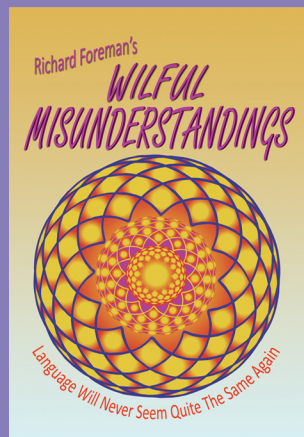
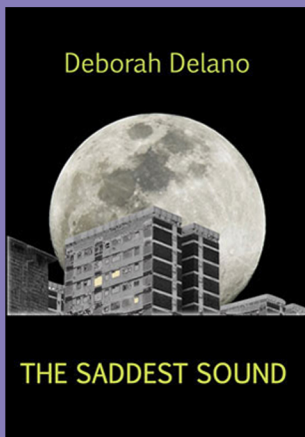
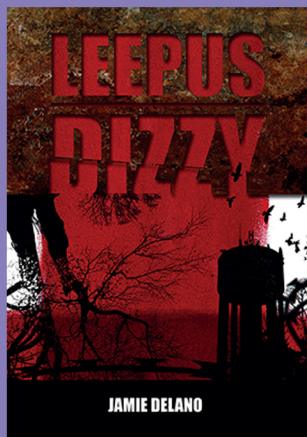
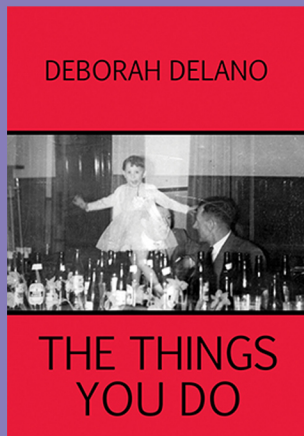
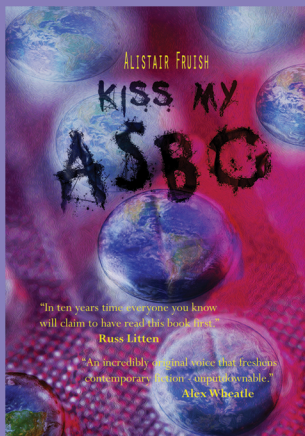
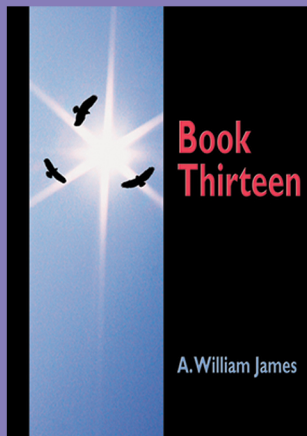


WRITING FOR THE HELL OF IT



A LEPUS BOOKS SAMPLER
2016

WRITING FOR THE HELL OF IT

Work by various LEPUS BOOKS authors

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“Book Thirteen” © A. William James

“Kiss My ASBO” © Alistair Fruish

“The Things You Do” © Deborah Delano

“Leepus | DIZZY” © Jamie Delano

“The Saddest Sound” © Deborah Delano

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LEPUS BOOKS

2016



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Writing for the hell of it

Lepus Books is an independent publishing co-operative which I haphazardly manage in the (worryingly frequent) spaces when my personal muse is AWOL.

In its current format, the imprint exists to offer the chance of a readership for the work of authors with a connection to that infamous font of creativity and enlightenment affectionately known as NoHo (Northampton, if you must) and also to each other.

It can be a tough and lonely job to write a book. It helps if there are others around you engaged in the same struggle. Someone to goad or encourage, to butt in with an occasional editorial opinion and help you make your immortally published work the best that it possibly can be.

I like to think that the six works that so far bear the mark of Lepus testify to some success in that direction. But the final judgment can only be yours.

We are a disparate bunch of writers, divergent in style and material: a former comics scriptwriter; a prison educator; a teacher; a community arts developer. The works extracted in this volume include a black-comic domestic drama, a lesbian memoir, experimental 'grime fiction', a crazed dystopic yarn, a serial-killer story told from a novel perspective, and a collection of short stories inspired by linguistic misunderstandings.

Fuller details of the authors and their works can be acquired by visiting www.lepusbooks.co.uk.

Thank you for taking the trouble to download this collection of samples. I hope you find something to your taste among them, and would be honoured if you are consequently moved to purchase any of the available full-length editions. Not that any of us are in it for the money; that could only doom us to disappointment and inevitable madness. Writing is an illness. We do it because we have to.

Jamie Delano - NoHo 2016

Extract from “Book Thirteen” by A. William James aka Jamie Delano

Chapters 1 - 5

one

Sullen, he walked an hour despoiling virgin snow. A high cold cry disrupted the analgesic rhythm of his footfall. He looked up. Buzzards circled overhead.

A cartoon omen like that could spook a psyche sensitised to dread by a crafty toke of filthy GM skunk, but The Old Writer had practice dodging paranoia. He ducked from the path into the dead cover of the wood. The damp chill caught on his chest. He coughed. Somewhere through the pillared trees a mocking deer coughed back.

When he was a child without a thought of being old, and words were just breadcrumbs to be followed to The End, buzzards had been exotic birds, border guards to the wild highlands where anything might happen. Now these raptors were commonplace. They no more provoked the imaginations of the bored grandchildren to whom he routinely pointed them out than did the ragged proletariat of starlings that flocked the aerials and eaves of their domestic ‘Gormenghast’.

The cult of Leepus had secured their family seat. A dozen books in half as many years of furious creativity. A *tsunami* of cash. The Old Writer had wanted to buy an island, preferably with lighthouse, but Helen hated boats. They had bought the big old house instead. It had numberless thick-walled rooms in which to muffle small children and their interminable distress, with an acre of garden to encourage physical competence and sustain the organic diversity essential to thriving growth.

It had the Tower of Babble, too. That had swung the deal for him.

The tower, a local grandee’s architectural pretension, jutted ornate above a clumsy geometry of gables and moss-clumped roofs. Up there in his aloof turret a scribbler could think and smoke, smoke and write, and for occasional relaxation stare baleful over the mundane world beyond its ivied windows while he rolled another smoke.

Backed against the ancient wildwood edge by six lanes of constant traffic, The Village of Idiots skulked at bay in a foggy depression. Their house was its eastern outpost. The trees began one field from their paddock boundary and spread to the ring road that encircled the exhausted industrial town of Dismal, an indifferent reality into which The Old Writer had, sixty years before, slipped from Dead Doris's cosy womb.

In his childhood memory the forest was a damp entanglement of briars, where dead dark plantations of larch concealed sporadic grotesque oaks. There were makeshift car parks – the decayed concrete foundations of wartime ammunition dumps – where damp titty-books covered turd piles and occasional suicides choked in fume-filled cars, or kicked their last fandangos dangled by their braces from low branches where no bird had ever sung. There were rumours of a feral bull, witch covens and naked rites, an IRA arms-cache unearthed. Now this unwholesome territory was gentrified, opened to the light and paved with wheelchair friendly paths: an exercise yard for the urban rookeries of debt slaves.

Evading the buzzards' surveillance, he had followed the trail of a foraging pheasant through a snowy hazel coppice. Now a simultaneous awareness of the other's presence froze both The Old Writer and the fowl in suspended animation. He anticipated the inevitable clap of panic – the prey bird lurching upward, clattering through thin branches for the safety of the sky – but, though the pheasant crouched and tensed, takeoff was aborted.

A tiny whip of ginger violence lashed from ambush. A beak gaped, croaked once. Wings drummed. An eye rolled in its field of red and, redder yet, a thin jet of throat blood squirted, pumped by the bird's failing heart. Once; twice; three times. Dead.

The Old Writer acknowledged this perfect savagery with a tiny gasp of awe. Rearing erect a full six inches, a furry prick rigid with bloodlust, the weasel challenged him. No fear. Just scorn: its tiny black stare withering.

The Old Writer blinked and looked away. A patrolling helicopter throbbed above the motorway's tidal drone. A dog barked. A distant chainsaw chewed the frozen air. Calmed by these remote sounds of life continuing, he looked back. Assassin and victim were gone from the killing ground; only a cold-blooded epitaph remained, splashed scarlet on a snow-white shroud.

Grey sky shed shaved-ice dandruff. Done now with wildness and cold, The Old Writer stepped lighter on a path for home. The pheasant had taken his bullet. The buzzards could forget him now.

two

'It's no good getting arsey about it.'

Helen dabbed at the stinging cut above his eye.

'You built the bloody thing for him.'

'All the more reason he should've picked another target. Why not Cracked Jack—or better still the vile mother that spawned the little terrorist, or her fucked up girlfriend?'

His wife splashed iodine vindictive.

'Don't call our daughter vile. And if the lad had hit your dad on the head he'd have killed the poor old sod.'

'The downside escapes me.'

'It's clean.'

Helen reached for a towel, dried her hands.

'Stick a plaster on it. Then find young Cormac and tell him you were joking about 'spiking his sick little head on a pole to warn off other feral-child assassins''

'That would be a lie.'

'Tell him anyway.'

'Okay—but only if you accept the ultimate responsibility is yours.'

'What?'

'You grew that inedible fucking peasant food. A compost heap littered with half-frozen turnips is an obvious stash of trebuchet ammunition. What psychopathic ten-year-old could resist?'

Helen – The Unseen Hand, as The Old Writer characterised his wife with affectionate but sincere resentment – disdained his bait. Seconds later, the siren howl of the vacuum cleaner tormented him from a nearby room. He got up, reached instinctive for the coffeepot, and then – remembering the misery evoked by caffeine in an invalid bowel – for the canister of gentler *maté* instead. He poured boiled water onto the insipid substitute aware of a sullen presence in the kitchen door, turned to the stick-thin puckish boy shifting uncomfortably there and raised a throbbing eyebrow.

'Sorry, Granddad.'

'You should be you little savage. Could have caved-in my skull, made me a drooling cabbage.'

Cormac grinned, unconvinced by his victim's 'face of unforgiving wrath'.

'Wicked shot though, weren't it?'

'Wasn't it, you ignorant chav. But yeah—good job we didn't build the ballista, or I'd be nailed to the bloody wall.'

A moment's hesitation. The boy decided to push his luck.

'You said we could capture Carthage next time I was over.'

'I did. Let me do an hour's work, then come and find me in the tower. We should have time before your mother picks you up.'

'Right.'

A glint of anxiety troubled dark eyes.

'What?'

'Nothing—just Mum says they're going to chuck us out of our house 'cause Angie messed up with her ASBO thing again. So we might have to move into the caravan for a while.'

'Cool,' The Old Writer said, wing-shadow flickering in the periphery of awareness. 'Be good to have you all around.'

'Rome does not tolerate failure in her generals.'

The digital senate was excoriating. His grandson was not that chilled about it either.

'You dickhead.'

Cormac's thin lip curled.

'I told you to keep Scipio out of the fighting. He had seven stars. He was our faction heir. But no, Captain Wow gets him trashed by war elephants in a suicide attack, and the rest of our army routs.'

In defence, The Old Writer might have countered that their general had died leading a heroic cavalry decoy to draw the lethal elephants away from the vulnerable Cretan archers. All would be good if the fire arrows had not sent the terrible beasts amok. It was a gamble that went bad. On such tiny variables the tide of history turns, etceteras, etceteras.

But the boy was a black hole of betrayal. Silent contrition was the only response to his furious disappointment.

'It took years to build that army. Messana and Syracuse are rioting because we took their best units for the siege. Now Carthage'll never be our capital.'

The chair slammed back against the filing cabinet. The boy paused at the door. His face was white, clenched tight. His hand cut the air, a gladius drawn to strike.

'I hate—'

Head bowed, The Old Writer waited for the cruel blade to slip between his ribs, but his grandson spared him the killing stroke.

'I hate fucking elephants.'

The storm passed on, thundered down the tower's wooden stair.

The Old Writer took a breath. Cormac was an all-or-nothing kid: a joy when life rolled sweet, but in adversity – as had too often been the case in his short span – a demon of indiscriminate rage. The

boy's character needed development. It would require a deft authorial hand to write him a survivable story arc, not to mention a chunk of luck.

He saved and quit the game, shut down the computer. His soul cried for a fat oily spliff but honour demanded denial. He did not officially smoke now. Vaping got him by. A periodic suck at his Chinese electronic ciggie maintained his nicotine addiction and kept his graveyard cough at bay. Maturity was the art of compromise.

The Old Writer compromised now. The cigarette's tip glowed LED-blue, cool in the gloom of the office. Its vapour was thin and tasted clinical.

'Will you hurry up and get down here. Everyone's waiting to eat,' called Helen from the foot of the stair.

She sounded tired. He pushed back his chair, braced for Pandemonium.

three

A house is a book; it needs characters to fill its pages and give its story life, an author to find meaning in the chaos of its days. The Old Writer claimed his was the controlling mastermind but deferred responsibility for the tedious plot-minutiae to Helen.

He watched his wife manage the table: one reluctant grandchild encouraged to eat its pasta with a word, another dissuaded with a glance from wiping sauce in her brother's hair, a wrist-slap for Obscene Irene who – covered by her daughter's distraction – extruded a licentious claw beneath the tabletop horizon in a sly grab for Cracked Jack's balls. Oblivious, the old man spooned vinegar through the toothless hole in his beard.

'Spoilsport,' said Obscene Irene and cackled.

Down the table, Helen rolled her eyes. The Old Writer winked. She smiled: a flash of the shy girl who still lived inside the matriarch, who had made him love her all those years ago, give her all those fucking babies.

