old man with the enormous hat and beard, once fuzzily represented in an oval frame on his Nan's dresser. Best to explain where it came from. Everyone always wondering why he got lumped with it.

Madeline shook her head. 'Irresponsible, lumbering you with that name. Especially for a nobody.' She leaned in, looked closely at him, conspiratorial. 'You're not a Somebody, are you? They don't normally put Somebodies in this hospital. They go private.'

He shook his head. Did that make him a nobody? He guessed so, although it didn't really seem like a bad thing. She confirmed it.

‘Good. Somebodies bore me to tears. Too full of their own self-importance. Oh, I’ve known a few that were okay, but in the main...’ She shook her head. ‘Now, where was I? Yes. You need to be a Mark, or a David or a John. It’d make things much easier.’

‘I did think about changing it. I wanted to be Xavier when I was at school. Or Zane. Last on the list. Not in the middle.’

Her eyes widened. ‘Bit dramatic, don’t you think? They’re dancers names. Actors. Somebody names. But I agree, much less old-fogeyish. Anyway,’ she fixed him with a bird’s appraising eye, ‘tell me why you’re in here.’

He wasn’t sure whether it was her eyes, or her hands or her slippers, but something opened inside of him and the words – the words just poured out. Everything from the death of his Nan, to the departure of his parents, to the loss of his last job – and a lot of the jobs before that – how he had been unsure, unconvinced and unable to manage everything he wanted to do. Things other people seemed so capable of. And that despite the goodness that he tried to see in everything and everyone, the truth that he insisted on telling for its own sake, no one seemed to appreciate it – they told him to be more discerning instead. Then the weather forecast that had oozed more nothingness; how he was over nothingness. Had enough of nothing. Needed something, even if it was death. Something different.

Half an hour’s worth. Seemed like more words at once than he’d managed in his life.

Madeline just sat and nodded, occasionally rubbing her hip with her left hand. Surprisingly quiet. ‘Hmm’, she said when he’d finished. ‘Just as I thought. You’re almost at your boring zenith. Some reach it earlier, some later. I reached mine at 38. So I went and lived in the Pacific. Vanuatu. Took my husband, had a son there. Learned to play the ukulele and ate so much swordfish that I couldn’t touch it again for twenty years.’

He shifted the pillow behind his neck. ‘But I don’t understand how that helped. Going somewhere else.’

‘Well, you tried it, in your own way,’ she said. ‘Leaving, that is. The trouble with you is that you were just trying to escape, without knowing why.’ She tapped the side of her head. ‘You’ve got to have an idea of what you’re running from – really running from – before you run. Otherwise you find yourself running back to it.’

‘But I couldn’t do anything else.’

‘See, that’s the problem with cities. You get too caught up with doing everything. Stops you thinking. No time for contemplation, which is what you really need, if you’re a nothing kind of person. It’s very exhausting being a Someone. Whereas it can be rather relaxing being a No One if you just give it a chance. Got to get away from the Someones though. They can be quite insufferable. And the pressure to be Someone. We aren’t all cut out for it, you know. Sometimes it’s better to realise that than die trying.’

Ernest’s brain seemed to turn inside out.

The door opened at the end of the corridor then and he heard the squeak of nurses’ shoes on the floor. Madeline gave him a wink and a salute. ‘I’ll be back. Time for them to see me on the move.’ She hauled herself up off his bed with a sharp exhalation of breath, and walked off, leaving what he imagined to be – although it surely wasn’t – a faint tropical fragrance in her wake.

Chapter Four.

Ernest slept like a dog at a bus station.

Nurses’ faces at his shoulder

Noises from the man next door

A distant moaning

Bedpans in the dark

Curtains ringing on rails

Hushed voices like sandpaper on his ears

Then a wakeup at six am. Just when he’d managed to get to a decent heavy part of sleep, when he was wrapped tightly in it, a thick, sticky sludge between him and outside.

He hadn’t thought that it was possible to sleep more poorly than the nights spent outside the bookshop. But this came close. At one point in the night – 4:25am, the clock said with a baleful glow – he considered getting up and walking out, walking all the way back to his shop doorway, back to lie outside the calming books with their layers of knowledge, the smell of ink and new carpet that lay just beyond the window. Then an image of Madeline dropped in, as if on a cover of a book, and he knew he could not leave. Not yet. So he stayed his hand when it turned down the sheet. Arrested his leg as it slid to the floor. And consciously, with some effort, brought both of them back into

bed. He pulled up the cover almost to his ears, then reached around and tucked the slightest portion of the sheet in snugly around himself, and the bed held him like that till morning.

After breakfast, Dr Wood-Highsmith came to see him, brought someone else. ‘Hi Ernest. I’m Tiff.’ A toothy smile, large teeth in a small mouth. Must have had braces. Mouths like that had to have braces or the teeth crowded each other into all kinds of strange positions. He was supposed to have them in his teens, but refused at the last minute. Saw what they had meant for his brother, all that fiddling about with rubber bands. Painkillers after each tightening. Having that metal in your mouth night and day, home and school, and if you weren’t handy with your fists it was like a shining lure for other kids, drew them in to taunt and point, pretend they were being sucked in by some magnetic force. So he refused. Flat out said ‘No. I won’t. You’ll have to carry me.’ Stuck up for himself for once. Meant every word, and he was already big by then. Tall, and heavy with it.

Tiff stood back while the doctor asked him questions about his head and his sleep. Ernest answered briefly, single words with no sharp edges. *Okay. No. Yes.* Why use several words when one would do? The doctor prodding him with other words to make his flow better. ‘Tell me how...what do you feel...’ Open-ended questions. But if you knew how, it was easy to close them off.

An interrogation. But it didn’t last too long; it was clear the doctor preferred to be somewhere else. Then she left and Tiff took the chair. ‘Hey Ernest. You’re not looking too bad for someone with a grade four concussion.’ Those teeth again, standing permanently to attention. A joke?

‘I’m a social worker. Jut here to see if we can talk to you about yesterday, help you. Look, I won’t go into it now. We’ll talk about it when you’re ready. But it sounds like you’ve been a bit stuck. Which isn’t your fault. It happens all the time.’

Ernest watched her mouth moving, the teeth saluting him now and then. He wondered if she’d had to wear one of those plates with the fake mouth roof, like his brother. A social worker. They had allocated him a social worker. He wasn’t that hopeless, was he? Just useless at bumping himself off. And happened to not have anywhere to live, or a job. Oh god. Here it came again. A damp cloud of hopelessness.

‘I’d like you to talk to someone though, see if we can help. Make sure you aren’t spending your nights outside stations, under bridges or God knows where.’

Bookshops, he thought. *It’s bookshops. Friendly bookshop doorways.*

She had one of those expressions that seemed fixed in a version of a smile, a whole range of smiles, through from the little and fixed to the one where all her teeth were out there parading, on show. There was something about her eyes though. They didn’t seem in on the act.

She was a New Zealander. He could hear it by her accent – he had always been good with accents – and by the flat green pendant she wore around her neck; a native stone they found in water there. A colleague at the egg-sorting job had shown him her smooth chunk of green, shaped like a mini oar-head. Said it was from an ex-boyfriend and she was thinking of chucking it out, but she half hoped that if she continued to wear it, it would bring him back. Besides, you weren’t allowed to buy them for yourself; someone had to give one to you. If she chucked it out, when would she get given another one, especially over in London, after all.

He wondered who had given Tiff hers. Family, he decided. She didn’t seem like someone who would wear an ex-boyfriend’s jewellery after they broke up. Too all together. Too there – in the moment – to ever be thinking of what had been and what would be. She had a square chin, wide cheekbones and broad shoulders. Large eyes, brown, almost the colour of a cow’s, with dark brown wavy hair, practically black. She looked like someone who got things done, the sort of person who could build fences, kept a fully-stocked first aid kit and RSVPed the very day she got an invitation, instead of waiting till the last minute, or several days after it was due. She looked like she didn’t miss a trick, did Tiff.

‘I’ve spoken to your sister.’ Tiff shifted some of her hair from the front of her shoulder to the back. ‘Ah, Amanda isn’t it?’

He nodded.

‘She says you can stay a night with her before I get you into a hostel. You’re lucky’ – there was that word again – ‘there’s a short-term spot coming up tomorrow night. If you can stay with her tonight, we’ll get you a bed in the hostel from tomorrow. Long term, obviously, we can talk about later. Right now, my job is about making sure you don’t end up on the street again. Then help you get back on your feet.’

Back on his feet. As if he had fallen from the world and was now lying in its gutter, some sort of limbo place, horizontal. Well, he was in the hospital bed, that much was true. Half-horizontal. She made it sound like he'd fallen so far, yet it wasn't a long way, really. It wasn't if he'd had everything, if only to lose it. He'd not had much to lose. And in fact, after he lost his last job and his flat, the clothing he had and things he owned didn't seem to mean much. He'd fitted them into four boxes and one rubbish bag, no trouble. His flatmate had owned everything else. Couldn't take them with him onto the street – so the logical thing was to get rid of them. Baggage. That's all they were. Nothing to do but box them up and leave them outside a charity shop, dropped off in the middle of the night, so no one could go through it in front of him at the counter and reject any of his things.

Now he had nothing. Himself. A watch. A bag and one set of clothes. What was it they said? *Nothing to lose, everything to gain*. But how to gain everything? And if you got it, what to do with it? Everything was an awful lot. Wasn't him. He did not even know whether back on his feet was somewhere he wanted to be.

Madeline's words returned to him. Crisp hailstones from a murky sky. *Sometimes it's better to realise that than die trying*.

If he couldn't get out one way, then maybe another kind of escape was the answer.

Tiff was talking again. Saying something about banks, doctors, benefits, seeing a dentist. Organising his life around him while he sat there in the bed. As if from an unwritten list of expectations that you were expected to fulfil. He stared at the wall behind her while she reeled things off. Felt the old anxieties beginning again.

He began his own list, etching it with his eyeballs against the green of the wall.

The Great Escape

Alcatraz

Shawshank Redemption

What others were there? As a child, he had been obsessed with lists – although then, it was not the making of them; it was the ticking off he was more compelled to do. Things to see. Things to do. Things to know. He knew all the world's capital cities by the age of thirteen, along with each country's chief exports. For example: Senegal (Dakar): fish, chemicals, cotton, fabrics, groundnuts and calcium phosphate. Cuba

(Havana): sugar, nickel, tobacco, fish, medical products, citrus and coffee. New Zealand (Wellington): agriculture, horticulture, fish and forestry. And Vanuatu (Port Vila): copra, beef, cocoa, timber, kava and coffee. A shame that they were never any use in real life. But then maybe they were. Vanuatu. That was where Madeline had lived, wasn't it?

'Ernest? You're not actually listening to me, are you.' Tiff's teeth retreated behind pursed lips. 'Tell you what, how about we go over this stuff later. I'll pick you up tomorrow morning from your sister's. Okay?'

He nodded.

'All right. See you then.' She smiled in parting, and her teeth glared at him, very white.

So much for Tiff taking him in hand, running him over, like it seemed she meant to. Social worker – the idea had seemed so daunting. The fact of her like a judgement upon him. *We are going to make you social. Fit for society.* Now she was gone, just like that. And they were letting him out. So that was a positive, at least. But before he went, just one thing he had to do.

Finding the ward was easier than he'd thought. 'Madeline? Do you know her last name? Oh I know the one you mean.' A quizzical look. Probably wondering how he knew her, or maybe why he was wandering about. Just let them try and stop him.

'Ward 5F, I think. Next floor up, down the corridor on your left. Ask the nurses up there – they'll show you.'

He took the stairs, rather than the lift. Only 14 steps, it wasn't far. Then down the corridor to the ward. His bare feet sticking to the linoleum floor.

Madeline's ward was too small. No wonder she wanted to get out. Same number of beds, same number of people – mostly little people, old ladies every one. Same space between the beds. But a smaller room, somehow. Walls appeared closer; windows were shut. More stuff than in his ward. Plants and flowers watching from bedside tables and windowsills, heaps of them: geraniums, lilies, ferns, one sick-looking aspidistra – funny that, they were hard to kill. Magazines everywhere, too. Folded over halfway through articles, two showing on the bed nearest to him. *Serena and Jacob - true love at 92.* And *Cellulite Wars – secrets of the stars revealed.*

Some women had boxes of chocolates, or biscuits. Most unopened. Why did none of that stuff make it into the men's ward?

Elderly heads lay slackly on pillows, some with glasses by their beds containing their teeth, ready for action. Where was she?

He asked an old lady in pink. A banner above her head saying something about getting well soon in large purple letters. She didn't look well. Looked like she could use all the well-wishing she could get. 'Madeline? Closest to the window.' A gentle wave towards it.

At the window, the curtains around the bed were half drawn. He waited, scratched his head, unsure whether to stand there till invited in or step forward and look through.

He looked.

Two boxes of chocolates, one still in its wrapping

A gardening magazine

A plastic water jug

One cup

No teeth-filled glass. No slippers under the bed. No Madeline.

Chapter Five.

Amanda was late. It was silly of him really, expecting her to be on time this once. She was always late. Then when she did arrive, usually half an hour after you had expected her – or not expected her; you expected her to be late, more that you would have liked her to be there – she would turn up, waving her hands in the air, looking flushed, saying 'Sooooooooooooorrrrrrry!' And unlike some people you knew who were occasionally late and might say 'Won't happen again,' Amanda said nothing, because you and she both knew that it would. Today though, you would have thought that she might be on time, what with yesterday and everything – he wasn't being self-important, no he wasn't, it was just that he hadn't even seen her in almost a year, and she seemed to want to make it even longer. Here he was, sitting on the chair by the hospital bed, in yesterday's clothes and underwear, waiting. 29 minutes. He guessed some things never changed.

No great physical changes either. She still had the same mid-brown hair; occasional grey streaks in her crown and behind her ears. In fact, she was even wearing

the same top as the last time, a purple jumper with small brown camels circling the cuffs. It was one of his particular skills – useless skills, his family used to say – that he was able to remember exactly what people were wearing the last time he saw them. As if image was imprinted on his mind like a photographic transfer.

Of all of them, Amanda looked the most like him. Or he looked like her. They both resembled their Nan; soft curls the colour of wet hay, a prominent nose – made for sniffing out lies, his Nan used to say – fleshy lips that looked good on Amanda, but not on him. Both inherited Nan's height too, the several inches above average that would have been lanky were it not for the tendency to run to fat, and which had skipped a generation in their father's case.

'Look E.' She had called him E ever since they were small. When he was born she'd just started talking; he started out E and never became anything else. 'E. About yesterday. Honestly, I don't have time for this right now. The twins are little horrors at the moment and Martin's no bloody help, he's been working late nights and I hardly see him. I'm feeling a little alone myself. Anyway, I'm not trying to steal your thunder, but I think what you tried to do yesterday was pretty selfish. It stinks, quite frankly. It's just you wanting all the attention again, just like you've always done.'

She sighed and pushed her lips out, eyes going down at the ends. He could tell she was really angry, because instead of the seven lines in her forehead, now there were eight. But then they sank away suddenly, and she breathed in deeply through her nose, and out again, like she was expelling something mildly poisonous. She picked up his bag. 'Oh come on, E', she said. 'Let's go. We've got to be quick; I've left the twins upstairs asleep in their room and I don't want Social Services banging down my door.'

Her car was an old brown Hillman Hunter almost the same colour as the camels on her jumper, parked slightly haphazardly at one end of the car park. Down the line in the middle of two spaces. *Gives me extra room*, Amanda used to say. Ernest put out a hand and picked off a piece of flaking paint, a triangular reject shearing off from the old vehicle.

'Leave that', said Amanda. 'It's bad enough with the kids, I don't need my brother doing it too.'

The car smelt like Christmas trees and vomit. A green cardboard tree was hanging from the rear view mirror. A yellowing McDonalds carton on the dashboard. Two child

seats in the back, spattered with a kaleidoscope of stains. Amanda put his backpack into one of them, and as if tipped by a domino, Ernest reached in and retrieved it, stowing it safely in the front. Imagining poo molecules, vomit molecules and who-knows-what-else molecules clinging to the straps.

Probably safer in front anyway, in case she stopped suddenly and it came flying over to – what? – kill him? Unlikely. More like bump him on the head again. Although Amanda had never been a fast driver. Ruled by fear, her motto was *keep left, hug the shoulder, never pass. The tortoise gets there in one piece*. He had to give her credit. She had not had an accident since she was learning – the day she stopped in the middle of the road trying to avoid an injured crow and was tail-ended by a white van. He'd not been in the car that day, but the car was left with a large dent and a scrape of white paint on the bumper. It was uninsured, so they left it to slowly collapse in on itself, eaten away by the cancer of rust. Caving in finally one afternoon from a mysterious cricket ball hit, leaving red-brown stains on the road.

This one seemed like an okay car, if a little old. Started straight away, too, getting out of the hospital car park with only one backfire, and hardly any smoke. 'Where's your other car?' asked Ernest. The silver Rover they used to have.

'Martin has it. He needs a car for work, to see customers', said Amanda. He's driving round all day now, so we needed to get a second car for me. But he refuses to have a Japanese car in the family. Said it had to be British, and within our budget. Wouldn't even consider another European car, something German or even French. So I got this. Little toad of a car. Nowhere to bloody park it anyway. Not in our street.'

She slammed her palm onto the steering wheel suddenly, the force sending the car careering over into the right hand lane, narrowly missing a red Toyota.

There was a heavy-handed toot.

'Fucking wanker,' said Amanda.

'Maybe you should just let me out here,' said Ernest. 'Or at the next lights.'

She gave him a sideways look. 'No,' she said. A tiny muscle twitched in her jaw. 'I'm not letting you out. I promised your social worker. We're going to go home and you're going to put your stuff in Felicity's room and then we'll watch some telly and wait for Martin and I'll cook some pork and potatoes or something, whatever I've got in the freezer, or we'll get takeaways if we have to and then tomorrow morning...

tomorrow morning then you can go.’ She flexed her fingers on the steering wheel, drummed them on it twice. ‘Remember to say hello to Martin when he comes in, too, will you? Ask him how his day went. You know, just a couple of pleasantries. He thinks you’re weird.’

Yes, and Martin was a twat. They had nothing in common other than penises. If only she had married her previous boyfriend.

But no mention of yesterday, at least. Amanda had never been one for questions.

They lived in a small terrace house not far from Tooting station, its walls still their original brick, seemingly in defiance of the pebble-dashed facades on either side. Instead of curtains, they had timber Venetians, painted white, while the neighbours were united in their use of net curtains in every window. ‘Nothing but net’, Amanda used to joke, as if interior decorating were a sport, net particularly bad, and her aiming for no net, no net at all.

Upstairs were two large bedrooms and one small funny-shaped one. And it was into this that Ernest was shown, told to hang his coat behind the door. The room belonging to his eldest niece, tonight sleeping over at a friend’s. He hadn’t seen Felicity since she was nine, the same time he last saw Amanda. Christmas last year.

She was growing up fast by the look of it. The horse posters that were dominant when he was here last were being superseded by those of young men. Some in various stages of undress. Above her floral-covered bed, the largest print had three men posing in front of what looked like an old mine, looking remarkably shiny and clean compared to the background, their open shirts and tight trousers appearing freshly washed, although not pressed. One of them had his thumbs hooked into his belt loops, dragging the trousers down lower on his hips than what was surely necessary, showing the top of his pants. It made Ernest uncomfortable and vaguely horny. Although why should he be, really, he only liked girls. That is, women. He was never quite sure what to call them, women of around his age. In their late twenties, early thirties, but often insisting that they were girls. Then when he said he liked girls, sometimes he got funny looks, narrowed eyes and questioning. No, he was not sure how it worked.

The adjacent bedroom was occupied by the twins, three-year-old boys who now stood behind him at the door, watching. Staring at him silently, perfectly still. Ernest

hated being watched, and especially by children. After what Madeline had said, it was even creepier. Little Gods. Open, observing creatures, predictably unpredictable. He always felt expected to interact, when really, he had no idea what to do or say. They didn't speak his language, and he often seemed to make them cry.

Ike and Oliver were not identical but they liked to wear the same clothes. Had a habit of copying the other whenever one spoke. Seemed to speak their own language, which resembled Turkic. Alien beings.

'Taag. Sjzz.' Said Oliver. 'Watchimadakdak' replied Ike, his eyes not leaving Ernest's face.

'Raarr!' Ernest tried the monster face. Kids liked that, didn't they? But Ike and Oliver just screamed, ran yelling down the hall.

'Come on', said Amanda, coming up the stairs. 'Don't get them all worked up. Give me a hand to get them downstairs, will you? You take Oliver, I'll take Ike.' They carried the twins over the safety gate and down to the lounge, and Ernest sat with them in front of the television while Amanda started dinner.

Martin arrived home at seven o'clock, his hair thinner than Ernest remembered, and seemingly freshly brushed. He was even taller than Ernest, close to six foot four, and appeared to retain his great fondness for fast food. In the years Ernest had known him, his previously angular features had softened like butter, rounding at the edges and spreading across his face. He extended his large hand, shook Ernest's absent-mindedly. 'Good to see you again, Ernest. It's been a while.' Then he went straight upstairs without saying a word to his wife.

Amanda came out of the kitchen. 'Where's Martin?'

'Changing, I think.'

'I didn't hear you ask about his day.'

'I didn't get a chance.'

'Try and make an effort will you, E?'

Amanda walked over to the bottom of the stairs and yelled up them. 'Martin! Dinner in five minutes!'

They sat at the dinner table, Martin and him, the two boys either side of their father, like red-faced sentinels. 'So', said Martin. 'I hear you tried to do yourself in. What's all that about, eh? Woman troubles?' He winked.

Ernest looked at the table. 'Just troubles.'

Amanda brought the plates out from the kitchen. 'Here you go,' she said. Plonked them down so the plates echoed on the tabletop. Martin got an extra hard plonk, so that some liquid slopped over the side.

'Ha,' said Martin. He stared at Amanda's bottom as it retreated into the kitchen. Turned his attention back to the plate without looking at Ernest.

Two pork chops lay there on a bed of mash, the fat clinging alongside like hard icing. Next to the chops was a brownish-green mound of spinach and alongside a single boiled carrot, naked and friendless among the other food. A brownish sauce surrounded them all.

Amanda brought out her own plate. She sat. They started.

'How was your day, Martin?' *Tick.*

'Good thanks, Ernest.'

Then not a word from anyone.

After dinner, when the twins were in bed, Amanda brought down some of Martin's old clothes from upstairs. Seeing as Ernest had chucked his out. Most were two sizes too big for him, but she'd found a few that fitted well, ones that Martin hadn't worn for years. 'Look,' she said to Martin, holding them up in the lounge. 'Remember when you used to fit these. You were quite slim then.'

'So were you,' said Martin and turned back to the television, a car programme where the presenters were racing each other from Paris to Brighton using different means of transport. One of the presenters had hair like Ernest, although a much posher voice.

Amanda just stood there at first, then walked over to the television, turned it off at the wall. Stood there with her hands on her hips, daring Martin to say something. Her mouth twisted.

'Well what did you expect me to say?' Martin's voice had risen a couple of octaves.

‘Um...you were both quite a lot slimmer then.’

‘E, stay out of this’, said Amanda. ‘You are not helping.’

Just like when they were kids. As if he were her kid even, when he was 29 and she now 36. He wasn’t sure how to answer. Only knew that something was not right. Not working. What was the problem, when both of them were telling the truth?

‘I’m serious. I’d say you’ve put on about seven kilos. Maybe ten for Martin.’

‘Ernest, shut it.’

No one moved. In the kitchen, the dishwasher gurgled. A fly settled on the chair behind Martin’s head. Then Martin walked over to the television. Reached behind Amanda, turned on the switch again.

She moved aside, arms folded now, waited until he was back in his seat and had switched on the remote. Then she pulled the plug out of the wall.

‘This is ridiculous’, said Martin. ‘You’re just as fucking moronic as your brother.’

Ernest felt the room shrink. The sofa now practically on top of his head. He turned and walked upstairs, a slow steady step. God, it was hot. Hard to breathe. *One - one thousand, two - one thousand, three-one thousand.* He focused on the sensation of the carpet under his feet. Not his itchy fingers, aching fist. Fucking wanking twatting cunt. Reached the top (*eleven - one thousand*), opened the door, walked to the bed, sat down. Downstairs he could hear Amanda and Martin arguing. Raised voices goading him still. ‘Slow to anger, hard to calm,’ his Nan would say. ‘Watch that temperament, luvvie, because no one else will – it will get you into trouble.’

So lists, distractions. They helped. He turned and punched the pillow. *Fucker.* Pulled the pillow to his chest, squeezed it, squashed all the air out. Suffocated it.

Tried to relax. Tried.

Ahead of him was Felicity’s desk: the school timetable and a list of project ideas pinned onto a pink board, and her computer next to that, still on. Its multicoloured sleep waves hurt his eyes. He went over, pressed a key. A website still up. White page, few words. *Best Anagram for Your Name. Turn your birth name into something hilarious. What’s yours?*

Felicity’s was still there. Felicity Ann Maddox = Notify and Climaxed. He typed in his.

Ernest Shaw = The Answers.

Downstairs the voices died away. The pouting posters retreated into the walls. He was nowhere, everywhere. He typed his name in again.

Ernest Shaw = The Answers.

He stared at the screen until the words became unfamiliar, looked wrong. Did it really say Answers? Was it spelt like that? *Aswners, Anseres. Anses.*

He looked at it a while longer, willing it to reveal a little more. It was all too weird. But it was just a website, after all. Next he would be looking up tarot cards or astrology sites. Ha.

And he turned off the screen.

Chapter Six.

He stayed in bed the next morning till he heard Martin leave the house, heard the door slam behind him with a pleasing finality (*and stay out!*). Then he went downstairs and helped himself to some toast.

The twins were at playgroup, dropped off by Martin on the way to work, and Tiff was not due until half-past ten. Amanda had been about to start on the washing, but just as she started to load the machine, she said, 'Stuff it – I'll do this when you're gone. Come with me a minute.'

She left a pair of black leggings hanging half-in, half-out of the machine door, and the washing bag slumped in the corner of the kitchen – a squat beige slug, baby sock slugs spilling from its drawstring mouth. Then she took out the album from the bottom shelf of the bookcase, liberated it from under several smaller, newer-looking albums; brushed away the film on the cover where time had collected on the edges exposed to the air.

They sat on the floor in the lounge, silently at first, just the occasional snort at a particularly dated outfit, an exchange of glances and a finger tapped on an old photo – though the pose was so familiar it could have been taken yesterday or thirty years ago – of their father asleep on the sofa. They worked backwards from the more recent to the seemingly ancient, and Ernest finally felt calm, enjoyed just sitting with his sister in the stillness, no one else to get in the way, nothing to *discuss*. It seemed enough just to sit and remember, feeling their way back, as if tracing in the root structure of a tree.

They came to a family portrait, all five of them clustered around their parents. An awkwardly-posed studio shot, in front of a grey mottled background. Even Robert was there, must have been just before he went away to Brighton and got a flat; before Amanda finished school; before Louisa – she was in it too.

Neither of them moved to turn the page.

‘You ever think of her?’

The question took him by surprise. Of course he did, but he preferred not to dwell on it; it was something that was better stayed buried, as it were, shut away in the past, to lie quietly. ‘Sometimes. Not often. I try not to. She’s not here, hasn’t been for a long time. It happened. Can’t be changed.’

Amanda frowned, rocked back on her haunches. ‘That’s a very clinical way of putting it. Sometimes I think it would be easier to think the way you do.’

He said nothing. Really? Easier to be him?

‘Felicity reminds me of her, you know. That hair.’ She bit her bottom lip, her teeth making as if to pull it back into her mouth. ‘I’d like her to get it chopped off; get a pageboy cut or something. A style that doesn’t attract attention. Something short, boyish even. Fat chance though, at her age. Unless I do it in the middle of the night.’ She drew a long breath in, then sighed.

Felicity’s long hair was like theirs but warmer, more gold in it; just the right side of brassiness, with an incandescence even in the shade. It fell in relaxed waves down her back – *cascaded*, people said, although that inferred tumbling, and her hair was too fine to tumble – a fine shallow river of individual strands that shone when it moved. It was beautiful hair, but he knew why Amanda wanted it gone. Louisa’s hair. A magnet, indiscriminate in who it drew.

Amanda reached up to her own hair, drew a lock around her finger, tethering her right arm loosely to her head. She stared at the page; her other hand fingered its bottom corner. ‘She wouldn’t have wanted you to, you know. The train...’

The carpet was getting uncomfortable; he shifted his weight to the other side, stretched out his legs.

‘You were always her favourite. Even though I was her only sister.’

‘I know.’

Amanda made a snorting sound in the back of her throat, shook her head, turned back to the photos. ‘You could at least make me feel better, E. Tell me I was her favourite.’ She had an oddly crunched smile on her face. ‘You’re too damn honest. Anyway...’ She released her finger from its bindings, tapped it on the photo. ‘I had that dress before her. Mum patched under the armpit where I tore it playing footy with you boys in the street. Remember the day I did it? Got in proper trouble, I did. Auntie Sara was round, her and Uncle Dan. Remember?’

But Ernest couldn’t, had no link to that day; nothing brought it back.

‘They’d just been to Sweden the week before. Don’t you remember? Them and Mum sitting round that afternoon, drinking the schnapps they bought.’

He remembered the schnapps, come to think of it. Another day though, another time of day: he and Amanda had thought to try it, daring each other to down short glasses from the solid brown bottle. Shots, like they had seen the adults do. It was awful, like someone had set fire to his throat, burning with a vigour that left him starved of breath, gasping like some landed fish in the sun. Pepper schnapps. Yes, he remembered the schnapps clearly. But not the footy, not that day, not the one Amanda was talking about.

He hadn’t seen this studio photo either, although could remember when it was taken. The hair-brushing that had started when they got out of bed that morning; the same hairbrush, applied in the car and the photography studio; his mother’s spit smoothed on everyone’s hair at random, sometimes their shoulders too (his father’s, Robert’s). It was as if she knew, a mother’s second-sense perhaps, that it was the last – the only – official, and complete family photo. ‘How did you get this?’

‘Mum gave me some of the extras before she left.’

His mother still had The Album, a faux-leather ring-binder stacked full of the family: his parents, and early photos of the first three children. It was an obese version of its former self, burgeoned with pages, its photos carefully applied at first, then later, with an extra-careful crookedness that hinted at the delegation of photo filing to a younger family member. A few pages of montages near the very end – a last-ditch, and aborted, attempt to maximise the space before it ran out for good – before two more regularly-spaced pages made up the rear guard. The rest of the photos – from around Ernest’s birth, onwards – were stuffed into an A4 envelope at the back. When his mother

moved to Spain, she took a selection of photos from the envelope, offered up the rest. Robert and Reece were not concerned about them. Nor was he. Amanda had welcomed them in, organised them into her own Album. Was it a woman thing? This recording of family; the documenting of mergers, additions and growth. Come to think of it, the only thing not documented was loss.

Not long before she died, his Nan had a clear-out too, kept her photos but gave away some vases, ornaments – all the clutter. She seemed ruthless about it, he thought; afterwards, to him, the flat had looked like it had been burgled. She attached names to the things that weren't given away immediately, small pieces of rectangular paper that Ernest had helped her make, tearing them down a ruler edge, then handing them to her for naming with a blue plastic pen. 'Can't have people fighting over my bits and pieces', his nan had said. 'Better to have it all sorted out beforehand.'

He helped her with the list, too. *This goes to them, this goes to her, this to him.* Everyone got something, however small. A vase called Patricia. A teapot called Sue. Two old gardening books called Ernest – he had not wanted anything else. Heavy and smelling of dust, they were. Black and white pictures with all the Latin names, and very fine, thin pages that felt as if they would at any minute tear and rip. Yet they were stronger than he expected and none were any worse for wear other than for a bit of yellowing on the edges.

Despite the names, it didn't save fights. The day his Nan had died, his mother had gone round changing over the notes. 'I was here when she died, I was with her,' his mother had said. 'The rest of them weren't around for her last hours. It's my right.'

Ernest turned to Amanda. 'Did you get anything from Nan?'