'What are you gawping at you gormless twat?' spat Cracked Jack vinegary.

'Me?'

The Old Writer was unprepared for his father's sudden assault.

'No other twats here.'

'That's what you think, handsome.'

Irene grabbed the old man's hand, tugged it to her lap.

'Get off!' Jack squawked. 'Bloody old whore.'

'Granddad, please. Little ears hear every word.'

Vile Viola raised one stout bejewelled finger to red pursed lips. Her massive bosom quaked, flushed hot.

Christ, thought The Old Writer; how did his daughter ever grow so fucking huge?

'What's a twat?'

Cormac raised a curious eyebrow, feigned innocence for the wind-up.

'Twat, twat, twat,' the excited baby chanted, flung a fistful of tagliatelle into its grandfather's face.

He wiped off the mess with the dishcloth Helen tossed him. The laughter was general but Cracked Jack's mirth was raw with spite.

Trapped in genetic reflection, father and eldest son had spent their lives at war. Old Jack was always an angry man. Secret ambitions frustrated by domesticity, he begrudged his children the liberty he had never claimed. His eldest son struggled against paternal oppression throughout his pre-pubescent years, until the culture clash of a 'sixties adolescence rendered their worldviews irreconcilable. Violent rebellion established his inalienable right to read whatever 'stupid drivel' he chose, and they had coexisted, for the six or seven years he remained in his childhood home, in a state of armed neutrality.

Four decades of adult independence passed in mutual indifference, punctuated routinely at family events by their boorish clash of prejudice, hostilities moderated only by a shared consideration of frail Doris' craving for peace.

The gloves had come off when the death of his wife forced Jack – now officially demented – to suffer the humiliation of his son's cold charity. Weirdly, the vitriol his father now spewed uncensored provoked in The Old Writer only condescension, an exasperated love.

'It's none of my business, but you're a fucking mug, mate. If my old man talked that way to me I'd give the cunt a slap.'

ASBO Angie crumpled her empty lager can, drew sharp on a skinny roll-up.

The Old Writer had joined his daughter's girlfriend outside the kitchen door, seduced by the opportunity to cadge a drag on her after-dinner ciggie. He shivered now in the sharp night air, feeble beside the stocky woman in her sleeveless vest.

'He's my father, goddamnit—not some detainee in Bagram.'

'Fuckin' soft hippy.'

Angie's eye twitched. She exhaled smoke, condemned him with a sneer. He took her crumpled

cigarette, sucked the last comfort from it.

Whatever other damage she inflicted, he thought, at least this most recent of his daughter's lovers would not leave her with another child. Perhaps that was the attraction. Four kids in ten years, abandoned by three deadbeat dads – a junkie, a compulsive gambler, a halfwit fuck-up musician – Vile Viola was unlucky in love, to say the least. It remained to be seen if a volatile ex-Military Policewoman, with two Afghan tours, a medical discharge and drink-related antisocial tendencies, had the potential to break the pattern.

'So, Cormac tells me you're having problems with the council.'

'Yeah, sorta. Fuckin' hick neighbours start on the kids with their homophobic crap again. So I torch their fuckin' car to modernise their attitude.'

'Jesus, Angie.'

'I know—I'm a stupid bitch. They can't prove shit but they go crying to the council anyway. Claim I've threatened to hang one of their idiot spawn at random from a lamppost the next time anyone says 'dyke''

'Have you?'

'Yeah—and now we're getting evicted.'

She shrugged, defied disapprobation.

'Fuck 'em. Serve 'em right if a tribe of pikey scum moves in when we go.'

The Old Writer failed to suppress a chuckle of admiration. He should have been appalled. The woman was a psychopath uncompromised by political correctness, but she had a certain violent charm that he found peculiarly attractive.

four

The kitchen was chilly and grey, a freezing fog outside. The Old Writer watched the kettle for a full five thoughtless minutes before he remembered to switch it on. His head ached and his stomach churned: the dyspeptic aftermath of restless sleep.

He had woken in a breathless tangle of duvet. Helen was long-since departed from the bed so he lay for a while, regained equilibrium.

Once, he had relished dreams, welcomed their rich imagery: the exotic landscapes that delighted his nocturnal mind and catalysed creativity. Now they were just a monotonous struggle with incoherence. He was typecast in a repetitious passion play, condemned to perform interminable variations on a dreary theme.

He called it 'Narcopolis', that vast mayhem of ambiguous urban threat through which he must marshal successive gaggles of incompetent dependents in pursuit of some arbitrarily vital goal. Whether his wayward charges were family, old lovers or friends was immaterial to the outcome of the enterprise: invariably failure, frustration, the poignant shame of inadequacy exposed.

He rationalised these episodes as writers' dreams, expressions of a scribbler's guilty neglect of his duty of care to character and plot; this insight made them no less anxiously exhausting.

The need to piss had eventually hauled him from the bed, sent him stumbling bleary to the bathroom. He was standing over the toilet bowl, conscious of nothing but the need to direct the impending unruly flow, when Obscene Irene ambushed him from behind.

'I'll hold the old fella for you if you like. Then you can soap my titties.'

His twitch of surprise cracked an involuntary whip of urine across the floor. He had turned to find his mother-in-law, lewd in scrawny nakedness, smirking from the tub.

'Damnit, Irene—some privacy would be nice. You've got your own bloody *en suite* in the granny flat,' he had said and fled in disarray.

The Old Writer drank his tea and read the note Helen had left on the kitchen table.

Couldn't wake you. Taken your dad to his memory clinic. Keep your eye on Mum. H.

Her handwriting was spiky, a reflection of her mood. He sighed, stuffed the toaster with ragged slabs of bread, keyed the radio on.

An excited girl chirped local news in counterpoint to an over-urgent beat: *'Council blasted as big freeze turns roads to ice rinks... Pet snake blamed for neighbour's missing dog... No evidence to link church hall arson to Islamists, claim police...'*

The phone rang. He choked down a mouthful of dry toast, silenced the radio, moved to answer the call.

'Hi, privileged winner,' a robot voice smarmed. 'You have been selected to receive a valuable reward. Stay on the line to hear details of your fabulous Caribbean crui—'

'Fuck off and die!'

He discarded the handset with vigour.

'I only came to apologise,' said a querulous voice behind him. 'Sometimes a devil gets into me.'

He shivered, glimpsed Helen's future decrepitude foreshadowed in her mother's anxious features.

'I know, Irene. No harm done. You just gave me a bit of a fright.'

The Old Writer rested a sympathetic hand on the old woman's frail shoulder, steered her to her TV chair.

'Sit yourself down and I'll put Trisha on.'

Disarmed by her vulnerability, he was reaching for the controller when the crone pounced, snagged his arm with a cruel claw and winked her evil eye.

'It's just our dirty little secret, right? No need to blab to wifey.'

The Old Writer hovered the cursor over the icon marked "Leepus—Bk13" but did not double-click. His uneasy dream still hung over him. A headache aborted foetal creativity. Cormac and his bloody turnip could take the blame for indolence today.

There were thirty-three unread emails in his inbox. Deleting the obvious spam left three. The first was a *pro forma* request for an autographed photo, the receipt of which was guaranteed to 'light up the day' of brave twelve-year-old cancer-victim Jody from Saskatchewan, 'your greatest Canadian fan'.

The next invited him to attend a forthcoming 'Celebration of Mystery Writing' at the University of The Midlands, wherever the fuck that was. It hinted that Leepus might snag another award. He saved it for consideration.

The last was from *passion8one@freemail.com*. He recognised the address but a morbid curiosity made him open it anyway.

Crystal was a fucked up kid. Her first email had arrived about eighteen months before. "Leepus: The Jesus Girl" had struck a chord in her imagination, moved her to confide her undying love for its omniscient creator.

Reading between her unpunctuated lines, The Old Writer had glimpsed a lonely child of hippy communards stranded by young adulthood in a bleak provincial bedsit. Mental health was definitely an issue. There were hints of abusive boyfriends and drug confusion, of suicide considered.

The Old Writer had hesitated but felt obliged to craft a considered reply. He pitched it avuncular but hip, diverted her inappropriate affections with humorous self-deprecation, offered discreet lifestyle guidance while affirming his respect for the primacy of free will.

Once a month since, or thereabouts, The Old Writer had found a fresh deposit of emotional turmoil uploaded to his mailbox. He had patiently deconstructed Crystal's paranoid delusion that a TV weatherman's forecasts nightly ordained her fate. A stern paternal tone contradicted the wisdom of her announced intent to share her bed with a 'professional thief' and adopt his Temazepam habit. He had encouraged her doomed pursuit of an NVQ in horticulture, shared her eager dread at the prospect of maternal reconciliation, offered rational commiseration when this embittered encounter disappointed; but consistent rebuff of flattery failed to deflect her fanatic arrows of love and his patience had eroded.

His last email – a terse acknowledgment of Crystal's detailed recollection of her lurid dream in

which The Old Writer had fulfilled a succession of unrealistic but biologically precise sexual expectations – had been sent over two months before. The lack of a prompt reply encouraged the hope that his admirer’s unhealthy heat had finally been quenched, preferably without resort to lethal overdose. The opened mail that now filled his screen made it clear this was not the case.

The Old Writer had imagined her older.

A chubby kid, his seductress had draped her shabby boudoir with exotic Indian cloth. A romantic constellation of candles illuminated the heap of grubby cushions on which she knelt, posed naked but for the T-shirt pulled up to reveal plump asymmetrical breasts. Her belly button winked shy from a cushion of puppy fat creased above her sparse-shadowed groin. On one pneumatic inner thigh: a tattoo-butterfly fluttering poignant. Bruises on the other recalled a cruder touch. But it was Crystal’s eyes – glittering dark and nervous over the veil of her lifted shirt-hem – that disturbed him most profoundly. They reminded him of his daughter’s, how she would peep over the bed-sheet at him as he read her a bedtime story all those distant years ago, before she got fat and fecund and learned to peep at men.

A crow rasped harsh outside in the sullen air. The Old Writer was suddenly despondent. His hand trembled as he exorcised the sordid image. It vanished instantly from the screen but would haunt his mental hard drive much longer, he suspected.

He had stared out of the high window at least an hour, lulled into a sepia world that blurred and resolved with the ebb and flow of the fog. He might have stared an hour more if Obscene Irene had not shrieked raucous from below.

The shriek repeated insistent – an infant pterodactyl in demand of meat – as The Old Writer clattered stiff-jointed down the wooden stair. He had time to imagine the full horror show of catastrophe that might have befallen the harridan, but frankly he preferred not to.

The Old Writer found Obscene Irene perched rigid on the edge of her TV chair: jazz hands fluttering spastic, head craned on tortoise-neck, jaundiced eyes averted from the unpleasantness in her lap.

‘Get the filthy thing off of me,’ she squawked.

Relieved not to find her in flames, he indulged a mild urge for payback.

‘Hold still then. Don’t want it to bite.’

Irene shuddered as he plucked the dusty conglomeration of feather, bone and plastic from its withered crash-site.

‘Is it dead?’

He smiled.

‘Has been for twenty years.’

‘Where the devil did it come from? I nearly wet myself.’

‘Nearly is good.’

The Old Writer remembered his son reaching with drawing pins and fishing line, tiptoed precarious on a stool.

'John hung it up there. Must have been about eight or nine when he made it. It's the fuselage of a B52 with a barn owl's head and wings. Called it "Nature of Death" as I recall. Precocious little sod.'

'Well it could have been the death of me. I was just having a little beauty sleep waiting for the snooker to come on. Next thing there's an animal burrowing at my fanny.'

'Teach you to be more careful what you wish for.'

He turned away, mutant corpse cradled.

'Just relax and get your breath back. I'll put the kettle on.'

'It's beyond me why any child would make such a disgusting thing.'

Her voice followed him to the kitchen.

'Unless he was disturbed.'

'He's an artist, Irene,' he called back defensive. 'That's what artists do. And these days he gets money for it, too.'

'Well it's creepy. No wonder that nice little girl upped and left the mucky bugger on his own.'

The Old Writer suspected there was a degree of truth in Irene's observation.

Jilted John was a sweet kid but weird. His chosen medium for the artistic expression of his preoccupation with life's darker aspects – the creation of nightmare tableaux of disturbingly mutated taxidermy specimens – would certainly inhibit traditional domestic bliss. His compulsion to fill both studio and home with junk-shop scavenged stuffed animal cadavers, collected as raw material for his monstrous creations, would be hard to live with too.

But the love of his life, Shy Skye, had idiosyncrasies of her own and, for seven seeming-contented years, she had been John's patient muse and loyal emissary to the world of humans. News of her delirious betrayal – born again in the passionate arms of both Christ and the rabid evangelist who had subverted her – had left The Old Writer and Helen concerned for the mental welfare of their eldest son.

John's connection to hearth and home had always been tenuous; the shock of his lover's departure had rendered him near invisible. Helen's distress – maternal compassion unrequited by monosyllabic phone calls – had eventually embarked her squeamish husband on a mission to confront their son's depression man to man.

The shabby backstreet undertakers' parlour had been bought from its bankrupt family owners with a parental loan and converted for use as a studio cum living space.

'Just thought I'd check you were still alive,' The Old Writer said as John admitted him hesitant over the threshold.

'I'm clinging on.'

His son's demeanour raised no immediate suspicion of extremity. The boy looked clean enough: dreadlocks neatly trapped by headband, beard carefully braided and adorned with ethnic beads, smile customarily self-effacing.

They danced awkward, negotiated the mountain bike propped in the narrow passage, ducked into the sitting room. It was oven hot, the window of the pot-bellied stove incandescent, orange-white.