'Just a little ceramic cat ornament. Guess I must still have been cat mad at that point; or maybe I asked for it. You?'

'Books. Gardening ones. I always thought I'd have an allotment like Nan, or a big house with a back garden.'

'You? In London? Fat chance.' She said it with a soft smile – it didn't seem intended to cut him. 'What happened to them?'

'I gave them away when I moved out of my flat. Before...the other day.' It upset him suddenly, the thought of the gardening books being in someone else's house, or worse, unloved on a charity shop bookshelf.

He felt Amanda's eyes on his face. 'You could buy them back. When did you drop them off?'

'A week ago. With some other stuff. I'm not sure they'll still have them.'

'Doesn't hurt to look.'

And yes, he could look. She was right; it was that easy. He would go there and look, and hopefully, get them back. Although there was the problem of what to buy them back with. He couldn't very well go in and ask them to give him the books free, could he? *Excuse me, I made a mistake. I dropped these off and I've changed my mind. I want them back.*

'Wait. Let me get the laptop. We'll look it up online, see if we can call them and get them to put the books aside.' Amanda got up and went upstairs.

Ernest felt thirsty. Time for a tea. He got up and went through to the kitchen, pressed the toggle on at the back of the stainless kettle, got out a couple of the nice blue mugs. Then he leaned on the kitchen benchtop, stretched his neck with circular movements, while he waited for the kettle to boil. Clockwise, then anti-clockwise. On his third circle anti-clockwise, it glinted at him. A spare-change jar just along from the kettle, snuggled in next to the recipe books. Mostly pennies and five pence pieces in there, but quite a few gold coins too. More than enough to buy a couple of old books. Surely. She had even suggested buying them back. It wasn't his fault that he had no money.

The phone rang behind him on the wall; the noise seemed to make the coins vibrate. He heard Amanda answer the call upstairs.

Ernest softly moved the jar out from the books. The end book fell over, hitting the counter with a heavy thud; he jumped. He took a breath, slowly unscrewed the lid, deliberate, even hand movements; one, two, three, and the lid came off, surprisingly light. With his other hand he took the jar and tipped it up, gently, just enough so he could reach the coins with two fingers. Five of them came out easily, slid into his fingers then tipped into his palm. They sat there, cold. Six pounds fifty. Would that be enough? Perhaps not. He reached in again, transferred several more coins to his hand. Now, eleven-eighty. He slipped the money into his jeans pockets; segregating some of them to minimise their shouty clinks, wedging the others close together into the smallest pocket to stop them moving and singing out.

Not really thieving, he said to himself. Not really. Amanda wanted him to have the books back. And it's only spare change. Left over. Not really used. Although, what am I doing? What is it about Amanda that makes me feel like a child again? I'm a grown man; should ask her for a loan – but she made it so difficult to ask for anything. Besides, they didn't really have much money. This was easier, wouldn't be missed. Besides, he would return it at some point.

He screwed the lid back onto the jar, tidied everything back in place. Then got the tea bags from the cupboard and finished their drinks. Two cups: milk, one sugar for him; black for Amanda.

Everything normal. Everything good.

He carried the cups through to the living room, set them on the floor beside the album, sat beside them. Turned the page.

Louisa winked at him from a swing, her smile wide, but closed; yellow trainers on her feet. A breeze had caught her hair. In the background it was spring – the hawthorn tree was in bloom, tight white petals readying to let go.

He heard Amanda's shoe on the top step; the timber creaked dully as she came down. 'Sorry E, that was Martin – he needed a quick word.'

Ernest smiled a tight smile at her; he looked down quickly to check the coins in his pockets were not poking out. Amanda followed his gaze down and saw the tea. 'Oh thanks, that was thoughtful of you.' She sat on the sofa, turned on the laptop. 'So where's this charity shop?'

'200 Southwark Park Road.'

'Wow, you even know the exact address. That should make it easy.'

Yes, that was the easy part. Would they be there though?

'Found it. See, told you. There's a listing online. I'll give them a call now.' She took the laptop through to the kitchen; he watched her through the doorway as she set it on the bench, took the phone from its holder, typed the numbers one by one.

'Hi, my brother dropped off some things a week ago; but there's been a mistake. There were a couple of things in there that shouldn't have been. I wondered if you still have them. Yes. Couple of gardening books. Titles, ah hang on...'

He told her.

'The Illustrated Dictionary of British Flora. green cover, gold letters. And *Cool Climate Gardens*...with a picture of a rose bower on the cover. Thanks.'

She covered the phone with her hand. 'They're having a look.' She crossed her fingers, held them up to her face and waved them at him.

'You do? Oh that's excellent. Thank you. Can you put them aside for my brother to pick up please? Later in the week. Thanks again.'

She hung up the phone, and walked back into the living room, a broad smile on her face. 'Well there you go. All done. You don't even have to buy them back. They completely understand. Happens quite often apparently. Great, isn't it?'

'Yeah, that's...great.' A part of him felt lighter, relieved of the worry about the books. Though now the coins were heavier, little flat rocks in his pockets.

'Thanks again for making tea.' She sat beside him on the floor.

'Thanks for ringing.'

'Promise me you won't go doing what you did the other day, E,' she said.

'Promise me.'

He hesitated. A promise was a promise. A promise meant *never, forbidden, door closed and locked*. But if he tried again it would certainly not be the train – the result was not sure enough and the last time had left him far too shaken up. And to be truthful, today was ok; he felt things were looking up, despite the stowaway coins on his person, which were now very unwelcome indeed. 'Okay. I promise.'

'Good.' She reached over him to the sofa, into her bag, pulled out her purse, wrinkled out a 20-pound note. 'Here, take this. For emergencies. Buy yourself a beer or something. You know. You should be signed up for benefits; I'm sure Tiff will organise that, but you need something for now. Go on, take it. E, I know you've got no money, take it.'

He took it from her, and held it folded in his hand, hardly holding it at all really, just feeling the paper resting on his skin. Then he closed his fist round it, stuffed it into one of his pockets, where he felt it cosy up to one of the coins.

'Thanks Mandy.' Dutiful. Required response. *Tick*.

A red car pulled up outside then, crunching over something in the gutter as it stopped. The two of them watched it, a welcome diversion in the static of the street. 'Mmmm, Volkswagen Polo,' said Amanda. 'I'd love one of those.'

They watched the car disgorge Tiff with a pleasing click of the door. The door shut; Tiff waved at them from the road. Her footsteps were quick and businesslike up the short path.

‘Right then. Looks like your ride.’ Amanda drew him to her in a hug, a very quick one, the family hug, fleshy arms gripping his torso quickly, then releasing and stepping back. Almost as if she were embarrassed to be doing it. But that was how they had always hugged – those of them who gave hugs, his mother and Amanda, not any of the boys (they were the hugged, the *huggees*) – like an apology that had to be given, something to be gotten over and done with.

He stood with his arms stiffly by his side.

‘E, when you get those books back, why don’t you come round and do my garden – what there is of it, anyway. How about that?’

‘Of course,’ Ernest said. ‘Of course’.

Amanda looked back out the window at the car. ‘Ah. Sunroof too,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘She must get paid okay’.

Chapter Seven.

Amanda opened the door and the cold air rushed in at them, clung at his face. He shrank into his jacket a little further, wrapped Martin’s scarf around his throat.

Tiff was wearing an enormous white puffa jacket from which her head stuck out as if propped on. Half a hand appeared from under a voluminous sleeve, waved at them. ‘Morning!’ The other hand appeared; she brought both together and rubbed them briskly. ‘Hey guys. Chilly, isn’t it? Brrr!’ She mimed an exaggerated shiver, which in the jacket only made her resemble a large maggot.

Ernest felt Amanda’s hand tense on him, almost as if she was fixing him to her, a sort of fleshy handcuff. He looked over and saw her thin-lipped smile, knew the word ‘guys’ to be a trigger that would have set her on edge. *I’m not a guy. Use my name.* She had been sensitive about it for years. Perhaps due to Reece’s teasing. ‘Amanda the man, Ernest the little twat,’ he would say, taking on the role of comic introducer to their friends.

‘That’s enough Reece,’ their mother would chip in. Ruffled his hair while Amanda glowered.

‘Man alive,’ he would say when she got up. ‘Man o man. Don’t be so manly. Ask the man’ – his response to anything that required knowledge – meant ‘ask the brainy one’, acknowledged to be Amanda. She took to wearing florals, avoided trousers, shorts. Even these days she would wear jeans, but nothing else with legs. Only skirts and dresses. *Guys*. A little word, and a few years ago she had corrected people who said it, but these days it seemed that she just swallowed it bitterly and communicated her feelings with a pointed stare instead, which Ernest could not help but feel was markedly less effective.

Amanda nodded, holding Tiff’s gaze. ‘Hello, Tiff.’ Said like she was spitting out a plum stone.

Ernest watched Tiff’s eyes wobble from him to Amanda, the welcome mat to the door frame, then back to Amanda and finally him again. ‘Got everything?’ she asked, glancing at the backpack, back at Ernest. A smile for Amanda calling up almost all of her teeth into service. They really were such large teeth it was rather off-putting. They disconcerted him, looked like chips of white marble, so sharp and bright.

Amanda patted him on the shoulder and he jumped. He dragged his gaze from the teeth and turned to look at her. She raised an eyebrow at him. ‘You okay? Need anything else?’

‘No, I’m good. I’ll manage. Really.’ He believed himself, mostly. ‘Thanks for everything.’

He looked back at Tiff. Thank god, she had covered her teeth with her lips. But they were behind there, he knew that. Lurking in wait. Their organised bulk just hidden but obvious. Toddlers behind curtains waiting to leap out.

Tiff shepherded him to the car, opened the door for him, waited till he got in, shut it on him as he connected the seatbelt with a loud click. He immediately undid it, held it until Tiff got in as well and locked herself down into the seat. Clicked it in again, holding his breath, and fought the urge to undo it again. The pressure across his stomach made him feel sick.

‘So how you feeling today? Okay? How’s that bump on the head?’

‘Fine.’ Ernest clutched his bag to his chest, focused on the road in front. His head spun, a cluster of helium balloons in an updraft, bumping against each other, whirling and pirouetting in the back of his brain. He was going to faint, keel over here in the seat,

his forehead meeting his knees with a thud. He took a deep breath, *slowly now, slowly*, held it, let it out gradually in little jerky puffs. Trying to get some control back. Wrest it away from the woman in the driver's seat.

It was a bit like being carried off the train platform all over again. Not that he remembered that bit, really. Just some hurting, the smell of coffee – spilt by someone on his shoes, he discovered later – and the rocking from side to side as they had put him on a stretcher. Completely out of control. A bit like being a child. Although truthfully, he wasn't sure exactly what he would do with himself at this point in time, if left to his own devices. Sometimes that was the problem with freedom. The freedom to choose, to do what you wanted whenever you liked. Sometimes having the choice was actually the most restricting, was the scary bit. Paralysing even.

'I've booked you into a hostel in the East End. You'll have a room there for a while, then we'll try and get you something more permanent.'

Was he expected to comment? *Hooray! Thanks for the help! Making me social.*

Tiff's hand was pale on the dark gear-stick. Long with prominent knuckles. One ring on the forefinger, with a red stone set in to the silver. She pushed the gear-stick into first, dragged it into second. Took her hand back to the wheel. They turned out of Amanda's street, passed Finsbury Park station. 'Your sister seems nice,' she said.

Ernest said nothing.

'You're lucky to have family to help you out; some people don't have that. I know families can sometimes be tricky, but when you really need help, family is a blessing. Did you have a nice night, catching up?'

Painful. This car trip was going to be incredibly wearing. Chit-chat. Pointless conversation. He needed to do something. Stop her chatting, going on at him. He turned to look over at Tiff; she turned her head and gave him a smile.

'Shut up please,' he said. 'It's too early for me to talk. I don't really want to, and to be honest, my family aren't that nice. Please, just shut up.' Bees whirring in his throat, the words like stones, un-weighted him.

Tiff looked sideways at him and he saw her hands grip the wheel a little tighter. 'Ok then, Ernest, whatever you like. Sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. We'll talk later, after you're settled in the hostel.'

Though she didn't sound sorry. Sorry sounded like cotton wool, elderflower cordial, sunshine. Hers was an anvil, broken glass, dry oat crackers.

What might happen if he hopped out of the car at the next traffic lights; just opened the door and stepped out, swung the bag over his shoulder and walked off? She would probably just drive on. Social workers were busy. And he was a small fish, wasn't he? Only a danger to himself really. There were others with drug problems, alcohol problems. They really needed saving. Not him. She'd probably just let him go. He could get out at the next lights and walk to the train station. Buy a ticket with the money and get out of London. Get on the first train. Go somewhere.

Madeline would say do it, go for it. Do something. Do anything. Amanda's voice, so recently in his head, said *stay in the car*. His nan would have agreed. Almost twenty years since her death and he was still consulting her memory. But Madeline, of all of them, was strongest.

Ernest checked the door, considered his exit. A small handle near his elbow, straightforward enough, no locking on the doors. His backpack at his feet, reachable if he just leaned forward, grabbed the strap. Which he did now, dragged it up and perched it on his lap like a pet. Albeit a bulky, legless one.

They were coming up to some lights. Orange...now red. Tiff slowed, braked smoothly, steadily, not like Amanda. Drove as she seemed to practice her job, calmly, confidently. Quite a good driver. She looked across at him briefly, back to the road.

He watched the cars on the cross street start up, move through the intersection. Then when it appeared that they were beginning to slow, he reached for the handle, turned it and ejected himself from the car in a rolling lurch. Turned back to the way in which they had come and started walking in the opposite direction to the car. Purposeful steps. Feet carrying him eagerly, even joyfully. The thrill of escape.

He looked back over his left shoulder as Tiff wound down the window, called after him. Then the light went green and as she opened her door and went to step out, the person behind her tooted, leant on the horn – a vehicular scream at her misdemeanour, setting off several sympathetic toots. She shut the door and drove off slowly, creeping along beside the kerb as if Ernest might decide to change his mind and come back.

Now where was he? Just down from Caledonian Road. Bit of a useless station. He really needed one like Finsbury Park, but they were well past that now, not that the

thought of walking had ever put him off. But Paddington, London Bridge, Victoria, they were all useful stations. Not Caledonian Road. And he didn't want to use up his money on a short ride just to get somewhere of use. That would be, well, wasteful. He was sure Amanda would prefer that her donation to him was used carefully, not thrown away on short rides.

Then there were the books. How would he pick up the books? He would have to walk to south London, pick them up, then walk to Kings Cross, or Euston. It could be done, but it would take a while. He stopped to measure up the distances, the times taken, then did another about face, back towards the city and away from Caledonian Road. His watch said 10:23am. So at this pace, he could pick up the books and be on a train by 1pm, maybe 12:40 if the lights were right. His knee was sore though, twinged behind the kneecap. Bit of a twist from the accident, maybe. He stopped to flex it, stretch his muscles, feeling the merging of pleasure and pain the length of his calf. The knee still hurt though, stubbornly refusing to be soothed by the stretch. Something inside, inaccessible and tender. He stood straight again, shifted the backpack to the other shoulder; perhaps the other leg would bear the weight. Started walking again, slower this time. *Twinge*.

If I ignore it, it might go away. He walked for a few minutes, trying to discern a pattern to his pain. One, two three steps, *twinge*. Five six seven, *twinge, twinge, twinge*. Eleven *twinge*. He stopped, looked out at the road. *Why now, knee?*

Someone tooted him, pulled alongside. Red car, window wound down. She leaned over, called to him. 'Ernest please. I'm sorry.' Two sugars this time. 'Please. Come on, I won't say a word, promise. Whatever's wrong I can help you get it sorted. Will you just come to the hostel with me? Then you can do whatever you want.'

His knee answered her with a twinge of acquiescence. He frowned at it, but acknowledged that it spoke sense. How could he walk three hours with a knee injury; mild though it was, it would certainly get worse. And then where would he be. Back in the hospital? An awful prospect.

She pushed open the car door and as it swung out toward him, the warmth of the air-conditioning seemed to head straight to him, played him on its line. His resolve dropped away. What was he thinking? He had little more than twenty pounds to his

name. A few days food at best, let alone anything else. By escaping he would only be prolonging the inevitable. They would reel him back in, in the end.

What else could you do with twenty pounds? Buy a lottery ticket he supposed. He had never done that. Buy a cheap pair of shoes. With reliable laces. Get a professional CV done. Or get a train, see where it takes you, then leave the rest up to chance. Come to think of it, it didn't sound much like something he would do at all. Romantic. Foolish. No thinking things through. Besides, he was in no fit state.

He felt the train idea dissolve – first the image of the station, then the vision of the countryside he might see on the way, then the sound of the opening doors, *sssshhhhh* – allowed them to sneak out the back way from his brain; pretending they had never been there in the first place. Then he stepped back into the car, threw the backpack on the floor at his feet.

'Thanks,' said Tiff. 'Really, thanks.' She wiped her nose, gave a sniff.

They were back at the traffic lights. Ernest stared out the window, looked for plastic bags in trees, always more visible at this time of the year when the branches were bare. Wondered why no one ever got them out. Litter collectors stretching their remit to above the footpath and the gutter.

A man crossed in front of them with several dogs of various shapes and sizes, a couple of the smaller ones with coats. 'Crappy job being a dog walker in this weather,' said Tiff. 'Oops,' she put her hand over her mouth, looked over at him. 'Sorry, couldn't help myself.' Her eyes were red.

'It's okay. Sorry I was grumpy before. I didn't mean to be rude.' The cold air seemed to have cleared his head a bit. Perhaps she wasn't so bad.

'Apology accepted.' A smile.

They sat and watched the man stop and wait with his dogs for the crossing at the next corner. A blue plastic bag fluttered from his back pocket. The dogs stood. One sat, turned as if to watch the car.

'Here,' said Tiff. 'Have one of these.' She reached across and opened the glove-box, crackled a green and white plastic packet at him.

'Mints?' he asked. They looked more like chlorine tablets.

'Yep, all the way from New Zealand. My favourites. My sister sends them to me.'

‘They’re enormous,’ he said, holding one between a thumb and forefinger. Hard white powdery circles, only slightly smaller than a 50-pence coin. He popped it in his mouth, sucked on it. Felt the hard edges bump against his teeth.

‘Back home it’s traditional to try and suck a hole in them,’ said Tiff, her words a little misshapen, although still understandable. He heard the muted click of tooth on confectionary and saw a round mint shape settle in the side of her cheek.

He ran his tongue round the hard edges, wondered how on earth you could suck a hole in something this big. Already his tastebuds were bristling at the roughness of the mint and the concentration of sugar. Too much mint. Though not that minty. He sucked at it absentmindedly, his attention already moving off to outside the car again, leaving his mouth and tongue to do their instinctive work on their own.

Green light. Man with dogs was left behind; now there was a jogger with a very strange run, probably how Ernest would run if he ever chose to; now a couple of people walking, one on his phone, the other fiddling in her bag, looking for something as she walked. Maybe a phone ringing. You never were safe from them. Another plastic bag in a tree. Blue one. Looked like the bags the dog man had in his pocket.

Ernest’s molars met peppermint with firm intention, and it cracked. ‘Oh.’ He couldn’t help himself letting out a note of disappointment.

‘Harder than it sounds, aye?’ she said, reached across, flicked open the glove-box again, took the mints out, squashed the packet into a cup holder between the seats. ‘I find it almost impossible when I’m driving.’ As if on cue, there was a crack. She stuck out her tongue at him and showed him the mint in three uneven pieces.

He took another mint, ignored the world outside the car. This time he was more successful. It took concentration, application of his senses to his mouth alone. He used his incisor to scrape a small hollow in the top of the peppermint, then turned it over with his tongue, gently scraped at the other side. Then he used his tongue to slowly worry the rest until the middle gave way, became a Polo instead. Was that why Polos had been invented? To save the time making holes in larger peppermints? There was nothing you could do with Polos. No variety. You either sucked them, or crunched them. A packet did not last long, although granted, they were more subtle than these gigantic peppermint tablets. Though not as moreish. These were really rather good. You could even say

addictive. He imagined everyone in New Zealand walking round with huge mints in their mouths, round shapes in their cheeks.

When the Polo was gone, he reached for another. 'May I?' he said. 'They're really good.'

She nodded. 'Absolutely. Go for your life. Hey Ernest, what were you doing before you were homeless? You'd only been on the street, what, four days?'

'What study have you done? When did you leave school?'

'I studied IT at first', said Ernest. 'Two years. A diploma. I actually wanted to be a librarian. But my father wouldn't let me. Said it wasn't a man's job. Said it would make me go blind.'

'Silly,' said Tiff.

'So, family, said Ernest. 'I don't like talking about my family.'

'All right, mate. Consider it noted.' Tiff clamped her mouth shut, nodded at him. Smiled. 'I get it. Actually, I know what you mean. Sometimes it's easier getting on with your family when you're on the other side of the world. Apart from occasional phone calls in the middle of the night. But bear in mind that they can still be useful when you're in a bind. When no one else will help you out, family usually will. You may not like them, you may not like having to rely on them, but be thankful they're there.'

They drove in silence after that. She had a point, though he wasn't willing to concede it. He helped himself to three more peppermints.

'Right,' said Tiff eventually. 'Here we are. Home sweet home for you for the next few days.'

A large brick building. Small door for the size of it, really. A couple of men sitting on the steps, bodies curled over like old leaves, faces watching the street.

Tiff nodded to the packet of peppermints as he got out. 'Take a couple for the road.'

Chapter Eight.

The room was small with a tall, white wardrobe on the left, and a squat, wooden chest of drawers with peeling veneer to his right. Two single beds ranged on either side, their heads at the far end underneath a long, PVC-framed window. It felt light, airy, if a little stuffy. He had expected it to feel like a cell, but despite its starkness, the ceilings were

high enough to avoid the feeling of being in a trap. He walked to the window and opened it the couple of centimetres it would allow, sucked in the cold air, laced with smoke, wafting up, no doubt from the front steps, from the two old men. Despite the smoke – he didn't like it, but a room was a room, he had nothing to complain about – he was glad they had not given him a room on one of the higher floors. He said to Tiff in the foyer. 'Nothing too high up. It gives me vertigo.'

She had looked at him curiously – although perhaps that was just her normal look, from the little he had been around her, she seemed to use it a lot, that searching look (often combined with one of her smiles), trying to see the words you hadn't said – and said she would see what they could do. There was nothing on the ground level, common areas only, apparently, but there was this room. 'It's normally kept for less mobile people,' said the woman at reception, 'but we'll give it to you for now – though we might have to move you if someone comes in who needs it more than you.' He was fine with that, even a temporary room on a lower floor was better than having to bear being on a higher level, surely higher than humans should be.

He leaned against the window, faced into the room, blocked the breeze from the window so it had to change direction and curve around him. He could feel it either side, a slow seeping of the cold leaking into the warm, a steady exchange, vigorous cold air coming in confident and curious, sleepy warm air being hustled out.

The walls of the room were pale yellow, the curtains a shade darker, almost the same colour as the checks on the bedcovers. Yellow: uplifting, warming, the colour of optimism. Though for Ernest, it made him positively queasy, the colour of weak urine, sun-sneezes, and bile, although at least it wasn't the so-called healing green of the hospital.

He sat down on one of the beds; it squeaked, as if in protest, and a small spider ran out from under it, across the floor and under the drawers. Someone had scratched *Me Too* into the wall above the headboard. Then he tried a bouncy sort of sitting motion, swivelling his buttocks from side to side to see if the bed softened up. Then lying down on each, facing the wall, as he always did in sleep, shoulder butting mattress in greeting, one by one. Tried both beds, hoping there was a clear winner, but they performed equitably. Hard mattresses, although without the lumps he expected there might be. Both said durable, felt reliable, promised serviceable sleep. Nothing to complain about;

nothing to write home about - wherever that was. One bed on the wardrobe side, the other along from the chest of drawers. Not really an advantage either way. The left bed had a fuller pillow, but you could always swap those over.

He needed to make a choice in case someone else came in to share the room, yet the enormity of it worried him. If only they had chosen for him. Or someone else was already in here, occupying a bed.

The same old anxiety fixed him to the floor, made the beds loom monstrous in his vision. Should he toss a coin? Although the only coins he had were from Amanda's jar. His stomach flipped instead. Better to leave the coins. They were just a reminder of something he didn't wish remembered.

He turned back the covers and inspected the sheets – pale blue, a roughish texture. The left bed's sheeting had a few brownish spots on the edges, looked like old blood stains. You would think they would have some of that industrial bleach to get rid of those, blanch them right out of existence, that chemical freshness sweeping aside the taint. Perhaps they had tried. It was the decider, at any rate. He re-folded the sheet with care, smoothed the duvet, then put his bag – like his colonising flag, wasn't it? - on the end of the other bed, demarcating his choice. The *Me Too* bed, which, in itself, was vaguely comforting. Not just him. Someone else, but without the awkwardness, the expectation to interact. Last, he exchanged the pillow for the fuller one, and lay down on his bed, feet up on the bag. It was not exactly homely, but it would do.

He could hear the traffic from the road, a few sirens slicing through the hum, and his stomach rumbled in response. Almost time for lunch. Perhaps he wasn't in the mood for a lie-down after all.

Tiff had given him a leaflet with soup kitchen locations, which he withdrew from his back pocket, at the same time releasing a coin to run across the floor, dash to the drawers where it fell flatly onto the thin carpet. He retrieved it, felt its complicit warmth from his pocket. Placed it on the windowsill in the cold cleansing breeze. *Coffee, Tea and Hot Dinners*, said the leaflet. *Provided thanks to our generous sponsor. A benevolent bread company taking a turn at providing soup with bread and hot drinks for the week.*

The thought of taking the donated food galled him. He was already taking free accommodation. Besides, there were others who needed it more. And it reminded him of

his family dinners. A rule always to finish what was on your plate, be grateful to be so fortunate. Had never thought the situation would be reversed.

‘There are starving children in Africa,’ his father would remind them, staring pointedly at the standby mound of mashed potato, or spare broccoli floret.

‘Not everyone’s as fortunate as you.’ His mother followed with her own stock line.

‘Why can’t we give it to the poor people,’ Ernest said one night, repulsed by a particularly fibrous piece of swede. ‘You mean the homeless,’ said his mother. ‘We can’t. By the time we get it to them it’ll have gone off.’

The thought of cast-off vegetables turned him off the soup kitchen even further. Undoubtedly he might have to resort to it at some point, but for now – the coin on the windowsill winked its agreement – it was preferable by far to use the tainted coins from Amanda’s for a sandwich. Perhaps if he got rid of them he might be less likely to remember how he got them. Or he could use the note, try to avoid touching the coins if at all possible. He unfolded the twenty from his pocket and unfolded it, fingered it, folded it back up again.

Okay, first some housekeeping, then the note would buy him lunch.

He opened the door to the wardrobe. The musty smell of old timber, and something else. Marijuana? Someone ignoring the hostel’s no drugs policy. *Me Too*, perhaps? He hung up a shirt – he could not imagine Martin ever fitting that one – along with the shorts (why had she given him shorts when it was winter?), trousers too (no way was he ever going to wear those), then unpacked the rest of the clothes one by one into the drawers, folding them neatly and layering them in order of outer to underwear.

It was then that he heard the music through the wall. Like reggae, very faint, and very tinny; the accompanying live percussion almost drowning it out. Reminded him of a certain summer’s day. This music, that music. Sitting in a private garden at Notting Hill, jumped over the fence and hidden up a tree. Funny that he got impatient and anxious around people, but he could spend hours up a tree – sitting there out of the crowds, listening to the music, watching the people, making up stories about them from his bird’s eye vantage point. *He sells shoes to fat ladies. She makes watches and has seven children. He’s come from out of town and is smuggling geckos in his pockets.* 1991 it was; late in the afternoon, although perhaps it just seemed that way, he didn’t really remember the time, only the light, how it had fallen through the leaves on him in

elongated spots. Or perhaps it was what had happened, what he had seen that brought his day to a close, made it seem later than it had actually been.

He had been sitting there since 9am, had packed himself a sandwich and an apple, and run off, snuck out and along the road, taken the tube to Notting Hill early with the crowds. It had been easy to get away, so many children in the house that his mother did not miss one or two, as long as they were back for dinner. He planned it the night before, patience the one thing he had in spades. He was not a risk taker, not demanding, did not expect ridiculous outcomes. Just methodical action, planning, to see a goal through. Sudden thinking, spontaneity, even reflexes made him nervous. He would have made a good wildlife photographer, he thought. All that waiting, crouched in bushes, grasses, riverbanks. He could wait for England, if only waiting was a sport. Gardening too, that was another one. He had been known to sit out in the garden after planting something, sitting there, watching it grow. There were always other things to see: ants, aphids, birds, bees, neighbours, cats, snails, grasshoppers. It was one of his greatest pleasures on a summer day.

‘Get yourselves outside!’ his mother would yell. ‘And don’t get into trouble!’ Shooing them off with great circular arm movements from the front door.

His siblings would run off down the street to friends’ houses, or play football in the street; Ernest would creep back round the back and sit at the bottom of their small garden, front row seat at the vegetable patch. Often Amanda or one of the others came and collected him to be their goalie, or make up an odd member of the team, but usually he was left alone as he wished.

This time he had been adamant that he was going to watch the Carnival, see the floats, listen to the music that his mother would not let him listen to – that African ting-a-ling, she called it – but was to his ears all blue sky, flip-flops and smiles. She had no idea, only his siblings would miss him if they needed someone for a game. He slipped out so easily he might have been an insect.

He was just watching the passers-by, listening to the music wafting through the warm afternoon air. Sitting there in the garden, waiting for something to happen. Watching ants carrying along pieces of leaves along the branches, people wandering past. Families with children drawn in tight – don’t get lost among the crowds. Though he had not expected the happening. A woman in a white dress and an orange visor was

dancing in front of his fence. Behind her, a man had stopped, half-turned to speak to another man, or perhaps answer, Ernest was too far away to hear. The gecko man moved in with something in his hand; it flashed in the air, moved like a fish, graceful and swift. A knife – a big one, he thought, he remembered it flick the sun into his eyes before his view was blocked by another person walking past. There was a sort of shuffling, a cry, then he saw the black helmet of a policeman move forward suddenly, then it was the crackle of receivers and shouts and running. Among the confusion, Ernest dropped down from the tree, although it was more of a falling really in his panic – happenings were good, but not those sort of happenings – had grazed his leg on the trunk or a sharp branch, and arrived home with blood streaking his leg in great stripes. His mother had screamed at him in panic until she realised that it was only a graze. Then she had slapped him for making her worry. But he never did find out what happened to the man who had fallen.

And ever since, he had been worse at watching. No trees. And he had been funny about heights. Although you couldn't quite call it vertigo, he was uncomfortable anywhere higher than the first floor. Lucky really, that Tiff had managed to get him this room.

He walked to the window and peered out, wondered again about his neighbour. The faint music coming from next door seemed friendly, laid back. Sounded like the sun.

Chapter Nine.

Plastic cups. Not speakers at all. It was two ribbed plastic cups, lying on their sides, with earphones placed in them. The music surprisingly quiet in the room itself. 'Thin walls', his neighbour said, thumping one to make a hollow sound. 'You can even hear it in there? Amazing. I know they's not as good as them travel speakers, but they better than nothing – they amplifies the sound, in any case. Besides, I isn't into sticking those things in my ears.'

'Can I have a look?'

The man nodded, bent slightly and swept his palms towards the cups, that elaborate 'be my guest' gesture, which Ernest usually found overly formal, seemed to belong on game shows where they were showing the prizes, though with this man it was

like part of his makeup. Was he from the Caribbean, maybe? Dark skin, old acne scars on his cheeks. Short, but very regal bearing.

Ernest took the earphones out of the cup, held them in the air. Sure enough it was quieter, though not by a lot. 'You seem to know a lot about electronics.'

'Not electronics. Principles of physics, innit? Sound bounces off the sides, makes more points of sound. You only just hear it? I play this every day.'

'No. I just moved in.'

'You just arrive? You got staff yet?'

'Er...' What did he mean? 'Staff?'

'You know. Social workers. Them people they want you to see. Psychologist. Psychiatrist, social worker, art therapist. Staff.' He shrugged.