The acid pungency of baked taxidermy flared The Old Writer's nostrils. A score or more stuffed birds sweltered in glass cases, posed stiff on truncated branches against painted habitats. Blind bead-eyes glittered in cruel mockery of life.

'Fuck. Nice and cosy in here, mate.'

'I don't like to be cold.'

The Old Writer groped for eloquence, came up dry.

'So—been working much?'

John shrugged.

'Not much. How's that Leepus book going?'

'Yeah, getting there,' The Old Writer lied.

'Coffee?' asked his son.

'Cool.'

John drifted off to the kitchen, left his father to sweat.

Desperate for relief from the boxed sun in the corner, The Old Writer moved to the sofa by the window across the room. His skin prickled. The seared air rasped his throat. He knelt on the grimy sofa arm, reached for the window catch, found it seized shut. He peered at the small yard, dull through streaked glass. Its centrepiece was a totem pole of carved grotesques, studded with bleached bird-skulls and fluttering with feathers. A rusted brazier overflowed with ashes: paper mostly, and the part-burned lattice of a wicker basket.

Cats. There had always been cats when he had visited before, three of them at least, that arched and stretched and scratched and sneered with sinister omnipresence.

The coffeepot death-rattled on the cooker. John watched it, sucked at a baggy spliff. The boy never could roll a decent joint.

The Old Writer flipped off the gas, scanned the tiny kitchen for cups. They were all in the sink, oiled seabirds mired in a greasy dishwater sea. He rinsed a couple under the cold tap, filled them with coffee black and thick as tar.

'Thanks.'

The loose cuff of his son's embroidered shirt slid back as he took the cup. The Old Writer glimpsed a weal, red raw on pale forearm skin.

'Playing with fire, boy?'

John stiffened, adjusted his sleeve to conceal the wound.

'Sort of.'

'Looks sore. You should put something on it.'

'It doesn't really hurt. Not in the wider scheme of things.'

Against his better judgement, The Old Writer accepted the reeking spliff, realised only as the harsh smoke ravaged his throat and lungs that the bastard had rolled it with pure weed.

His chest spasmed. He hacked, spluttered, practically coughed his eyeballs out. Tears liquefied his vision. It took a minute's extreme effort of will to restore normal respiration, by which time sly cold narcotic fingers had worked deep inside his brain.

'Fucking skunk! Toxic shit is evil. Why doesn't anyone smoke normal dope these days?'

'Jude would call you a lightweight.'

'Yeah. But your brother is an animal. His opinion doesn't count.'

'So how's Mum?' John asked to change the subject.

He had argued with his brother at The Old Writer's last birthday party. Rude Jude had got Shy Skye smashed on tequila shots and flattery, encouraged her to dance gauche on the table. Jude could be cruel sometimes; John could be over-sensitive.

'Mum's good. Worrying about everyone, running around doing good from dawn till dusk, as usual.'

'Give her my love.'

'Why not give it to her yourself?'

'I would, Dad—but her bottomless fucking compassion just makes it worse, you know?'

The skunk had darkened the periphery of The Old Writer's world. He focused on his son haloed by gloom, on the wet glint of his eye that he concealed turning away.

'I know, boy. It's okay. When you're feeling stronger.'

John twitched at his father's touch on his shoulder. Wary of emotional quicksand, The Old Writer backed off. A worktop pyramid of tinned cat-food suggested a less sentimental tack.

'I guess at least she had the grace to take her mangy moggies with her?'

He grinned, a forced bonhomie. John grinned back brittle in the gathering kitchen dusk.

'Guess again. Apparently her reverend new fuck is blessed with an allergy to felines. A sniff of cat sends the arsehole into anaphylactic rapture.'

Abrupt, John headed for the door.

'Shame all pussy doesn't have the same effect on the cunt.'

The uncharacteristically crude afterthought hung ugly as John plodded off up the stair. Restless, The Old Writer drifted down the short passage to the former mortuary room, now a chilly studio. He nudged open the door. The sound of his son's micturition trickled from above. Sympathetic

rivulets writhed cold down his spine as he checked the work-in-progress laid out on the embalming slab in a pool of savage light.

Three charcoaled wooden crosses jutted stark atop a Calvary of bones. Crucified on each symbolic scaffold: a scorched and contorted cat-corpse snarling toothy in agonised rage.

The Old Writer retreated shocked. Cold insects crawled his skin as he waited in the infernal sitting room, his dark child's descending footfall on the stair. The boy needed a stern talking to, a rational perspective to clarify the black confusion of his plot. The Old Writer wrestled to phrase wise insight, script comfort and supportive love. In the event, and not for the first time, words failed him absolutely.

The twenty minutes more that his pastoral visit endured had passed in stilted and hopelessly diminished repartee. John was clearly not disappointed when, evening traffic avoidance his lame excuse, The Old Writer had embraced his son perfunctory, fled guilty into the night.

Ashamed of his feeble dereliction he had excised the ugly detail from his mealtime report to Helen. But his obvious lack of appetite and the anxiety palled around their table ensured the cruel subtext infected her with doubt.

They had passed a distracted evening numbed by white-noise TV, spent the night side-by-side in the dark silence of their bed, each singularly conscious of the other's sleepless breath.

'So who does a girl have to shag anyway to get a cup of tea round here?'

Obscene Irene's bony knuckle poked The Old Writer from his trance. He turned, met her inquisitive bird-eyes with the wateriness of his own.

'Sorry. Just thinking about stuff. Kids—they grow up but they never leave you, do they?'

'To state the bleeding obvious.'

Irene grimaced vague disdain.

'Think less and write more. That's this wise old woman's advice to the young.'

She scabbled a balled tissue from the frayed sleeve of her cardy. A fleeting kindness dappled the wintry landscape of her face as she fumbled it into his palm with crooked fingers, scuttled back to her lair. 'Now pull yourself together, boy,' she called. 'And bring me my bloody tea.'

five

'If you'd just pop on your new glasses for me sir,' his Optical Advisor twinkled. 'And look directly at me so I can check the correct lens alignment.'

The Old Writer blinked into bright emerald eyes, grabbed a snapshot, caricatured the woman's life.

Like Leepus.

She was forty, childless, divorced maybe widowed, skinny from an excess of nervous energy and health food. Her job paid okay but she struggled with her mortgage, worried she might have to move downmarket, live alongside the common and uncouth.

Leepus would have held her gaze a little longer, sexed-up the mundane transaction, derailed her script with a charm of nuanced wit and pursued a deeper probing of her feminine mystique. The Old Writer was too old for that messy shit.

The bright fluorescence of the fitting room nagged the dull ache in his head; it picked out the flecks of dandruff on her tunic shoulders, the foundation adhering to the fine hairs of her sparse moustache.

'Perfect. I think they suit you very well, sir.'

The green eyes flickered, cancelled his examination.

'If you'd just pop them off for me again, I'll give them a final polish and pop them in a case.'

The Old Writer checked the nametag on her lapel. A discreet silver crucifix studded her buttonhole, provoked his sudden impatience.

'Thanks. I'll wear them, Alice. Just pop the old ones in the charity bin. Some African poppet might as well make use of them. Enhance their capacity for bible study, eh?'

'Of course, sir.'

Alice gathered documentation unruffled.

'And I'm pleased to confirm we can offer that service at no additional charge.'

She stood trim: shielding her breasts with sheaved paper, cocking her elfin head.

'Please follow me to the paypoint so we can complete the final formalities and leave you to enjoy your day.'

Outside in the pedestrianised high street, The Old Writer squinted and peered, reassessed features of the grubby urban world.

The pox of gobbed gum that afflicted the shoddy block paving did not seem to him any sharper.

The vomit-map of Cuba splashed on the steps of the derelict library remained unpleasantly low resolution.

THIRD TOWN CHURCH BLAZES, blared the headline on the paper-seller's hoarding; he deciphered its scrawl from across the street no more easily than before.

So that was four hundred and fifty-five quid well fucking spent.

Helen, bored with his intermittent headaches – or at least with his weeks of complaint and gruff resentment of Cormac, on whose turnip attack he persisted in blaming his discomfort – had despatched him to the optician. A plump child had shared an intimate garlic memory of her evening meal, exhaled as she leant close to study his inner optical workings. Stoically non-committal on the subject of headaches, she had advised that his astigmatism might benefit from a slightly stronger prescription and passed him to Alice for specialist cash-extraction.

The Old Writer reviewed the experience now as he strolled in casual search of his car. He felt mildly violated, as if a naive anxiety had been callously taxed. Ageing baby-boomers were going to fuel a twenty-first century Capitalist bonanza; he should buy shares in parasitic US healthcare corporations.

Sirens howled somewhere beyond the market square, diminished in retreat. Muffled inside his heavy coat, a persistent double-bleep chided his neglect of electronic duty. The Old Writer searched four pockets before he found the phone. Its screen announced a text from Rude Jude. A drip of adrenaline curdled his blood as he keyed the message open with a clumsy finger.

hi - on mway heading sth mite cum and c u l8er

The sub-literate composition stirred irrational annoyance, just as Jude knew it would. Borderline dyslexia was no excuse for wilful language mutilation, or for punching sarcastic teachers, getting expelled, and then running away with a busload of raggle-taggle ravers to test your iron constitution with a five-year Ketamine binge.

Ten years ago The Old Writer and Helen had thought their youngest son lost, waited in dread resignation for the inevitable news of death or incarceration. But Jude, it appeared, was bulletproof. Bored, eventually, by poverty and the travelling life, he had ‘come ashore’ to set up shop in Hackney, renting sound systems to outlaw party-animals for both fun and considerable profit. An impressive achievement in an uneducated force of nature, The Old Writer grudged, worried Jude’s penchant for high-end gangster chic betrayed interests in riskier business.

The Old Writer shivered in the pissy car park stairwell, blinked baffled at the ticket machine. He had used his card at the opticians’ not twenty minutes before, so why now was access denied to the slot in his brain where his PIN was habitually stored?

Mental fingers scrabbled for clues. It was the year of Helen’s birth with digits reversed? No. His telephone area code minus the zero? No. Someone shuffled impatient behind him; rattled, he stabbed random keys.

The machine extruded his card like an insolent tongue. ‘Please select an alternative valid means of payment,’ its robot voice insisted. He fed it a note fumbled from his wallet, took his ticket, relieved.

Change clattered in the chute as he stalked to the stair. Embarrassed to turn back, he abandoned it, an offering to the demon Dementia.

A worm of trepidation turned in The Old Writer's belly. Rude bloody Jude and his crazy fucking static; even at long-distance the bastard still had the power to spin his father's fragile mental compass.

The Old Writer parked his stolid old Volvo in the chill shadow of the obsidian starship docked considerately – by Jude, he assumed – a nanometre from the porch. His mouth puckered in envious disgust. The thing was a monster of pure arrogance; just like its fucking driver.

There was barely enough room to open his door. The Old Writer disembarked clumsy, squeezed past the massive vehicle, scraped gleeful zips along its deep-shone flank. Caught in a tinted window close-up, his reflection winked: a malevolent old fuck, crooked mouth cracked with childish spite.

There was something inside on the backseat; something disconcerting.

Curious, The Old Writer leaned close, shaded his eyes to peer dark through the glass. It took him a frowning moment to be sure what he saw, and then fear seized his balls, wriggled its frosty finger in his sphincter.

The body was stretched out stiff, mummy-wrapped tight in a blanket. A naked foot poked from a teasing cleft in the extremity of the winding.

The Old Writer saw chipped green varnish on toenails, a slave bracelet closed with a tiny gold padlock. He felt sick. Flies buzzed dark inside his head. Jude's bass laugh boomed out large to meet him as he opened the front door of the house.

He found them in the kitchen. Helen had made tea. She sipped hers, watched wary over the rim of her mug as her son flirted with her mother.

'I'd love to Nan, honest. Fox like you, who wouldn't?'

Jude slid Obscene Irene from his knee, patted her scrawny rump.

'But I took a stupid vow of abstinence.'

Down the table Cracked Jack snorted mirthful, slapped his bony thigh; his nostrils dribbled tea.

'And Granddad Jack is jealous,' Jude said and stood to greet his father.

'Hey, Jude.'

The Old Writer offered the ritual greeting dry-mouthed.

'Hey, man. How're you doing?'

The boy's open face beamed close; his tattooed arms spread possessive. The Old Writer's ribs creaked as Jude's merciless *abrazo* engulfed him; air wheezed from his lungs. He was teetering on the edge of blackout when the iron grip relaxed. Grateful, he sucked a breath, smelled the animal heat his son exuded, the musk of stale perfume and whisky. He smiled. The boy's raw power enfeebled him but swelled his genetic pride.

'I'm doing okay for an old fuck. But I reckon you're doing better—if that outrageous gangster-truck parked outside is anything to go by.'

'Yeah. Cool huh?'

'Bit of a fucking cop magnet down your ends, I'd have thought.'

Jude smirked non-committal.

'So what's the occasion?' his father probed, timid. 'Doing your bit for global warming at ten bloody miles to the gallon?'

'Been up to Leeds, checkin' a club. Investment opportunity—y'feel me?'

The Old Writer looked for tells, the eyelid twitch or tongue-flick on dry lip that would betray a terrible guilt. Nothing; Jude's brash countenance was unperturbed. Perhaps the backseat mummy was a febrile hallucination. Only a psychopathic monster could sip innocent tea in his parents' kitchen while a corpse cooled in his car. Was that what his wild boy had become?

Helen raised a tentative eyebrow. 'No room for romance between the wheeling and dealing?' she asked. 'What happened to that nice black girl—Denise?'