Now that was an interesting concept. A new way of looking at it. 'I have a social worker. And in a few days I'm seeing a psychiatrist.' Or was it a psychologist; he never could tell the difference.

Tiff had arranged it – not something he was looking forward to. Interrogation, that's what it was. He had to see a psychiatrist a few times as a child. When his parents felt that he wasn't joining in with the others. Thought he was being picked on, bullied. He was, but he didn't want to talk about it, and the psychiatrist didn't help. Told his parents that he was very intelligent and needed to be kept occupied. They organised things for him to do after school, which had actually made things worse. Table tennis, which he was hopeless at; chess, which he was really rather good at, although it was too difficult to play at home because no one else was interested in learning; home chemistry, which would have been fun, apart from the fact that Robert used to nick half the stuff out of it for bomb-making experiments.

In the end his parents realised that he was happiest spending time with his Nan, so that had been the fallback plan. Visit her after school almost every day, the two of them making their own fun. School holidays he was sometimes even allowed to stay with her for a week on end, helping her with the train cataloguing, helping her with the garden, accompanying her to the trains, and a couple of times, even to the local pub, where she would have her gin and tonics and they would share a plate of fish and chips with peas or sometimes a steak and kidney pie.

‘There you go then man, you on the way up,’ his neighbour said. ‘Only gets better from here. See if they give you a nutritionist as well. Maybe a little of that physiotherapy. They do it if you need it. Just have to convince them that it’s necessary. Back ache? Get yourself to the osteopath. Stomach pains? Dietician. Before you know it you can have a regular retinue.’ He gesticulated behind him with a sweeping motion as if to indicate an enormous behind. ‘There’s posters downstairs. Pick one, sign up, and add to your staff. Services for you and me, man. That’s what it is. Make use of it. You make their lives worth living.’

‘What staff do you have?’

‘Several, man, getting so many I can barely keep count. Personally, I’m starting to think maybe I don’t need so many – but don’t let that put you off – once you start seeing them you have to keep it up, and between you and me, I think they get dependent on us. So you just got to keep a little distance. Let them go after a while. Try a new one. Maybe take it slow.’

‘You sound like you have it all figured out.’

‘Oh yes. If you really need attention, just find a problem in your head – my top tip – invent a little suicidal episode. They LOVE that, makes them feel really needed. Course you don’t need to go through with the thing. Just tell em you feel like killing yourself. They’ll be all over you like a rash. Talking, talking, talking, at ya, to ya. Perfect if you want a little extra-intensive three-on-one.’

‘I have extra-intensive attention at the moment.’

‘Phoooo!,’ he exclaimed. ‘You go right in at the top! You got a drug dependency?’

‘No.’

‘Good. You don’t want that shit, man. Who you got for your social worker?’

‘Tiff. Blonde hair, New Zealander. Seems nice.’

‘Tiff. She that one who looks like Debbie Harry in her young days? Blondie, right?’ He whistled a song that Ernest did not know.

Ernest shrugged. She didn’t look like anyone he knew of.

‘Mine’s a proper handful. On my back constantly trying to get me to stop smoking. It’s like she’d rather me take up the drink. It’s hard to get good staff in this city. Not enough focus on the individual. They have their quotas, I’m sure. They divvy us up and allocate us like colour by numbers. Except it’s jobs by numbers. This one for art class,

this one for psychotherapy, this one for music therapy. Man, brother, you got to get yourself into as many as you can. Then you'll be too busy to get a job.'

'I don't see the problem. You don't want a job?'

'They don't want to find you any decent jobs here. They'll have you packing at a supermarket, stacking shelves. Booooooring! I rather be on the street, playing music for a living. But I pawned my guitar, ain't got nothing to buy it back. Now I not sure I even remember how to play.' He looked out the window.

'As a young man I had so many ideas, things to do, places to be. Now I think I forgotten who I am. At least I got my staff. Gives me something to do.' He stopped suddenly, as if he had remembered something.

'Hey man, I gotta pack.' Here he waved at an enormous mound of clothes and flat boxes stacked against the wall. 'I'm moving on, they's taken away my bags and found me a place of my own. Pleased to make your acquaintance neighbour. Now if you'll excuse me, I got packing to do.'

He walked with Ernest to the door, held up an unsteady palm as Ernest walked off down the stairs. With his dark lips and very white teeth like a ray of light.

For the first time in a long while, Ernest felt his smile come more easily, lips and mouth feeling drawn to the sides as if on string. He had staff. Perhaps this wasn't so bad after all. People who were paid to give a shit.

Chapter Ten.

Two days later he was going stir-crazy.

He was still the only one in his room, but the echoes from the corridor – even the noise from the rooms nearby – seemed to seep in through the walls. Felt as if he had company all the time; it was like the whole place was alive, regardless of whether anyone was visible or not.

He had taken to walking to get away from it, which gave him some respite, but it didn't seem enough. He needed a change. It was nice that they were all so *well-meaning*, but he didn't feel well here. Felt queasy, on edge. Itchy. Though he knew why they were encouraging him to stay. He was High Risk, had a large fluorescent label now, thanks to his efforts at the station. They wanted to keep him where they could keep an eye on him.

Make sure he didn't do anything they didn't want him to do. Top himself, specifically, but probably other things too. Not that there was much problem with that – he wasn't one for drugs. He had Robert to thank for that.

All this time and nothing to fill it. Tiff had promised him some job assistance. But what sort of job? He had looked for several weeks after his last job finished and found nothing. Other than customer service. Which no one would ever force him to do, not that he would be any good at it anyway.

Without drugs, it was almost better being on the street. At least on the street you had other things to keep you busy. Finding somewhere to sleep that didn't smell of piss, was out of the thoroughfare so you didn't get moved on, gave enough shelter against the rain or prevailing winds. Looking for money, asking for it if you were brave; if you had gotten to that point. Collecting enough to buy a coffee or a sandwich, a pasty if it was cold. Ha, look at him, pretending he was a specialist. After four days sleeping in a bookshop doorway, and in fact, he hadn't even needed to ask for money, well, only once, and he had sworn it would be the last.

It was hardly as if he had become accustomed to it. A homelessness specialist. An honorary doctorate in No Fixed Address. Although he had managed to prove that you could exist on the street on £5.30. That bought you three bread rolls, an apple, a couple of pieces of smoked fish, mackerel or whatever it was – though they often only came in packs of three which was altogether a bit much fish for one over a single day and it wasn't the sort of thing you could carry around with you for later – also a packet of green beans, which you should really cook, in fact it did recommend it on the packet because they were grown in Kenya or somewhere. He supposed it was to protect people in case they picked up a sort of dodgy African soil bug or something. Still, he had eaten a raw packet of beans on two of the four days and it hadn't done him any harm. It was the fish that he didn't want to eat again.

If you could manage to spend a little extra, up the budget to £8.20, you could add on a coffee at one of the chain cafes – if you were presentable enough, that meant a place to manage a shave and a bit of a clean-up. Though to be fair, you only really needed a coffee if you were going to work; something to get you started – not much point of that if you were unemployed. It was habit. The coffee in the hostel was like dirty water though; if there was anything that would help him break the habit, that was

it. And he had only Amanda's money left, wasn't exactly flush with money for coffees. He'd picked up the books the day before and thank God they hadn't charged him, were very understanding that 'Mistakes happen dear.' But he wanted to use the money for something worthwhile, not supplement his nervous energy with coffee. It would only throw the rest of his pitiful existence into sharp relief.

Exist though, that was the operative word. For £5.30 you could exist. Or exist moderately cleanly on £8.20. With about as much meaning as a flea on a cat. It wasn't living, by any stretch of the imagination. Not that he had been living before. And this, it wasn't living either. It was Death by Severe and Unmitigated Boredom. If anything, it was worse. Being monitored constantly. 'What are you going to do today Ernest? Why don't you join the Art Therapy Classes Ernest? Have you thought about a job Ernest, you're a bright guy, let me help you.'

How does fuck off sound, he had thought. But not said. It was just easier to nod and blink and do what they suggested. At the moment. After all, it wasn't that he had anything better to do. Sometimes he wished his mouth was not on such a tight leash; it would make things interesting, if not easier, if the words were just allowed out now and again. But somehow, at some earlier point, he had developed this restriction on them. Recognised their danger. They had power, that was the trouble, and you needed to know how to use them properly, swing them about with skill.

Sometimes he didn't understand things, jokes, for example. Had learned that often it was easier to just keep reactions and words in check. Better that than comment and become a target, the centre of attention. Though it was not without its problems. Anxiety fizzing his head, frothing like icecream in Coke. Which led to accidents on the outside.

At school, he had been remarked upon as bright – almost too bright. Caused trouble, shifted in his seat. Could not seem to concentrate, especially after lunch, or when put on the spot. Was unable to give a straight answer in class, though was spot on with his homework. 'We're not sure what to do with him', teachers told his parents.

His parents would answer, 'neither are we'. It became a well-worn family joke, *Ernest Holiday Brain.* Although really, it was just in waiting, in hiding, tension turning it to stone.

Here it wasn't that there was anxiety of the usual kind; all the old stimuli were removed. The issue now was that he was surrounded by people who dealt in removing stress. Over-attentive people, who thought that they knew best.

The only thing that had ever really removed his worries was being in the garden, come to think of it. The one thing out of everything he'd ever done; and yes, so what if he was young, and hadn't done that much – it had been more him, made him feel centred and unworried and light. Just sitting there and watching the plants. Talking to them when you felt like it, but otherwise just watching and feeding and watering and sometimes planting, maybe moving them round a bit or cutting bits off to make them fit. You could talk nonsense to them if you wanted, even read them a book; they didn't mind. Music too, that was supposed to be good. Classical. Years ago there was a boy in his class who said he'd killed a plant with the Velvet Underground really loud, but his father had said 'Rubbish, you can't kill a plant by playing Velvet Underground,' but then his father would have said that; he loved them, the Velvet Underground that is. Hated plants, liked meat better, perhaps that was one of the reasons he had moved to France. So why the hell had he been a grocer?

Wasn't much call for gardening in central London. Not unless you could count that guerrilla gardening. Those people who snuck up to roundabouts in the middle of the night and planted peonies, mandarin trees and the like. Couple of years ago he helped a colleague plant a small row of ornamental cabbages outside a north London tower block. Wrong area for them really. Three days later they were gone. One by one hoofed out in the middle of the night, with just small untidy hollows in the earth to show that anything had been there at all. Ernest had walked the neighbourhood sniffing for boiled cabbage, but there was none.

His room could do with a pot plant. Something to brighten it up. One of those peace lilies – the kind that took the chemicals out of the air. He felt for the twenty in his back pocket, fished it out and unfolded it, smelling its chemical newness, the potential of a leafy green companion for beside the window.

Anyway, everything else he had done had been stressful in some way, not a good way, not a coping with stress and being improved by it sort of way – character-building, that was it – not that sort of way, but paralysing, a freaking out and hiding in the cellar sort of way. Take the IT course. He was quite good at it in college, picked it up really

quickly, as soon as he got used to the initial environment. Then he had to go out and get a job, and he did that, they were really impressed by his results and the reference from his lecturer, saying 'aptitude plus!' in bold letters. But on the job there were colleagues and lunch breaks and staff away days for bonding, and they interfered with his job a little too much. He didn't want to know that David from Sales had a dog called Jack and that that was his photo and yes wasn't he interesting-looking and wasn't it great that David had taught him to roll over, lie down and bark on command all in one day. Or that Sally from Distribution really liked shoes, pink ones mostly, and had thirty-five pairs would you believe it and her husband was building her a shoe cupboard just to hold them all. Let alone that Archie, he forgot what department he worked in, it might have been IT as well, that Archie went on holiday in Tenerife every year and picked up Spanish girls who wouldn't put out. Whereas he should have known that it wasn't the Spanish girls who were there to put out, it was the English ones – at least that's what Ernest had heard. What did it all matter really, these people who he had nothing in common with. No shoe collection, no pets, no overseas holiday romances. He wanted to talk about real things, important things, like problems at work and how to solve them, or world problems, things he knew about, not this dancing about with words that meant nothing with people he didn't care for, didn't want to learn to care for. Did that make him anti-social? He supposed so. Plants were easier. They would take a one-sided lecture on the state of the Middle East, or how clouds were formed (that was probably quite interesting for them, had some relevance), even last night's dreams and what they might mean. There was none of that chit-chat that just took up more space in the air.

Yes, plants were much simpler.

He supposed there was probably some other activity out there that might suit him too, but the stress of trying new things, well that caused anxiety too, didn't it, newness and change was the cause of most of aging. Look at the incidences: moving house, getting married, changing jobs, having a child. Change, change, change. Yet here he was unable to change, stuck as a squirrel in a bird feeder (he had seen that once, although they went quite berserk, perhaps he was not quite like that, maybe something more docile more like a dormouse). No change was stressful too. What was it that made humans happy then? Some balance between too much change and not enough change. Too much choice and not enough choice. If only there was a formula for it. 50%

newness, 50% status quo. No, that sounded stressful, although he couldn't put his finger on whether it sounded like too much status quo or too much change. He knew he was being simplistic, but surely there was a basis to it.

He closed his eyes, squeezed them very tightly to help him concentrate. What were the statistics? That all the cells in your body are renewed once every seven years. That would make it, what, 14.3% (rounded up) newness that the body could cope with every year. It made sense that psychological newness and physical newness would correlate in some way. That, in order to be happy, you must keep 85.7% of your life more-or-less the same until the next year rolled around.

So then, he had struck upon a formula for coping. He sought to test it with some more fact. The seven year itch, right? And the Romans had decided on seven days in the week. Also, Amanda had renovated her bathroom seven years ago and it was now looking decidedly shabby, due for a re-fit. Yes, ok, so that last bit was not exactly scientific, but it made a sort of sense. Incredible that he had figured it out all by himself, here, in this room in the yellow. And without any coffee at all.

So this Vanuatu idea, that was possibly too much change, was it not? He supposed it came under moving house. He had already changed jobs, well, lost one, this year. And so what if he was fixating on it as Tiff seemed to say. He'd also read that achievement was 99 percent perspiration. Maybe that was being a little too literal, but then he wasn't much good at lateral, cryptic crosswords and stuff. That was for old people when your logical facilities got worse and your lateral ones got better. Or did they? Perhaps it was something worth talking to Madeline about.

Maybe he should pay a visit to her. How many days had it been since he left the hospital? He didn't even know if she would still be there. Still didn't know her damn surname – that was foolish. Ah well, it was easy enough to get there, then he could ask.

Chapter Eleven.

Madeline was reading the paper. Had it spread across her lap like a blanket, left hand resting on it, while her right hand held a cigarette to her mouth. As he watched, she drew it away in a gentle arc, turned her face to the nearby window and made Os with her mouth as if she were blowing smoke rings, though nothing but air came out. A small section of the window fogged lightly with the warmth of her breath.

Thin-rimmed glasses sat awkwardly on her nose, leaning to the right. She had her parrot slippers on too, and from here, he could see their backs, small rubber studs embedded between the feathers, he supposed for extra grip. She must have caught a glimpse of his reflection in the window, for she turned to face the door and waved him over with a smile. She put the paper aside, scrunching it up with a violet rustle rather than folding it, then offered him a cigarette from a striped purple packet.

‘No thanks, I don’t smoke.’

‘Neither do I.’ She waved the cigarette at him. ‘Not that they’d let you light up in here anyway. I just like to remind myself that I could start smoking any time I want to. I tried it in my thirties for the first time – those were the days they were practically giving them out for free. Everyone was doing it; it seemed to be a good way to keep the weight down, and if you were waiting for someone, which you were often doing – those weren’t the days of calling ahead on your mobile and saying you’d be late – you could while away the time with a cigarette. Wasn’t really for me though; I found it foul, one try left me feeling like I’d kissed a farmer’s arse.’ She gave a shallow laugh. ‘And after that I decided the anticipation was better than the thing itself.’

‘Works for most of life.’

‘Ah my dear, you’re catching on!’

He felt brighter on seeing her, was glad he’d made the effort, not just for his sake, but for hers. She looked smaller today than the other day, a little droopy; even her hair looked lankier, her eyes seemed dull. Fancy holding a cigarette though, just for something to do. She really wasn’t worried what people thought, was she? She was refreshing, good for him, none of that small talk, just discussion of a different kind. She gave him energy just by talking – even though today she seemed to have less of it herself.

‘It’s nice to see you again, young man. Ernest isn’t it? You’re looking better. Although I don’t know about that shirt on you. A little dull.’

He agreed with her privately, didn’t think it bore mentioning. ‘I thought you’d be out of here by now.’

‘Oh I wish.’ She rolled her eyes, flicked her gaze across to her neighbour, a large grey-skinned woman who was taking a glass of some thick, muddy-looking drink from the male nurse. ‘If I had my way, I’d be long gone. But they insist on keeping me here.’

My guess is it's something to do with my son. He's probably going through all my stuff seeing what he can sell. Can't let me go till he's cleared me out.'

He looked at her, horrified. 'Your son would do that?'

'Only joking.' She sighed. 'My son, what can I say – he's my blood, but I often wouldn't know it.' Her shoulders sagged a bit, she slid down a little in the bed. 'They let you out at least,' she said. 'Suppose you have to see some head doctors now.'

'Yes, I'm seeing a psychiatrist this afternoon.'

'Don't let them do any of that hypnosis mumbo-jumbo on you, will you? Although they probably won't get into that on the first session. No, they'll ask you about your family, your schooling, your past relationships, how you feel about it. I tell you, for them, it's all about the past.' She shook her head. 'History.'

She picked at a mark on the sheet. 'Given any thought to our conversation the other night?'

'I've been thinking. The boring zenith, I think my sister's at that too.'

'Mmm. How old?'

'Thirty-six.'

She gave a short exclamation. 'Aha!' Waggled a finger at him.

'And her husband.' As he said it, her eyes appeared to spark up.

'See, what was I telling you? Easy to fall into it, that one. And what about you, what are you doing? If you ask me, you sounded like you had it as bad as anyone I've known. Except perhaps my son,' she murmured, and looked down at her chest, flicked a crumb or something off onto the floor.

He was not sure whether that bit was for him or for her, so let it go. 'I'm in a hostel. East London though, not south.'

'Across the river.' She shook her head, clicked her tongue, put the cigarette into a saucer by the bed. 'Well, you'll have to work with that I guess.'

'Not for too long, I hope. I feel like I'm stuck there.'

'So what are you doing about it? What's next? Your name. Dear old Ernest. Are you going to change that?'

'Well, no, I hadn't thought of that. In fact, an odd thing happened.' He told her about the anagram.

Madeline threw up her hands. 'The Answers? But that's wonderful! That's the most interesting thing I've heard all day. How intriguing! Yes, I think you'll have to keep your name. I wonder what mine might have been.' Her face brightened, her eyes retreated, heading off somewhere inside.

He had to bring her back. Fast. 'I've been thinking. I'd like to go to Vanuatu.'

'Really?' She sat up straighter in bed. 'Well, why not? Why shouldn't you? Of course, it will have changed. Nothing like it used to be, but still...'

'What do you mean, not like it used to be?'

'A case of mistaken identity dear. French and British both niggling for control. No one could decide who was top dog, so they shared it. No one knew who was coming or going. The New Hebrides, they called it then – though it bears no resemblance to the Old Hebrides; too many coconuts, nowhere near as grim. Now of course, it's all much more sedate than it used to be.' She leant forward. 'You should go as soon as you can. Get on your way quickly. Do you have a passport?'

'Not yet. I've never needed one. We used to take our family holidays here, in Britain. I meant to go to Paris on the train some time, but...' He always saw holidays as group affairs, couples or families, not friends, never something to do on your own. What was the point, seeing all those things and having no one to talk to about it? There were those bus trips, organised tours, but they sounded awful, all those strangers on the same bus – who knows what they would be like. And no escape. No way of getting away from them.

'Some time is as good as never in my book. Get yourself a passport. Do you have a job? Ah, that's right, no job. Which is good in one way, but perhaps you might have to get one, extend that boringness as a matter of necessity, just till you scrape enough together to get some money. Can you paint?'

'Paint houses?'

'No, dear. Portraits. Set yourself up in Leicester Square and do the tourists.'

He shook his head. 'No, I've never, I mean I can't paint.'

'That's a shame. I don't suppose you have enough time for a course in it, either. Not now, maybe later. What about writing? Singing? Dancing?'

'Gardening.'

‘Oh. Well, yes, that’s ok. Yes, that will do. Creative. Outdoorsy. Sensible people to work with. Wrong time of year to be looking though, isn’t it? Jobs are hard to come by now, I hear.’

He nodded, thinking of the last job. Perhaps it was time to wait for something he liked. ‘They’ve signed me up for the unemployment benefit while I look.’

‘Pittance that will be, but it’s something.’ She stopped and stared at him suddenly, pointed. ‘Grab me my purse, will you. It’s in that cupboard by the bed.’

‘Let’s see.’ She fished in her purse, fingers fluttering through the various pockets. ‘Here’s \$10 to start you off.’

He explained that Amanda had already given him \$20.

‘Well then, you’re almost halfway there. Excellent, I love a little mystery.’ Her eyes looked almost feverish. She sat up straighter suddenly. ‘Tell you what, I was thinking. About your little memory flashes, what do you call them. Déjà vu moments. Ever had any premonitions, dreams that have come true?’

He shook his head. ‘Never; I rarely remember my dreams.’

‘No? Ah.’ That seemed to bother her, disappoint her. ‘I was wondering whether you were having a prediction of some kind. Maybe not. Anyway, keep a lookout for similar things, just in case.’

He shrugged. Where was she going with all this?

She held up a finger at him. ‘Could be a fast-forward. A shaman in Vanuatu once told me this story. One morning he was out spear fishing, got attacked by a shark. Pow, got him in the leg and severed an artery. Blood everywhere, but the shark didn’t take him. Instead, he passed out from loss of blood, saw his life flash forward as an old man. Like a glimpse of his potential. Don’t suppose you had one of those?’

‘Well no, they were too small. Like chips from broken plates. And I didn’t get a sense that I was old.’ And he had not seen himself in any of them.

‘Oh. Oh well, never mind.’ She looked annoyed. ‘Well, we’ll get to the bottom of it.’

She raised her hand, seemed about to say something else, but stopped at the last minute as a man came up to them, stood at her shoulder by the bed.

Madeline looked up at him without smiling. ‘Oh, here’s my son. Ed, meet Ernest.’

Ed's hand pumped his with a workmanlike grip. One, two, three, release. A palm that was rough, callused. He looked to be in his late fifties, balding, hazel eyes, ruddy cheeks. He had a tattoo of a bird, an eagle or something, on the back of his neck.

'All right Ernest?'

Ernest nodded. 'All right.'

'Nice of you to see to me mum. She's had a hard time of it in here, haven't you mum. It's tough getting old.'

She frowned at him. 'Ed.'

'Sorry mum.' He sing-songed it at her. Madeline's face hardened.

'Mum doesn't like me calling her old, She says you're not old until you've had a telegram from the queen. Then you're old. That'll give her another 16 years of being young.' He laughed, and Madeline reached out and slapped his hand.

'Cut that out, Ed.' She made to get up from the bed, but a nurse came by at that point.

'Oh aren't you the popular one. Two visitors!' A bright sequinned voice. 'Here's your lunch. Got to keep your strength up – soup and bread.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Like prison food it is. No wonder I'm losing weight.' Ernest could see her foot fidgeting under the blanket, tapping its tension.

Ed turned to Ernest. 'Perhaps you should go.'

'I'm happy to stay.'

'No, I think you should go. It's tiring for her to have a lot of visitors.'

'No let him stay if he wants to. He cheers me up.'

'Really mum, you're tired. I can see it. He can come another day. Okay?'

'I *could* come another day,' said Ernest, to nobody in particular. 'Would you like me to bring anything?'

'Perhaps a New Scientist magazine or something. Maybe Time,' said Madeline.

'All Ed seems to bring me are these godawful women's magazines and nobody else in here has any taste either.' She glared at the sleeping woman in the bed next to her. Also at Ed.

'Well most of the other women seem to like them,' said Ed. 'Sometimes I think you're just doing it to find fault. You always have to be seen to be a level above everyone else. On a higher intellectual-like plane.'

Ed faced Ernest again. 'She also wanted me to be an artist, you know. But I wanted to be a plumber. Do you think I hear the end of it? 50 years I've been told.'

'I just want you to be happy. Do something interesting with your life. You always were good at art at school.'

'Well I want to make money,' said Ed. 'That's interesting. Art doesn't make money.'

'Pah.' Madeline blew air out with a bit of saliva. 'You just don't have the guts.'

'Look mum, here you are wanting me to be all bohemian, always have, and I don't want to starve and earn no money doing something that nobody might even buy. I want to make money, live in a nice house, take the odd holiday overseas.'

'You could do it now, take a class. Enjoy yourself for a change.'

'Mum, I like golf, and watching football.'

'You could do it in your spare time. After work. Take one day off a week and do a workshop.'

'Mum, I like me job, I like me occasional trip to Malaga, I don't want to muck around with paint or fucking formaldehyde or ponce about with a camera.'

'Life drawing?' she asked hopefully. 'You always liked the ladies.'

'You don't get it, do you?'

Madeline seemed desperate now. 'You're running out of time!' she half-yelled at him, her voice straining, starting to crack. 'I just don't want you to waste your life!'

'What, like you?' Ed asked.

'I didn't!' Madeline looked cross. 'I did lots of things!'

'Like?'

'Like travel. Writing.'

'Oh, the trip to the Isle of Man. The couple of articles in the dentistry magazine.'

'You were a dentist?' Ernest was shocked. Working with teeth, all day? He could barely believe it.

'Yes dear, I was a dental hygienist for a while. How do you think I managed to escape those beastly things' – she pointed at the teeth in the jar by the bed next door to them. 'Before I saw sense.' She waved a hand at him as if batting away a fly.

Ernest interjected. 'What about Vanuatu? That sounded worthwhile. Was that afterwards?'

Ed looked at Ernest, back at Madeline. ‘Mum? You haven’t been on at him with that old story, have you?’

Madeline huffed, then looked over at Ernest. ‘I’m sorry dear, perhaps you should go. This could go on for hours.’

‘But...’

She placed her hand flat on the blanket in front of her. ‘No, dear. Ed’s right. You should go – come and see me another day though will you? Time magazine remember. And look out, with that psychiatrist. They’ll want you to look back on your past, examine you like a bug, watch you squirm.’ She held a hand up to Ed, who seemed just about to say something else. ‘Oh, I have nothing against them. For goodness sakes, I married one once; it’s just that you have to look out.’

‘Of course.’ He got up, stood beside her, unsure whether he was supposed to kiss her on the cheek now or give her a wave – what were the rules? Even though this was the second time he had met her she seemed like family to him. Someone safe, trustworthy. He thought about shaking Ed’s hand, decided against it. Waved at them both instead as he left.

And it was only as he got out of the lift on the ground floor that he realised that he had forgotten to bring up his theory of change.

Chapter 11

The psychiatrist was interested though. Dr Latham was interested in the 14.3%, interested in the accident, and just as Madeline had predicted, interested in Ernest’s family. He was thinner than Ernest had expected, really quite enormous, although Ernest wasn’t sure why he had believed psychiatrists to be trim, models of health in body as well as mind, must have just been the ones in movies that he’d seen, not that he could recall any films in particular.

The other notable thing about the psychiatrist was his shoes, which were long and thin with pristine heels and extraordinarily shiny, so shiny that Ernest found himself wondering who cleaned them; not Dr Latham – that would be unlikely, the man looked like he could barely bend over to put his shoes on, let alone spend the half an hour or so it would take to polish them to such a sheen.

Both the shoes and Dr Latham's vast and unreasonable bulk were in fact so distracting that Ernest strained himself to find something else to focus on. Words. Dr Latham had a certain way with words. Several stock phrases kept popping up, as if he had a small roulette wheel of them in his throat. There was 'Hmmm, interesting.' Also 'Hmmm, really.' A couple of times he seemed to catch himself saying 'Hmm, and Ernest would see his mouth just start to form the word interesting, but he would change it at the last minute to say '...fascinating.' But if Ernest had cash, he would have put most of it on either 'Yes, tell me more about that.' or 'And how do you feel about that?' They were like the red and the black, the safest bets of all, almost guaranteed to occur within a five-minute time period.

Dr Latham also advised Ernest that suicide was not a solution. 'We don't want you doing that at all, Ernest, we want to try to help you deal with the reasons you are thinking of suicide. Self-harm is not the solution, it is the symptom. Promise me that if you have any thoughts in that direction' – Ernest knew full well what he was thinking of, but naturally he got to thinking about train directions instead. Towards Southampton or Eastbourne was the preferred direction for suicide trains, rather than the London direction, because towards London seemed quite pointless; for some reason every time he'd been watching they were ridiculously slow, it was the trains going away from London that were faster, although maybe that was his perception, seeing as he wanted to get out of it himself, or perhaps there was a more reasonable explanation, something like congestion on the incoming lines for major stations – 'please talk to Tiff and she will help you through it.'

Ernest began by arguing with Dr Latham that yes suicide could be the solution, or at least it was a solution for him, then he changed that tack very quickly, very quickly indeed, as it seemed to instigate a rash of sudden note-taking by Dr Latham, and he was reminded of his talk with Charles at the hostel about the discrepancy in status between Suicidal Thoughts and Suicidal Intent. Suicidal Intent meant sectioning. Go straight to hospital, signed, sealed and delivered, and this time they would be not nearly so laissez-faire about letting him go. It would be a decent and enforced stint of lockdown and intensive therapy without respite for at least a couple of weeks. Certainly there would be some lively people-watching to break the monotony, but you couldn't do that all day and stay sane.

Dr Latham then brought up the 14.3%; tried to get him on a technicality. Said that surely sudden deliberate death was a 100% change. Not a 14.3% change.

Ernest got as far as 'Yes but' and decided to give up. For the rest of the session he contented himself with denying all intent of suicide and all thoughts of it – in fact, there were a much larger body of Vanuatu thoughts rather than suicidal thoughts there now anyway – and told Dr Latham varied and multi-coloured memories, picking out the ones that he thought he'd like the best. He already had a good heads up from Tiff a couple of days before on what he might like to hear.

The first session with her had actually come shortly after he went down to get some lunch. Tiff had practically jumped on him when he was in the hostel lobby; he had the distinct impression that she was waiting for him.

'Were you watching me?' he'd asked. Afraid that her timing meant something like a hidden camera in his room.

'No, no,' she said. 'Not at all. Just happened to be meeting someone else. Have you had a look round yet? I probably should have shown you when you first arrived, but you seemed quite intent on getting settled in the room.' She beckoned to him with her hand. 'Come on, I'll just give you a quick tour.'

Although it wasn't as quick as he would have liked. There was a lounge room furnished with various pastel sofas, none of which looked comfortable but instead sat awkwardly on steel tubing legs. Two of the sofas bore a single cushion, each of which looked strangely lonely on their respective seats. On one wall was a noticeboard with posters and bright coloured sheets of paper tacked on with pins. All the posters were for things like Homeless events, budgeting advice, free services for homeless people, drug abuse services. *Staff*, he thought. Underneath, someone had placed a bin and a small table with coffee and tea-making facilities. It was from here that his neighbour must have taken the cups.

Next to the lounge was a very basic kitchen with, he noted, matching mugs that were vastly better for hot drinks than the pathetic plastic cups, but most of them looked new and unused, at least from a distance. Like people actually preferred the plastic. Also three rooms off the corridor, all of which locked from the outside and had bars on the windows. Tiff showed him into one of these – Puerto Rico, it proclaimed above the door

– after showing him the rest. ‘Just a bit of housekeeping,’ she said. ‘Forms to fill out, basic info.’

She loaded him up with more leaflets. She also tried to make him promise that no he would not commit suicide, at least without telling her he was going to do it.

‘No’, he said, ‘I am not planning on suicide.’ That was true at least. He wasn’t planning it right at that very time.

She wanted him to focus on positive things. ‘Perhaps,’ said Tiff, ‘you might want to talk about what things you’re interested in. What you like doing. What you’ve been doing. What you really need is to get involved in things. Get yourself busy.’

‘I’m not interested in art classes,’ he said. ‘Or dance.’

‘What about sport?’

‘Not sport either.’ He wasn’t going to give her anything. He wasn’t here to take a course. He was here to get out as soon as he could.

‘Right.’ Said as if she wanted to tell him he was wrong. ‘Well...what would you like to do? What would you do if you won the lottery?’ said Tiff. ‘If money was no object? That’s what life coaches always say.’

‘But I haven’t won. I don’t buy tickets.’

‘Yes, but that’s not the point. Just answer the question. What if you had no money worries, whatsoever. What would you do?’

‘Well, I’d visit my mum in Spain. Maybe give her a hand for a bit.’

‘Okay, what about longer term?’

He scratched under his leg where the rough seat was itching his thigh. ‘Um, I’d leave London.’

‘Okay. Better. Where would you go?’

‘The South Pacific,’ said Ernest. ‘Vanuatu I think. Yes. I’d go there.’

‘Sounds nice,’ said Tiff. ‘I’ve been nearby. Cook Islands. The swordfish was cheaper than potatoes. So what would you do there – in Vanuatu? Let’s pretend that even though you’ve won the lottery you still want to have a job.’

‘I don’t know. Set up a business perhaps,’ said Ernest. ‘Whale watching maybe. Kava growing. Something outdoors.’

‘Well, they’re pretty good ideas,’ Tiff smiled at him. ‘Why don’t you hang on to that for a while. You never know, you might get there in the end. But maybe there’s

something you can do in the meantime. You can't grow kava in London, but I can get you onto a gardening project. You could grow other stuff. Turnips, parsnips, potatoes.'

'Here, in London?'

'Yeah, London.'

She wasn't so bad, Tiff. She didn't think Vanuatu was a bad idea at all. She didn't scoff at it, which surprised him. Although come to think of it, she didn't seem the scoffing type. And she had suggested a course.

He was feeling quite uncomfortable at that point; his leg had started jiggling all on its own without him even realising it, it was only when it bumped against the table that he noticed and put his hand on it to make it stop.

'Don't worry, I won't keep you,' she said. 'Just one other thing really. I don't think I have a proper list of personal contacts. I mean, I know Amanda is the closest one, but do you have other siblings, parents that I can put down? I could ask Amanda, I know, but just in case we can't get hold of Amanda, you know, if anything happened, if we needed anything, to speak to anyone, do you have any other family?'

So he reeled them off, watched her as she noted down the details while he spoke. And it wasn't his fault that it wasn't the sort of thing he could do easily or quickly; it wasn't a simple list, it was awkward, didn't fit the shape he would have preferred it to take. So after listing his parents, Robert, Amanda, and Reece, he also included Louisa, because she did belong in the listing, even though, strictly speaking, she wasn't a personal contact – not in the way Tiff wanted, anyway.

When he came to that bit, Tiff looked up sharply, nodded slowly. Her eyes met his. 'That's very sad,' she said. 'And you were how old?'

'Eleven. I had my birthday three weeks before.'

'Sorry to hear about that Ernest. Mention that to Dr Latham, will you.'

He nodded his assertion, thought she would leave it at that. But unlike him, who would have liked it to be left, preferred to leave it, she found it needed a little more exploration before she could move on. 'Who did it? Did they catch them?'

He had shaken his head, could not manage a more in-depth description. Not today. Some other time. No one had ever caught who did it. They found Louisa a few weeks later. But no clues, a few fibres. Nothing much for the forensics to go on. Perhaps these days they would be able to do more. DNA profiling, that sort of thing. Perhaps they still

could, later. It was being improved all the time. Only last week he had heard of a man apprehended after trying to steal some confectionary. The DNA sample they took that day linked him to a rape 13 years before. ‘Ha,’ he could imagine his mother saying. ‘Ha. Serves him right. See, things will always catch up with you Ernest. Things will always catch up.’

As expected, Dr Latham was quite riveted when Ernest told him about Louisa, especially when Ernest told him that he’d witnessed the abduction and everything, but could not remember the man’s face. He did not even say interesting, or fascinating or yes. Just sat there with his mouth grown strangely smaller and puckered in on itself. It was as if he was waiting for Ernest to talk about it, without being asked, but when that didn’t happen, he just said. ‘Well we’ll talk about that another day, shall we?’

It was not long after that that the interview finished. ‘I think that’s enough for today,’ he said. ‘Anything else before you go? Any questions?’

Well, since he was asking. ‘Yes,’ said Ernest, ‘Who cleans your shoes?’

‘My wife. ‘ Dr Latham kept his face very straight; he leaned back a little in his chair, looked down his nose and placed his hands on his remarkable stomach, interlaced his stubby fingers into a spiky sculpture, the ends pointing the way to the door. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Just wondered,’ said Ernest and got up quickly. He did not look back as he left.

Chapter 12

The next four weeks passed slowly and methodically, with all the bits he’d purged from his life reassembled by Tiff like a factory slowly putting something together from a cutting sheet. Within a week she organised his employment and jobseeker’s allowance, registered him with a new doctor, made a dentist’s appointment, reopened his bank account and sent him to get a haircut. Not the gardening course yet – it wasn’t running at the moment – but ‘soon,’ Tiff promised. ‘Soon.’

‘There’, she said. ‘Isn’t that better?’

Privately, Ernest admitted that it was an improvement compared to the day of the accident, but there was an aimlessness about it. Everything was just keeping him alive; the various support mechanisms holding him in existence, when he had only recently

spent all that time dismantling them. It seemed harder to pull them down than set them up.

For instance, when he closed the bank account, they'd wanted to interrogate him. 'Why do you wish to close your account, Sir?' Pen in hand, waited to record his answer.

Then, when he didn't say anything, hadn't taken the chair she gestured towards, the woman thrust a piece of paper at him instead. 'Can you please fill in this questionnaire, then? It's customer service policy.'

And who was he, to argue with policy.

'Just one question, that's all. Won't take long.'

Just one question. *Reason why you wish to close this account. Please tick the most appropriate answer.* Moving Country. Unused Account. Dissatisfaction With Service. Account To Be Merged. Other (please state).

He drew a line of precise, evenly-spaced surf waves along the bottom of the form while he considered his options. And found himself repeatedly drawn back to Other. The box for the misfit. The unusual. The extra. But after fifteen minutes he decided there was no way of shoehorning himself into one of the other categories. Anticipated Decease was very firmly and irrevocably Other. He made a very small and barely visible tick, and declined to elaborate.

It should have been a simple procedure, such a very simple, straightforward procedure. At least the reopening of the account wasn't such a palaver.

Perhaps it was the drugs.

Dr Latham had prescribed him some pills; blue and white striped capsules that sat like small alien spaceships in his palm. He would have preferred not to take them, but the threat of sectioning was enough to make him agree to stick with them for now. Two to swallow before every meal. Though he wasn't crazy. Just wanted out, that was all. And the pills helped with the anxiety; he was almost calm these days. Almost as if there was a cloud over everything. No great excitement at any one thing in particular – though no great sadness either. He could take or leave it all: tube station evacuations through to posters for lost cats; unfeasibly clear winter days and unlikely five-pound notes in his pocket. All of it digested at the same pace with slow steady breaths.

He had even formed a sort of routine. Developed a tentative comfort in its predictability. Breathe in, breathe out. Tuesdays, meeting with Tiff, Wednesday

afternoons visiting Amanda, Thursday with Dr Latham, followed by creative writing classes – they seemed quite popular – Writing Therapy, they called it; they either encouraged you to do that or Art Therapy. Friday to Monday were his own days to do with what he wished. Usually a wander round the West End. Sometimes a ramble through a park. Occasionally the museums. He remembered the Science Museum from years ago, heard it was much better now, so that had been the first one he did. Lined up one weekend with jostling families and tourists clad in flimsy lightweight raincoats, their backs humped with small colourful backpacks.

He spent the entire time acquainting himself with the Exploring Space gallery – everything from the Indian war rocket right through to the one that went to Mars, or rather, a replica of the one that didn't quite make it. In there for over four hours, without even making it to the second floor. And possibly having spent too long examining the replica of Sputnik – his neck was rather wooden at the end of it, filled with cracks and creaks. They should really sell some sort of neck support in the shop; he wasn't old, but if you were over ten, all those exhibits hanging from the ceiling were just impractical. You could stuff yourself up for the rest of the week if you got really absorbed. He guessed you had to strike a balance between exhibits on the ground and the ones up high. Was it his fault that he just found the hanging ones more interesting?

Just one other hitch to the day, and that was the crowds – there was the queuing for a start; then the energy of it, the over-excited children rushing round his legs in noisy eddies. The pills helped, but he still found himself with a vague sense of unease, the feeling that he was somehow out of place, a thistle among the cornflowers.

Monday was better for museums. Too early in the week for schools, just the occasional long weekend tourist. Although Mondays he had other plans. Every week he would visit Madeline in her small terrace in West Bromley. They would share a cup of coffee – real coffee – made on the stove in a squat aluminium pot. It was one of the highlights of his week, one of the only things that got his heart racing like in the old days before the blue and white capsules. Coffee, and invariably some sort of cake, into which Madeline would press him to eat several slices, while she had one, which was probably contributing to his weight gain. He would be fitting into Martin's clothes at this rate. He pointed out his tight waistband.

'I can't eat it all myself, dear. And I don't want it going to waste.'

Often she would also slip him ten pounds towards what she called The Escape Fund, so eventually he reconciled it that way – he was paid to eat cake.

They would sit out back in the kitchen overlooking the small garden, with its mossy courtyard in the middle, a jumble of overgrown plants leaning in from the raised beds at the sides. Exotics mostly, Ernest noted. They were troublesome, exotics, either died or took over, as these ones had. He spotted several varieties of bamboo, an aggressive aloe vera and two sturdy, spreading tree ferns, with a clematis running amok through everything. Each time he visited, he would offer to help her trim it, but she would knock him back. ‘I like it lush, natural,’ she would say. ‘There’s enough in this city that’s been tamed and stifled.’

‘But they’re taking over the English plants,’ he said. ‘Look, you can hardly see the hawthorn.’

‘And? All *that* does is encourage the squirrels!’

‘But the squirrels are exotics too.’

She frowned at him. ‘Oh don’t be pedantic! All I want is a bit of excitement.’

Sometimes when she went off to the bathroom he would rush out and tug at the clematis, wrestle a climbing strand off the hedge and fling it over into the neighbour’s, but even so the plants seemed to grow thicker and more vigorous weekly, regardless of the winter weather. But to him it wasn’t lush; it was merely untidy – even a little menacing. At some point, he was sure, it was going to reach the bird feeder. He wasn’t sure what Madeline would make of that.

The bird feeder hung precariously from a makeshift gallows-type structure in the middle of the courtyard. Halfway up, it had a large spiked barrier hung with chillies. ‘Cat-proofing,’ she said on the first day, as Ernest stared at it and bit his lip. ‘Cats were always getting at the birds before. I still sometimes catch them sitting round the bottom, even several at once – they seem to put their differences aside for the birds. One of them even tries to squawk like them, talk them down.’

She also had a large water pistol propped near the back door, with which she said she shot the cats from the window whenever she had the chance. Though on every one of Ernest’s visits, the pink-and-yellow plastic gun would just sit there gaudily, while the bird feeder stood empty of both birds and attendant cats.

Every week, as the garden stalked ever closer, Madeline seemed to get slightly smaller and more birdlike herself, her chin and cheeks getting markedly more downy, as if she was preparing to sprout feathers and fly, and depleted of energy since his last visit. Only when he mentioned Vanuatu would she brighten, and start on a story of some past adventure. But those eventually grew slower and sometimes trailed off altogether; her head fell forward onto her chest, her breathing slid into a soft and rhythmic rasp, and even if he called 'Cat!' she would not wake up.

The weather crept slowly colder, the light beginning later in the mornings, leaving earlier in the afternoons. Then Christmas came and went, a quickstep and a shuffle and a sidestepping through the glitz and food. The hostel put on a large dinner sponsored by a local restaurant. Ernest would have liked to have been there – all the hostel gatherings were only suggested, never obligations – but Amanda bought a blow-up mattress, was determined that he would be the first to use it. Set it up in the lounge next to the tree.

Christmas dinner was roast turkey with plum sauce. Amanda had tried for cranberry but by the time she got to the supermarket they had run out. She had Ernest peeling vegetables the entire morning, parsnips, carrots, potatoes; chopping onions for real stuffing. Onion tears sliding down onto his hands and knife – he wondered if he had been invited only for that. But the dinner was good, filling not only stomachs but hearts as well, it seemed. Even Martin appeared in a festive mood, putting his hands around Amanda's waist at the kitchen sink, and throwing the twins in the air, one-by-one, until Ike knocked his hand on the ceiling and needed to sit with peas on it in the corner, Amanda fluttering round him all stroking hands and rapid kisses, Martin sitting on the lounge hardly moving, clenching and unclenching his fists.

Felicity got Ernest to pose for her: arranged him cross-legged on the floor in front of the television, painted him with her new set of watercolours. She depicted the queen behind him giving a speech – all cloud hair, pink lips and deep black wrinkles creasing her face, the opposite of airbrushing – although it wasn't strictly accurate, the television hadn't been on at the time, and his shirt had been more blue, rather than green.

For the first time in years they had present giving under the tree; a plastic tree on spindly legs that seemed to almost float on top of the carpet, despite the army of striped

candy canes and countless plastic balls. 'I'd like to get a real one,' said Amanda, 'but those needles get everywhere. Besides, I think pine makes Felicity sneeze.'

Several branches stuck out at odd angles, and when the inevitable happened and Ike – or was it Oliver? – ran into the tree after dessert ('No running near the tree,' said Amanda loudly, 'Oops'), several of the branches fell off and no one could be bothered putting them back on. They sat beneath the tree like stiff fallen hairs, leaving the tree strangely lopsided and precarious.

Amanda asked if Ernest wanted to visit Robert, but he shook his head, 'No. I can't face it. It's not...'

What was it not? It wasn't not Christmassy. Visiting someone in prison when everyone else was on holiday. Reminding them that you, what – missed them? Even if you didn't. Instead were quite happy that they were stuck in there away from you and everybody else. Was it unnatural to feel that way about your sibling? That you would rather that they disappeared, were swallowed up by a great hole, or ran off to the other side of the world. Somewhere like Australia. Not just sibling, your eldest brother. He didn't feel that way about Amanda, he would do most anything she asked him. He knew she meant well, even if it didn't always seem that way. He trusted her, and he couldn't say that about all of them.

He spoke by phone to him instead, along with the others. Robert did not have much to say, sounded as if he didn't really want to talk. He was coming up for parole in seven months, he said. Wondered if he could stay at their place while he got himself sorted, worked out the lie of the land. Amanda had a headache after that phone call and had to go upstairs for a while and lie down.

Reece was just on his way out to the airport, lucky they caught him, he said, he and the family were off to go diving in the Red Sea. He promised to send a postcard.

'Always such glamorous holidays,' said Amanda. 'But then they can afford it.'

They tried several times to reach his mother, but the phone rang out again and again. Eventually they got hold of her at 5pm. Amanda first, then Martin had a word. 'Hi Margery,' he said. How's the pool business? Glad to hear it. Guess everyone needs a pool down there, warm weather and whatnot. Well, good to speak to you Margery, you take care. Don't drink too much sang-ria, ha-ha-ha!'

Last was Ernest, only the second time he had spoken to her since the accident, and he was not really sure what to say, but it was okay, she did all the talking. ‘It’s 19 degrees here; it’s gorgeous,’ she said. ‘I’ve been on the sangrias since 10am. You should come over some time and visit. There’s a spare room. And a pool.’ A man’s voice said her name over and over – *Margery, Margery* – in the background, and she started giggling. ‘He’s tickling me,’ she said, not telling him who *he* was. ‘I can’t talk long right now. Put Felicity back on for a minute will you?’ She sounded happy. Wings on her voice.

They got through it all without any fights. The whole day uncannily civil, the adults acting as if they were scripted. ‘Will you take this through to the table Martin?’

‘Certainly Mandy.’

A care about it as if they were colouring in, taking care not to go over the edges. Ernest helping when needed, but unable to get over the feeling that he was somehow the controller of all of it, holding the strings, that without him they might fly off, spinning round the room like full balloons suddenly released. It was all too ordered to make sense. Because that’s what families were – an unscripted, un-choreographed, chaotic mess. He saw that now, looking back. It was the tidy, well-behaved families who were the ones to beware of, the very uptight well-mannered ones who fell apart even worse than his. All that constriction, controlled behaviour; expectations, that’s what it was. All that pressure to be and act a certain way.

On his head, few expectations had rested. The others had come first, taken the expectations with them. Robert, the sportsman. Amanda, the intellectual. Reece, the one who was financially-savvy. Louisa was the one with the looks, charmed everyone. Even at eleven she had been a stunner. Cars would slow down to look at her, a car had stopped, she had gotten in. After that, expectations had seemed transparent, became visible as the confines, the shackles, that they really were. *We expect. Look forward to. We think this will happen.* But when faced with the unexpected – the unimaginable – expectation of any kind seems a pretence, even a joke.

Everything was broken after that. Ernest, once again the youngest – the youngest of the living, if not the youngest by birth – flipped back into a status he had not held for eleven years, had only held for two; it wasn’t as if he was experienced at it. So he had seen a way to slip through the cracks, escape the expectations that might have been

placed on him. If they had even held to expectations then. No, they had never been a scripted family even from the start. But it had become very loose and ad lib, lost lines all over the place, nobody playing any of their roles, after Louisa. After Louisa. Coming so soon after his Nan.

So it had been an odd Christmas. Almost as if Louisa had returned, making things peaceful and ordered again. But she had not. It was all for him. Almost as if they behaved themselves perfectly this time, he would not go off and injure himself again.

He was back in the hostel the day after Boxing Day. Lots of time for reflection, although the hostel was so full that it was impossible to get any space to himself. He spent most days walking round the streets, or taking the bus to the West End, going round and round Piccadilly, then along Tottenham Court Road, trying to pick out tourists from the Londoners. His family were okay, he mused. Bearable. They meant well, even if being around them was poor for sleep – two nights in a row he had dreamt of being shut up in a factory farm.

Still, staying in London was not an option. He was going – that was it. In the last few weeks he had squirreled away half the money for his passport application. Step one.

Four more weeks would do it. It was hard to save any money on a benefit. But it helped not being a drinker. Although he did have a weakness for biscuits. HobNobs. Sugar for instant energy, oats for fibre. A packet at a time. Helped when you were feeling low. All that chocolateyness, painted on the inside of your stomach, sticking to it like a comfort blanket of cocoa.

Four weeks and the passport would be his. Practically his, just had to wait for them to process the form, waiting right now in a folder under the bed. He had downloaded the application, well actually Tiff had. She was hugely keen to help him do it despite the fact that he had plenty of experience in computers, could not only download an application but could probably design a rudimentary one as well. However at least he didn't have to pay for the internet café.

In the meantime he would just have to occupy himself somehow for free. Explore the city by bus. A few museums. Some research. Maybe he would even take up Art Therapy for a while to pass the time.

Chapter 13

He saw the sign from the bus. *Earl's Court Showgrounds*, it said. *Travel Show. 355 stands, worldwide travel.* Stopped not far from Liverpool station, a red light holding the bus; him upstairs at the front, a clear view of the sign; time to examine it properly. A montage of images, among them one in particular that called to him – a visual siren of blue, green and gold. He was too far to make out the details, but it held at least some sea, sky and sand, plenty of coconut palms too. And was it – yes, it appeared to be – a bikini-clad girl lying on the beach, an open book held up to block out the sun. Could only have been Vanuatu.

A travel show. Such a thing was like practice, getting used to going before he even went. They would have decent photos, large in scale. Not the same as sitting in front of a computer. More – tactile, that was it. And he would be able to speak to people who had been there, experienced the things Madeline had told him of, kayaked with whales, done the bungy-jump thing with vines.

Hang on, he was already getting ahead of himself, getting ideas, when what was needed was an open mind. A mind easier to work with, which would also make it simpler, he hoped anyway, to get information from the people at the stand. People other than Madeline, who had even said to him that she had been there so long ago that she was no help, it had probably all changed too much.

Besides, it would be practice. Dr Latham had said 'Put yourself in situations, don't avoid them. Challenge yourself a little every day.' Daunting, but essential. Part of 'getting back out there,' as Tiff put it.

Gold sand. *Save your gold to get the gold*, it seemed to say – or was it *save your gold to get the girl*? Either way, the sign was what he needed. An extra incentive to do away with the HobNobs and put a few more pounds in his wallet – it seemed realer that way than having it in the bank; he had always been one for real money, not just numbers. You couldn't own numbers; could feel no security in them. Real money though, that was more like it. You could hold it, count it, smell it; easier to imagine the exchange of it for something tangible – swap the money for the money order, then the money order for the passport.

And in the following weeks, his gold added up – just a few gold coins a week they were, but enough. Only two weeks from the day he had seen the poster, and he had not only enough for the passport, but also a bit extra.

He could have used the extra ten pounds on anything, a new book, a movie ticket, but he spent it on the show entry – though it was fine; it wasn't wasteful, it was research – and made a list of questions to stop him getting sidetracked. Prompts in case he was nervous. Actually not *in case*, more like *when*. From experience he knew that some people reacted badly to the prompts, looked him over like he was stupid, peered at him as if they were looking for facial tics or perhaps a second head. But not to have the prompts at all, that was inconceivable. He would rather have someone remove his legs and ask him to walk the length of Whitechapel Road on his hands.

Many of the questions were things he could find on the internet, but it wasn't quite the same, reading about it, when you could go along and compare it side by side with other destinations. Sometimes it also seemed that the less you knew in advance, the more likely you were to discover what you wanted. He knew this from that flatmate, the Australian – what was her name again? Carla. Seven months he had lived in that flat and five trips she had taken, weekenders mostly – he was not sure why anyone would want to go on holiday to another country for a weekend to begin with; only two days to get used to the atmosphere and the food and the transport system, when any one of those things needed months, even needed years. He shuddered with the thought of it, all that complexity.

Carla travelled so much that she always seemed to be borrowing or buying books for another destination. One day he would come home and there was Croatia sitting atop the mantelpiece, while a few weeks later, he'd be in the toilet, trying to mind his own business, and there would be Namibia staring up at him; well, to be accurate, it was a cheetah and her cubs. How you were expected to concentrate with a cheetah staring at your bits, he had no idea.

Yet despite all this newness, she was always complaining that the places that were recommended in the guide books were old, has-beens, full of other tourists waving the same books. 'I want to find things off the beaten track, find things for myself,' Carla said. 'I want to ask how to find the toilet in the local language; I'd like to accidentally order the strangest thing on the menu and have to guess what it is. I want to drink the

local brew, not Stella or XXXX, which, by the way, I don't even think is available in Australia. Why do you lot drink that stuff?'

It was after the Paris trip that things really came to a head; she had wanted to find secret jazz bars and local boutiques, she said, but all she ended up with was the telephone number of a builder from Wanstead and a top from a mall named after General Lafayette. She told Ernest, 'That's it, no more books for me, from now on, it's online forums only, and random bars where I can ask the locals their recommendations. No plans, only maps.'

Amanda had a different view. 'You have to, with kids,' she said. 'I need to know things that have been tried and vetted in advance. Kids don't like being dragged around finding the next best thing. It's better to have the last best thing and be done with it. Who cares if everyone knows about it and is already there. I want to know what it costs, what it's like, is there something that will engage Ike and Oliver for a few minutes while I can have a cup of tea and can I make myself understood in case something goes wrong.'

'Scorpions,' said Ernest.

'Too right,' said Amanda. 'And that's why we spend most of our holidays in the Lake District. You can understand everybody – usually – you can eat the food and know there's something Ike and Oliver will eat too; the scariest things are those ultra-keen walkers who seem hell-bent on lancing you with their titanium walking poles. And you know that some stranger isn't going to abduct the kids if you turn away from them for a second in Boots. Probably anyway.'

Yet if you didn't have children to worry about, sometimes knowing nothing and simply asking someone the right questions would yield all kinds of information that you hadn't known existed.

As long as he had the important things sorted out in advance.

First, what were the work opportunities? It was no use going halfway across the world if you had to work inside doing what you did before you left home.

Also, lifestyle and diet. Would he need to change his eating habits? Become a pescetarian? He was not strictly attached to this idea, but wondered if it might become the next phase of his life change – the next 14.4% after the big move, if you will.

Then climate. He already had an idea about this, it being a relatively easy thing to research online. Weather services were trustworthy, too. Weather was recordable, measurable. But weather talk put people at ease, didn't it? Everybody loved to talk about the weather. The climate questions, therefore, would be his way of breaking ground, making small talk, before he moved on to... predators – snakes and other such creatures. Sinister, but essential housekeeping. Most of these things existed in the tropics, he knew that, and he'd also read disturbing reports of sharks in the warm Vanuatu waters. But if at all possible, he would like to find out more specific information. It was risk management. The sorts of things that would obviously put some people off going – but then you could cross the road near Green Park and get run over any day of the week, or get hit by a falling crane on a building site in Central London. They were all risks.

Next up, diseases. Again, covering off the potential hazards. He had never much been one for being nursed, cooped up in hospital against his will. If they had any serious diseases of epidemic proportions it was wise to be forewarned.

He knew that Vanuatu wouldn't exactly be relaxing for him, not at first. The temperature would probably be quite stifling compared to London; he would probably have to get used to wearing t-shirts all the time, even pack away his jacket for good – that jacket that had been with him for several years now, with the comforting holes in the elbow and the reassuringly threadbare collar – familiarity, it said; they had been through things together, him and that jacket. It fitted him still, and even having to wear Martin's clothes, which neither felt nor looked quite right...just wearing the jacket over them mitigated their effect. Of feeling a little wrong, a little not quite him. Like being a soul trapped in someone else's body. Those terrible movies that came out every few years, with different characters and different locations, but everybody knew, it was the same movie in a new suit.

Ok, he admitted that the cuffs of his jacket were a little stained, one portion of it that could do with improvement, but otherwise the jacket was an old friend. He wasn't fooling anyone with it, it was 'what you see is what you get'. Worn, used, a little battered. It was him. He stroked the sleeve of the jacket fondly, anticipating their future parting with a premature pang of regret.

The people at the stand seemed somewhat perplexed that he had such a comprehensive list of questions, but one woman was only too happy to answer them. She hadn't actually been to Vanuatu herself – this surprised him – but she assured him that her colleagues had, and they had passed on their extensive knowledge to her.

He particularly liked the way they had all dressed themselves; dark navy suits with brightly coloured flower necklaces – plastic, of course, you couldn't grow frangipani in London, although you might stand a slight chance in the Isles of Scilly. They had good promotional literature too, quality printing – he knew about printing from his time at the printers, checking the proofs as they came out of the machines – high gloss posters on decent stock. A few pamphlets with matt stock covers promoting luxury resorts; it seemed to be the thing to do nowadays, use that matt, maybe with a bit of cellular glazing to highlight something, the headline or part of the design. At his old work it was vastly more straightforward, even though it was only a few years back. Although perhaps that was just that particular printers. They printed only cards – had tried a brief and unsuccessful foray into calendars which had left a marked rift in the company and resulted in a major management shift – and old-fashioned cards at that. Their In Memoriam and In Sympathy cards had been the best-sellers, their traditionalism obviously appealing to the over sixty-fives, who had the unusual and disturbing distinction of being both the most common purchasers and likely subjects.

These posters had clearly been professionally designed. Although he was not so keen on that shot of the couple in the water. A little too American. Too many teeth on show, too much dry hair for a couple splashing each other like that. Where was the realism?

The young woman he spoke to was visibly proud of the brochures. She didn't hand one to him straight away, though when he asked, she let him look through one of the luxury ones, full of pictures of honeymooning couples in various types of embrace. Then later she took it off him and swapped it for one about volunteer work. 'This is probably more your sort of thing.'

Cathy, her name tag said; in small capital letters on a yellow background, pinned on her left lapel. Strange that she frowned at him when he used it. 'Cathy,' he stared hard at the tag and said it again when she did not say yes, 'Cathy, what's the best time to go to Vanuatu? When would you go?'

She answered him instead with a very formal sir, elevating him to a sir, 'September, Sir, September's lovely. So I hear.'

The only real low point of the day was the estimate she gave him on costs to fly there and stay. Even the rustic-looking huts at the beach were very expensive. And it appeared that his ideas about moving there were also troublesome.

'Do you have a business?' said Cathy. Her eyes flicked downwards to his shoes, then up again. 'Vanuatu normally only issues residence permits to people who could in some way make a positive economic contribution to the country.'

Which sounded easy, surely. He was not a bum, well, he was unemployed at the moment, but he could do almost anything, would do anything, was a willing, patient worker, knew a lot about plants. Not tropical ones, but he was good with cacti. He was flexible and biddable. Had never been fired from any job, only made redundant. He explained all this to Cathy, knew that he was deviating from his prompts, had transgressed very much into the red zone, but he was panicking now, trying to convince her and also convince himself.

'Oh,' she said. 'That's...great.' She looked behind her at her colleagues. 'Sir, I think you should go and see the people at the Vanuatu embassy, talk to them. We can help you with holidays though, we can organise everything to do with that. Tell you what, why don't you go and check out some of the other destinations while you're here?' Then she wrote him down a quote on a card. 'There you go sir. That's a rough estimate. You can book over the phone.'

It seemed a ludicrously large amount. Perhaps not if you were working full-time, maybe it would take several months to save the money then, but on a benefit? In his situation? Several years.

Had it not been for a small conversation held the week before – as if at random, a stroke of luck – it would have been the death knell for the whole idea. He was on the bus, doing his usual West End round, had an American woman sitting next to him, a friendly black lady who wanted to chat.

'Hey buddy, can you tell me where to get off for Trafalgar Square?'

He nodded. 'I can do that.'

'Cool. I'm just finding my way around the place, only been here a couple days.'

She introduced herself as June. Forthright but relaxed. ‘Sorry if I talk your ears off – I’m a typical Cancer.’

Astrology then. Not something he was familiar with, but she was pleased when she heard he was a Pisces. ‘Hey, I LOVE Pisces! I just stayed with this great guy in Hungary – Pisces, Scorpio rising – was he a character! You ever travel?’

And then she had gone on to tell him about her experiences, how she met all sorts of people through a website and they let her stay on their sofas, showed her round their cities.

That was one of those examples in finding information when you hadn’t even looked. Not that he had thought much of it at the time; he only had a quick look online, just being curious, not sure he would ever need to use it. And there it was: thousands of people around the world, volunteering their furniture as free guest accommodation. You just needed to sign up. Which he did, using Amanda’s address – he was sure she wouldn’t mind. Yesterday there were four people listed on Vanuatu, although none seemed to be permanent residents. However, he would only need to stay for a short while until he got a job himself.

And he would not take up much room. He was proud of his ability to pack so light, exist on so little. Touch the earth lightly, was that what they said? Apart from his size, which he couldn’t do anything about, he was practically floating on it. Though he hadn’t actually weighed his current pack – he was aware that that was one of the obsessive behaviours that Dr Latham had warned him about, cautioned him not to act on the impulse – yet he was sure it was well under seven kilograms, possibly even six-and-a-half. He preferred to exist on a bare minimum of essentials, tethered loosely to the earth, that was it. So if he died, things would be in order; no cleaning up after him, sorting his belongings out. His life could be tidied away in half an hour at most – perhaps not even that. He was that well-ordered, lightly attached, that surely he would hardly be noticed borrowing someone’s sofa.

No, the expense of accommodation wouldn’t stop him from going. He would make sure of that.

He left the stand with an unfamiliar, yet not uncomfortable, feeling. A slight intoxication, the sense of an unending in-breath. Pleased with himself. Actual

satisfaction. A step taken, something achieved. A couple of little hiccups, but nothing too serious. Cathy, that was her name. Nice hair but slippery eyes.

Back onto a bus. Feeling that what he was full of was so visible that someone must see it, sense the heat and vibrations coming from him, all a-buzz like a generator, cells glowing in waves like the northern lights.

But being London, people just stayed turned studiously to the windows, gazing at their own gradually solidifying reflections as the afternoon outside grew dim.