'Denelle. I couldn't afford her crack habit, Mum. She got superseded by Natalya.'

Cracked Jack sneered.

'She sounds bloody foreign too. 'What's wrong with English totty?'

'Their accents are a turn-off you nasty old bigot.'

Jude chastised the old man without malice.

'Natalya's a lovely name. Is she Russian, Jude?' asked Helen.

'Latvian, Mum.'

Jude frowned.

'Or is it Lithuanian? I can never fucking remember.'

'It's a shame she's not with you. It's always nice to meet your friends.'

'She is.'

Jude sucked his teeth.

'But it might be a problem bringing her in. It was a heavy night up north.'

The Old Writer studied his son, imagined the interior turmoil masked by his poker face. Jude grabbed up his keys, jangled for the door.

'Left the lazy tart dead in the fucking car. Not sure she'll be human yet.'

'Thank you, but not to worry.'

Natalya pouted, brushed a flame of hair from snowy forehead.

'The English winter is not so cold for a girl who grows up in Riga.'

She shifted on her stool, crossed elegant legs, tugged down the hem of her tiny green dress with fingernails painted to match. The Old Writer caught himself observing the modest gesture a little too closely.

Helen caught him, too. 'Nonsense, girl,' she said. 'It gives me goose bumps just to look at you. Put on that jumper. You'll catch your death.'

Natalya frowned.

'Goose bums? What are these please?'

'Great British delicacy, babe,' Jude deadpanned. 'We eat them with piccalilli.'

'Jude's teasing you, Natalya,' said Helen. 'Goose bumps are when your skin looks like you've had all your feathers plucked out.'

'You think I have bad complexion?'

Natalya caressed a cheek alarmed.

Helen flushed.

'No, no. I just meant—'

'Stop digging, Mum,' said Jude. 'And don't fuss so much. Natalya's a lap-dancer. She's used to being stared at.'

'This is not true!'

Natalya slid cool from the stool, reached to take the heavy jumper from Helen's flustered hand.

'I am post-graduate student. I read for doctorate—criminology.'

'That's just what it says on her visa.'

Jude helped his girlfriend hide her assets in shapeless knitwear while Obscene Irene tottered up from her chair, lifted her housecoat above rolled stockings, flashed her varicose thighs.

'Lap-dancing sounds much more exciting,' the old lady said. 'I wouldn't mind learning a couple of moves.'

Helen buried her face in her hands. Her mother ground arthritic hips, thrust her ancient booty at Cracked Jack trapped terrified in his chair.

'Dirty, dirty, dirty,' the old man moaned. 'Sweet Jesus, when will my Doris ever come and take me home?'

Jude beat time on a cupboard. 'Go, Nan!' he encouraged, impervious to pathos.

The Old Writer caught Natalya's eye, grimaced apologetic.

'Please—is not problem.'

She shrugged, graceful in bulky wool.

'My family is crazy, also. But they drink very much wodka.'

'Wodka sounds good,' The Old Writer said a little too loud. He was high on relief. His son was not a sordid killer after all; that warranted celebration. 'We've still got a couple of bottles left over from Christmas. I'll break them out and phone for a curry—if you and Jude are cool to stay?'

'Sounds fuckin' top to me, man.'

Jude punched his father's shoulder with sincere but brutal affection.

'Never pass on a chance to get messy.'

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Extract from "Kiss My ASBO" by Alistair Fruish

Double Bubble (Part One)

My Dad spiked me with a powerful mind-altering drug. He loved me and thought that it would make up for never helping with my homework. The homework he always insisted that I did. I didn't get much help from Mum, she lives out of town and it gets tricky when we see each other.

Maybe I could turn this into a comic. Start with a panel the size of a whole page. Uncle Vic hands over the electric blue smartie to Dad. It would be good if Vic were in a black military uniform with yellow rank markings. Dad all belly in his cheesy Hawaiian shirt, standing in the dark middle of The Firs. They're the woods on the other side of what's left of the Heath, in the direction of the planted Princess. I see sharp beams of sunlight like death-rays penetrating the dark pillars of pine around them. The pill in Vic's hand's a super glow-worm. It shines up on their faces and down on the millions of wood ants swarming at their feet. These ants march in step to spell out a title, which will be: The Straight Dope.

The panel would contain two balloons; one for speech and one for thought. The dialogue in the speech bubble is from Dad, saying, "Any side effects?" The thought bubble that hovers over Vic's head contains five other thought bubbles, which also contain thought bubbles, and so on. And in each thought balloon would be a unique mark, like a hieroglyph.

It's very likely that it didn't happen that way. (It would be a good way to start the comic though.) Dad was probably cotched in front of the TV drinking brew and burning weed. Vic wasn't around very long and I didn't see him. He never hung in these ends too long. Don't blame him. My main memory of him is of a tall man, sullen looking. Muscle upon muscle. He didn't pay attention to us kids at family dos and stuff. Dad said that what Vic did was secret, that I should maybe think about joining the army too. Perhaps he was trying to offer me a way out of the Estate, show it could be done without flitting off with a junkie to Welwyn Garden City, like Mum. He used to say that Vic was the only good example in our family, even though I knew he hated him. He dissed him to everyone else, except Gran. It was a bit of a mixed message. Dad's good at those. I always thought that the so-called secret job probably meant Vic did something boring and was pretending to be more interesting than he was really up to. Seems I was wrong there. I was wrong about

a lot of things back before Dad spiked me.

It was juss a few weeks after the Olympics had finished in London; a couple of weeks after Vic had chipped from the Estate, and the day before I went back to school, when a couple of military police turned up looking for him. I wasn't going to let them talk to me. I had a suspicion that it was about the smartie, and if they talked to me, they might figure something out. I thought of Dad's mantra: "Don't bring no beast t' the yard!" Uncle Vic had gone and done it now. Dad nearly crapped himself trying to hide the weed before he let them in, but they weren't bothered about a seedy old toker. They were very cagey about what they wanted Vic for. Tried to scare Dad by saying failure to tell them anything would be considered treason and that you can still be hung for that. Little did they know that talking to beast, even military beast, was a bigger treason to my old man. He wasn't going to grass even if he hated his brother, though I wasn't so sure he did anymore. He acted like a dumb old stoner. Told them nothing. Why exactly his feelings had changed toward his brother I wasn't sure until later. He really seemed proud when he spoke about him. I stayed out of the way. I left my mobile on audio record in the living room, then took off out the back and got a bus into town.

Northampton is about as far in England as you can get from the sea – should be OK here when the ice caps melt, innit? Can't think of any other reason to live here. It's the biggest town in Europe, but it only takes a quarter of an hour on a bus to get from the edge into the centre. The bus station exists to sap the remaining will of the people who use it. It resembles the docking bay of the Death Star as you're mercilessly pulled into it on a tractor beam of boredom. Except I'd never felt so unbored. Strange intuitions, feelings about things that were not obviously connected, seemed to come to me. The air under pressure in the wheels of the bus, I thought about that for ages. I was struck by the beauty of valves, and figured out how to increase the power of an air-pistol I'd found in the attic at Gran's the summer before. I thought about the wind and thought about the precious bubble of atmosphere that normally goes unnoticed as we swim in it. Like my own mind had been to me in the past. Air and mind, both invisible in a sense. We notice them more when they change. As soon as I got into town I got straight back on a bus and went home.

I was gone for about an hour. When I got back the cops had gone. I have the whole of Dad's interrogation stored as a wav file: the best bit is at the beginning with Dad running around freaking out. I should post it on the net one day.

Before I swallowed the blue smartie, hidden out in the open, stuck on top of some Cornish ice cream that Dad gave me, I was certain about a lot of things. Now I am no longer certain. There seems to be a lot more in the way of possibilities and maybes. Yet in another way it all seems simple. Everything I feel or think about seems different now. Like there are these alternatives I wouldn't have grasped

before. I feel like they were probably always there, but I was closed off to them. Like when a fridge turns off, you become aware that it was humming all along, but you only notice it when it's gone. It's like these possibilities flicker in and out of existence in a way that makes me notice them. Words – they're so interesting. Ra! How could I have not noticed that before? Somehow the smartie has changed me but left me the same. Well, to look at.

Earl and Darren started to notice once I got back to school. In a sense I suppose they became my victims, or maybe I was their saviour. I was still getting on with them like before, but Darren was starting to annoy me. When I asked him to lend me a tenner, he said only for double bubble. That pissed me off. A tenner to borrow a tenner! Tossler. This joker was supposed to be my spar, my bredren. I suppose that this planted some of the seeds of what was to follow.

Vic told my Dad that it would be permanent for him; but I'm a lot younger, so who knows? I didn't realise anything was different to start off with. The drug zonked me. I slept for about a week. Thought I'd juss got the lurgie. I think Dad was really worried that my brain might rot and I would be permanently crystallised in the quilt: comatose, sparko, a chrysalis of cotton and fever sweat. I'm glad he was worried. Serves him right. Dad's never been too hot at the forward thinking. Probably juss as well he didn't call a doctor in. Still, what's done is done. Sometimes you can make the right choice for the wrong reasons. I have faint memories of him telling me stories as I recovered.

He muss have made them up: he's not too hot at reading. It made me remember a time when he was away and he sent me a CD of tales he made up. There was one about a monster called a Grisilore. It would always want twice as much back as it gave out and kept the whole Kingdom poor. I guess that type of behaviour upset Dad too. I used to listen to that CD every night at Gran's. I still have it somewhere.

All that wire and the dogs, it was kind of like school. I used to hate visiting him in that place, except on the days when he was freed. I'd bunk off to meet him at the gates, if I could get a bus out there. Help him carry his stuff in a bin liner. Then we'd hang out together for the whole day.

If I was going to tell this for Hollywood it'd be about the military accidentally developing pills that made you super attractive and irresistible. No one is interested in smarts. It's all about being famous or getting respect'.

I can't think of anyone who's famous for having ideas that wasn't some kind of businessman or politician. They seem like hypnotists to me now. It's clear that the cleverest people are not in charge, or at least they're not on TV much: but where are they? I need to read more. Perhaps I can find out. Now I can read a book in about half an hour and remember it all. I read more books yesterday than I read last year.

It wasn't until I'd eaten Uncle Vic's blue pill that I started to realise how angry I had been with Dad. Mum as well. I knew I was angry with her; but I didn't know why. I'm working on that. It had a lot to do with Mum, what I did, I guess. If she hates me the whole world might as well hate me. Realising I was angry with Dad was more of a surprise to me. It's not as if Vic's pill was a miracle that suddenly cured everything. I'd hidden a lot of it from myself. Took it out on others. Probably on Mum's boyfriend the most, though he is a muppet. Various teachers and adults in general made me miserable so I'd piss them off by withdrawing. I muss have taken a lot in during school, but I didn't think I remembered much of it. Not until I woke up. Now I seem to have this fantastic memory bank full of all sorts of information that I can cross connect and get lost in. It's like someone has opened the curtains and light has flooded in, making my dusty brain zing. So I've made a few mistakes. Juss because I've taken a drug that's made me smart doesn't mean I don't still make mistakes. It's juss that I tend to look at problems as something to face, more than I did before.

The government have supposedly banned smart drugs in schools until their long-term safety is known. This isn't stopping the rich kids taking them. If you know who's juggling them you can get them, but they're pricey. I don't know anyone who has ever taken any. The politicians are probably chucking them down so they can figure out how to screw everybody even more. It's mostly juss weed in my school though. No one is rich. Most of my crew want to be, and famous. When Dad was at school it was all sniffing glue. Back in the day he was the only one blazing, so he says. According to him, "It's an improvement, the herb is sacred." I guess that's how he justifies supplying Earl. He gets uppity about the stronger shit, like crack and what-not. That's probably got a lot to do with Mum. He wouldn't like it if he knew that Darren was dabbling, but he wouldn't be surprised - this is the Estate after all. One thing I seem to have lost interest in is weed. I suppose I never had much really; that's Dad's thing. The plant is interesting though, and beautiful. Maybe I'll grow it one day.

I guess in his own daft way Dad juss wanted to give me the same chances that the rich kids get. It seems that Uncle Vic's blue pill was some kind of military dope. An ultra-smart drug. One hit, and if you survive, you're massively more intelligent. I feel a bit vain putting it like that, but it seems that's what's happened. It's not that I was thick before; it's juss that I have so many more choices now. But that's OK. Despite what's happened, I think everything is going to get better.

I first realised something was different when I went back to school, after being virtually unconscious for a week. Actually, as soon as I really woke up I knew something was different. But other people can be our mirrors sometimes, and they helped me to see it more clearly. I was in the bogs, hanging with Darren and Earl, talking about the Olympics that had been happening over the summer, discussing whether or not skateboarding was an Olympic sport and if they had an equivalent

in ancient Greece. The school had got the drug dogs in again, and I spotted them out of the window. Darren and Earl wanted to flush the shit they got from Dad, but I wouldn't let them. In the past Earl would've made the decisions. But in the space of two minutes I thought of hundreds of plans. Finally I got Darren to get out his blade. Then I got Earl to take out the in-soles from his trainers. I sliced through them width-wise like cutting up a roll. I ran Darren's lighter flame gently over them for a few minutes then got an old condom out of my keyring holder that I kept as a kind of charm to bring good luck in the shag department (it hadn't worked). I rubbed the in-soles all over my body then my friends did the same, as they laughed and cussed me for cheesing up their threads. Then I wrapped up the weed in the Odour Eaters, pulled the condom over the parcel and tied up the end tight, folding the plastic back over on itself. Then I stuck it under the tap with loads of soap, washed everything, dried off the parcel, put my hands under the hand-blower and stuck the packet in my pocket. Earl and Darren thought I'd gone mental. I should juss cork it, or flush it. I'd never behaved like this before. They didn't know what to do. I told them to chill and wash their hands and faces, I'd take the fall if anything went down. I walked out onto the corridor, straight into the path of the dog, and nothing happened.