Chapter 14

It was after five when Ernest got back to the hostel. Head overflowing with the day's events. Sand and seawater throughout his cerebral cortex; a line of thatched roofs in his cerebellum; several small brightly-coloured fish and a ukulele orchestra in his inner ear. And in his hippocampus, the shadowy bulk of a whale shark circling slowly in the dim. Despite – or possibly thanks to – these tropical hangers-on, he felt more alert than he had for a very long time.

The hostel lounge was almost empty. Just a woman in a grey jacket curled up on the leather chair and Dominic in his usual spot, staring at the television screen without really seeming to take it in. Then a couple of men standing at the telephones, and that was it. Of course – giro day. Strange that he had already forgotten. Few would be in when there was money to be spent. Not many staff about either – just whatshisname, Phil, and a new woman. There was always someone new.

Should he join the others in the lounge? They looked flattened, lumpish, like half-empty potato sacks lying on the sofas. Glued to the television as if it were god. Another property programme. Though if he went in, Dominic might talk to him. The woman seemed happy to hold a conversation with herself. 'Would you look at that, painting it beige. It would look so much better in magnolia.' She drew her coat tighter in the chair.

Ah, there was Barry, too, slumped against the wall beside the sofa. No one knew his real age, only that he was somewhere between forty and sixty-six. Called himself a recovering alcoholic, 'Recovering from yesterday. Got a pound for a spot of medicine to help me pull through?' Always cheery, ruddy-faced. He never asked for a roof over his head, a bite to eat, or a cup of tea. It was always booze. 'Spare some change for a pint guv – I'm thirsty as fuck.' But Barry was fast asleep.

Dominic turned and looked at Ernest.

Better that he go upstairs to his room. Yes, sleep until it was time for dinner. Let his tropical imagery run untrammelled on its own; see what it could get up to without his consciousness getting in the way. Later he would count his money, fill out the passport application again – in a neater hand this time– and put it in an envelope ready to take to the post office tomorrow. Then the next stage of waiting would begin. Ernest felt a humming in his bones. Things were, as they said, looking up. This week, he was sure, he would even get a job.

He stopped in front of the door, catching a glimpse of himself reflected in the shiny doorknob. A smaller, deformed, but more positive Ernest than the one who had left that morning. A fun-mirror Ernest with a small head and legs but wide torso, stretched out of shape by the doorknob, yet oddly better looking. He did not know of anyone else who had ever thought themselves better looking in a convex surface. But he supposed it was his sense of perception. His anticipation of better things making everything, by association, better. He nodded approval to his image and opened the door.

There was a new guy in his room – somewhere in his forties by the look of it, stained jacket, ripped jeans – sprawled on his stomach on the bed opposite Ernest's. He was leafing through a tattered sports magazine, and looked up as Ernest came in; he shifted onto his side in one awkward, rolling movement then propped himself up on an elbow. 'Name's Billy,' the guy said, extending a thin and shaking hand.

'Ernest.'

'Oh yeah? Like Hemingway.' Billy nodded with a slow bob of the head, loose and somewhat lazy, like that of the nodding dog statuette that had inhabited the back of their car window when Ernest was a child; a dent in its fawn-coloured haunches from one particularly heated long-distance trip. A mastiff type. Actually, oddly similar to Billy himself.

Ernest took a proper look at Billy's pale, round face: the chin beginning to slide downwards, become jowly; stubble that was really almost a beard; half-bloodshot eyes; the shadow of years of poor sleep and heavy drinking. *Like Hemingway*. A new one. A decent one. 'Yeah. Like Hemingway.' He smiled.

Billy scratched his stomach, flipped the magazine closed. 'Hey,' he said, 'You got the time?'

‘Yes. Yes I do.’ Ernest uncovered his watch hurriedly from under his jacket cuff. ‘5:23.’ Looked back at Billy for a response.

‘Blimey, mate, it’s getting on. The night calls, right?’ He waggled his shoulders exaggeratedly, a seated swagger. ‘I don’t like to act the typical Irishman. You know those stereotypes of us and our liquor – but payday comes but once a fortnight.’ Rubbed his hands together. ‘And I could do with a few. Hey, why don’t you join us? Look like you could hold your own.’

‘Uh...’ Ernest flicked through numbers in his head. He had very little left after the passport money. And drinking was not really his thing. But at least he was being invited out. Sort of. It was an invitation, wasn’t it? Best to be sure.

‘Are you inviting me?’

‘Ooh, you’re quick.’ Billy raised an eyebrow, just one, giving him a lopsided, almost maniacal look. ‘Yes. We’re just going for a few down the road. Don’t feel you have to.’

‘Ok. Yes. I’ll come. Thank you.’ He twitched his lips up, a half smile forming, before nerves froze it off. It had been so long since he was in a pub. What should he order? What was the current beer de jour, as his dad used to say? De jour. Two words not to say to this lot. One of the super lagers it was most likely. But he was invited. They had asked *him* to join *them*.

They walked along the corridor to room 107, where Billy rapped on the door in a quick rhythm. ‘Oiyoo,’ he called, and within what seemed like only a few seconds, there were five of them filling up the corridor, Billy jiggling about as if he was warming up for exercise. One Ernest recognised as a regular – Adam – but the others were new faces. Billy pointed them out: ‘Adz, Scotty, Duncan.’

They nodded their acknowledgement.

‘Show me your money, lads. Ten pounds each’. Adam stated, did not ask.

Ernest guessed he was the organiser. He’d often seen him in the foyer, so pissed that he could hardly stand. Couple of times he’d been kicked out till he sobered up. They weren’t supposed to do that, but even hostel staff had their limits and some people were the limit.

‘Hey,’ said Scotty. ‘I seen you wandering about in your pants last week. Leopard print, weren’t they? You’re a right dark horse.’

Ernest felt the weight of his jacket sit heavily on his shoulders. Nausea lunged in his gut. That night, he'd just done a runner down the hall to the shared bathroom. Thought no one would be around. Needed a wee at 1am. They were Martin's pants, not ones he would ever have bought. 'You're lucky I had any on at all,' he said.

Not sure where that came from, but it had a good effect. The group laughed as one, even Duncan who had said nothing so far, who seemed to be hanging back.

Ernest joined in, adding his *ha-ha-ha* onto the end of the others, although his laugh sounded funny, awkward. Not as he meant it to sound at all. Though he hoped it made him seem like a good sport.

Billy clapped him on the back with a broad hand. 'Ern lad, you're funny; you're all right.'

And they were grinning at him, actually grinning at him and nodding at him. Adam like a Cheshire cat, Billy like a Staffordshire terrier, Scotty very widely, showing his tongue, Duncan just slightly and, probably because – now that Ernest looked closely – he had hardly any teeth.

Adam cut it short. 'Well, enough with the chit-chat. Everyone got their tenner?'

Ernest only had a twenty, and said so.

'That'll do fine for now. I'll give you your change later, all right?' Adam collected the notes in a chubby fist, flicked the edges so they fluttered like a multi-winged butterfly trying out its wings. 'Almost got ourselves a wedge here, don't we folks? A good old wedge of Super.'

He headed downstairs and they followed. Out the front door, into the early evening, black and shining with recent rain. Then along the main road like a mother duck and her ducklings, Adam at the front, Ernest trailing at the rear.

Ernest called ahead to Billy, 'What pub are we going to?'

'Ooh, you are a newbie. How's this, lads? He thinks we're going to a pub.'

They all snickered. 'Oh, but we are. It's called the Layabout Arms.' Adam raised his arms above his head as he walked.

The East London Mosque was humming over the road, an orderly mass of humanity streaming in its doors. 'Would ya look at that.' Adam shook his head. 'Beer time is also prayer time. All those lads need is a few cans of the lady. Remind 'em o' the

good times in life. Stop 'em blowing things up. Just gotta get happy.' He added as an afterthought, 'And laid.'

He led them into an off-licence. An olive-skinned man behind the counter reading a paper. Radio One in the background playing a dance tune. A young woman browsing a magazine flicked her eyes at them, then put the magazine back and walked out.

Adam leaned in to the counter. 'Why int you out praying with the rest of them? It's time. We heard the wotchimicallit, the aljazeera, yeah?' Adam swaying from side to side like a boxer as he spoke.

'The azan,' said the man behind the counter, looking up from his paper slowly, eyes very steady. 'Can I help you?'

'It's nuffin man, we'll get it ourselves', Adam tossed the words at him like they were hot, peppery, and sloped down the back to the fridge. He loaded Duncan's outstretched arms up with six-packs. 'Beautiful. Like a sculpture, that is. You belong in Whitechapel Gallery, you does.'

They lumbered back to the counter, and stood watching while the man packed the cans into plastic bags. Seven six packs swallowed up with silver rustles. 'Will that be all?' he asked.

Adam narrowed his eyes, stepped forward with a balled fist. 'You being smart?'

The man left both palms on the counter. Shrugged. 'Just asking if you want anything else. Crisps?' He pointed behind him at a security camera. 'Or the coppers?'

'Nah.' Adam dropped his head suddenly. Fiddled in his pocket for something. Then, 'Oh go on then. We'll av a couple of these.' He reached for some Walkers. Chicken. Then he turned away from the counter, raised his eyebrows at Duncan, 'Anyone got a problem with birds, say so now.'

No one said a word.

'Ok. Got what we come for. Let's off.' Adam led the way back outside rather quicker than they had gone in, and headed off up the street. He turned left into the common, loped towards a paved corner with some benches. 'Our local,' he said, nodding at Ernest. 'The Layabout Arms. Most famous pub in the whole common.' He slapped his palm on the front of his jacket. 'Licensee, moi.' Drew out the moi like a baby's cry:

mwaaaaah.

Billy looked around. 'S a bit wet out here. Reckon we should go up behind the shops.'

Duncan nodded without saying anything.

Adam shrugged, turned to Ernest. 'You're all right here, aren't you? You don't want to move?'

'I'm all right.' He was warm, didn't mind standing, though it would be nice to have somewhere to sit down instead of on the wet benches.

Adam clapped him on the shoulder. 'Good on ya, Erns.' Inclined his head towards the others. 'These lads need to harden up.'

He reached into a bag, lifted out some beers and began to hand them out. 'Who's for a beverage?' Then ripped open some crisps, before tucking the packet into a jacket pocket.

Ernest clutched his can like a prayer book. Two hands for extra security. Held it in front of him and read the label. *9%. Strong liquor*. The cold aluminium seemed to burn his fingers and he wished he had gloves. The others ripped theirs open in unison, clacking and fizzing and hissing together in an almost musical way. He watched Adam drain his can in a single movement: head back, mouth wide, throat bobbing four times, then drop the can on the ground as Adam reached for another.

To his left, Duncan started talking softly. 'I reckon I might leave in a few weeks, head down to Brighton, get meself some sea air.'

Then Billy. 'Nah, you don't want to go there. Football team's shit.'

Ernest played with the ring on his can. The others launched animatedly into the football discussion; Adam pretended to kick a ball in the air. His face reminded Ernest of someone. He had one of those hair-dos that, in defiance of baldness, carried on its own wiry party below the ears, frizzing out and tickling the owner's shoulders, as if to detract from the deficiency above. He would have to shave it soon. Ernest ran a hand through his own hair. Thick and curly. No signs that it would leave him for a while yet.

Someone leaned over and took his can from him with a swift movement. Adam. Kingfisher nabbing a fish. 'Can't let it go off, mate.'

Billy got Ernest another from one of the black bags, flicked it open as it met his hand. 'Better get that down ya or you'll miss out.'

‘So how come you’re in the hostel anyway?’ Adam asked. Civil for a change.
‘You ain’t got no drugs problems. Look at you, you don’t even drink.’

‘I was homeless. They picked me up in hospital. I had an accident.’ Not really a lie, but not strictly the truth, either.

‘So do you drink?’

‘Not really. Not much.’

‘You’re a strange one. You one of those tee-to-tahllers? You all there upstairs?’
Adam tapped his temple.

‘No. I mean yes.’ It was these kinds of conversations that Ernest found difficult. The ones where people asked him what was going on in his head. And it was impossible to tell them. Not impossible in the sense that he was embarrassed. Just that there was often nothing clear in there to tell. Sometimes his brain entered what seemed to be a holding pattern, just whirled around and around until someone said something to bring it out.

‘I don’t like being drunk.’ It was the last thing he wanted to say, but the pressure got to him; his mouth decided to betray his brain and blurt something out.

‘We got to bring you with us again sometime Ernest. You’re hilarious. You’re just fucking hilarious.’

Duncan leaned across to Ernest. ‘Don’t mind him mate, he’s just playing with you – don’t take it personal.’

Adam was on his third beer. Ernest had not yet sipped his. The smell of the stuff was overpowering. Didn’t smell so much like beer as some kind of drain cleaner.

‘Come on Erns, drink up,’ said Billy. ‘You’re letting the side down.’

Ernest took a breath. Tipped his head back, lifted the can to his mouth. Tipped it. Swallowed. Again and again. It wasn’t so bad. He burped. A bitter blast of hot air.

They all clapped.

‘So Ernest, got yourself a girlfriend?’

‘No. No girlfriend.’

Someone handed him another beer. He took a large mouthful, drank it down. Another mouthful. And swallow.

‘You like boys? You’re not like Billy here, are ya?’ Now Adam bumped his shoulder into Billy, who swaggered about protesting.

‘No. I like girls, it’s just...I don’t know what to say to them. Never have.’ He took another swig from the can. ‘I used to live next door to a girl once.’ *Melissa*. The fish and chip shop girl. Long blonde hair like an angel. Blue-grey eyes. Thin with small pikelet breasts, from what he could tell at the time. Several earrings in each ear and later she got an eyebrow ring, which come to think of it, had always been infected. Eventually she’d had to take it out. His shoulders sank, and he was back there, smelling the cod and the grease in the chip shop, when Adam shifted closer, beery breath right in Ernest’s face.

‘When did you last have a shag, Ernie?’ Adam really looking at him this time. A new tone to his voice. Deeper, less of the sing-song notes.

‘Um.’ Ernest studied his beer more closely. A round, typical can shape. tallish, blueish-purple like a bruise, with a couple of sheaves of wheat on a gold circle, surrounding a red letter T, as though protecting it from harm. The word *strong* sat above the T, while *lager* sat below. He took a swig. *Strong. Lager. Strong. Lager.* Another swig.

‘Over a year? Few years? Oh I never – you’ve never...have you?’

The cold of the can was burning his palm.

Adam was very active now, no longer standing in the one spot, but pacing back and forth, waving his can above his head. Froth started to swill from it and run down his hand, dripping onto the grass in a fizz of yeast. Adam was oblivious. ‘Lads - come on, drink up. We got work to do tonight. We av a duty to see our mate here Ernest looked after.’

‘Looked after,’ repeated Duncan, his hollowed face nodding repeatedly.

Then Billy yelled ‘Oi oi!’

The group seemed to have gained in energy, become larger, certainly louder. Ernest finished his can.

‘There’s nuffink wrong with you is there? You’re all present and correct?’

Ernest nodded, stepped back. Were they about to do an inspection? But no, Adam was just checking, ruling out the physical disability that might make Ernest an unfair target.

Assured that Ernest’s bits were indeed there, Adam went back to business. ‘What have we got left in the kitty, lads? Four pounds. Four lousy pounds? That’s not even

going to get you a hand job. What have you got in your pocket Erns? Got any more dosh?’

Ernest tried to shake his head, but rolled it instead.

‘What’s that? No? Yes? I think you might have more than you’re letting on. Come on.’

Ernest’s hand hovered over his pocket. Eighty pounds folded neatly away in there, held together with a black rubber band. He looked at them all, eyes fixed on him, attentive in a way that no one had been for years. He withdrew the money.

Billy plucked it from his hand and took it over to the streetlight. ‘What’s this? Eighty quid? Don’t worry mate, we ain’t going to nick it. Not today anyway, not with our giros just through. If it was Friday though, you might be a bit lighter. How’d you get all this? We could even get you two...or something else.’ He looked at Adam, twitched his right eyebrow at him.

Someone poked Ernest in the side. Duncan, with another can.

‘I don’t know,’ said Ernest. ‘I mean, I just don’t know. I’m not...’

‘That’s the problem, mate. You don’t know,’ said Adam, gone all quiet suddenly, fatherly even.

Billy nodded. ‘But you need to know.’

Duncan’s mouth worked around absent teeth. ‘It’s a tragedy.’

‘I was saving it, I need it.’

And Adam listened to him, actually listened to him. ‘Well, howzabout we chip in. I could give a fiver.’

And Billy and Duncan, too, rummaged in their pockets and produced another eight between them. Then Duncan went out to the road, while the others separated Ernest’s money into two.

‘There you go, this one’s to keep,’ said Billy. ‘The rest you invest tonight. You’ll make it up again. It can’t be that urgent.’

And right now, it didn’t seem that urgent. Not as important as this, as a girl, which he could have tonight, in a matter of hours, whereas Vanuatu was weeks, no many months away. She might even look like the girl on the poster. All pale hair and tanned skin and slender limbs.

They drank more beer. And a short while later, Duncan returned with another few pounds.

‘Trust me.’ Adam turned his palms up towards Ernest. ‘Mate, I’ll sort it. It’ll be good. You won’t regret it, mate. You’ll thank us.’

Billy spoke then, quickly, almost too quickly. ‘I know someone, takes... references.’ His eyebrow did something. ‘Works in Soho. She’ll be perfect. She’ll look after us... him.’

As if in one motion, the other three men herded Ernest towards the main road, and somehow he ended up with another beer in his left hand.

Chapter 15

They reached Soho a little after eight o’clock, after stumbling their way from the bus stop on Tottenham Court Road, shouldering through the revellers outside the Whitehorse Arms and detouring through an adult shop on Soho Lane, where Adam had tried to shoplift a copy of *Angles on Earth*, a film that seemed to be about extremely flexible naked angels.

The others questioned him most of the way about hair colour, eye colour, body type, breast size and legs. Was he a leg man or a breast man? Billy had argued that you couldn’t actually have a preference until you had experience. After all, he claimed, he had been a leg man until he met a girl with immeasurable breasts – maintaining that she had been unable to find a bra that fitted her, and that from the age of 17 she had spent her life walking round with aprons fashioned into slings for them. There was general hilarity at this, and a consensus that Billy had an imagination far larger than the breasts; that they had actually been A-cups and he had seen them at nine, and over the years they had grown exponentially larger as time had passed. Adam told Billy that he was wasting his imagination and that he should write a book.

Ernest did not share their doubt; large breasts ran in his family. Amanda and his mother both had enormous bosoms – they told him often enough of the difficulties of finding clothes to fit. Though they hadn’t needed to resort to aprons – he once swapped a boy at school one of Amanda’s bras, and got a proper Swiss army knife in return.

He managed to express this information in between a series of burps. And for some reason this was cause for them to make him stop and scull another can before they went on.

His shoes felt heavy, thick-soled. Several times he scuffed them on the footpath and almost tripped up. His tongue felt heavy too, a large slab of meat in his mouth. At least the beer was going down more easily. In fact, come to think of it, he was thirsty and wanted more.

‘Here’, said Duncan. He gestured stiffly towards a doorway outlined with peeling orange paint, watched over by a small CCTV camera. The space beyond was dim, darkness deepening to steep stairs.

Ernest thought the neighbouring fabric shop was markedly more appealing. Two limbless torsos draped with bolts of velvety fabric, giving them an air of invisible people at a costumed ball. They reminded him of his mother, though he wasn’t sure why. Just to the side, a young couple were arguing, the woman in pink heels and tight jeans, the man with hedgehog hair, leant over her; thin but tall, seemed as stiff as wood, as though if you pushed him he would snap in two.

‘Think you can get away with that,’ he said. ‘I’ll sort you.’

Well that wasn’t right. Not polite at all. Ernest moved towards them. ‘Mate. Leave her. Alone.’ He wanted to move the woman out of the man’s way, went to actually push the man back against the window, but Duncan grabbed Ernest by the arm instead, just above the elbow.

‘Come on mate. Leave it. You can’t do nothing.’ He held a palm out to the other man, and backed through the doorway towing Ernest.

Ernest stared at him through frosted glass, let himself be nudged up the stairs. Beside him, the wall was dark green, pitted with dents. He ran his hands over them all the way to the top, where a young woman opened the door.

‘Hey,’ she said. Looked them over with lazy eyes, a look that soaked into Ernest like butter on hot toast.

‘My cousin,’ said Billy. ‘Natalie. Or, oops, Chloe. Sorry Nat.’

‘Alright Billy,’ said Chloe. ‘I’m just going home. Been working today, so it’s my night off. But I’m sure we can look after you.’ She smiled, then frowned. ‘There’s a lot of you.’

Ernest's head was heavy. He let it fall forward and began to examine his shoes.

'Nah,' said Billy. 'Just him.' He jabbed his elbow into Ernest's ribs.

Ernest straightened up.

'It's busy,' Chloe's eyes met Ernest's, slid downwards and up again, 'but Violet might be available. Wait here a minute.'

Violet was a curvy girl, more of a woman really, in her early forties, with thin lips and very long blonde hair that sat awkwardly on her head. A few strands of red hair escaped at the sides. 'If you don't like blondes,' she said, 'I can do brunette.'

'She has alopecia,' said Chloe, matter-of-factly. 'I swear, this bird has the best collection of wigs I've ever seen. Actually, if you're into costume, you're in luck.'

Ernest felt a jab in the ribs on his other side. Looked across and saw Adam giving him fish eyes.

'No, blonde's good,' said Ernest.

Violet had on a short brown leather skirt, high silver heels and a thin singlet top, outlining a pair of long flat breasts, no bra; the right breast was noticeably larger than the left. She flicked her hair at him. Smiled. She had good teeth and very green eyes.

'Okay, in you go,' said Adam, pushing Ernest towards Violet.

'But how much?'

'Don't worry, we'll sort it.' Adam clapped Ernest on the shoulder, twice.

Then Violet took him by the arm, gently, her hand curving round his bicep and softly squeezing it. He went with her, a large and ungainly lamb. He looked back once, before they went in the door. The others had already turned away, and were counting out money with Chloe.

Violet shut the door behind them. The door handle rattled and Ernest felt short of breath. The room was small with yellow walls, and dimly lit, although not dingy. It seemed hot. A bed, wastepaper basket beside the bed, shower in the corner, a small table with tissues and magazines and flowers on it. His head felt tremendously heavy, filled with wet sand. In fact, his whole body felt awkward, cumbersome; his legs were shrinking and becoming weak. 'I need to sit,' he said.

'I can do better than that. We can lie down.'

She pushed him softly backwards and Ernest let go, fell onto the bed. *Probably better lying down anyway.* He was tired, felt stiff and a little sick. She seemed very tall, a giantess.

Violet bent over him, pulled his t-shirt off. Then his jeans, peeling them off his legs with strong tugs. Then she walked over, stood beside where his head lay, unbuttoned her skirt and stepped out of it. Two clean steps and she was standing next to him, her thighs at the same level as his face. He could smell her and suddenly there was a lot more skin in the room. Her standing next to him. Him lying next to her. Underwear made of soft shiny stuff. Satin. Pale green.

He rolled onto his side and hugged her legs to his face. Hot, they were.

‘Steady on, fella!’

She gave him a light push and he released her, rolled flat on his back again. The smell of her still in his nostrils. Vanilla and lemons.

And above him the pendant swung gently. *Energy-efficient lightbulb, is it? Good. Not so bright.*

Movement to the side. He slow-blinked and turned his head, watched as she removed her top. Her breasts swayed free, settled on her front. Ripe raspberries on old pennies on pale pancakes, lying on her chest, somehow sad and beautiful. He reached out towards her and she climbed on top of him; the breasts fell in his face, heavy and soft and malleable; he touched them; handfuls of warm bread dough and he was interested and sleepy but awake; there was someone next door making a noise like a donkey, he half wanted to know what they were doing, but he also wanted to just pull the breasts to him and use them as pillows, smelling of yeast, and he wanted more, the weight of her body on his pelvis was making him stir; he wanted his pants off, too tight they were; and now, now she was removing his socks, the left and then the right, touching the sole of his foot; he didn’t like that, it tickled and distracted him, made him feel queasy; now she was pulling him up and taking his pants off, finally, and what?, pushing him away, no, towards the shower in the corner of the room, turning it on for him and the cold water – too cold, need more hot, that’s better – the shower made him sleepy and the feel of the water on his skin was comforting and yes, he’d spent his money, but it wasn’t so bad really, was it, this shower and the girl, what was her name again, not sure; there she is through the shower-screen doing something to the sheets and

it is hard to see her and the water on his head feels good and her name, something to do with flowers, made him think of bees, fat furry bees, necessary for the garden they were, kept everything ticking along, broad beans for example, they would flower, hundreds of the black and white flowers up the stalk promising hundreds of beans but then nothing, only dropped flowers until the weather was warm enough for bees, and what's she doing now, bringing him a towel to dry himself, water off, a slight chill on his skin as he steps out, the coarseness of the towel on his back and his hair is still wet and dripping down his neck but she is leading him towards the bed although he is not quite dry, and he half trips half falls on it, soft mattress taking him in, the smell of bleach on the sheets and she rolls him over and he can't stop giggling and she is smiling, the friendly wiggly front teeth on the bottom of her smile crowding forward, he is smiling back at them but it is hard to see them clearly as they come closer, the bed is rocking like a boat, she is climbing astride him, the blonde wig is sitting too far forward on her head, he reaches over to push it back and it comes off, the bits of red hair are like thin autumn tussock on her smooth head; she reaches for the blonde but he says no, I like it, I like your head, so she leaves it and leans over, she is beautiful and he says so, but everyone must say that, don't they, and she has something in her hand, and he smells the latex, the chemical smell jarring right to the back of his throat and is it the smell of that or the rocking of the bed, or the grey clouds pushing themselves to the front of his head or the cracks in the ceiling behind her; somehow he feels dizzy and things are hard to keep in focus and he is spinning, it is all spinning.

Chapter Fifteen.

There was something large and heavy on his head. No, that was his head. Someone had fixed it to the pillow with enormous nails through his eyes. And the rest of him – that was not right, either; so very not right.

His tongue felt hard and swollen and terribly dry, tastebuds rough as sandpaper. As for his heart, it was constricted, welded to a jittery stomach which, as he shifted every so slightly on the mattress – underneath him was damp with sweat – called its distress and threatened rejection of its contents, warned him of an abrupt and irreversible ejection should he take things anything other than very slowly, very slowly at all. There

was a noise too – a persistent clattering accompanied him, which appeared to be coming from outside his body, but he couldn't be sure. It was almost regular, but not quite; it seemed to mimic the staccato beating of his heart.

He winched up an eyelid slightly, saw a poster on the wall flapping in the hot air from the radiator. White on its underside, dark on top, a rectangular, tail-less manta ray. 'Shhh' Ernest croaked, and pulled the duvet over his head.

The clattering continued, fainter now; he took shallow warm breaths for a few minutes and tried to ignore it. But his own stale air suffocated him, the nails through his eyes seemed to grow deeper with each hot mouthful of recycled air. Forced to surface from under the duvet, he sucked in oxygen with a deep slow gasp. *Have to do something about that noise.*

He creaked his body to a sitting position and gently manoeuvred himself across the room. Reached out an arm, dragged down the poster, left it to fall unaided to the floor. Who cared if it got stepped on, damaged or completely destroyed. As long as the noise was done with.

He had a drink from the basin and crept back to the bed, the sheets damp and crumpled, but welcome all the same. Old friend bed. Safety. Shelter. Bed. A cousin of last night's. Him and the woman. In bed. His brain flickered.

Wet pillow on his cheek

Skin on skin

Cool hands on his forehead

Warm breath on his ear

The tang of leather

Rough fabric on his back

A very harsh and unwelcome Loudness

Bees in his head

So had they? Ernest examined himself for telltale signs. Remnants of stickiness, stains on the sheet.

Hard to tell. The sheet had stains on it anyway; night sweats, essence of nightmare. And his penis looked like it always did at this hour of the morning. Awake, interested, alert. No signs of strain or struggle in the night. Next to the bed were his jeans, discarded in a low hill of denim, his wallet sticking out of a pocket. He plucked it out, careful to

bend down in small increments; and took the wallet into bed without unfolding himself to a standing position.

He did a stock-take of the contents, checked all the sections, the little coin pocket, even each card-holder. Sticky leather. But not sticky enough. His stomach froze, chest went numb. Then he drew the pillow to his chest and curled his body as tightly as he could, let the wallet slip out of his hand to lie next to the pillow.

Seven pounds sixty. And a silver-wrapped condom that had crinkled wetly as he pulled it out.

He could have sworn he had more money. Somehow he had gone from having a comfortable sum to having next to nothing. Some of it had gone on the woman; he could live with that – it had been, what? an induction of sorts – but he was sure there had been more left, which meant he must have lost it somewhere in the clouded ether of the night.

Then the fog rolled back in. Shut his brain down. Like a computer, literally, a closing in feeling, everything going grey, then black. In the darkness, he summoned up tropical fish on a shooting range, picked them off, one by one. Glow-in-the-dark apparitions floating in space. A whale shark. *Bam*. Puffer fish. Angelfish. A humpback whale; not strictly a fish, but fuck it.

He didn't know how long he lay there. Shooting fish in his mind, then letting them fade to nothingness, deep black sea. Several minutes, a few hours, it could have been either. He did not really care. The density of the emptiness choked him; he gave himself up to it. Wallowed.

When he did get up, there was a pigeon at the window, tapping on the ledge with its beak. His head still ached with an intensity that seemed to spread even to the ends of his hair, so he threw his pillow – the only thing to hand – at the window and the bird flew away. *And stay gone*. Then he reached into the drawers, cast the remaining blue pills into the bin. Pulled his clothes on, splashed his face at the basin. Retrieved his jacket from behind the door and removed a fine red hair from where it had curled itself around one of the buttons like a tentacle. *Enough*.

He took only his small backpack as he left the hostel. None of Martin's clothes, Amanda's charity efforts. *Last time. End of story*. Then walked south-west, on a steady zigzag course for the Thames, that great brown strip that hid every secret. Consecutive lefts and rights, one foot in front of the other as if they had been programmed in that

way. The fresh air a balm of sorts for his head. But after ten minutes he was so drained that he gave up, took the tube instead, headed down into the earth to the unpleasant noise and the warmth and sat across from a thick-faced man with a book, who read rabidly with his head instead of his eyes. Ernest watched the man's head jerk over the sentences, then flick back to the left of the page like a old typewriter. *Bing, tap tap tap, bing tap tap tap bing*. In the mass of stationary people in the carriage, his head movements stood out like wildly flailing arms. Ernest watched him dully, mesmerised by the movement, willed it to hypnotise him; *I will not be sick, I will not be sick*. All the way to St Pauls.

The noise reached him when he was over 300 metres away, still walking past the bulk of the cathedral, trying not to think of his Nan. A hum, tooting, voices calling to each other. A riverbank peppered with people, office workers, tourists, parents with kids. It was not the subdued riverbank he had expected and hoped for.

'A whale,' someone said ahead of him, practically yelling into their phone. 'Can you believe it? A whale in the Thames.'

He thought of his earlier humpback whale shooting, and a wash of guilt sucked at him, before anger rushed in, salting his nerves. So much for stepping quietly off into the river, letting it wash him out to sea, or claim him in its mud. If he jumped in now, someone was bound to fish him out. Such a vast number of people standing on the riverbank, standing around to watch the whale. They'd be certain to notice; the propensity of good Samaritans would be high. People who liked whales tended to do good deeds, didn't they? Even in London. Statistically, after all, Londoners were less likely to help a dying man – most big cities were – but put a big lost sea mammal in the mix and people grew suddenly concerned, parasitic in their care. More to the point, where crowds were, police were. Undoubtedly if he leapt in now, it would be construed as an attempt to swim with the whale. They'd haul him out on charges of harassing a wild animal.

So he stood there quietly instead, watching the water flow past. Slowly, it seemed – deceptively so – that had been the point. It was actually fast and strong. And at this time of year, cold, so very cold. If you just let yourself be carried downwards, hypothermia would get you if drowning didn't. It would probably take less than ten minutes to lose consciousness. You could hasten things a little by struggling against the current, but that would be more likely to draw attention, not to mention increase the

possibility of drowning, when hypothermia seemed somehow more peaceful, painless and whole. The cold would lead to numbness and then unconsciousness and then slipping gently below – well, that was the idea, anyway. Having never spoken directly to anyone who had actually had hypothermia or come close to drowning, he did not have any incontrovertible evidence to go on, was only relying on second-hand knowledge from the internet.