Uncle Vic had taken it himself as part of a government experiment. Top secret, that's what he told Dad. One of the effects of the drug was to make him realise that he should sort out his differences with Dad. So he stole some of the blue pills and the details of how to make them. Then he rocked up in Northampton and told Dad that he was going into the drug business, the army was no longer relevant. They could go to Hell, all war was pointless, and the ones we were fighting especially so. The only war worth fighting was the war against wars. His bosses were sitting on this stuff and he was going to let it out. The risk was worth taking. The entire world should have these smarties. He was going abroad. Expect some kind of message. He'd juss walked out -- went AWOL. I thought he sounded like a crusty, or a hedge monkey, and perhaps he'd gone a bit nuts. But Dad said it was something else. Something he'd never seen in him before. Sanity.

Vic told Dad that he was sorry for all that had gone down with them. That he loved him, and that he had something special for him: that he muss take it and be prepared to stay in bed for a week. Dad was flabbergasted. But I guess I can see why the bastard gave it to me. It had radically transformed his meathead brother -- what would it do to him? So being the small time drug-dealing scumbag that he is, he tested it out on me. The one that he hoped would not grow up to be like him, even though he enjoyed being him. He probably made the right choice. Still fair's fair. If I get the chance and get hold of some more of those smarties, I would spike him right back.

The day before we did it we went for a walk after school and ended up on the meadow. Earl and Darren were watching a stolen moped burn down by the railway

line and talking the usual crap. I asked Darren what would be the best way to create more chances in our area and he said, "Move the red light district up here, innit?" There was some truth in that.

Black smoke from the burning bike drifted over the rails and across the fields towards the Firs. I wanted to carry on walking, but Earl was coming on all tough, rapping about how this was all Earl's land, and that we should call him 'The Earl', and that we could go no further unless he allowed us to go on. It was indeed all the Earl's land, but a different Earl.

I think Earl was finding the changes in my brain difficult to deal with. I was now a threat to his idea of himself as the boss and he was starting to throw his weight around a bit. I dared Earl in front of Darren knowing he'd have to say yes. I don't know where it came from. He was bigging himself up as usual. It never used to bother me, but now it was starting to get on my nerves. I didn't think. I juss said it: "What's the point in school? Let's face it, we're either going to end up unemployed, in prison, or working in the bake house like everybody else. Let's do something pucker, that'll get us proper respect. You wanna be famous, right?" They agreed. So I continued, "Let's juss walk a couple of miles over there and dig up the body of the Princess. Then we'll be famous and can ketch props and maybe make a raise." I knew I was forcing Earl's hand when I said, "I'll do it myself if you're not up to it."

The main problem for Darren was there was no obvious money in it. He thought we should ransom her skull. I told him he was more likely to get his tunes played if we said it was a protest. I could see he was hesitating. Then I thought of what would swing him, "Bring your mobile and take some pictures.

You can sell those on the Internet." He bought that.

"Ok," he said, "let's do it." He was in.

Uncle Vic's pill was connected to what I did. I would never have thought of it before. I certainly understand myself more and more since I took it. But you don't understand yourself completely overnight, even with hardcore military aid. Darren and Earl hadn't really thought about the consequences – they were too busy thinking about how to load the footage up onto the net. But I knew what I was doing. I didn't know why. Now that I've had some time to think about it a lot, I feel I know some of the reasons. I was making myself pay twice. Bursting the bubble of my world again. Bringing the buried past into the present. I think that's what a lot of crimes are – ways of repeating a pattern. Hurting yourself some more.

The next evening I cleaned the weed from Dad's. Later I put it in his old hiding place in the woods as we walked through them on our mission with destiny. Dad would go mad when he got in, but he'd be glad if the beast kicked his door in later

on. I got a spade, Darren's brother's inflatable dingy, and a torch. Then we checked out the location on Google Earth. We walked there easily enough, climbed the wall and headed for the lake.

Please visit <http://lepusbooks.co.uk/kiss-my-asbo/> to purchase and read on

**Extract from “The Things You Do” a memoir by Deborah Delano
(full book is illustrated with photos)**

Chapter 22

The Things You Do

I'd told my husband that I thought I was gay but he didn't believe me. Instead he thought I was unhappy because I hadn't finished my education and he offered to support me through 'A' levels. This was generous of him but his 'altruism' also tied me to him in gratitude.

I began studying English, History and Sociology at the F.E. College in September of 1979. I loved academic study and at twenty-one had more of a sense of the value of it than I would have done earlier. Of course, I fancied my English teacher like crazy and this had a salutary effect on the quality of my essays. In fact, she suggested that I should think about sitting the Oxbridge exam on the strength of a stonking good essay I'd written on Evelyn Waugh's 'A Handful of Dust'. It's amazing how desire can sharpen the wits.

But, in my despondency surrounding my sexuality, I was still taking too many bathtub blues and abrading my molars whilst cleaning behind the taps with a cotton bud in the middle of the night.

During this period I'd become friendly with my husband's sister, Jackie the witch, who had by now left her junkie husband. My husband had a distinct lack of familial affection and he was particularly suspicious of this outlandish sister. She and I got along like a house on fire. She had all manner of weird and wonderful mates.

Unlike her brother, she did believe I was a lesbian and offered to introduce me to a 'bisexual' witch friend of hers and to come with me to The Princess Royal, Northampton's only gay pub. I'd been longing to go there but feared that such an act would prove irrevocable.

On a Saturday night just before Christmas, Jackie took me to visit the bisexual witch. She was a fifty-something faded beauty with raven black dyed hair. She gave me tea and invited me into her parlour to read my Tarot cards. As she turned each card she talked about 'emotional journeys' and the 'difficult process of renewal'. At the end she took my hands in hers and intoned, 'My dear, you must find a nice little straight girl—and make her gay.'

Armed with this intelligence, Jackie and I left and went to the Princess Royal. It was small and packed, and after the pub shut there was a private members club upstairs. Jackie and I

got signed in by a pair of elderly gay men and within the hour I'd been picked up by a gorgeous young lesbian called Jane. She had blonde hair and smelled heavenly. Jane had the kind of confidence born of being at the centre of a crowd of outsiders. She lived with two bitchy gay men who protected her like vituperative mother hens. She'd had every available lesbian in a fifty mile radius. Jane knew exactly what she wanted, and that was an older straight woman who had been her 'affair' then rejected her for the security of heterosexuality. In those days gays used 'affair' as a noun defining the person rather than the activity. There was, to me, something powerfully exotic about this affectation. I wanted to be an 'affair'.

I took Jane back to my marital home and we had sex on the living room floor. She scratched my back to ribbons. The next morning my husband woke us up. He opened the living room door, and then closed it again. Jane gathered up her clothes and fled into the morning. My husband, seething with barely controlled rage and disgust, told me to get out of the house. He was actually vomiting into the kitchen sink as I packed a suitcase and left. I went to my parents' for the holidays and I had a date with Jane for New Year's Eve.

My spirit soared with the sense of freedom and joy I felt as I hauled my luggage to Mum and Dad's council flat in Jimmy's End. As I passed a pub, 'Brass in Pocket' came blaring out of the door. It went to number one that week.

The date didn't go so well. Jane, it transpired, was far too much in love with the older straight woman and barely spoke to me all evening. She didn't protest when at 2am I said I'd walk home. That was a bitter cold night and, alone in the dark streets, I foresaw that this queer thing wasn't going to be plain sailing.

Leaving my husband also meant I'd have to leave college and get a job. This I did, and by the middle of January I'd secured a post in the Personnel Department at the County Council. On the strength of the expected salary, I also took a room in a house. It was tiny and bleak with a single bed and a Formica table but it was better than staying with my parents. My dad had stopped drinking by this time and was far less confrontational with me, but I needed to be alone to explore my shiny new sexual orientation and I wasn't yet ready to tell them about it.

The job was just another office, but I worked opposite a lovely, ethereal young woman called Wendy. We quickly became allies in the office politics game. We also shared a sense of humour, so we spent much of the day pissing ourselves about the bizarre lives and habits of our colleagues.

I was burning an entire box of candles at every end. Being the new lesbian on a very small block meant I was quickly snapped up by those more seasoned dykes around town. The 'scene' for women in those days revolved around the home of a woman called Pat. She'd been a dolly-bird of the sixties and was still absolutely stunning—think of the young Joanna

Lumley and you'd not be a million miles away. She shared this home with the even more beautiful Helen, who drove an MG sports car and entertained an international string of gorgeous young women. Pat was the second woman I slept with and, while the encounter was dull, it was illuminating in that we both bore the scarred backs of recent encounters with Jane.

There were parties and clubs on three or four nights a week. Sometimes we piled into Pat's beetle and went to one-nighters in random small-town locations, and sometimes we went to that famous lesbian cellar, the 'Gateways' in Chelsea. There are some things about being old that are rubbish but I'm eternally glad that I'm old enough to say I went to 'The Gates'. It was run in the 'sixties by a butch dyke called Smithy and she still presided at the bar accepting gin from her grateful clientele. This is sheer lesbo memorabilia, but Dusty Springfield used to go to Gateways, so of course I'm proud to say I went there. As lesbians, we have so little historical connection that you really have to get it where you can.

Several mornings each week I arrived at work straight from the night before with the strains of 'Echo Beach' still ringing in my head. Wendy invariably covered for me when I was late or when I couldn't see straight from exhaustion. She knew about, and totally accepted, my lesbianism. She herself was in strange relationship with a hippy bloke called Geoff who had a couple of kids by another woman. Wendy seemed to spend a lot of time looking after those kids. She also spent a lot of time with other 'cool' sounding friends, in particular a couple called Phyllis and Alan who had a baby. Alan was trying to make it as a writer. This meant they were severely skint and Wendy tried to help out, buying baby clothes and little treats that she'd come and show me in the office.

Wendy said we should go out sometime, if I ever had a free evening. We arranged to go for a drink and our office chatter deepened into real friendship. We just never shut up from seven until they threw us out at midnight. We kissed on the cheek when we said goodbye and Wendy took my hand and squeezed it tight.

It wasn't long before I got chucked out of my horrible little room for having unnatural relationships. The landlady had found some semi-naked conquest of mine on the landing and I got my marching orders the following day. I had to go back to Mum and Dad's for a spell. While I was there I came down with some bug, probably bought on by too much partying and was off work for a week. Wendy came to visit me on the Tuesday night. She bought a bag of oranges and 'The Pretenders' new album. We ate the oranges and played the album in my bedroom. She told me that she'd lost her appetite because she was in love. I had noticed that she'd lost a lot of weight and idiotically asked who the lucky guy was. We were sitting on the floor leaning against my bed. She looked at me long and closed her beautiful eyes. Wordlessly we kissed and in our embrace ended on my bed where we made love silently with the muffled sound of 'Minder' coming from the telly in the living room.

We were head-over-heels in love. Everything was shining and golden, and the springtime around us just exploded. I started to live at Wendy's flat most of the time. She had broken up with the hippy and he'd left claiming to be happy that Wendy had 'found herself'. I realized that I needed now to tell my family that I was gay. This was a proper relationship and it was the first time I'd been in love.

I went to see my mum the next Saturday lunchtime. Dad was in the living room watching Grandstand. She busied around me making cheese-on-toast and I said, 'Mum, I've met someone and I'm in love.'

'Ooh, that's good,' she replied. 'What's his name?'

'Her name's Wendy, Mum. I'm a lesbian'

She layered the cheese on the bread thoughtfully and said, 'Oo, ere Deb. The things you do.'

Please visit <http://lepusbooks.co.uk/the-things-you-do/> to purchase full edition

Extract from “Leepus | DIZZY” by Jamie Delano

Chapters 1- 5

1

BludKlash coming on.

At one end of the dripping underpass—four silent BurkaBabes with horror dogs on chains. A cohort of HateBoyz at the other looking for frontation.

Caught out in the killzone. Heed the need to fade.

One veiled sister giggles weird—slips leash from playful puppy. The dog fast and loose. Bouncing muscle. Snot festoons. A shrunk-down snorting bull.

Sidestep swift. Veronica into shadow.

The dog snuffles and bustles past on the scent of HateBoy groin. Nut-clamped human dogchew howls. BurkaBabes ululate—let go another mutt. Nervous bruvvas flicker machetes backlit by sick moonlight.

Wall-slide snot-slick tile. Ooze towards the glimmer.

Shrieks and bellowed battle-cries reverb in the dark. The electric thrill of violence flashes razor stripes.

Out! Scramble the garbage-avalanche stairwell up into the stink smoke of NoGo.

∞

Night rain in the rookeries. A street of dead-car tortoises—carapaces rusting.

Step steady down the centre-line. Imagine a destination.

Cross-legged on a cardboard prayer mat beneath a naked tree—a ragman. Damp dreadlocks brightly beaded. Placard hung round scrawny neck—crooked grey-skin finger underlining its scrawled message.

Step closer. Read.

Kik me for a wanna. Kil me dedd for ten.

A barricade of worn-out white goods defends a cul-de-sac of maisonettes. Trashcan brazier

smouldering. Yard guard in sandbagged shelter. He looks up from handheld porno—picks up a pistol crossbow.

Eyes front. Maintain casual momentum.

∞

Footbridge over railway.