Ernest walked to the river wall and found a spot as far from other people as possible. Which was not really so very far. Only a short distance between a woman with a green beret on his left, and an old man in a red coat on the other side. The woman looked strangely familiar, so he stared at her profile, trying to call it up. Checked the rest of her for clues. A dark brown, woollen coat, good quality. Pair of black flat boots. Hard to tell what colour her hair was; the beret seemed to cover all of it. He shuffled closer, tried to get a better view of her face.

She turned to look at him. Green eyes. *Her.*

‘Hello.’ His voice came out squeaky, compressed. He tried again. ‘Hello. I met you last night.’

An expression he could not name crossed over her face, then she looked at him more intently. ‘Oh, yes. Of course. You’d had a few. I’m surprised you’re even standing today. Ernest, isn’t it?’

He nodded. ‘I’ve forgotten your name. Sorry.’

‘That’s okay.’ She smiled, placed her hand on her chest – rather elegantly, he thought – ‘Violet.’

He met her eyes, then looked down, out at the water to avoid her gaze. Then he saw the whale, downriver, swimming up towards them, two boats tailing it. A surprisingly small dorsal fin on its large bulk. It swam in slow waves, as if it were searching for something. Nothing like the whale he had imagined. Less majestic. Much...sadder. Powerless despite its size. Was it hungry? Perhaps he should buy it a sandwich with the last of his money. Throw it in just ahead of its nose. Would that help?

Her voice brought him back. ‘Morbid, isn’t it? No way is the whale going to make it.’

He looked at her eyebrows. Anything but the eyes. ‘But can’t they turn it around?’

‘I think the tide’s about to change and go out. If they turn it, they have to act now. But look at the whale – it’s not about to turn around. In fact, I think it’s trying to get away from them.’

The few words were enough to convince him; he knew she spoke the truth. But how could she? How could she be so sure? He tried anyway. ‘Maybe it can rest, then go out with the next tide.’

She drew her eyebrows together. Shook her head slightly. ‘What, you think it just came in for a city break – it’s going to rest overnight, then head off again when it’s done the tour?’

He nodded. ‘I...I don’t know what I thought.’ Her pessimism was contagious. He wasn’t angry any more, just deflated, and darkly fascinated with the route the day was taking.

They stood silent for a few minutes as the whale came closer.

To their left, a small child was jumping and down; a blue-and-yellow striped beanie clung precariously to his head. He screamed with excitement, although he couldn’t have been able to see much of the whale, just the top and the fin, no more than that.

‘Look at them all,’ Ernest said. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it.’

‘The idea of it is almost more exciting than the real thing though,’ said Violet. ‘A huge wild creature coming to visit our concrete towers. It’s unimaginable. Surreal.’ She looked back out at the river and her shoulders sagged. ‘I’d love to swim with them. But not like this.’ She put out a hand and steadied herself on the wall, leaned out over the water.

The whale had almost reached them now, started to turn in circles; a half circle one way, headed off by the boat, then a half circle the other. ‘It’s confused,’ said Ernest. ‘It doesn’t seem to know what’s good for it.’

Violet put her hand to her head. ‘Oh god, why can’t they just turn it around?’

The whale straightened, gave a short blow of water. To Ernest, it sounded like a small fountain with sporadic water pressure, but it excited the people around them like nothing yet.

‘Funny, isn’t it,’ said Violet. ‘People pay so much money to do all sorts of things in London, but this’ll stick in their minds more than almost any of them. People will say

to their kids – and even their grandkids – once upon a time, we saw a whale swim up the Thames. And no one will believe it. It'll be like the tales we hear of the Thames being frozen over with ice. Back when they could hold fairs on it and everything.'

'I never really believed that,' said Ernest, as the whale passed them, headed towards Westminster.

'You see. This is one of those things. An experience that's above everyday life. You know when you're having them, they stick in your heart like dry bread in your throat.'

Exactly as he would have put it himself.

'It's so odd. We go about our daily lives here and you almost forget that everyone else exists, feels, lives just like you. Then comes one thing that moves people, brings us all together at once.'

A helicopter came over then, its rhythmic clacking cutting the air. He pointed at it. 'I hate helicopters,' he said, raising his voice, but not quite yelling.

'Why? I think they're exciting.'

'There's something apocalyptic about them.'

Violet laughed. 'You've seen too many Vietnam war films. Let's move.'

They walked together up the Thames trailing the whale, which now moved further into the distance – it travelling faster than them, looking for whatever it sought. Its mate, its pod, its place in the ocean.

'How did you remember my name?'

'It's my job, isn't it? To know people.'

'Do you remember everyone's names?'

'For a while. After a few weeks it's a bit difficult, unless they're a regular customer. I use memory games, brain training. The trick is to think of a picture associated with whatever it is you're trying to remember. Like, for example, the other night, when I was introduced to you, I thought of chocolate chip biscuits.'

Ernest blinked at her.

'I don't know why. Just did.' She gave a small laugh and he saw the pink of her tongue. 'I can't always explain what pops in there, but if it's chocolate chip biscuits, biscuits it is.'

'So when you saw me today...'

‘Chocolate chip biscuits.’

‘I don’t understand how that works.’

‘Ernest. Your name sounds a bit like a brand of biscuits. Or maybe a type. Packet of Ernests? Care for an Ernest? They’re delicious.’

He was...biscuits? How was he supposed to take that? Though, it was original.

‘But I think...you know what? After today, I think I might replace biscuits with a whale. It might be easier to remember.’ She winked at him.

And then, despite the whale and the cold and the very loud people shrieking next to his poor sore head, Ernest felt his heart flare hot and bright. He started to reach out to touch her arm.

Something beeped and he jumped back.

‘Now, who will that be?’ She fished her phone from her pocket and Ernest stared hard upriver, trying to catch a glimpse of the whale.

‘Whale in the Thames,’ Violet read. ‘See’ – though she didn’t show him – ‘This friend of mine is at work following this online. She’s telling everyone about the whale and she’s not even down here. Her work’s gone right out the window.’

Ernest’s fingers itched to take the phone and throw it in the water. ‘I suppose the whole city’s watching in some way.’

Violet put the phone back into her pocket and shrugged. ‘Most of the time we can only agree to disagree: who to vote for, what to feed the kids, who does the school run, where’s the best place to get off the tube if you’re going to Covent Garden on the weekend. To even go to Covent Garden on the weekend. Now here’s this animal, big old lump of blubber, and none of us can think of anything else. Care about anything else.’

‘It’s like our lives have been put on hold for the whale.’ Funny that he’d said that. If it weren’t for the whale he might not still have a life. Or be here. Talking to her.

‘Yes, and it’s wonderful and horrible at the same time. Look at us all. Smiling at each other. Strangers. When we can’t even let one another on the tube nicely. And today, at the end of the day, we’ll all go home and we’ll have shared something. The whole city. The day a whale came to visit.’

Ernest glanced around at the other faces. ‘Do they know though, do you think?’ he asked. ‘Do they know what it means for the whale?’

‘Who knows. Could be they’re just doing the London thing – watching and enjoying the spectacle.’

He looked about him. Everyone certainly did appear more animated than normal.

‘Anyway’ said Violet. ‘I’m sure we’re all hoping. 16 million people hoping that one creature will somehow turn its big arse around before it’s too late and head off out to sea to freedom. But I’m not sure most people can see through the hope.’ She turned to a woman next to her. ‘What do you think?’ said Violet. ‘Will it make it? Will they turn it around?’

‘Ooh I hope so,’ said the woman. ‘Yes, I’m sure. They must be able to herd it or something.’

‘Hmm,’ said Violet. ‘Whale herding. Sounds more like a Pacific island skill to me, not something they teach at St Martins.’

She sighed then, a heavy breath that Ernest felt, rather than saw. ‘I can’t watch this any more,’ she said. ‘I can’t. It tears me up.’

And then his mouth moved, almost of its own accord. ‘Want to get a cup of tea?’

There was a pause of several seconds, in which time Westminster fell and was built again, the whale made a brief unscheduled journey through the earth’s crust to the Antipodes and back, and everybody simultaneously disappeared before reappearing in brighter clothes. Then, ‘Yes,’ said Violet. ‘Why not.’

Chapter Sixteen.

He didn’t even drink tea. He drank coffee. Always. So where *that* had come from he had no idea. Not sure who had taken control of his mouth but it had worked.

They walked to a caff twenty minutes away, along the waterfront, against the thin human tide tracking the whale. They passed an elderly man with grandchildren rugged up like small striped beetles; several large women of indeterminate age with near-identical bobbed haircuts, who walked in a line blocking the whole footpath, forcing Ernest and Violet into single file on the edge. ‘Twats,’ said Violet. And a group of busking musicians with their instruments, following the crowds and their coins, one humming ‘*Imagine*’ as he walked.

They were the caff's only customers though the woman behind the counter did not seem to know it. She took her time coming to the counter from out the back, seemed harried, as if Violet and Ernest were an inconvenience. Ernest ordered dry toast and coffee with the last of his funds. Violet a bacon sandwich and tea. They took a seat at a greying melamine table with a peeling top layer. Ernest fingered the surface, fought the desire to pick it off.

'Well, this is nice,' Violet grinned at him. Winked. 'Hey, are you okay? You don't look so well.'

'I'm right.' Now that was a lie. It was warm in the caff, easily ten degrees higher than it had been outside. He could feel himself starting to sweat already. And with the heat his headache had returned, more heavily muscled than before.

'You don't look right. But if you say you are, well...'

'It's hot in here,' he said. Felt panicked suddenly. Sitting so close to her. And needing to remove some clothes, which would make it closer still. If he wasn't to faint though, it had to be done. He took off his jacket, draped it over the back of his chair. Decided to go straight in. 'Last night,' he said.

'Yes.' She looked at him from under eyelids dusted grey.

'I don't remember. It. Did I? Did we...'

She waited. It seemed that she leant closer to him. Then, 'Did we...?'

He looked at the table. She knew what he meant. She must.

'Ah, you mean, *did we*,' she said, raising her eyebrows. 'Of course,' she said. A small smile. She reached up and adjusted her beret. 'You were great.'

'Was I?' His stomach was pulsing again, squirming, trying to find a way out.

'Yes, best I've ever had,' She shifted her head to an incline, scratched her earlobe, stretched it between her thumb and forefinger. 'Really.'

The words slid across the table at him on rollers. But there was something not right about the way she said it. Almost as if she was being paid. Like an advertisement for washing powder or a special fibrous cereal.

'Really?' He dipped in, haltingly, testing, seeing if the comment would withstand a stir.

'One of the best. Honest.' Her eyebrows shifted as she spoke.

One of. It sounded more feasible. One of. The best. He felt embarrassed. Unused to declarations of competence, of value, well other than that time that they had been happy with him at the real estate agent. More property photos loaded onto the website than anyone had ever loaded, apparently. 768 of them. It was a small thing, but he had felt pride. His skills were recognised. And now, she said, also good at sex. He felt himself harden slightly, was it a form of embarrassment, he wondered – the blood rushing to his penis instead of his face.

He scraped for memories, but could only remember a shower, something about bees. Her hair, removing the blonde wig to see her scalp, the ethereal remaining tufts. Also cold water on his scalp, running down the back of his neck, not sure how that linked to the rest of it. Disjointed recollections without the bitter aftertaste that he so often associated with being drunk.

Their drinks came, the coffee oily and thin, nothing like the stuff he used to have at the chain cafe. There was a valid reason he used to pay the extra. Her tea, in a chipped cup, steaming vigorously, without milk. She stirred in a sugar, looked up to catch his eyes. ‘I shouldn’t, but it’s one of my only vices. Can’t help myself. Always did have a sweet tooth. Besides this stuff is shocking. You need a bit of sugar just to make it palatable.’ She put down the teaspoon on the saucer. ‘But it’s cheap. And it makes you appreciate the good stuff.’

‘You don’t drink coffee?’

‘Oh you know, when I need a pick-me-up. Something to get me going. Otherwise tea’s enough. Easily satisfied, me.’

He started again. Urgent. Trying to finish it, fill things in, as if the extra knowledge would settle his stomach; as if it were the gaps that were making him feel sick. ‘Last night,’ he said. ‘I really can’t remember much at all. Next to nothing.’

‘So I gathered. You had to ask me didn’t you? Not exactly an advertisement for my services is it? Ha ha.’ She smiled at him, all jolly-like, tipped herself back in the chair and made a face as if she were horrified but laughing at the same time.

‘So maybe you could give me some details,’ said Ernest. ‘You know, help me along a bit.’

‘What?’ She straightened up. ‘No way. You want a sex line for that sort of thing. Me, I’m not one for describing the action blow by blow;’ she grimaced, ‘excuse the pun – but we could do it again. Give you something to work with. Another fifty quid.’

‘But I don’t have that. I spent everything I had last night.’ He tipped out his wallet on the table, counted out the few remaining coins. ‘I’ve only got... seventy nine pence.’ A vague hope. ‘Would you take an IOU?’

Violet looked at him; her eyes narrowed, just slightly. ‘No credit,’ said Violet. ‘It’s a cash business. Has no one ever told you that?’

‘I probably couldn’t anyway,’ said Ernest. He could feel tiny beads of sweat gathering on his forehead, massing, ready for ambush. ‘I feel... I feel very unwell.’

‘Like I said, you don’t look right. Very green around the gills.’ She leant back a little in her chair. ‘Hang on though – that’s all the cash you’ve got? Really? If you don’t mind me asking, why did you spend the last of it last night? On me.’

‘It’s complicated.’ Turned the cuffs back on his jacket.

‘Don’t worry, I can guess. Everyone’s the same with a bit of booze. Always doing things they really shouldn’t. Often things they want but haven’t got the guts to do when they’re sober.’ She sighed. ‘Ah, look, maybe I can tell you a little bit about last night. But I’d rather do it in private.’ She looked around at the café, then back at him in a very direct way.

This confused him. There was no one there but her and him. And the caff lady, but she was in and out to the kitchen, hardly there at all.

‘Ok. When? Could you come back to my hostel room afterwards?’

‘You’re in a hostel? I’m not sure that would be appropriate. Or allowed. Let me have a think about it, I’ll tell you later.’ A small cake proffered and then withdrawn.

Then came the caff woman, brisk steps and a whiff of perfume mixed with bacon fat that almost unseated his stomach. She deposited the plates with a hollow clatter. Anorexic white bread, under-toasted, sickly pale. Violet’s plate slippery with grease.

‘Hey,’ said Violet, manipulating her beans onto her toast, then her egg onto the beans. ‘Oops.’ The yolk escaped and oozed off back to join the bacon. ‘Memories are better if you make them up anyway. If you tell yourself something often enough you get to believe it pretty quick.’

She called over her shoulder at the woman's retreating back. 'Excuse me, I asked for two pieces of toast – you've only given me one.'

Ernest concentrated on his toast. The smell of the split egg wafted around him, clung in the air. He managed two small bites of his toast, hardly chewed; too much saliva and his stomach would revolt. What she said had confused him. 'So you're saying I should invent it?'

'Well, I wouldn't use the word invent, exactly,' she said. 'More like imagine. Embellish. Pad it out a bit, round it up. You embellish your CV don't you?'

'No.' Why should he do that? It was a record of employment and achievements. Why should he list a Bachelor of Science, for example, when he only had a Diploma in IT?

'Oh come on,' she said. 'There must be something you've bigged up a bit, a job with some puffery, something you've given a spit and polish.'

He shook his head.

'Really? Oh well. I thought everyone did that. I thought employers thought that too. They probably scale it down a bit, how much you think?'

Well that was obvious. '14.3%.'

'Yeah, well, that sounds a bit random, but it's a good number. What is that, about a seventh? Hey don't look so surprised. I've always been good at maths.'

'So why not memory?' He pressed on. It was tempting to explain his change theory, but it would have to wait till later. 'Why don't you like it?'

'It's not that I don't like it. I just don't always trust it. See, you've already demonstrated that you can't rely on memory to tell you what happened last night.' The woman arrived back with the extra piece of toast, and Violet ripped off a corner, jabbed it into the egg. 'Sometimes you even discover that years later you've remembered something completely wrong. You can carry a memory with you years and think you know its shape. Then one day something happens and you have to examine it again; you find a diary, or you meet someone who was there at the time and one of those sources has a completely different recollection of the same thing. You think it's sugar, but it turns out that the whole time it's been salt.'

'I'm not sure I'm following,' he said.

‘Never mind. Eat your toast.’ She bent her head to sip her tea, and he saw the small point on her beret. Looked somewhat like a nipple.

‘You look better with clothes on,’ he said.

She paused with her fork halfway to her mouth. ‘You’ve got to be one of the only clients I’ve had say that to me. Most of them want the clothes off as fast as possible, quicker than they were made in the sweatshop.’

‘I mean compared to what you had on last night – you know. The small clothes.’ He gestured with his fingers to his own breasts.

‘Oh them. You are a funny one. Most men find it saucy – to see a bit of what they’re getting up front, you know. See as much of the goods as possible before they buy – just like the plastic windows in packaging.’

‘I would’ve been just as interested if you had been dressed as you are now.’

‘Why thank you, my prince. So you do remember something from last night, at any rate.’

‘Why do you do it, anyway? You seem, I don’t know. Not like the others.’ He corrected himself. ‘Not like the other one.’

‘Chloe?’

‘Your colleague?’

‘Yes, that’s Chloe. I agree, she is more what you’d expect of someone in our line of work. More glamorous. Very good at her job, too. But then she does have the advantage of having all her hair.’ She did an odd thing with her lips, sucked them in so they became even thinner, pressed them together and looked down at the table.

‘Why do you do it? I mean, how do you decide to do what you do? For money. With men. Sex and everything. Why, how did you decide, when did you...um...’ She was looking at him strangely. Oh dear, he was rambling now, wasn’t he?

Violet’s eyes turned darker green. ‘Darling, I like it. Did you ever stop to think about that? I’m not on drugs – I don’t do crack or coke or any of that shit. I just happen to like sex and money. Sometimes my clients don’t even want sex. Or they’re too drunk. So then I just take the money.’ She stopped speaking abruptly, flicked her glance at him and shifted a little in her chair. Then moved her beret back a bit. ‘Anyway, it’s great. I enjoy it.’

‘But will you do it until you retire?’ He was sure it was a profession, but the thought of it, of her, of old women, it was completely unappealing.

‘Oh god no!’ She laughed, a high-pitched cackle. ‘Can you imagine it – I’d be putting on a wig *and* putting in my teeth – or come to think of it, I’m sure there are those who would prefer I left the teeth out.’ This was also hilariously funny to her for some reason, though when he didn’t join her in laughing she quickly stopped.

‘Anyway, you’re right, I will have to do something else later. Or sooner. It’s not like I’m raking it in and building myself a decent nest egg. Where does it all go?’

‘Breakfasts?’

‘Pffff,’ an explosive laugh. ‘Hey, you’re funny.’

He frowned. Yes, but it was true. That \$5.20 she had spent on breakfast could feed her for a whole day if she wanted.

She became serious again. ‘I dunno what I’ll do though. Never really thought about it.’ She turned her head to the side, looked off towards the plastic clock on the wall.

There was something about her profile then, reminded him of how he used to watch Melissa’s profile in the car – would stare at her memorising it as she drove. Violet had a similar chin, a very alike nose. It was only her eyes that were different. Melissa had had brown eyes, while Violet’s were green.

‘Let me see,’ she turned the eyes on him suddenly, made him look away. Sculpture? Maybe cooking. I could see myself in one of those shows – you know, like with the famous chef who swears a lot. My mum loves him – hoary old bastard – crusty I reckon – but I could do that maybe. Or an aborist. Yeah. Perhaps that.’

Ernest regarded her slight frame. Didn’t look much like an aborist to him, although she did have a green beret. The chef thing he could see though. And with her alopecia she wouldn’t have to worry about hairs falling into people’s plates. ‘I bet you’d make a good chef.’

‘Yeah? I write a bit too. Nothing special. Could probably throw a basic cookbook together.’ She scraped up the last of her beans. ‘What about you?’

‘I would have liked to be a gardener. Growing things is what I’m good for, although I haven’t had much chance. My Nan had an allotment down near Redhill way. I helped her there sometimes when I was young.’

‘Mmm?’ Violet wiped her plate with a toast crust, shoved it into her mouth briskly, a smooth movement, like she was just putting things in their rightful place.

His toast though, that was being troublesome. Still a quarter of it left. He pushed it to the edge of the plate, picked it in half. Pushed the plate away, feeling suddenly the motion of his stomach, the door closing against more intruders. No more. And he sat, willed it to quiet down there, willed it to lie back and relax. Digest the toast. Let it pass through unhindered. Peacefully. No trouble.

‘Starving children in Africa,’ said Violet.

He stared at her half in shock, in horror, transported back. Reached for the corner and shoved it into his mouth.

‘It’s a joke, fella!’

‘Ah, yes. Ha.’ A forced laugh through a soft toast screen. Then a forced chew, and another, and a swallow.

‘You didn’t have to eat it.’

‘No.’ Staring. Never was a word more sincerely meant. Too much, that last piece of toast.

His brain and stomach conspire then, close borders, join in an anti-toast defence mission, a rejection of all toast, all those with toast affiliations. His brain shifts a large bag of ball bearings from the back of his head to the front. Suddenly, without notice. His stomach slams down the gates and brings in the armed guard. For a second he and Violet look at each other, then he feels his eyes bulge slightly. Opens his mouth to say ‘No,’ again but no words come out. Not even a vague retch beforehand to warn him. Just a ghastly, awful noise, and a mass of food – ex-food – and that smell, that terrible smell, and his stomach does this three times, three times he feels it clench and release and clench and release and clench and release. Violet is standing up, away from the table. She is saying something loudly. ‘Oh my god,’ she says. ‘Oh fuck!’

His headache has lifted. He leans back and puts his palms on the cool of the table. Feels the sweat on his forehead suddenly cool too. Realises that Violet is yelling at him, well, not yelling, but she is still very loud. ‘Look what you’ve done! Look what you’ve fucking well done!’

He sends his eyes where she is pointing. And away.

He has thrown up in Violet’s bag.

‘Fuck. Oh. Sorry.’ Now it is hard not to look. The bag, the vomit, her face, her hands as they scrabble to move the bag away from the scene. But the bag was the scene, that was the trouble. He could see that. The beige and white lining was spattered with gobs of something whiteish – ah that would be the toast – and an orangey-brown something. What had he eaten last night? Nothing but crisps. And more crisps, which were now recycled and re-bagged in a leather handbag.

‘I’m sorry.’ It was all he could say. Over and over again. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘You’ll have to pay for it’ she said. ‘It’s ruined. It cost heaps, that bag. Marc Jacobs, it is. Four hundred quid!’

That was an expensive bag. ‘Maybe that’s why you’re not saving anything?’

She glared at him. ‘You’ll have to pay for it.’

And the café woman now. ‘Oh my lord. Oh dear!’ Accusing eyes at Ernest and his terrorist belly. ‘You isn’t sick are you? Oh god, I couldn’t take a bout of gastro at the moment. Oh dear.’

Violet recoiled further from him. ‘Oh no’ she said. ‘Please tell me it’s alcohol poisoning, not gastro.’

‘Sorry,’ he said, for what seemed the hundredth time. ‘Hung over. Thought the toast would make it better.’

The woman tutted. ‘Well isn’t that typical. Least it’s not gastro though.’ She threw them a handful of paper towels. ‘Clean up with them.’ Pointed at Violet. ‘You come out here love, you can clean up your things out the back. Give them a quick wash. I’ll give you a plastic bag to chuck it all into.’ A look at Ernest. ‘I’ll leave you to it. Be quick will you? Oh, and if you think you’re going to be sick again, you can go out in the street.’

He nodded, turned to the bag, tipped it upside down to clear out the things and assess the damage. Violet, back on her chair now, a safe distance away, watched.

Umbrella, black, not in a case, unfortunately. Would take some cleaning.

A wallet, fuschia pink, looked like crocodile leather. Not too bad as it had been under the umbrella.

A make-up case, plasticky fabric – possibly salvageable.

A book, quite spattered. Something about swans.

From the pocket on the front, a mobile phone, Clean.

Keys. Could be washed.

He handed the clean items to her. Put the soiled ones in the plastic bag. 'I'm sorry,' he said. Again. 'It was an accident.'

'I know.' Wearily. 'Wait there.' She walked out the back with her things.

Five minutes later, she was back again, a new plastic bag with her stuff in, another plastic bag with her bag in. The café woman called after her. 'Baking soda for the smell, love,' she said. 'Works a treat. Sponge it off, then baking soda over the stain.'

'Oh God,' said Violet. 'I'd rather just get it drycleaned.'

'Save your money love,' the woman said. 'Doesn't work. Baking soda now, that's what you want.'

'Okay.' Violet took the bag in her left hand. Tied up the end and looked at it with distaste.

'I can clean it,' he said. Hoping that she would take him up on it. Give him the chance to make things all right again. Baking soda. Amanda would have some.

She looked at him, studied him for several long seconds. 'Okay', she said suddenly, holding out the bag to him. 'You deal with it. I know you don't have the money, but it is your vomit. So you get it off, and return it to me. Okay? You clean it. Remember, baking soda. You can forget the rest, but remember that.'

He nodded. 'So how will I get it back to you?'

'Bring it to my work. If I'm not there, you can leave it with Chloe – she's like the receptionist. Oh here, you may as well take this, as well. I can't save I'm only going to chuck it out.' She handed him the book and a card from her pocket, several digits printed on it in blue pen. 'That's my number. Just please get the bag clean. Please?' The last word seemingly tacked on as a last thought; sharper than the others, it hooked into him with a barb.

He stood outside the café and watched her walk off. He held the plastic bag gently, held it up in front of his face, looked through at the contents, then placed it gingerly in his own untarnished backpack.

Chapter Seventeen.

He walked back to the hostel striding as if on fresh snow, feeling each step must be leaving a mark, proof of his being. Still a headache, still an incredible tiredness in his whole being, but he felt better in a way he could not put his finger on. The earlier sense

of being at once weighted down and faded out had changed to something altogether lighter. Like there were feathers in his blood, an invisible armour coating his skin. She remembered his name. He had her bag. Would be seeing her again. Baking soda. It took him back to the day he had kissed Melissa for the first time.

That was a day, all right. That was a great day. He had gone straight to her house after school, skipped the last English class actually – he was never very interested in them anyway, at that point he was skipping quite a few, it took a while till they caught him, and his mother had no idea. Melissa was two years older than him. She had left the year before, was looking for a job in between working in the fish shop. His brother said, ‘Why Melissa? Why that one? Too old for you. And she’s not even pretty.’ But she was, Robert just couldn’t see it.

She was in the lounge, alone, playing patience on the sofa. When she saw him – no one ever knocked in those days in their street – she grinned, reached down beside the sofa and held up a bottle. ‘Mum’s sherry,’ she said. I’ve been monitoring it for weeks. She never drinks it. Probably really old, but it’s alcohol isn’t it? Alcohol never goes off. Come on, have some.’

He looked round for a sign of Mrs Parker’s presence, a set of keys, a half-drunk cup of tea.

‘Don’t worry, they’re all out. Tuesday. She’s at my uncle’s. She’ll never know.’

Excited and terrified in equal measure – no, it had probably been more excitement, it always was excitement around Melissa – he joined her on the sofa and they took turns swigging the tart medicinal liquid while they played cards. Poker, he seems to remember, it was poker. He remembers a mention of strip poker, how it inflamed him, how he could think of almost nothing else after it was said. That word, always in lights, unhappy in lowercase. STRIP. Sounds like rip. The energy of it, extrovert, electrified word.

Five o’clock he saw the lights turn on in the street, knew his mother would be home now, starting dinner, looking for them all. Wanting help. ‘I’ve gotta go,’ he said. Stood up too quickly and sat down again.

Melissa laughed at him, with him; he laughed back, rolled around on the sofa acting silly, anything to keep her laughing. Felt like he was wearing the wrong shoes and a beanie inside his head. ‘See you then.’ Grinned at her, moved as if he were getting up

again, then he was looking at her mouth and her breasts and her legs and he thought *do it now*; he leaned in and kissed her, pressed his lips against hers, quite hard, so her head squashed into the sofa, then her hand was on his arm and she was kissing him back. Dry lips and the smell of vanilla. And the rush in his throat, in his stomach, in his groin, this rush of knowledge. The anticipation of it.

Before that, he hadn't known whether they were boy and girlfriend, or just friends. After all, he had lived next door to her for years. She even babysat him once.

The kiss had ended, too soon and he sat back. Was too shocked to do it a second time. 'See you,' he'd said again. That time left and gone home, touching his lips on the way out, half panicked, half thrilled that he had a girlfriend, was on his way to Sex, on the first step of that high and holy stair. Thought his mother would guess everything he'd been up to in a flash. Like he was painted orange, no, red, purple, all the colours of the rainbow, flashing like a Christmas light. But no, all she wanted him to do was peel potatoes. Didn't mind where he did it, so he sat at the table and did them with the biggest grin painted on his face, aching and aching with the joy of it.

Though when he walked into the hostel, they noticed straight away.

'Hey Ern, my man. You're looking pleased with yourself. Good night?' Billy laughed, clapped him on the shoulder.

'You was pretty hammered when we left you.'

'Hear you didn't stay long though.' Billy said it with raised eyebrows.

'Well I spoke to Violet today, actually.'

'Really? You went back for seconds?' They all laughed.

'No, I saw her at the river, then at a caff.'

'Ooh a date.'

'Yeah, I think she likes me.' Sure of himself today. Confident he does not need their approval any more.

'Wow, what were you swinging last night?'

Billy weighed in again. More serious than the others. 'Careful though mate. You got to watch em, you know. Hookers and that.'

'No I really think she likes me.'

They looked at each other. 'She's a bird, innit. Birds say stuff sometimes. Dunno. Make you feel better. Plus, you paid for it. She wants you to pay again. Course she's gonna treat you nice.'

'Well, I think she likes me.' He shrugged, looked towards the stairs. 'Excuse me, I have some things to do.' And he walked straight up to his room. What did they know? Cynical, too long on the street. Wouldn't let anyone get close. Even the bond between the group of them was formed of alcohol. So they had bravado, the courage to do things that he often lacked, but it was born of booze, came in a can, left in your piss.

In his room, he took Violet's bag out of his backpack, carried it along the corridor to the bathroom, still in the plastic bag. He opened it up and threw the whole thing into the shower, turned on the water and stared at himself in the mirror for a few minutes until it started to fog up. Swished it round trying not to look at it, while his earthy painting slowly left the bag.

He wiped the book down too, it wasn't too bad really. You wouldn't even really know what had happened to it unless you had been there. Could be a coffee spatter or something. And old books often smelt odd anyway. It was all as clean as he could get it. Clean as could be, considering. And there was still the baking soda to come. The sooner he could get that, the sooner her could see her again. Amanda tomorrow. She must be home.

Today though, there was something else yet to do.

He took out his razor from Martin's washbag. The nail scissors too. (At some point he must buy a clipper instead, something sturdier, for now though, the scissors came in handy.) One new blade in the razor, plus a spare one – that should do it.

He stopped the drain in the basin with a sock. Not ideal, but there were no plugs, not even one on a chain. He filled the basin half full, and left the razor to soak. Then he carefully clipped the hair from his head with the scissors so it was short and tufted. A slow process, slower than he thought, but then they were nail scissors, what did he expect?

The water had seeped out of the basin now too, so he had to fill it up again. Waste of water. He shook his head. Must buy a travel plug. Should have bought one already, but he'd had other priorities. Then he wet his head, soaped it, and took the razor to his remaining hair, starting at the temples, working back. Inch by inch a soapy lather, then

scraping off the fibres. That's all they were, fibres, many, many of them. A rough deep abrasive sound with every scrape. Razed it to the scalp, and in some places beyond. It was hard going and there were bumps.

Only one person came in while he was doing it. And he was not the sort to tell. He looked at Ernest and just said, 'Haircut?'