Zigzag up ramp. Blood pumping. Midway across—a rush.

Weird fingers hooking diamond-mesh of rusty no-jump cage.

Look down.

Track-veins gleam in deep red cutting. Motion-quake trips palpitation. Disturbs vision. Excites bowel. Iron sings and whistles wet. A midnight SafeTran punches through. Shrieks—dives into howling tunnel.

Look up.

A mile away—haphazard geometry of dark buildings piled behind the Fence. Floodlit razor-wire spike-collar encircling anxious civic throat. SafeCity—a municipal reservation. Strivas toiling reassured. Predatory poors at bay.

Catch a breath. Taste sour electricity—a blueness on the tongue.

Sway dizzy.

Dizzy.

Dizzy.

∞

Freemart on washland outside River Gate.

A squabble of late-home privs jams the priority channel. Flash-highs dissipating. Clammy hands thrust passfones. Curfew-waiver timeout soon—they need to get checked in.

Thrill skills hiss the revellers—pass out scratchcards. Casino suckabags of freeroll chips. Cocktail tokens. Whore maps. Burga vouchers. All kinds of brightly coloured shit to suck up unspent playkrip—encourage repeat business.

Alongside—the loser lane.

GateGoons shove daywork shufflas into scantraps. Swipe tags. Feel them up with sniffer wands. Run random biometrics—stash rejects in the cage. Make the deportation quota. Snag a tasty bonus.

Pick an exit route.

Hesitate uncertain—another rush squirms sick. Tightens perineum. Assaults hypothalamus.

Hallucination bubbles pop pop pop. Heartbeat paradiddles.

Surrender to distraction.

Veer into market aisles.

∞

A complexity of subprime commerce. Tables. Blankets. Barrows. A spilled cornucopia of crap.
Tarp-caves stuffed with dead tek. Blind TVs. Cable tangles. Multifarious media. A million old fones.
A musty suffocation of jumbled pissy clothes.
Bent cutlery. Cracked crocks. Stopped clocks.
A sprawl of car parts.
Battered bikes.
A wall of batteries.
The sickly smell of streetmeat—gut-rot foodcarts steaming. A sweaty tattoo tent.
The musk of mildewed books.

Keep moving. Nothing to see there.

∞

A constellation of LEDs dapples a battle booth—blood-spray patterned curtains obscuring smack and grunt. A fiva gets you fifty if you beat the monsta down.
Erbwitch squats in the entrance of a plastic-patchwork bender—peers up through cataract curtains. Need heart pills? Love powders? No-pain potion? Stiff-dick lotion? Any kind of poison to settle up your scores? Got all those things and more here to ease those old-man sores.
Fuck tents flank an oozing alley.
Kid shitting in puddled shadow.
Temptation in a candlelit vinyl boudoir. She smiles—uncovers tattooed breasts.
Turn away. Move on.
Temptation pouts—hip-sways and rolls down pants.
Move on now.
Temptation shows off swinging cock and hairy balls.
Too late. Shadow swooping.
Black-tooth scab-lip snarl. Spittle fleck. Bubble eyes and grease-spike hair.
Low-held blade gleams: Gimme!
Act compliant. Slip hand into deep coat-pocket.
Expectant desperado extends palm—thinks it might be Christmas.
Bring out PocketPyro. Thumb-spark fuse and toss.

A butane-fire halo—oiled hair flaring. The desperado yelps and flaps. Flame contagion ignites fuck

tents.

Leave now. Get lost.

Tread quick on shadow heels. Out-pace incandescence.

Walk.

Walk.

Walk.

Walk mapless into madness. Misery. Despair.

∞

Dawn.

The sun heaves up behind Craphills—blears through a chink in filthy cloud and emits a stale gust of light.

Another phony new-day promise.

Shitgulls launch up screaming yellow. The sky filled with off-white wheeling. A refreshing squall of guano.

Walk on.

Rotcarpet softens underfoot concrete.

Hawk. Taste brass. Spit.

Creep of surveillance prickling nape.

Not law. Gulls would mob an overseer. Blind beady eye with blood and feather. Mashup dizzy rotors with splintered hollow bones.

It's skavvas squinting from their burrows in the screes and scarps of waste. They're sniffing threat potential—assaying scrap value.

Could be they got a verminator out to check his snares—out to snag a battla to keep and savage-up. He'll run it in the playpens—make himself good gold.

Could be they got a peedofuk looking for some tight. Or just some stupid lost meat wandering bad ground. Something to jump out on. Something to drag down. Shoddy shit to be recycled for a snap of krakkle.

Duck through scrub out of skavva sight. Follow stream. Cross bombed-out NuHope zone.

Step surer here on known ground. Things starting to make sense.

∞

Stencilled sign on terrace gable: WORLD'S END CAFÉ 400 yards.

Looking good. Maintain course for imminent safe touchdown.

Downhill glide past burned-out gallows-dodger barracks.

Across an allotment jungle—old girl foraging veg.

Give her a friendly wave.

Just sixty or so fluttered heartbeats now to breakfast chillpill. Caffy. Smokes. Recovery womb at Mother Mellow's. Warm oblivious downtime. Wake with consciousness rebooted—faculties restored. A cognitive renaissance.

But the world pitches. The world yaws. Progress wobbles—stalls.

Pull up! Pull up!

Dead dog in puddle. Oilslick iridescence swirling.

Closer.

Pull up!

Pratfall splashdown. The lap and slap of tiny waves. A bubbling of breath.

The forager applauds the hapless idiot.

Staccato handclaps fade ironic into black.

◇◇◇◇

2

'Good night then, is it?'

'Caffy?' Leepus ignores Mike's question—waves to the inscrutable dark flesh-mountain behind the bar. Mother Mellow fills fat sails—billows into motion.

'Yeah.' Mike tosses gauntlets onto cup-ringed table—unzips greasy leather breastplate. 'Eggs'n'rashas too. With a double side of fungo. And a gristle burga—heavy on the ketchup.'

The leaky espresso machine hisses steam. A bulbous shadow moves in the mist.

Mike scrapes out a chair and sits—shakes a smoke deft from the wrapper slid across by Leepus. 'Two hours through the rain. Half a dozen checkpoint face-offs with arsey militia cunts. I need a full fuckin' breakfast.'

'Two minutes,' Mother Mellow wheezes clattering plate into microwave.

Leepus sparks Mike's weedstick. 'Have to buy it yourself, mate. Do my bastard stack.'

'Fuckin' mug.' Mike inhales—coughs harsh. 'That explains the filthy backyard weedsticks and general air of dejection. So what about the stab-wound eyes? And the fuckin' corpse-stink clothes?'

'Dizzy, I think. Maybe krakkle. Maybe a bastard cocktail.'

'Old habits still not dead, then?'

'Spiked,' Leepus says tight-lipped.

Mother Mellow delivers Mike's breakfast—lumbers back to the bar.

Mike shovels in a lurid forkful. Yolk drips. 'Then you're a double cunt, aren't you? For going into shit town unprotected. And getting head-raped and fucked over.'

'Spontaneous operation, mate. Get a ping on that doorstep organ-loan bastard—one who forecloses on Tattooed Sally's eldest's kidney when Sal loses her gig at the KashBak hospice and falls down on her payments?'

Mike saws a rasha with gusto. Leepus lunges—scoops smokes clear of slopped caffy ruination. 'Fool fancies his chances in Sick Dick's Big Fat Sunday live game,' he continues. 'Feel the urge to buy in too. Kick his parasitic arse and win old Sal some compo.'

'Only a twat plays Sick Dick's solo.'

'No choice. Backup's fucking AWOL.'

Mike masticates a gristle-wad—swallows. 'Personal shit to take care of.'

Leepus wonders—decides not to ask. 'Anyway,' he says, 'fish is an open book. I've got him down verbatim well before the dizzy hits.'

Mike bread-mops surplus ketchup.

'So—' Leepus smoke signalling for attention. 'Hand sixty-nine. Prick's got a neck-pulse telling he's good pre-flop, but likely not that good. We get a bunch of chips in. Flop hits him. Hits me harder. All-in shove. Snap call. Nice—except the idiot sucks out. Badbeat on the river, Mike. Nothing fucking worse.'

'Yeah there is.' Mike extracts a trapped connective-tissue strand from between pearly canine and bicuspid.

It looks like meaty dental floss Leepus observes idly.

Mike's long-lashed stare is green-eyed and unflinching.

'What?' challenges Leepus. Window light picks up the old fragscar question-mark curled around Mike's cheekbone. Unfortunate disfigurement or curious enhancement he wonders—not for the first time. 'What's worse than a river badbeat?'

Deadpan Mike finger-rolls freed floss—flicks and says, 'Having to listen to some sad cunt replay his bad card-karma blow by arse-ache blow, when you don't have a clue what he's whining about due to not giving a soft shit about poka.'

'Sorry,' says Leepus. 'Want to hear what happens next?'

'Dunno. Will it make me laugh?'

'Maybe the part where the horror-dog chomps HateBoy bollocks?'

'Ho ho.'

'And the rascal whose ugly head I set on fire so he burns down half a market?'

Mike frowns. 'How?'

'He just goes flapping and screaming off crazy through some fuck tents.'

'No. How'd you torch the silly cunt's head?'

'PocketPyro.'

'You successfully deploy a novelty weapon? Now I am fuckin' impressed.'

'Thanks.'

'Impressed you don't get charcoaled in a blowback—those things are ten years past their use-by.'

'You never mention that.'

'You don't buy them if I do. Never dream you'll find the balls to spark one.'

'Dizzy makes me reckless.'

'Yeah—that's what I recall.'

Leepus leans forward and narrows his eyes—drops the butt of his smoked-out weedstick into the dregs of Mike's caffy. It sizzles and dies sodden. 'You done?' he asks her cold.

Mike smiles sweet. 'Sorry—it's only 'cause I care.'

'I mean are you done eating?'

Mike shrugs.

'Because you might want to wipe off the ketchup lipstick,' Leepus says and stands. 'It's just a bit unsettling. Makes you look like a mad fucking sex-clown.'

Mother Mellow's playing roulette on a fone.

Leepus crosses the desolate bar. 'Bit slow in here today.'

'Right.' Mother Mellow eyerolls the redundant comment. 'Punters clock your sick mate's ride outside—lose their appetites.'

Leepus watches Mike fixing her face in stab-knife mirror-steel. 'Yeah,' he says. 'Mad cow's a liability but I just can't shake her off. No clue why she's turned up here this morning.'

Mother Mellow sniffs. 'I give her a shout when I find you dizzy-daft outside—face down in rotten-dog juice.'

'Only yourself to blame, then.'

'Don't mention it. You're welcome.'

'Okay. What's the damage?'

'Rescue. Resuss. Vomit cleanup and disinfection. Womb time with sedation. Weedsticks, food, lost

trade—even at mate’s rate that’s two-fifty.’

Leepus shrugs—grabs the fone from Mother Mellow and fingerslides chips onto random numbers. He passes it back with virtual wheel already spinning—says, ‘That hits, you’re covered with gratuity on top.’

Leepus leaves Mother Mellow staring and follows Mike outside. Hoarse exultations wheeze through the old café-door clattering shut behind them.

‘What the fuck?’ Mike cocks her head. ‘You picking up reads on fones now?’

Leepus winks—folds into the armoured sidecar. ‘Shot in the fucking dark, mate. Even idiots sometimes get lucky.’

◇◇◇◇

3

Leepus up on the roof of his high tower looking out. Lichen continents creep tectonic over the parapet concrete. His fingertips trace their coastlines. There’s a time when he can name them and the nations that comprise them. But geography is unstable now—globally rebranded. He can barely recognise Inglund.

A sudden ragged clatter. Imperfectly combusted biodiesel gusting skyward.

Jackdaws lift from treetops—call raucous disapproval riding twitchy on the wind.

Mike coaxes the stuttering engine into throaty eloquence. Lurches the massive bike and sidecar around the compound turning-circle. Blares out through the briar-tangled anti-vermin fence.

The portcullis rattling down automatic.

Fumes persist as the noise recedes down the rutted tarmac lane. Booms through the scabby coagulation of rural habitations locally known as Shithole. Fades over Hanging Hill.

Jackdaws plane weightless back into position above twiggy filigree—extend hooked-claw landing gear to touchdown dark on brittle perches.

Effortless precision.

Air dank—autumnal. Leepus sucks up a restorative lungful.

A ride in Mike’s combo is never relaxing. Trace dizzy eddying through cortex. Exhaust stink. Intolerable savage vibration. Five miles more and he’s plucking his own damn eyes out.

Whining for mercy is futile. Hardboiled Mike’s soft spot for her hand-built pride and joy is

borderline maternal—complaint is bound to be perceived as extraordinary bad manners.

Mike does not appreciate bad manners. Bad manners demand payback. For strangers—a short sharp shock of physical retribution. But for a transgressor she decides ought to know better—the remorseless application of protracted mental torture.

Leepus' masochistic tendency is marginal at best. He judges it best to bite his tongue—adopt an aspect of cheerful endurance.

Something invisible stirring the air. A damp chill pushed up the valley. The pressure wave provokes the wind turbine—its blades turning in elegant motion. Alternators whirl. Amps trickle. Batteries effervesce minutely.

Leepus shivers—grasps cold steel rungs. Climbs the ladder down into the re-purposed old water tower. Pistons hiss hydraulic—the heavy hatch-lid lowering slowly closed above his head.

The tank room quietly cavernous—close to hypothermic.

Leepus opens the stove. A hint of dull red in the ashes. He stuffs its empty belly and increases carburetion—watches glimmer glare to inferno.