Ernest nodded slowly, the razor held just above his head. He could not shave while others watched. Too intimate, this slow and ragged revealing of the white skin beneath. Already the portion that was shaven felt taut; he could feel his follicles shocked in their exposition to the air, raised in defiance to the cold.

Barry stared at the razor for a couple of seconds, swayed to the right and leaned on the wall. Then motioned with his hand, a slicing move across his throat. 'You're not gonna?'

Ernest shook his head.

'Good. Thas good. Don't wanna have you doing something like...something, you know. Nasty business. Thas good. Good man.' Barry bobbed his head and went out.

Ernest waited till the door banged shut, the heavy regulatory fire door thump, then put the razor to his scalp again, re-commenced the slow process of clearing, careful to go extra slowly around his ears. The bumps on his hard scalp were less forgiving than the softer skin on his face. Despite his diligence, he still nicked himself several times at the back. It was impossible to see what he was doing there, and the razor was by now rather blunt. Back there it had needed to be done by touch, fingers sliding across scalp, seeking a patch that didn't match the rest. Perhaps he should have asked Barry for a hand? Although he had smelt the alcohol on him from a few metres away.

Nevertheless, 30 minutes later he was done. Cuts or no cuts. He splashed it with water. Winced as the cuts stung, sent blood to mix with water. Pink rivulets striped the white of his scalp. A kind of moonscape.

He passed his hand over it several times, wiped the bloodwater from his skin, and a smooth pate glowed dully at him, the visible cuts like random road markings. No parking. Do not park hair.

Fuck, it was bare, wasn't it? Transparent. And exposed. Looked almost grey in colour. Surprising how many bumps there were lurking under all that hair. Was that why she didn't shave it all off? Why she left the tufts. He must ask her.

He tried to recall her scalp, the look of it, the feel, though he didn't remember touching it. Then remembered what she had said. Closed his eyes. Put his hands to his head and softly explored every bump, every hollow. Concentrating in his fingertips. Imagining. Her head. Gently over the cuts. Eyes open to see her.

Grey eyes. Himself. And the moment was gone.

He considered his eyebrows then, wondered whether to remove them too. They looked almost indecent against the barrenness of his scalp. Lush streaks of fecundity in pale brown. He wiggled them, rubbed them up with his index finger to make them stand on end. Caterpillars of carpet. Probably better if they stayed. Not just for practicality's sake – they were useful for expression – but also health. There were no remaining sharp razor blades and to have cuts on his eyebrows would be risking blood running into his eyes.

It was cold, too; he had not expected it to be so cold. Prickling. The bareness of his scalp affronted by the air. He was not even outside. And he didn't own a hat.

He cleaned up the hair on the floor by scraping it up with toilet paper. Into the corner where he could gather it into the bin. Took the bag, the book, his things, back into his room. Hung the bag in front of the window, where it could dry in the weak warmth of the winter sun. Funny that, it had even turned out to be quite a nice day.

Some hairs glinting in the zip. Not his, too red. He removed them, stretched them out against his finger, not one longer than his index finger. God, they were fine. He twisted them carefully into a barely-there rope and put it in the first page of the book. Put the book on the floor beside his bed. Something about a man called Swann, by the look of it. He scanned the few pages, decided to read a little. But it seemed to be all about the main character – what was his name, he wasn't even sure what his name was – who kept going on about his mother kissing him goodnight. And all that talk of goodnights and bed was the soporific tonic that he needed.

Bobby was back late that night, burst into the room stumbling over himself. He turned on the light. 'Oi, name's Billy,' he began, and when Ernest lifted a weary head from the pillow, Bobby took a step backwards. 'Oh, it's you. What you done to your head? You shaved it, hasn't you? You're gonna be cold. Lose thirty percent of your heat through there.'

‘I know. Tell me in the morning.’ He put a hand over his eyes to block out the glare. ‘Turn the light off will you?’

He was asleep again before Billy had even turned it off.

Chapter Eighteen.

The whale died, of course, just as he and Violet had predicted. The whole city got its hopes up, thought that maybe, just maybe, it would swim off happily ever after into the North Atlantic to join its friends and dive for squid and fish. Like the film about the killer whale. Naïve, foolish sheep.

He had indulged a faint hope too, of course, had let it reside there at the very back of his brain, unformed and almost silent. Just the occasional peep. But in the end it was incontrovertible, the outcome spreading by word of mouth across the city while yesterday’s saga was still being run in the papers. Front pages and lots of pictures – shots of it near London landmarks seemed to be the most favoured, as if it were a large and unusual tourist ticking off the sights. *Look, mum, here I am swimming past the Tower of London.* And *See how big I am next to the Houses of Parliament.* Like an end-of season’s cliffhanger soap episode run concurrently with the next season’s resolution.

At least it was a change to see a story like that in the headlines. But he couldn’t help a suspicion that it had probably turned out the way the newspapers preferred. Even wondering if they had had a hand in things. Yesterday’s conversations in the press towers taking a sinister turn; several men in suits gathered round a board room table.

‘So, this whale then.’

‘Tricky one, isn’t it? We all know the public would like to see it get free.’

‘Good news is no news, you know that, Benson.’

‘Doesn’t sell papers.’

‘However, it would be nice to have a happy ending. We could do an interview with one of the rescuers – how did they save the whale, that sort of thing. Perhaps we could give away whale stickers with every newspaper – I helped save Willy the whale. Or come to think of it, perhaps an umbrella with a whale on it, swimming through our logo perhaps.’

‘We could sponsor some whale-saving training courses.’

‘Perhaps, yes.’

‘Some interesting ideas there.’

Until someone piped up. ‘How long do you think that’s likely to last? A day at best. It won’t stand up. Bad news is what we want. Besides, there’s nothing else at the moment. No shoe bombers, no major terror plots foiled. No missing children.’

‘What about stabbings?’

‘No, it’s pretty quiet, everyone’s been watching that whale.’

‘Tube or airline walkouts?’

‘I told you it was quiet.’

‘Ah, well, you’re right of course. We really need that whale to die. Bob, get yourself out there on a runabout or something. Media taking photos, that sort of thing. See if you can get some underwater music happening; as far from whale song as you can get, something traumatising. What’s that stuff your daughter’s into? Always gives me a headache, that racket, might work the same for the fish.’

Of course Ernest knew it hadn’t been like that. There’d been a lot of media around, taking photos from a distance, but none too close enough to really have a hand in things. It appeared to be more a case of well-meaning rescuers, unanticipated consequences.

The night earlier, it looked like the beast might get itself back into the English Channel, back out to take its chances with the container ships. But by the following lunchtime, it had weakened and they were battling an outgoing tide; so someone decided to hurry things along a bit; winch the whale onto a pontoon and tow it out to sea. Who knows if it would have made it by itself, but as they lifted it out of the water it was obvious how the saga would finish. The whale started to convulse. No coming back from that. Eventually it died not far from Greenwich.

Ernest saw none of the drama, not in person anyway, just later on the news. Although he saw the whale that morning – it was still quite alive at that point, though definitely slower, lower in the water. He’d not planned to go and see it, had hoped to go to Amanda’s straight after breakfast, but she was out, *doing family time*, she said. Which meant Martin had made plans for the day and ring-fenced them around the family unit. No one goes in, no one comes out. So he took the tube upriver to Embankment, checked to see how the whale was getting on. A bit like you would a friend in hospital who you didn’t expect to come out. But that was no reason not to visit, no reason not to give them some support.

It was Saturday, with even more people out than yesterday. Some clapped the rescue boats; others concentrated on taking photographs of the top of the whale's back, just visible above the water. But it wasn't moving much; to him, it looked depressed, lethargic. The words kept coming to him, 'out of its depth,' yet that wasn't the appropriate term, was it? It was more stuck in the shallows.

He watched it for only a few minutes, then decided he was better off elsewhere. Anywhere than at the whale's passing, because it could only be that – and there were more people starting to realise it today; you could see it in the way they looked at the whale, then looked at their watch, in that way people have when they feel compelled to watch but would rather be somewhere else: at the movies, safe in the expectation of a happy ending, because that actor's movies always end well and besides a neighbour said it was a lovely film and they wouldn't have said 'lovely' if it was going to be tragic; upstairs in the John Soane museum in the morning light when it was empty of people and full of waiting; in the sweet-smelling waffle queue on Oxford Street. Although none of those particularly appealed to Ernest on a day like today, unless someone else was buying the waffles; then he might be tempted.

He said his goodbyes to the whale from the riverbank, if you could call it a goodbye – a sort of wordless human-to-whale mind messaging that he didn't really believe could work, but what else was there to offer it? Then he went back to the hostel to read his book while he waited for things to turn out. Whatever happened it would be on the news that night. Good or bad, they would broadcast the result.

And later, in the television room, he was there with the rest of them as they stood and sat together in the overheated room, smelling variously of smoke and alcohol. The few chairs were taken by women; they gave them that consideration. Even if homeless, there were still some conventions that most people observed. Ladies sit first. Funny, sometimes it was more polite in here than it was on the tube.

'Sad day,' said Barry. Shook his head vigorously. 'Poor thing shouldna come to London. Kills us all in the end some way or another. Shoulda let the poor thing find its own way out.'

They were already talking about what to do with its body. An unexpected boon for the Natural History Museum. The whale now ensconced in London for good.

There was only one person he could really talk to about it. He texted her. *Hi Violet, want to meet for coffee 2night?*

Hi, who is this?

Ernest. Remember, from the other night, also the whale and the café.

Hi, busy 2night and 2moro. You cd come in and see me Monday.

OK Violet, I'll do that. See you then. PS do you like flowers?

Your phone does not have enough credit to send a txt. You can top up by calling 0800—

Fuck. So he wouldn't know if she liked flowers. He would need to try again, somehow find the money to use his phone.

He cast around for coins to call Amanda from the payphone downstairs, and begged her to top up his phone with her credit card.

'Can't you use a payphone, E? Well okay, I'll top you up with twenty.'

He went back to his room and sent the text again, though perhaps Violet had run out of credit too, or batteries, as there was no reply, just the hard blank screen reflecting his chin back at him from a funny angle. He sat on the edge of his bed and waited ten minutes just in case, stared at the uncooperative phone. Another one of Martin's cast-offs. He'd never bothered with one before, but now, he had no idea what he would do without it. Now it was as important to him as breathing. Should he ring her? Eeels rushed through his stomach. He quashed them and called anyway.

Just a standard answerphone, without her voice, or even her name. Waste of money, waste of time.

Who else might understand? Madeline. She would have something to say. He stood at the window, its blinds open on the street, and looked out into the darkness as he waited for her to pick up the phone.

But it wasn't her who answered; it was someone else.

'Is Madeline there?'

'Who's speaking?'

'I'm, it's Ernest, I'm Ernest, her friend. From the hospital.'

'Ah. Hang on.' Then silence, someone talking, faintly muffled in the background, like they had put their hand over the phone.

Then someone else's voice. 'Look mate, ah, Madeline's not here. She ah...she had a stroke. Couple of nights ago.' A crack in his voice that Ernest did not quite fall into, just registered and stepped over, hardly giving it a thought.

'So is she back in hospital?'

'No mate, she's not. No, she's...' Ernest heard him swallow, take a deep breath in and out again, 'She's gone. Died two days ago.'

But how could she be? She was there last week. He'd even said to her just as he left, 'See you next Monday,' and she said 'Yes dear, I'll look forward to it. Stay interesting.' She always said that. Stay interesting.

'Funeral's on Monday if you want to come,' the voice said. 'I'm sure she'd want you to be there.'

She would? How could she? She was dead. And she was supposed to be helping him get to Vanuatu. Now what was he supposed to do?

'Are you there? Did you want the address?'

Chapter Nineteen.

The funeral was in a church. Funny that, he could have sworn that Madeline wasn't the religious type. She seemed too...radical. Too carefree, never telling him not to take the lord's name in vain when he said 'Oh god,' and even uttering the odd swear word, which always came both as a complete surprise and a small shock from someone as petite as her. And the limits she would go to in keeping the cats out of her garden were positively evil.

Though here he was, at a small suburban church in Blackheath. Which was strange for another reason; the whale had died only two days ago not far from here.

He was early. Seated well before any other mourners, alone with the daylilies, the electric candles and the heavy marble altar. It did to be prompt at these sort of things. Besides, it wasn't as if he had anywhere more important to be. Mondays were Madeline. That was just how things were.

To his left, a collection of saints held a meeting with a cracked Jesus. He tried to ignore them, despite their bright robes, and fingered the pew-back in front of him, its wood shiny and darkened from the years. How many others had touched it? Had Madeline?

A small part of him wished she was already there, that it would be possible to sit with her and wait for the rest of them; have a moment to themselves. But he was there even before her casket, so he just sat alone, a nobody, being very unobtrusive – unless you counted the small scrape he had made in the varnish of the pew-back; but that had started to come loose anyway – and embraced his nobody-ness for Madeline's sake.

She arrived at ten minutes to two; he heard her before he saw her. The hearse pulled up at the door with a squeak of brakes, like she was in a rush.

Four large men carried her in down the aisle: Ed, who stared straight ahead, not even a glance towards Ernest, and three others. On top of the coffin was a small white and pink wreath. Ernest couldn't identify the flowers from where he sat, but he guessed there were lilies among them. There always were.

A small display. Not too expensive. His brother Reece had ordered funeral flowers for his second marriage. 'Much cheaper if they think it's for a funeral,' he said. 'Same flowers, just discounted for tragedy. People always pay extra for joy. But not me, I've got their number.'

Ernest hadn't bought a card or flowers. Even if he'd had the money, he would not have known what to write. And flowers seemed too feminine for someone like Ed. A chilli plant in a pot seemed more appropriate, although he wasn't sure why. Though, like he said, Ed needed nothing. He had a well-paying job, the requisite number of holidays and a nice house. No mum any more, but everyone got to that point, didn't they? He didn't know what was worse, having a parent who was dead, or one who didn't speak to you, had forgotten about you, so you didn't even know if they were alive or dead. He hadn't spoken to his father in almost a year. Amanda had tried to phone at Christmas, but the number had changed; they just ended up with a recorded message in Received Pronunciation telling them to try again. 'Would have thought he'd be over that mid-life crisis by now,' Martin had said. 'Hopeless. Doesn't even ring for his grandkids' birthdays.' Ernest and Amanda said nothing at all.

A few more people trickled in and went to stand with Ed at the front by the coffin. Which were Madeline's grandchildren? He seemed to remember Ed mentioning two. Probably those young men there in suits, who looked about twenty, both with very blond hair, like the woman with Ed.

A few old ladies creaked themselves into the pew a few rows in front of Ernest, which brought the number of people to fifteen; not as many as Ernest had expected, but then the older you got, the less friends you had, the more you'd farewelled for good. He stared at the back of the old ladies' heads; imagined their varying shades of hair in a paint catalogue: greys called Agnes, Joan and Ethel.

Someone leant in from the aisle and passed him a small pamphlet with a photo on the front. Madeline looked out at him from a golf cart, a fuller-cheeked Madeline with much darker hair, and a thin, floral scarf around her neck. Overleaf was the liturgy. He knew this without even turning the page; where the photograph ended, it showed through the paper in reversed shadows of type. Poor quality stock. He glared at Ed. Couldn't even spend the extra for his own mother, couldn't give a damn that her photo wouldn't be allowed to stand alone, but was constantly attended by those thin grey stripes. He folded the pamphlet over several times, as far as it would go until it became stiff, recalcitrant, then wedged it in his jeans pocket, while he focused on Ed's lumpish profile. If only he owned a suit he wouldn't feel so out of place here; then he could walk up to Ed and ask him why he'd gone for 100gsm when 150 was the barely acceptable minimum for something like this. And if it wasn't his choice then someone should have known better, the someone who was printing it.

'Did you know her well?' asked a voice behind him. An unfamiliar accent. Not English.

Ernest realised he had been holding his breath and expelled it in a rush, then turned and met the man's eyes. Brown, an almost identical brown to what his tightly curled hair must once have been – that close cropped mat of it, almost white, apart from a brown patch at the front that was stubbornly refusing to turn. A yellow scarf shouted above the collar of his black suit.

'Yes, a bit. Not so well. I mean...I was getting to know her.'

'Ah, new friends,' said the man, and placed his dark hand on his chest. 'And I, of course, am one of the old.'

He was definitely that. Possibly even older than Madeline.

Ernest opened his mouth to ask how old, when the man's attention was drawn to the front of the church, and Ernest followed his gaze to see the grandsons – if that's who they were – removing part of the casket lid.

‘Shall we?’ said the man, getting up. ‘Last chance to see her in this life. And I didn’t even get to see her enough in this one.’

Madeline lay there in a blue dress with rather pinker cheeks than she had had in life. Just her top part visible; below the waist covered by the casket lid. Would she have the parrot slippers on? It seemed unfeasible that she would wear anything else. They were part of her, the rest of this was borrowed, made for someone else. He was struck with an urge to shake her, drag her out of the mahogany-coloured box. But she was an old lady; you didn’t shake old ladies, even in death.

They took their seats again as a bearded man started to speak. ‘We are here to celebrate the life of Madeline Riley,’ he said. And Ernest was reminded again of the pamphlet, with the photo and her name, and how the words ‘Madeline Riley’ underneath the photo fought valiantly to stand out as the other words loomed through the back. How Ed had failed to protect her from them. 100gsm for fuck’s sake.

He could feel his breathing getting stiffer again, his fists feeling loose and floppy and uncontrollable. He was going to have to count to ten. No, he was going to have to get out of here.

The man seemed to be saying something about dentistry, but Ernest couldn’t focus – he wanted to punch him in the teeth. So he got up and walked out, back up the aisle – *focus on the door, focus on the door, on the light outside, just get there* – the soles of his trainers making a dull plop-plop-plop on the tiled church floor.

He stood outside, clenching and unclenching his fists and blowing steam into the cold air. Dragon breath, he’d called it as a child. If only he could set Ed alight with it, toast him so he crisped like pork crackling. Wanker. His own fucking mother.

He counted to 107, then realised he was shivering less with anger than from cold – he’d left his jacket on the seat inside, and his ears had no hair any more to protect them – so he went back into the foyer and waited till he heard some music start up. Then snuck down the side and back into his pew. The song he remembered from a movie; he forgot which one, just that the actress had curly red hair. Its lyrics would be on the pamphlet in his pocket, but he didn’t wish to read them now, didn’t want to sing; his throat felt swollen and chilled. So he hummed instead, a broken vibration to blanket his throat.

It was the first funeral he’d been to in over 15 years. Less people than either of the others, though he preferred it this way, quieter, more respectful somehow. Funerals full

of people seemed more like a meeting, something more official. Felt like there could be an uprising. You couldn't be alone with your thoughts, too many people coming up and asking how you were, or talking about the dead person. Always an anecdote to relate. Though there hadn't been any anecdotes at Louisa's. He had never been anywhere more silent, more sombre. The air almost humming with the vibration of their grief. Like something had sucked the words out of all of them, and saturated the air with pins and needles.

Just the thought of it made him feel like his throat was closing, someone was drawing his neck up with a metal spike. He needed something to cope. He wasn't going back outside to count again; that would be ridiculous. A list would do, any list. What about the liturgy? The order of service. It was a type of list. Anything to take his mind back to order.

Order of service. Order. Even the first word was comforting.

Service conducted by Barry Owen. That would be the bearded man, then.

Entry Music: The Wind Beneath My Wings

Introduction

Hymn: The Lord is my Shepherd. And the words on the facing page.

Tribute

Reading: Questions from a worker who reads, by Bertholt Brecht. Text on back page.

He stopped at this one. Flipped to the back. This was more like it. So many questions. It was the only thing that reminded him of her in the whole service. He returned to the liturgy.

The Lords Prayer.

Time for Silent Reflection (one minute's silence)

The Committal

Closing Words

Exit Music

They were still singing. So he read it again, and again and again till he knew it off by heart. By the time he had it memorised, the hymn was over, and Ed was up at the pulpit, or the lectern, whatever it was called.

‘Thank you all for coming,’ he said. ‘Me mum would have appreciated it.’ His eyes flicked over the people, skimmed across Ernest without appearing to really see him.

‘Me mum was a great mother. I know most of you remember her as having a great imagination.’ He gave a half laugh. ‘She was stubborn, feisty and liked getting her own way. Especially at the end of her life.’

Ernest looked around at the others, some of whom were nodding.

‘She was mother to me and my sister Alicia, in Canada, who unfortunately can’t get here today, and grandmother to five.’

He was at the right funeral, wasn’t he? She had said she had one child, not two. She only mentioned two, not five grandchildren.

‘She was very successful in her career as a dental hygienist for many years. She was faithfully married to my father for forty-one years, until he died five years ago.’

Ed’s face seemed to swim in and out of focus. *Hang on, that wasn’t right.*

‘Pfff’, said the old man behind Ernest. ‘That’s a lie.’ He said it quietly, but it must have carried to the front, because Ed looked up and glared straight at them. Then he focused back on the paper in front of him and continued reading.

‘She set a great example to all of us.’ Said rather loudly than the rest.

The old man coughed.

Ed continued. ‘Most of you know the stories about Vanuatu. You could almost believe that she’d been there. She took more than one person in with her stories. But then Mum always liked to have a laugh.’ Ed paused, then reached up and rubbed his head.

The saints and Jesus flickered at the edge of Ernest’s vision. His neck itched. Why was Ed lying? Madeline had been there. How could the things she’d told him be false?

‘Mum liked to tell people about her alternative life – I think it’s the life she wanted to have lived.’ Ed looked around, almost met Ernest’s eyes, but not quite. ‘Those parrots.’

A few people tittered.

‘Whatever you think about my mum, and I know she has made both enemies and friends – sometimes of the same people...’

More titters.

‘She was larger than life. And now I guess she’ll be even larger in death. I like to think my mum would like the fact that now she’s become a story herself. A woman who wore parrot slippers? No way.’

Smoke wafted past Ernest from behind. He stole a glance back at the old man, who was leaning back in his pew, drawing on a cigarette. Looked like the same brand that Madeline had offered Ernest in the hospital. A couple of the old ladies muttered in front of him, turned round to glare, but no one said anything; it was a funeral, you didn’t tell people off, it was rude. They were mourning. And so what if mourning happened to include a cigarette.

Ed’s mouth seemed to draw in, move more stiffly. ‘Anyway, I hope you remember my mum the way she’d like to be remembered. As a bright and lively woman who was a great mother, wife and professional. She set a great example to us, I think she did everything in her life she always wanted, apart from travel. Now I like to think of her as free to follow her dreams.’

He introduced Madeline’s grandson, who was to do the reading, then went to sit down.

‘<Copyrighted material removed>?’ said the grandson. He paused, looked out at the audience. ‘Copyrighted material removed>?’

Ed got up stiffly.

‘Copyrighted material removed>?’ read the grandson.

Ed walked to the side of the church. The grandson read. Ed made his way past the old ladies, past the saints and Jesus, and slid quietly in next to the old man. The grandson continued to read.

Ed’s voice was low, right in the old man’s ear. Ernest had to strain to hear over the grandson. ‘I know you’ve a right to be here, but why can’t you just leave us alone? Why can’t you keep to yourself, yeah? Shut your mouth and smoke outside.’

From the front, Madeline’s grandson read, ‘Copyrighted material removed>?’

And the old man said quite loudly, ‘I’ve a right to say my piece. I’ve held my tongue long enough. You’re in denial, all of you. You even drag her in here to get cremated – she wouldn’t have liked that. We always talked of being buried in the land. So I’ll have my memoriam cigarette for her. And you,’ – here, Ernest imagined he might

have pointed at Ed just above the breastbone, without actually touching him – ‘You can’t stop me.’

And the grandson said, ‘*Copyrighted material removed*>?’

There was silence. Ernest listened for Ed’s response to the old man, but none came.

‘*Copyrighted material removed*>?’, said the grandson.

Ed still said nothing.

Ernest imagined them staring at each other, facing off, Ed and the old man, the old man’s yellow scarf acting like a taunt, Ed’s fat cheeks going red with the effort to keep calm, and Ernest wished he had eyes in the back of his head.

‘*Copyrighted material removed*>?’ The grandson waved his hand to illustrate his point.

Then Ed slid back along the pew, strode back down the front to his seat. He spent the rest of the funeral staring straight ahead. The old man stayed silent, until the curtains around the coffin started to close, then he cleared his throat and got up and left before any of them. Ernest turned to watch him go. Maybe he was going to have a cigarette. Hopefully he would still be outside when Ernest left.

Ed stood at the door, shaking hands on the way out. ‘Thanks for coming,’ he said to Ernest. ‘She would have appreciated it.’ He sniffed. Nodded.

Ernest wasn’t sure what to say. He had to ask though. ‘Um...Vanuatu?’

Ed leaned back a bit and paused, gave a faint grimace. ‘Mate, she sucked you in, didn’t she?’ He shook his head slowly. ‘Sorry mate. It’s her old story. It’s complete and utter bollocks. She tells it to everyone. She’s only ever been to Tahiti Club Med. We took her and Dad with the kids fifteen years ago. Then for some reason she starts pulling out this fancy afterwards.’

‘But...’ Ernest’s mouth made repetitive fishlike movements. ‘But...’

‘Sorry mate, that’s the way it is. Me mum was an original all right. But she did like telling the odd porky pie.’

He reached out his hand, shook Ernest’s mostly limp one. ‘Thanks for coming.’ Then he turned to the next person. ‘Alright Dave. Thanks for coming. She would have appreciated it.’

Chapter Twenty.

Amanda was very helpful at first. More helpful than he would have expected, but then since the accident she had been more indulgent than before, extra patient with him. When he asked for the baking soda she only hesitated for a brief moment, then handed over a whole packet. Though he knew that such acquiescence usually came with a cost. 'But why do you have the bag?' she asked. 'Why do you have a woman's bag? Nice one too. Expensive.'

He avoided her questions to begin with. Tried being vague. 'Just someone I know. A friend.'

But that just seemed to make her even more excited, got her all jiggly and squeally. 'A woman friend, E? Tell me. A woman? Someone you met? With your hair – your head – like that?'

She went quite odd when she saw his head initially, had opened the door and put her hands to her face, then reached out and pulled him inside, made him sit down on the sofa straight away, as if he were sick. 'Are you...are you okay? Do you feel all right? Are you depressed?'

It took over ten minutes before she would let him alone, stop staring at his head, accept his explanation that he just wanted to shave it, remove his hair. Had done it himself with no torment or terrible coercion.

'Well I wish you'd gone to a barber. Look at all the cuts.'

She brought him a beanie from upstairs – Martin's wardrobe must be getting very slender – and some antiseptic cream, which she daubed all over his head like icing. So that was useful. Then he had taken out the bag and it had started.

'Yes a woman friend.' Head bent on his task, applying the soda to the lining. 'Do you mind if I use it all up – it's quite a big stain.'

She stood over his shoulder. 'No. Go for it. Go right ahead. I can always get more. In fact, I might have another packet.' Beaming at him, he knew it – he dared not look around.

'So what's her name? Come on E, tell me.' She moved over to the cupboards, rustled around a bit, moving things and stacking and unstacking. 'Here, look, I do have more.' Amanda put the baking soda next to him, beside the sink, then went back to the cupboards again and clattered some tins, pretending she was getting things out for lunch.

He added a little water on the bag and dabbed it with the sponge. Was he supposed to add water? No one had said anything about that.

He risked a glance. Look at her, acting as if she wasn't interested, trying to make him tell her more. She had taken out tuna, marmalade and Weetabix. Like she planned to do something with that. Now she was putting back the Weetabix and pulling out a can of chickpeas, putting back the marmalade and taking out Marmite. Bustling with complete and utter pointlessness. She had always been like that. Once she got an idea in her mind it would lodge there with great titanium barbs; she would pursue it until it gave up, relinquished all its power. She had been a bit like that with Martin. Why was it that women always had to know everything? If they thought you had a secret, they would winkle at you with their needle tongues, small prying questions to widen the hole, until all the information they wanted came spilling out. Why was it? Was it boredom?

'So? This woman. Does she have a name?' She came back over to him, holding a jar of sweetcorn.

'Violet.' He dabbed a bit more at the baking soda. That seemed to be enough. How long should he leave it for?

'Ooh, nice name. And where did you meet her?' Standing back again, turning the sweetcorn tin round and round in her hand.

Well, he may as well tell her. The hole was wide enough and there was no point prolonging the inevitable. 'The other night. I went out. I met her...I paid her...she's a prostitute in Soho. We had breakfast. Then I was sick, um...' He motioned to the bag. There, that wasn't so hard.

Amanda leaned forward and looked at him as if she was trying to work out the colour of his eyes. Then she put the sweetcorn tin carefully on the bench. 'Are you telling me you're using up my baking soda on some hooker's bag?'

They had a bit of a fight after that. At least, Amanda was trying to have a fight, telling Ernest that he should have standards, which upset him, after all she hadn't met Violet, had no idea what she was like. He was trying not to fight, not to react, because when he got worked up like that sometimes he would punch things, walls and doors and furnishings, and it was better not to be worked up like that around people, he knew from when he was younger, because they would get in the way, and then there would be trouble. Amanda was ranting, so he put his hands over his ears and focused on the image

of Violet's naked scalp. Its smoothness and uncomplicated shape, its vulnerable tufts of hair. He didn't see a problem, not really, not with her being a prostitute. It wasn't like they were on the list of least-trusted professions after all – everyone always said lawyer or estate agent or car salesman, didn't they? You never saw prostitute on that list. And after all, at least she was honest, she said she loved her job, that was why she did it, whereas he had worked with plenty of people who said they loved their jobs, then you would see them at lunchtime working on their CVs, playing with colours for the headings sometimes, or adding bits of experience.

Ernest could see no way out of it but to take the bag and go, put it back into the plastic bag along with both packets of baking soda, and go, just walk off down the street, with Amanda screaming from the gate at him 'Don't you walk off on me! Don't you dare! Bring back my baking soda!'

Until she must have remembered herself, that she did not scream in public, that she thought people who screamed in public were common, at least that's what she'd always told Ernest. Anyway, the screaming stopped abruptly before he reached the corner of Finsbury Park Road.

Chapter Twenty-one.

The station smelt like hamburgers. Somebody must have walked through just before him with one from down the road. His stomach growled its discontent. He'd expected to stay at Amanda's for lunch; afterwards he had a meeting with Tiff. But now he was out here, had pushed the eject button himself in damage limitation. It grated on him, being outside when he should be in there, in the warmth of her house, having lunch, engaging his time usefully before the appointment.

An appointment to which he would really rather not go, could simply not be bothered.

It wasn't that he had anything better to do. Not if you counted sitting in the hostel lounge watching re-runs of Corrie – or lately one of the staff members had taken to coming in and putting on an Anthony Robbins DVD; that made a change, despite the whiff of self-help about it. Not that he minded self-help, it's just that there was so much overbearing help around the place that you couldn't be bothered to help yourself; it would put far too many people out of a job. Normally they didn't bring DVDs in and

leave them unless it was a monitored scenario, a semi-official film screening – things would get stolen, someone would flog them off further down the street – but Anthony Robbins was probably safe.

He was early though, he had time on his hands. An hour or more.

The worst sort of time; waiting for something you didn't want to do. People complained about waiting for things they wanted to do, but that was okay in his book, it was positive anticipatory time, sometimes even better than the thing itself – when you ran through what you were going to do in your head, and it was always the best that could happen, the ultimate scenario. Time ticked slowly, yes, but it was benevolent, ticklish time. Whereas this, this was carnivorous, time that drained you of energy instead of giving it, was almost like a vacuum. Time that you definitely wanted to kill.

The problem with waiting for anything is that the thing you were waiting for gained so much in significance. Was that why some people ran late, kept others waiting? To make themselves seem more important?

Yet he had always been good at one kind of waiting –waiting for the possible, the maybes, the unexpected. The element of surprise somehow took away the significance of the wait. In those cases you could do other things. It was when you were waiting for the definites – the definitely positive and the definitely negative. That's when it posed a problem. It was impossible to be happy if you expected anything at all.

He felt the next train come into the station, the rumble of it under his feet, and looked up at the clock. Almost midday. If he had more time, he would go to Kew. There weren't many people there at this time of year; mostly tourists, walking too-quickly round the gardens, ticking it off before the next attraction, which would probably be somewhere inside, out of the cold. Perhaps he could go into the West End, walk around a bit. Do some people-watching. See if *she* was in. Anything but sitting in the hostel, surrendering to the wait.