Heat penetrates his heavy greatcoat—irradiates grateful bones. Leepus stares—mulls the odds on the water warming sufficient for a survivable shower before he crashes.

In the meantime—food.

Leftover broth lingering in the cold safe. He fetches it—sets it to warm on hot cast-iron and then stumbles to the cracked-leather sofa to kill time rolling a smoke.

∞

'What's this?'

'Huh?' Leepus parts gluey eyelids.

The tank room air is cool again. There's an aftertaste of cremation—the rank memory of smoke. A diminutive figure looms over him plump in layered coats—stares down accusative with scorched cooking pan inverted. 'Waste of top bleedin' food, that,' says Doll. 'Think our Duane risks 'is arse poachin' GreenField veels for you to burn to ashes when there's babes starvin' down in the 'ole?'

'Sorry.' Leepus rubs eyes. Swings legs from the sofa. Winces at imminent bladder rupture. 'Moral compass on the blink.'

Doll's lip-ring twitching disdainful.

Leepus tries to stand. Tries again and succeeds. 'So this is a nice surprise,' he says with curious eyebrow arching.

'I always come on a Wednesday. Wednesday's my day, ennit?'

'It's Tuesday, Doll.'

'No it ain't.'

'You sure?' Leepus hobbles to the bathroom. 'It's Monday when I nod.'

‘Ave to take your word for that—but I wouldn’t be surprised. Obvious you’ve been at it.’

‘At it?’ Leepus standing over the toilet—anticipating relief.

‘Badness. Getting off on dirty shit again.’

Pan-clatter in kitchen sink. Tap-water splashing. Leepus swaying grateful—his spring rising sympathetic.

‘Ave a squint in the mirror,’ nags Doll. ‘Eyes like constipated cats’ arseholes.’

Leepus gushes heedless.

‘An’ close that bleedin’ door.’ Doll’s words eroded. ‘There’s ‘orses that piss quieter.’

∞

‘I make you eggs.’ Doll nodding toward kitchen table.

‘Cool.’ Leepus sits—waits.

‘I’d get stuck in or they will be.’

‘Spoon? Fork?’

Doll huffs and jangles in a drawer. Hands over a random utensil. Holds on as he accepts it.

Leepus tugs. ‘Thanks,’ he says belated.

‘No problem.’ Doll bundles away—slams open the dumbwaiter stacked with logs. ‘Hope it bleedin’ chokes you,’ she says enfolding an awkward armful.

Leepus munches impassive. A peripheral flicker on the monitor high-mounted on the wall. The remote on the dresser. He reaches it over—pans the rooftop *camera obscura*.

Red kites rising spooked from a hillside gorse-clump beyond the lane.

Leepus tilts up—zooms.

Blue overseer beacon blinking in a gyre of carrion birds.

‘Fukkit.’ Leepus spits out a crunched eggshell fragment—switches to infrared.

A green-laser godfinger incising the screen. It’s pointing down cold and steady—accusing a suspect gorse-clump.

Leepus thinks about it—opts for procrastination. He abandons his dirty plate on the table—follows a trail of bark scabs into the tank-room dense with smog.

Doll squats under the cloudbase. She’s feeding a log to a feeble smoulder—nurturing an appetite for fire in a reluctant cold-iron belly.

Leepus coughs. ‘Fukksake, girl.’

‘Some twat only leaves the woodshed door wide-open, dunnit? So the rain’s pissin’ in for days.’ Doll clangs the stove door shut—stands and smears back a lank forelock with sooty finger. ‘And less of the bleedin’ ‘girl’. I’m forty-three year-old, mate. Got three granbabs back indoors.’

'And I could be your dad.'

'Bollocks.'

Leepus on the sofa rolling up a smoke. 'Don't judge a book by its cover, Doll. I'm functionally dead inside.'

'Our Em's first boy, Ryda. He likes to look at books.'

'Beat the kid within an inch of his life and throw them on the fire.'

'What's wrong with books?'

Leepus shrugs—fires-up his weedstick.

'I'm thinking maybe you've got a few old ones knocking around,' says Doll unbuttoning one coat-layer. 'That the lad could have a lend of?'

'Thinking?'

'Something I hear.' Doll's eye probing. 'That there's a time when you're to do with them. You know. Before. Back then.'

Leepus obscure behind his smokescreen. 'Forget it, Doll,' he says. 'Then gets wiped in the dizzy years. Now there's only now.'

Dolls sniffs disgruntled. 'Alright, whatever you say. No 'arm asking, is there? Our Ryda's a pretty goodun. Not like his fuckin' dad.'

'Pleased to hear it. Your Em slips up badly there.'

'Can't blame the girl for gettin' took in by mental Jago. She fancies him for a right bold bastard—sly enough to jump the fence on those fanatics that raise him and 'ave it away with a chunk of their treasure. Who knows years later he'll flashback all mad fuckin' godly again—whip our poor Em naked up the yards for turnin' his 'ead with her 'fanny magic'?'

'Prick's no trouble now, though?'

'Still skulking up the woods for all I know. Whatever Mike tells 'im on her 'nature walk' sorts his nasty shit out.'

'Mike knows how to make a point.'

Doll smiles appreciation studying the stove. 'Fire's caught.'

'Yeah,' says Leepus. 'I might be warm in another hour.'

'Reckon I'm done for today then,' says Doll hovering expectant.

'Sit for a bit.' Leepus offers the weedstick.

'Okay.' Doll takes it—props her arse on the arm of the sofa. 'But last time I have a smoke with you I go off without getting paid. Don't think you can tink me twice.'

'Treat me as a bank.'

'Yeah.' Doll inflates her bosom. She holds—scans the hazy concrete chamber and snorts smoke-jets

down her nose. 'Must be nice to be a solid gold bastard snug up 'ere in his castle. I'm surprised you're not more cheerful.'

'Me too.'

Doll cocks her head—delves and scratches an armpit. 'I could do you a nice shag if you fancy it? Only an extra fifty?'

'I don't.'

'Let a girl down gentle why don't you?'

'Not personal,' says Leepus moving to his strongbox. 'There's a time you don't have to offer twice. These days I just don't.'

'What—not ever?'

'Can't be arsed.'

'Fair enough.' Doll buttons up—waits.

Leepus counts out a stack and hands it over.

'See you next Tuesday then,' says Doll riffling chips as she drifts for the lift.

'Don't you say your day is Wednesday?' asks Leepus without thinking.

'Gotcha!' Doll smirking—the concertina-gate rattling shut. 'The old ones are still the best, mate,' she says disappearing beneath floor-level.

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4

'Name?'

'Leepus.'

'Leepus what?'

'Just Leepus.'

'D. O. B.?'

'Uncertain. Data rinsed. Reduction minus a few decades—give or take.'

'Stakeholder registration?'

'Disinvested.'

'Entitlement?'

'Expired.'

'Means of support?'

'I play cards.'

'Whose colours?'

'Strictly freelance.'

'Scrutinised by OurFuture on any prior occasion?'

'What? The College not omniscient, lad?'

The prefect noncom stiffens—says, 'Respond in English only.' The cohort behind him shifts leery—students hefting weapons.

Leepus reads adolescent gestures. Eye-flick in shadow of helmet visor. Stabvest breastplate thumb-hooked—forefinger pointing at voltwhip. The prefect feeling horny. The illiterate twat wants to jolt him.

Leepus opts to muck—stoops and loses a couple of inches.

The prefect leans in with his headcam saying, 'Detail your last forty-eight hours.'

'Asleep.' Leepus coughs.

'For a full two days?'

'Been feeling a bit rough.'

'Rough?'

'Bringing up blood and stuff.' Leepus hacks ragged—spits out a whirling phlegm bolas. The prefect eyes it dangling from the twisted metalwork of the portcullis. Leepus picks up his thread—says, 'Erbwitch down in the village sorts me out with some magic powder. Puts me into a fucking coma.'

The prefect inching back then saying, 'Any activity out here you observe? Maybe you hear a vehicle? Some other kind of commotion?'

Leepus shakes his head—leans on a concrete doorpost.

'You reside here alone?' The prefect craning—scanning the ivy-veined tower.'

'Yeah—except for the bats in the lift shaft.'

'Wildlife harbours disease.'

Leepus shrugs—summons another expectorant spasm. 'Can we carry this on inside?' he wheezes. 'Damp air's killing my chest.'

The prefect's nostrils flattening reflexive. 'Preliminary investigation concluded,' he says. 'But scrutiny is ongoing.'

Leepus watches the students remount their armoured TacTruk. The vehicle snarls. Steel screams

as it guns free of the mangled portcullis—turns and bellows off down the lane in a rattle of pulverised tarmac.

Leepus thinks about climbing the hill. He decides to give it ten minutes—rides up to the tank room instead for a smoke. When he gets there his fone is ringing. He finds it in the pocket of his greatcoat hidden in the wardrobe by mischievous Doll—answers it, ‘Wrong number.’

‘Cunts gone?’ Mike’s voice phasing through static.

‘Heartbeats off the premises. Don’t know about the drone.’

‘Cloudbase is low but I can’t see it.’

‘You coming in?’

‘Best not. Meet me.’

‘Where?’

‘Woods.’

‘Fuck’s sake. It’s dark in twenty minutes.’

The fonescreen flashes Call Ended.

Leepus shrugs into his greatcoat and heads for the lift. He diverts to the armoury locker—pockets liquid capsaicin ampoules and a couple of poppers for good measure. Feral dog-packs hunt in the forest. The brutes like to run down humans—occasionally eat them.

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Leepus out on the hill. He noses through the plastic screens around the crime scene. A gorse clump felled at ground level—cleared vegetation heaped. Exposed turf glistens black and greasy. Bad-meat molecules taint his tongue.

A plodbot swivels on its tripod logging data. Leepus winds in his neck—spits and clumps up the hill.

Daylight dissolved in drizzle. The forest dark in the valley—a neighbourhood wilderness. Leepus descends gloomy—picks a random route through dripping trees to the derelict Cabin Café car park.

A straggle of buddleia erupting through ancient asphalt. Fronds drip around crouching Leepus. Eroded lettering suggests his space is reserved – in a long-lost quaintly sentimental era – for the convenience of the disabled.

Leepus checking out the café ruins. Red glow—a breeze fanning embers in tumbledown shadows.

Leepus infiltrates the collapsed-wall logjam—acquires a new perspective. Mike’s bulk dark against dying fire. He hisses a soft greeting—moves closer. Mike unresponsive. Head slumped—chin on chest. Mike asleep on watch.

Leepus is amused. He sneaks up behind—delivers a toe-prod to Mike’s kidneys.

Mike topples.

'Fuck!' says Leepus jumping back as Mike's body impacts the fireplace—sends sparks mosquito-dancing brief above dark sizzle.

Leepus' heart's a panicked hare trapped inside his ribcage. Sudden branches rattle. He turns to find buddleia looming—tumbleweeding from shadow.

'Ah!' Leepus dives—scrabbles through damp leaf-litter in search of an improvised weapon.

'Easy.' Mike's voice from foliage. 'Sorry if I spook you, mate. Don't lose your fuckin' arse.'

'Pissoff,' says Leepus down on hands and knees. 'Shit's not even funny.'

'Right.' Mike shrugs off her camo cape and stoops—rolls the stumpwood avatar from the fireplace and recovers her scorched leather. 'I follow you in from the tree-line—you don't have a fuckin' clue. Mine to shag at will, mate.'

Mike scattering kindling on embers—raising tentative fire.

A mouldering banquette in a ruined log-wall corner. Leepus brushes off debris and sits down sullen. 'Fucking paranoiac,' he says. 'You could just come to the tower.'

Mike arse up head down—lighting twin smokes from nascent flame. 'Don't think so, mate,' she says standing and moves to join Leepus on slimy vinyl. 'Sweaty College pride'n'joyboys squirting all over the gaff? I might do something silly.'

They smoke. Leepus waits till Mike opens her mouth to ask—then says, 'I pick up the drone but get distracted by Doll looking to top up her wages. By the time she's safely out the door the hill's already captured. I decide to mind my own business.'

'Overseer finds something murky?'

'Must do. Tags it for ground patrol.'

'You see what it is?'

'Not really. They have a squint and screen the site.'

'That's when I roll up. I'm scoping from Fox Covert.'

'Bodydump is my best guess. Grass is all black and nasty.'

'They haul it out in five plastic bags. One little wanker pukes.' Mike lights a smoke. Leepus takes it from her. Mike lights another—continues, 'And then they have a sniff around—decide to canvass suspect towers?'

'I'm halfway down to let them in and they've rammed the damn portcullis. No call for that shit, is there?'

'Classic force projection, mate. Cunts see a castle they have to crack it. My advice—rebuild stronger. Include a few IEDs.'

'Pretty sure pink-misting the Prefecture's finest counts as a capital crime. But it's probably fun at the time.'

'So—they chat you up a bit. Any intel on the dead meat?'

'Head Boy's pumping testo. Officer material—wants to make an impression. So I fold under minimal pressure, throw a bit of a coughing fit and put the fear of diseases in him.'

Mike frowns. 'Obvious this corpse is tracked—and well-enough connected to warrant search and rescue. Not what you need on your doorstep.'

'My sentiment exactly.'

'Right.' Mike stands—zips leather. 'I'd give it some serious thought, mate.'

'We can chew it over indoors,' says Leepus kicking humus to smother the fire. 'Maybe make some calls.'

'Another time, mate. Running late.'

'Not out here to visit then?'

'Nah.' Mike looks off into darkness. 'Just sliding through when I see the fuss.'

'What's up, Mike?'