Or there was the book; he was quite a way into it now. He was past the bit about the mother's kiss goodnight, thank goodness. It bothered him in a way he couldn't put his finger on.

When he lived alone, he would read before bed at night or before getting up in the morning. In the hostel you had to choose your moments. Books needed calm and time and space, and in the hostel, calm and space were like a precious fen violet. It needed

just the right conditions to propagate and just when you thought you had found somewhere where it grew, it would be gone again.

An hour probably wasn't enough. Especially for that book. It was slow going. Definitely not a reading before getting up sort of book. You needed coffee. All that talk of going to bed at the beginning, at least, just made you want to return to your own. And what if you were to read it before bed? Well, then you would be bound to put it down again, unable to read another word because your eyes were doing that slow blink thing, and sooner or later one blink would not make it back up to the top and you would fall asleep in an awkward position and wake with a crook in your neck at three am. It was a morning tea book, that's what it was. Perhaps an after dinner book.

His feet vibrated. Another train. So it was settled then.

Chloe let him in at the top of the stairs, chewing gum in a workmanlike way, her hair pulled back tight against her scalp. It was difficult not to look at her breasts; they rose from her neckline like freshly baked muffins from a tray. 'I've come to see Violet,' he told them.

'I'm afraid she's busy right now. However,' she held up a finger and walked over to the desk, 'I have a couple of other girls in today who you might like.' She raised an eyebrow.

His heart quickened in his throat. She had the wrong idea; he wasn't here for that. He just wanted to talk to her, that was all. 'Ah, no, it's Violet I want to see. I was here the other night.'

'Oh, you're the guy who...' She touched her hand to her head. 'Have you shaved it? You had hair the other night, right?'

He nodded, watched her gaze slide up and over the cuts.

'She's with a client. Are you sure you don't want to see someone else? Or you could come back in half an hour.' She leaned one hand on the desk and arched her back. Ooh, I need a good stretch.'

His stomach felt oily. 'No. Thank you. I just want to see Violet. For lunch. Can I wait?'

Chloe straightened up. 'Lunch? Right then. Well, take a seat if you want, or come back later.'

He chose to wait. She showed him round the side into a small sitting room. A shame that they had no magazines here to read, like in a doctor's surgery. It didn't look much like a doctor's surgery though, either. It was plusher. No medical green, more pinks and red tones. Flock wallpaper along one wall, same colour as the bunch of flowers in the corner. He reached over and touched them. Plastic. Some black and white photos of women in lingerie in various poses. A canvas print of a naked woman, seated, facing away, signed Gustav Klimt in the bottom right corner. IKEA, that was. Amanda had the same one in the lounge.

'Ah, excuse me?' Chloe popped her head round the corner. 'I've just realised Violet's already had lunch. You'll need to book a time if you want to see her. Sorry.' She gave him a half smile. 'Do you want to book in and for how long? Forty pounds for thirty minutes. Sixty pounds the hour.'

His hands started their fidgeting. 'I can't just see her to talk?'

She stared at him, scratched her head. 'She's working. You realise that, don't you? Do you take time out to chat when you're at work? She might be able to spare five minutes. Or you can leave a message with me if you want.'

Well, he could see her point. She was a professional, wasn't she, just like other professionals.

'No. No thank you.' He did not want five minutes. To say hello and be gone again. He wanted to sit down with her, have a proper conversation, like the other day in the café. Needed more time. More of her work time; costly, sixty-pound-an-hour time.

Who could he borrow money from? Amanda? No chance. Not for fifty years. And there was really no one else.

He'd often found money as a child – staring at his feet instead of where he was going, according to his mother. He didn't make a habit of looking at the ground these days, had forgotten what bounty could be discovered there if you were alert. Sixty pounds though – that was a lot.

'Can you tell her I'll be back? Two o'clock.'

Chloe nodded. 'Sure, I'll let her know.' She chewed her gum, looked at him from under spidery lashes.

Chapter Twenty-two.

It wasn't sixty pounds, not exactly. Not in cash. It was a belt, coiled like an armadillo in his pocket, where he had stashed it after slipping it off the stand in the shop. The tag read £97.50.

Chloe wouldn't take it though. 'Don't you have a credit card?' she said, as he unrolled it for her on the desk. 'We can't take that.' She felt the leather between her forefinger and thumb, tapped the buckle with a bright fingernail. 'It's nice though.'

But she had to. She must take it. He'd come and waited, he'd gone and put himself on the line with the belt – he still felt a bit trembly with the excitement of it all. The security guard had watched him very closely as he walked out the door and even though he'd checked the belt carefully for a security tag or sticker, he'd been ninety-three percent sure that he was going to feel the guard's hand on his shoulder any second. In fact, it wouldn't surprise him even now if the guard came bowling through the door with the police at his back.

And he'd missed the appointment with Dr Latham, which Tiff would have something to say about. All to see Violet. He must see her. He leaned forward, accidentally slammed his hip into the desk; was close enough to see the freckles on Chloe's cheek. 'Please. Can't you make an exception, just this once?'

Perhaps he had shouted. Her eyes widened and she jumped back from him. 'Look, I'll tell you what...' She took the belt hurriedly and tried it round her waist. 'I'll give you sixty quid for it. So we're even.'

'Oh, ok.' He smiled at her, relieved, though she did not smile back. Just stared at him.

'Is there anything the matter?' called a voice, then Violet was there, walking up to Chloe, green eyes meeting his.

His stomach contracted with the smell of her perfume, something spicy and earthy all at once, and he stared at her and his mouth dropped open just slightly, so his tongue might try the smell of her too; as if he might be able to drink her in and swallow her up, possess her utterly.

'Can I help you? Oh, hello. You've shaved your head.' She and Chloe exchanged a glance.

‘I’ve come to see you,’ he said. She was brunette today, wearing a short bob under which he could see the tiniest bits of her earlobes.

‘Great,’ she said and smiled at him. ‘Lucky me.’

‘He’s booked for an hour,’ said Chloe. Then Chloe took Violet’s arm and pulled her aside, said something that Ernest couldn’t catch.

Violet looked him over and turned back to Chloe. ‘Yeah, I think it’s all right,’ she said to her. They exchanged another look, then Violet reached out and took Ernest’s arm, led him down the corridor, smiled at him as she showed him into a room. ‘Missed you yesterday. Thought you were coming in to see me then.’ The door closed behind him with a click.

‘I was, I’m sorry. I had a funeral,’ he said. ‘A friend.’

The room smelt of lemon, a cloying sweetness to it unlike the actual fruit – perhaps it was one of those room deodoriser sprays.

‘I’m sorry.’ Her hand squeezed his arm. ‘You want to talk about it?’

She was so caring, so interested. This is why he was here; this is why he hadn’t gone to the appointment. It was the right decision. ‘I’d like that.’

She sat cross-legged on the bed and patted the duvet next to her. ‘Why don’t you lie down?’

So he took off his shoes, and lay on the bed, and she sat beside him and massaged his head with smooth, strong fingers circling the cuts. ‘Ow,’ he said. Winced as the movements awakened his wounds.

‘Do you want me to stop?’ Her touch grew lighter, threatened to cease.

‘No, it’s fine. It’s fine.’ It hurt, but it was a sensation caused by her. Reminded him that he was here, he was alive, he was with her.

‘Why did you shave your head?’ she asked? ‘Wrong time of year for it, isn’t it?’

‘I wanted to see what it was like,’ he said. ‘It’s colder, but easier.’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I know. Must be even easier having all of it off. Sometimes I wonder if I should shave mine, but I guess I’m always hoping that if I leave some of it, it will encourage the rest to come back. Ha.’

‘Take it off. Please.’ He pointed at her head.

‘My wig? Sure, whatever.’ She gave a tiny giggle, and pulled it off slowly, keeping eye contact with him all the while, then turned and placed it on the table next to the bed. ‘Better?’

‘You look younger like that.’

‘Really? Thanks.’ He wasn’t sure whether she believed him.

She stroked her head, her long fingers flattening the tufts. The same colour nail polish as on Madeline’s hands, folded across her silent chest. ‘She was going to help me get to Vanuatu.’

‘Who’s that then? Who’s she? Is this the funeral?’

‘My friend Madeline.’ He told Violet about the hospital and the slippers and his visits for tea. He repeated Madeline’s story of living in Vanuatu, her theory of boredom zeniths.

Violet was a good listener, kept asking him for more details, till he must have spent easily half an hour talking about Madeline. ‘Ah,’ she sighed. ‘She sounds like a character. Just the sort of person I’d like to meet. So that’s why you’re going. How exotic. You’ll need some sunscreen on this head.’

‘But she’s dead now. She’s...she was encouraging me. Helping.’ Not that he was sure how she was helping; it’s just that she had told him he could do it, and he believed her. ‘Now who can I talk to?’

‘You can talk to me,’ said Violet, lifting her hands from his head.

‘You?’

She brought her face round, winked at him. ‘Yes, me. I could encourage you. And I’m a great listener. Or do you prefer little old ladies?’

The green of her right iris was flecked with brown. She was very beautiful. He would like to kiss her.

Violet kept looking at him; started to stroke his head again, her fingers softer now. He could stay here forever.

‘I like you, you’re interesting,’ she said. ‘I’d love to hear what you’ve got to say.’

He shifted round, pushed himself up on his elbow so he could see her better. ‘Can I see you after work? It’s just that...I don’t have any money.’

She put a hand up, adjusted her wig. 'I'm sorry, I can't see you out of hours. I'll see you here, not elsewhere. I can't make exceptions. Ernest...' – it was the first time today she'd used his name – 'You do understand, don't you?'

'What if I brought you presents? I can bring you gifts instead of money.' It had worked for Chloe, maybe it could work for her.

'Like what? I'm sorry, I don't think I get you.'

'Like a belt. Like clothes. Jewellery?' He was speaking quickly now, urgently.

'Look I don't think that's acceptable. Honey...' she touched him on the arm, 'This is my job. I have expenses to pay.'

He had to continue seeing her. Somehow he must find a way. 'I still have your bag,' he said.

'Oh, have you cleaned it?'

'Yes, well, it's cleaning at the moment.' It was in his backpack. Technically he could give it to her now, but if he held on to it, then she would have another reason to see him again, and in that time, perhaps he could find out how to get some money. 'Can I bring it to you tomorrow? At lunch?'

She looked at him with an expression he couldn't place, as if she couldn't decide whether to smile or frown. 'Can't tomorrow; I'm not working,' she said. 'Thursday though. Thursday midday.' She turned her head and looked at the clock above the door. 'Almost out of time, honey,' she said, and laid her hand on his thigh. 'I've had a lovely time today, anything else I can do for you before you go? Ten more minutes.'

'I want to know more about you,' he said. Frustrated. Where did she live? Did she have brothers and sisters? What was her favourite food? What would she look like when she was sleeping?

'Me? Oh, I'm not very interesting. You're *much* more fascinating. Tell me about Vanuatu. It's so exciting. I'd love to go.'

It was nice that she was interested. Maybe if he told her more she would come too. He rattled off what he knew about life expectancy, diet, climate averages, flora and fauna. 'And it's the happiest place in the world.' Someone did a study – if only he knew who.

'The happiest place in the world? That's quite remarkable – I wonder how they measured that? You're so lucky. I'd love to hear more about it. Oh, look, our time is up.'

She rolled to the edge of the bed, reached out towards him and drew him to her in a hug. 'See you Thursday, honey.'

Chapter Twenty-three.

Tiff was waiting in the foyer the next morning when he got up. 'You missed your meeting with Dr Latham yesterday.'

'I forgot.' The first real lie he'd given her. Really rather easy; it slipped out like a tidy little packet from a vending machine.

He had practiced saying it all yesterday evening, every mouthful with his dinner, repeated it over and over, so it was almost like breathing, not even a quickened heartbeat with it. She was supposed to answer at this point; he had also rehearsed that bit – she was supposed to say 'That's a shame. Here's another appointment.' Just like that, easy. But she just stood there looking at him. Waiting. Doing that thing with her tongue between her top lip and her teeth.

What was she waiting for? Was there something else he was supposed to say? He didn't know what. Well, let her wait; he would wait too – for her to provide some clue, a hint of how this was to proceed. He looked at the wall behind her, just below her shoulders. Switched himself off the way he'd started to as a teenager, where you put up the walls and exist only in your head, like entering a standby mode which no one but yourself could allow you to exit. Fade out.

Sure enough he had hardly gotten into the zone when she cracked. Blinked several times and looked up at the ceiling, then back at him. 'You forgot? That's unlike you, Ernest.'

'I was busy. I forgot.' That time was slightly harder, more like taking a breath when your lungs still possessed some air – yet he got it out there, the lie a small bird doing graceful laps around their heads.

'It's important, you know. No one can do it for you. This is part of helping you get well.'

'Yes. Sorry.' And he *was* sorry. He didn't like to inconvenience people. But he also wasn't sorry to have seen Violet. Not sorry at all.

'Ernest? Do you still have the card I gave you?'

Damn, he hadn't practiced this. 'Yes.' He reached into his jacket pocket, fished it out. Right there, exactly where he'd put it the other week. The card flashed at him, a warning, and he slotted it back out of sight.

'Okay.' Tiff nodded, then shrugged. 'Well, you seemed to remember where you put the appointment card. But never mind. We'll let it go, shall we? I'll make another appointment.'

Yes, this was where he thought they'd get to. Though it seemed ridiculous that she should believe him when she was the one who had been telling him to lie. Only at the last meeting, she said 'You're too honest for your own good, Ernest.'

Which had probably come from him telling her that she looked very unwell, like she had been crying, her eyes all puffy and red. 'What are you thinking?' she'd asked, when he was being very silent. She had asked how he was, after all. What was there to say to that, then, but 'Okay.' There was never anything he wanted to add. So she pried, and he said 'I was thinking that you look terrible.' Because he was. And she did.

She had laughed, actually laughed. 'I asked for that, didn't I? You're a truth machine. Do you ever tell lies? Even white ones?'

He shrugged. 'Why should I? It's deception.' He felt strongly about this. If he started lying, he would be no better than Robert. Lying, thieving – the words went together.

'I don't mean you should go all out, lying about everything. Only that sometimes it's a good idea to um, not say things you're thinking, at least. Not negative things. Do you think I want to know I look terrible?'

'Maybe not. Maybe.'

'Never mind. All I'm trying to suggest is that sometimes you might think about not necessarily being so honest, so truthful. Just keep a little bit back. And also don't feel you need to help people so much. I've seen you, making cups of tea for the others downstairs – which is nice, but if you keep doing things for people all the time, they start to expect it. And they don't necessarily think better of you.'

He picked at his fingernails. But how else was he meant to be useful round here?

Tiff barrelled on. 'Maybe we can work on it. I'll give you some exercises. Say, for example, next time someone asks you to help with something, say no, sorry, I'm busy. If you are busy, of course. If you're not already doing anything, then by all means help.

But think about it. You don't exist on this earth to help other people. You have to find your own way.'

Now she had him confused. 'Why are you helping me then? Why do you do this for a job?'

Tiff laughed. 'Fair point. I like helping people. I studied it. Social sciences, psychology. I'm interested in why people like you end up where you...um, end up. I'm interested in helping people be the best they can be.'

And she had told him to lie? Well it wasn't like it was his fault, after all. He had to make his own way, like she'd said. So why did he still feel so bad?

'Come in here a minute,' said Tiff. 'I'll make you another appointment before I forget.'

He followed her into The Bahamas, one of the rooms off the main corridor, in between Puerto Rico and Mexico. He supposed it was better than calling them rooms one, two and three. The Bahamas had sunshine yellow walls, and a square window which opened on to a small internal light-well. There was no hint of what the day outside was like. They could have been anywhere.

'If you can't make it next time, can you call me, let me know?' Tiff said suddenly. 'It's very inconvenient. People wait around for you.'

But he had heard that it happened all the time – they would make appointments, people wouldn't turn up. Surely they expected it; he was just another one. They were professionals, they should have a system.

'So why don't you double-book, if people don't always turn up? Can't you make allowances, over-book by like airlines do? You must know the statistics.'

'It's not that simple. What happens if they turn up together?'

'Er, you could give out vouchers, book vouchers or something.' That was fair enough, wasn't it. Obviously they couldn't give cash, but they had budgets; they could get sponsors. It was the government, after all. They were Somebodies, they had contacts.

'Not a bad idea.' She laughed. 'Not bad at all. Although I can't see it finding favour with management. 'But forget it, it's not going to happen, I promise you. Water?'

He nodded. 'Please.'

She got them both a glass of water from the water cooler in the corner of the room. 'So what did you get up to yesterday that was so important? Normally you have a pretty good memory, from what I've seen.'

Should he tell her? There didn't seem any harm in it. 'I met up with a friend.'

'Great. That's excellent. Social contacts are very important. I'm pleased to hear you're making an effort, Ernest. I really am. Who's your friend? Do I know him? Someone at the hostel?'

'No, her name's Violet. She works in Soho. Billy introduced me to her the other night.'

Tiff's eyebrows floated towards her hairline. She shifted in her seat and took a slow sip of water. 'Soho. What does she do, this Violet?'

If Amanda's reaction had been anything to go on, perhaps he should back up a little here. Change the subject. Make up a new job for her. But no, Tiff didn't get angry. Tiff would want to talk about it, evenly. That's what she was like. He realised suddenly that he trusted her, could depend on her to discuss things with him calmly, be not in the least reactionary. It was her job. 'She's a prostitute. But we're friends, we're not...I'm not just her client.'

'I see. And Billy took you to see her?' She sort of waved her hand at him then, an odd movement. 'Look I'm only asking, it doesn't matter.'

Why would it matter though? What was wrong with it? Apart from him having no more money for his passport. 'The other night, yes. But I didn't have the chance to talk to her properly until the next day. I saw her at the river. At the whale.'

'Mm-hmm, the whale.' Tiff made a sort of grimace. 'Poor thing, I think us interfering with it didn't help. Although what else is there to do – I guess if we hadn't interfered it probably still would have died.'

'Maybe it's a bit like what you suggested about me wanting to help?' suggested Ernest.

'Yeah, could be. You're right; sometimes when we think we're helping, we're not.' She adjusted the bag at her feet. 'So anyway, this chick, sorry, this woman. You say you saw her again?'

'We had coffee together.'

The eyebrows went up again. 'Did she ask you for money?'

‘The guys gave her money on Thursday night, yes. But not the coffee.’

‘And have you paid her again? When you saw her today?’

‘To see her I had to pay her. She was busy. I had to book in.’ He shrugged.

Business was business.

‘Right.’ Tiff folded her arms.

‘But she’s going to help me get to Vanuatu.’

Another frown. ‘Look Ernest, it sounds like this woman seems quite nice to you. But you need to be aware...she makes money out of men wanting to spend time with her.’

‘Yes, that’s her job.’

‘I don’t think you quite get it. She is using you to make money. Whether you have sex with her or just talk with her, she’s using you. How did you get the money?’

‘I had some saved,’ – his heart pained him a little as he said this, but less than it had hurt him yesterday – ‘and I borrowed some. From Amanda.’ How bizarre, now the lies were just coming in packs. Was it a side effect of the blue pills?

Tiff stood up and went over to the window, looked out at the blank wall, then came back and sat down again. ‘Okay, listen to me; it’s not a good idea for you to see this woman. Friends don’t charge friends to see them, I’m sure you know that. I’d advise you not to borrow any more money to see her. If she wants to see you without payment, then she’s a friend.’

She had a point. Although Violet was different. She was busy, she didn’t have a lot of time. She did like him, she’d said so. She deserved him standing up for her. ‘I’m seeing her tomorrow for free.’

Tiff leant forward in her seat. ‘Good. Don’t give her any more money. Tell me, is there a man who takes the money or something? Does he threaten you?’

‘No, no it’s not like that.’

There was a daddy-long-legs spider behind her on the wall. He watched it climb up slowly, then let itself down again on its invisible silk. Should he tell her?

‘Okay.’ She sighed. ‘Can you talk to Dr Latham about this when you see him?’

The spider stopped just short of her shoulder.

He nodded.

Chapter Twenty-four.

Wednesday was a marathon in shackles. A day in interminable shades of grey. But he got through it, kept her face in the back of his mind the whole time, gazed on it at regular intervals. At breakfast; in the shower; as he walked to the Tate. He saw her in all of the Rothkos and in the tiled gallery floor. As waves in the brown of the river; as the possible sister of the redheaded woman selling roasted nuts at a stall; in the pound that he found on the concourse of Waterloo Station. He suffered through the day, with her, without her. At dinner, when he could hardly eat for the room his inflated heart had stolen from his stomach; during EastEnders, which he could barely watch because of the redhead at the bar; and for a short while in bed before he hastily masturbated, aware that any moment Billy might come into the room.

Then he awoke and it was Thursday.

He was up at seven, and walked all the way to Greenwich and back to get rid of his energy. He'd forgotten how good walking was for anxiety. So he walked to Soho too. Was waiting just in case she decided to go out early. In case she had forgotten he was coming. Then just before twelve, he strode up the stairs two at a time, Violet's bag snug in his backpack.

A girl was coming out as he went in. She seemed in a hurry, like something had bitten her and she wanted to get away. They feinted dance moves in the doorway, once, twice, before she quickly stepped back with a heavily-accented 'Sorry'.

'No, no. I'm sorry,' Ernest apologised, sliding in through the doorway slowly and moving to the side, worried that it was his bulk she was scared of. She was tall, but very slender, like a switch of grass. Probably only a third of his weight. He should have really let her go first – he hadn't even finished the thought, when she dashed past him and ran down the stairs, her heels scraping on the floor in her rush.

He looked after her a second, then back into the room, where Violet stood with a book in her hand.

'Who's that?' he asked.

'Ah, just someone I met yesterday' said Violet, not really looking at him. 'She doesn't seem to speak English; all I can get is that she seems to be from Latvia.'

'Ah,' he said, and nodded. 'Sveiks!'

'What?'

‘Sveiks. It means hello in Latvian. You can also say Labdien.’

‘You know Latvian?’ She swapped the book from her right hand to the left and dropped it to her side, then leant on the doorframe. Now looked at him.

‘Yes. I, er, well, I learnt it.’

‘Yes, obviously. How? When? Hang on, come in. Don’t just stand there. She dragged him up the corridor into the room. Mouthing something to Chloe on the way.

‘Aren’t we going out for lunch?’ He fished her bag out of his backpack.

‘In a minute. I need to ask you something first. Latvian. You really speak Latvian?’

It had been difficult at first. Learning the gender of words. And not having access to hearing it spoken, only written. There had been a girl on his web course, a very pale and aloof girl who he tried to get to know. But every time he sidled up to her and said hello, she would just say ‘Hi,’ then stare at him, waiting for him to say something else. As if she realised her power to silence him, and liked to practice it. She spoke excellent English – in fact, when he had remarked upon it, she said most Latvians spoke good English, in the cities at least. She had very blonde hair and hazel eyes. A sharp proud nose and a dimple on her chin that for some reason all he wanted to do was to smooth out.

He realised he could not get her attention in the usual ways – as if he was even good at that – so he went the back route. He learnt Latvian at lunchtimes, evenings and weekends, as soon as he had finished his coursework. It had been difficult to practice but he put an ad on a website and found a Latvian who was happy to teach him in exchange for some help with English pronunciation. In truth, Tomas was already quite good at English, despite his grammar being slightly strange, and his pronouns always getting mixed up, but as he said to Ernest, ‘Some little more practice is useful to me.’

So it was settled.

Not that it had done him any good. By the time he had worked up the courage to ask her out in Latvian, she was already seeing someone else.

‘How much do you know?’ asked Violet.

‘Quite a lot I think, said Ernest. ‘I can talk about ordering food, likes and dislikes, festivals and holidays. Why are you looking at me like that?’

‘You might be able to help me. That girl. I think her name’s Leila.’ Violet stared past him out the door. ‘She works somewhere near here, but I can’t make any sense of anything she says. She doesn’t seem to know any English. All I can get is that she seems to be from Latvia.’ She looked past him at the door and back again. ‘I want to help her. I’m not sure if she wants to be here. That is, I don’t know if she’s here of her own free will.’

‘You mean like a prisoner?’ There had been no one else here with her. No one outside at the bottom of the steps. Although...’ ‘Do you think she’s been trafficked?’

‘Yes, I mean no, I don’t know. She hardly knows any English. Or if she does, she won’t say anything. All I got out of her yesterday when I met her in the pharmacy was her name and ‘nice to meet you’. She hasn’t even told me what she does, but Chloe said she saw her dancing at one of the clubs.’ Violet shook her head. ‘She hardly looks 18. I saw her today again and asked her up for a drink, but I couldn’t make any headway.’

‘Do you speak Russian? Latvians also speak Russian. Although they don’t like to.’

‘Unfortunately no. A little French is the best I can do. I tried that too, but it didn’t work.’ She sighed. ‘But...you might be able to help me. Would you know how to ask someone if they felt safe? If they were ok? If they needed any help?’

‘Um, yes, I think so,’ said Ernest. He did think so, although not straight away. ‘I’ll have to look up my notes.’ His brain seized suddenly. *Shit, shit, shit! I don’t have my notes! I got rid of them with everything else!*

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Um, I, er, I’ll have to check.’

‘Okay, cool. Check. Tell you what, I’ll make a time with her – I’ll try – and you come along and act as interpreter.’ Her face brightened then. ‘That will be great.’ She smiled at him and he could almost see the happiness coming out of her, could see her looking at him with different eyes. As if she saw into him now, like looking at a picture and seeing the way it has been painted; the beauty of the individual strokes.

It was very nice, but it was no good getting carried away yet. Where was the closest bookshop? Charing Cross Road. He would go there straight after lunch to refresh his memory.

Violet took the bag from him, threw it behind her on the bed without even looking to see what a great job he’d done on cleaning it. ‘Sorry Ernest, can we do lunch

tomorrow instead? You don't mind, do you? We can talk, then we'll meet Leila together. I want to see if I can go and find Leila first, make a time. What was hello? Sveits?'

'Sveiks.'

'Oh my god, thanks so much. You're an angel, honey.'

And then she leaned over and kissed him on the mouth.

Chapter Twenty-five

He was relieved when Violet called him that evening and told him that Leila would not see him, would not deal with anyone other than Violet. The problem seemed to be that he was a man. 'Which makes things even more suspicious,' said Violet. 'Men, see. Some bastard has tricked her over here, lured her away from her family with promises of money and a UK visa and now she's trapped here. He will have taken her passport, locked her up in an apartment and only lets her out for a short time every day. He's probably threatening to kill her or kill her family if she doesn't comply.' She stopped and took a deep breath. 'So anyway, I guess you'll just have to teach me. I'll make a list of things I want to ask, and you teach me how to say them.'

'But you can't do it that way. You need to learn the rules, the grammar. Otherwise how will you understand her answers?'

'Damn. You're right. This might take longer than I think. Okay, so I'll see you at lunchtime? We better make it two hours instead of one.'

'Yes.' Oh yes. But he was going to have to wing it. The phrase books had been next to useless, geared up for people to ask the location of toilets and hotels, praise local cooking, and explain they were allergic to nuts. Asking whether someone had been abducted – that was going to be trickier.

He spent the evening online, trying to bolster his knowledge further, but the internet language tips available were rudimentary. His knowledge was full of dangerous holes. So many verbs were lost to him, and several crucial nouns. He couldn't get much further on his own. He prayed for her to be a slow learner.

At first he thought he might have gotten lucky. Violet didn't even want to learn Latvian at first. She suggested they brainstorm all the ways he could get to Vanuatu without cash. Some were quite ridiculous, but a few had merit. Getting a job on a cruise

ship, doing conservation volunteering, perhaps stowing away on a container ship – that one sounded risky, but all were more feasible than saving money in his current situation.

But then she put her hands flat on the table. ‘Right then. Let’s learn Latvian.’

He taught Violet Hello, Goodbye, Sorry, I, You, Do you speak English? Yes, No, I speak Latvian, and how to conjugate To Be and To Have. Also several choice swear words in both Latvian and Russian to help fill in the time. ‘Everybody swear in Latvia, Tomas had said. ‘Not so much swearing as in London, but close. It is important you learn. I teach you also Russian because not so many bad Latvian words.’

Ernest had instinctively known that swearing was unlikely to impress Ana at college, so he had not bothered to practice, but they had stuck in his mind all the same. Possibly because of the way Tomas had taught them to him. Standing on a table, shaking his fist, yelling out the words in a deep voice. Pulling Ernest up onto the table, nearly tipping it over with their weight. ‘Ah, it feels so good. Now you try.’

And Ernest had, summoning up his own lungs and forcing them to capacity over and over again. Imagining what his mother would say if she knew. Afterwards he had stood there in a kind of shimmery daze, feeling light and energised and incredibly calm. He looked at Tomas and shook his head. ‘That was great.’

And Tomas had jumped up on the chair and slapped his back and called ‘Pizdabols! Pizdabols! Pizdabols!’

Then they had sworn at each other over again until neither could talk for laughing.

Violet was a good pupil, studiously wrote down all the words and their phonetic spelling. She mouthed them to herself in between bites of her sandwich. But she seemed dissatisfied with both the sandwich and his teaching. ‘Wait there while I get a muffin. Ok, now how about you teach me some yes–no questions. Something to be going on with. I want to say “Are you happy here?” Also tell her she can trust me.’

But happiness and trust were lost to him. ‘Sorry, I need to look them up.’

Tomas was still working at the printers. Or he had been at least last year. Ernest hadn’t bothered to give him his number when he moved; he didn’t want to talk about the job he no longer held – the one Tomas still had. The job that Ernest had gotten for Tomas in the first place.

But now Tomas was the only person who could help him.

Chapter Twenty-six.

He rang Tomas the next morning from the payphone downstairs. Knew his number still off by heart. Tomas his only option to help Violet help Leila. For him to see Violet.

‘Ernest? Is that you?’ Tomas almost shouted down the line. ‘I try contact you for so long. I goes to your flat, but they say you not live there. I try café sometime in case you are still having coffee. Where are you these times? What you doing?’ And then another tone. ‘Why you not tell me. Why you not ring?’

‘I had to move out. I’m living at a hostel.’

‘You what? You come and stay my place. You can have sofa.’

‘No thank you. I’m ok.’

‘Why? We are friends! I worry about you. We are friends. We have been friends over two fucking years. Where have you be?’

Had his grammar gotten worse? Surely not. ‘I’m sorry, Tomas. I’ve been a bit stuck.’

‘Ernest. You are fucking A! Where you live? Hostel? You should not be in hostel. Come to my flat, still same place. You come to work today – I give you the key.’

‘Thanks Tomas, but I don’t want to go there.’ Seeing all their smug faces, working together still. ‘Um, I need some help with my Latvian. It’s urgent.’

Tomas paused a second. ‘Urgent. Latvian.’ Like he was trying the words together seeing if they fitted. And allowed it. ‘Well. Of course. Come, you stay at my house, I help you with your Latvian. You meet Ana again, yes?’

‘No, it’s ah, for a another friend.’

‘You meet another girl, you sly thing you Ernest. You are going behind my back. This is why you not call. You met a lady. You like the Latvians, uh? I must admit, we are a good-looking people. But maybe not so good as the Brazilians.’

‘No, I mean yes. I met a lady, but that’s not why I haven’t called.’

‘No matter, we will meet. Tomorrow?’

‘How about tonight?’ He’d promised Violet he would have the information for her tomorrow at lunch.

‘Ah, that is difficult. I have date. And before that I have gym.’

‘Can I just get a few words for now then?’ He listed his requirements. The full conjugations of trust, kidnap and escape.

‘Ernest, that is weird learnings you want. Sure you are not in trouble? No? You sure? You can tell me. Okay, then, I give you. You have a pen?’

It turned out Ernest knew all of them apart from kidnap; had just forgotten. As soon as Tomas said the root words, they all came flooding back.

‘Thanks Tomas. I’ll see you tomorrow then.’

‘Ah, no problem, tomorrow. I tell you, I am much happy to hear you. I am worried before. I think you dead or gone away or worse. Pizdabols! You must tell me everything.’