'Stuff going on.'

'Stuff?'

'This and that. Nothing special.'

'Later then,' says Leepus too old and wise to press.

'Yeah,' Mike says fading. 'Mind how you fuckin' go.'

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5

A mile beyond Shithole—the river. A valley-side scrub jungle intervening.

The scorched stumps of watchtowers felled by fire—climbing weeds drag down rusty chain-link strung between them.

Twin rows of sooty concrete hut-pads with grass infringing. Their geometry disordered by a charred sprawl of fallen frames. Charcoaled wood decaying—velvet black mosaic eroding into mulch.

Leepus salutes the fortitude of the righteously assertive tactical-default commando that kicks off the first debt-slave rebellion—picks up the crumbled asphalt of Repayment Pathway #1. He pauses for a moment—appreciates the ambient dereliction. Then he strolls on down through the trashed

infrastructure of the DebtShrink Honest Labour Park. Marches out past the exploded gatehouse. Stops where road meets water.

Lamppost tops chalky with bird-shit track the submerged roadway across the flow. Cormorants silhouetted on them—black flags hanging static above turbulent green.

The road re-emerging on the far bank vague through murk. Skeletons of drowned trees. The spire of the submarine church.

The river rising year on year—widening into mere. Wetlands oozing closer. Fish and fowl encroaching.

Leepus on the stonempath above waterside scrub-willow. Rats scuttle for cover in root clumps. Coots racket sudden—foot-slap alarmed across water. A red-eared terrapin slips from a log.

Terrapins, thinks Leepus. Since when do they live in Inglund?

A wall of vegetation defends a blackwater oxbow. Leepus negotiates a maze of weed-cloaked junk—arrives at a greasy wooden wharf. The rotten hulk of Bodja's houseboat floating a cable-length offshore.

A faded sign nailed to an alder: RING IF I NO U – FUKKOFF FAST IF I DONT!

Leepus picks up the hammer provided—beats the corroded cast-iron chunk chain-hung from its miniature gallows. Steely tintinnabulation cuts the swampy air.

Leepus gives it a couple of minutes—rings again. Bodja doesn't show.

A two-stroke motor echoing in stillness. An outboard on the river—puttering closer. Bodja nosing his skiff into the oxbow. His attention on the houseboat. Leepus lights up. Smoke catches Bodja's eye. He alters course and kills the motor—broadships the skiff to the wharf. 'Leepus?' he says blinking frog-like. 'What up? Got trouble, man?'

'Trouble?' Leepus raises an eyebrow. 'You'll need to be more specific.'

'Mike's not with you, is she?' asks Bodja peering wary.

'No.'

'Okay.' Bodja relaxes minutely—hands the skiff's painter up to Leepus. 'Don't see you down here for a while. Think maybe something's occurring.'

'Do you, mate?' Leepus loops the wet rope around a bollard. 'So what are you up to when I ring?'

'Just a bit of fishing.' Bodja clambers onto the wharf.

'No good?' Leepus sniffing—scenting only unwashed Bodja.

'Into a fuckin' monster. Catfish I reckon. Have to let it take my line or it sinks the skiff and eats me.'

'Obviously not picky then, those catfish?'

Bodja frowns—scratches manky beard with ragged nails. Dark residue in cuticles. Crusty tideline between fingers.

Leepus follows Bodja's gaze to the listing houseboat. 'Old wreck's still afloat then—or is it the mud-bank keeping her up?'

'Couple of sprung planks to caulk when we get some working weather. Bilge needs pumping now and then—but I generally keep my arse dry, if it's any of your business.'

'Okay—just banta.' Leepus shrugs. 'No need to get the hump.'

'All right for you coming down here to take the piss.' Bodja sniffs disgruntled—musters a half-hearted comeback. 'Leepus Tower still fuckin' standing, is it? Bet you haven't got round to rigging that lightning conductor yet.'

'Slipped my mind.'

'You'll be sorry when you hear a bang one night and wake up carbonised.'

'Maybe you can sort it when you're over to fix the portcullis.'

'What's wrong with the portcullis?'

'Traffic accident. Kids in a fucking halftrack.'

'Welding job, is it?'

'I'd say so.'

'When do you want it doing?'

'Soon as you like.'

'Got jobs outstanding on the boat. And I'll have to service the jenny.'

'Come over tomorrow.'

'Need a few chips up front—welding rods and fuel. Say fifty?'

Leepus measures off a short stack. 'Should be seventy-five there. Get a handful of weedsticks too—improve your fucking mood, mate.'

'Cheers.' Bodja trousers the chips—steps down into the skiff and rewinds the outboard pull-cord.

'Okay, mate.' Leepus shrugs wry as the motor revs high—settles to a steady splutter. 'I'll be on my way, then. Better things to waste a day doing than bandying fine words with you.'

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Leepus trudges back up the hill through the pissing rain. 'Fuck Bodja,' he mutters under his dripping hatbrim. Bastard's too far up his own arse to offer hospitality on board—Leepus is soaked to the fucking bone now. But that's probably best in the long run—an hour in that festering houseboat's a proposition that likely proves fatal.

Even bathed in sunshine - an event not recalled by many - Shithole is not classically picturesque.

A few streets of abandoned artisan-cottage holiday homes repossessed by Blut of Inglund squatters in the aftermath of the Reduction.

Two-dozen sound old council houses strung sullen along Windy Edge preserving inbred village-

bloodlines.

The enclave of unfinished StrivaHomz caged in rusty scaffolds. Flapping blue-plastic roofing. Plank bridges strung precarious across mud and flooded trenches. A few families of co-operative self-builders huddled despondent in un-glazed kitchen-diners awaiting better weather.

Behind a dark conspiracy of yew on a stonewalled barrow of ancestral bones at the ancient heart of the village: the Peasants' Party Palace—formerly St Peters. It's a shrine to godless pleasure now. Sexually energetic locals gather there on arbitrary shindig-days to indulge in joyous affirmation of community cohesion. Devotional intoxicants are imbibed—bonkers music relished.

And at the corner of High Street and Knacker's Lane overlooking the trash-filled duckpond: the Queen's Head on a Spike. His hat sheds water cold down Leepus' neck as he clocks the gory caricature of royal decapitation swinging over the door of the pub.

The past jumping out on Leepus—some arty anarchistic gal taut-arsed on a ladder. She hangs her rebel masterpiece—turns and flushes proud. Ribald Poors Militia lads raise sloppy glasses cheering.

It's one of those fleeting moments—a wildly optimistic recognition of a glorious but ultimately futile spasm of social-levelling with violence. Leepus buys the artist a drink—entices her to bed to revel in the slaughter.

Or maybe he just wants to. It's sometimes hard to tell with dizzy what really happens and what doesn't.

Leepus ducks into the snug. A dim fire flickers a faint welcome from the hearth. There's a comforting fug of weedsmoke marred by a pissy bouquet of wet dog. John Fox and Bob the Butcher turn from the bar to check him. Dribbling Dave's curled up poorly on the floor—Bob's dog lapping happy at pooled vomit.

The bar untended—Big Bethan in the corner passing slack time with video poka. The landlady looks from gambling machine to Leepus. 'Fuck me,' she squawks in greeting. 'Look what the rain flushes out.'

'Alright, Leepus?' Bob nods sly and lifts his empty jar. 'You're just in fuckin' time.'

'Thanks.' Leepus nods back. 'Mine's a caff, mate.'

'Walked into that one, Bob,' John Fox says and chugs off his ale. 'Old Leepus ain't no fish.'

'Up himself is what he is,' Bob the Butcher says sour. 'Fuckin' caff's liquid gold. What's wrong with regular bevvi?'

'Devil's piss,' says Leepus pulling up a stool. 'Look what years of drinking it does to you.'

Bethan gathers empty jars—ladles ale from a barrel and glances shrewd at Leepus. 'I'll be needing to see someone's gold on the bar before I put beans in the grinder.'

Leepus pulls out his chipstack. He measures a squat column on the sticky counter—sighs and tips it over.

'Nice one, mate.' Bob the Butcher is relieved.

'Pleasure,' says Leepus. 'Just don't blame me when you find yourself in the shitta one fine morning squirting out your liver.'

'That can't really happen, can it?' John Fox looking queasy.

Leepus shrugs. 'Just saying. Chance is yours to take.'

'Here,' says Bethan. 'I do my best, but the beans seem kind of furry.'

'Thanks,' says Leepus. 'As long as it's got some jangle. Get a jar in for yourself while you're at it. And Dave too—when he's feeling better.'

'Much going on up your ends then?' Bob shifts heavy on his barstool—adjusts the overhang of arsecheeks.

Leepus shrugs. 'Time passes, mate—thanks for asking. Any fun to be had down here?'

'Squad of fuckin' snotface studs roll through yesterday. Aggy round the yards a bit—try to scare-up background rabblegabble on "the dirty disease-bag grizzle scrote who lives up in that scabby tower".'

'Daft Danny tells 'em you're alright, though.' John Fox chiming in. 'Just as long as we throw you a juicy priv virgin now and then.'

'Yeah? They piss themselves at that, I bet,' says Leepus.

'Nah—but poor old Danny-boy fuckin' does when the top stud gets into him with a voltwhip.'

'Ouch,' says Leepus passing more chips to Bethan. 'Bottle of grog there for the lad when he stops twitching. Tell the dope I'm proud.'

'What do they want then, up at yours?' Bob not letting it go.

'Mystery.' Leepus gulps the last of his foul caffy. 'Anyone got any special problems?'

Big Bethan shakes her head. 'If they 'ave then they're not saying. I 'ear every bastard's troubles. Makes me right depressed.'

'Other strangers about?'

'Pack of tinkish scuttlas doorsteppin' looted bits and bobs.' Bob the Butcher spits disgusted. 'Slippy little shits. Blink and they rob the eyeballs out your head while you ain't looking.'

'Steady, Bob.' Leepus cocks his head. 'There's a clause in the Articles on ethnic slurs. Says they're out of order.'

'Fukkoff!' Bob's jowl wobbles. 'No way that applies to fuckin' tinkish scrotes. That'd just be mental.'

'Yeah.' Foxy sneers. 'Anyhow, this one mucky little tart—can't be more than twelve—says she'll toss me off for twenny.'

Big Bethan aghast. 'You never.'

'Course not.' Foxy smirks. 'Like I'm going to pay you twenny for a hand shandy, says I—when the barmaid up the Queen's only wants ten for a gobble.'

Big Bethan not amused. Her straight arm jutting across the bar—bursting Foxy's nose. 'Landlady, you cheeky sod,' she says. 'An' I'd want at least a nundred.'

Leepus sidesteps as Foxy topples facedown onto flagstone. The dog barks surprise—sniffs and lunges eager after nose blood.

Bob the Butcher mirthful—struggling for breath.

'Later.' Leepus winks at Big Bethan. 'Thanks for the entertainment.'

'Don't be a stranger.' Big Bethan winks back. 'Always glad to put on a show—for a minted old griz like you.'

Leepus is halfway out the door when a flicker catches his eye—the poka machine flashing alluring. He ducks back and feeds it chips—waits to see how the virtual cards fall.

Deuce. Another. Ace. Ace. Ace.

Full house—that's nice, thinks Leepus.

Tinny electronic trumpets fanfare his good fortune. Leepus whips his hat off—holds it at the ready. The machine pukes a copious rattle.

His hat brimful—overflowing.

Big Bethan's face a picture.

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Extract from “The Saddest Sound” by Deborah Delano

Prologue and chapters 1 - 5

Prologue

Monday, 15th September, 1980

Graham rounded the corner of The Avenue in his lime green Ford Capri and pulled up outside his nicely proportioned three-bed semi. His wife, Irina, was in the front garden torching the cracks between the paving stones with her newly purchased Weed Wand. His heart sank. He'd been supposed to do that job yesterday and he knew she'd be quarrelsome about it. He'd meant to do it, but with all the excitement of last night it had slipped his mind. Sometimes things did slip his mind. That was dangerous for a man in his position.

Irina would not tolerate weeds of any kind and she was frantic with irritation as she ruthlessly scoured them with the jet of fire. Weed Wands were the latest thing in eliminating untidiness. Graham leaned over to the glove compartment, took out a small crucifix on a broken chain and slipped it into his overall pocket. 'Sorry, petal. Let me take over,' he said climbing out of the car.

'Leave it,' Irina snapped at him. The very sight of him increased her irascibility. He attempted a peck on the cheek but Irina turned her face away.

'Shall I pop the kettle on, love? Fancy a brew?'

'As you please, but don't splash water everywhere when you fill it.'

Graham removed his work boots and went inside. His slippers were neatly paired on the shoe rack in the hall and he put them on. He inspected the soles of his boots cautiously and, satisfied that they were clean, he placed them on the rack where his slippers had been.

He went through to the kitchen and carefully filled the kettle. As he lit the stove, Irina came into the kitchen pulling off her gardening gloves.

'How were't Mum and Dad, love?' he asked in his most placatory manner.

Irina had stayed at her parents' house the night before.

'It was lovely to see them,' Irina said, thankfully deflected from her weed-killing. And then, more hesitantly: 'Selene was there with her young man.'

Graham hated Irina's sister Selene. When he thought of her, he imagined what her head would look like spiked on a pole. He chuckled inwardly when this image came to his mind because she was a Pole. Not like Irina though, Irina was Polish just the same but she was ladylike and refined. She'd been to university in Leeds and had a degree in English literature. That's what had attracted him to her in the first place. She was educated and cultured. She knew about ballet and classical music and books. All Selene had done with a university education was turn into a fleabag hippy cunt. Graham would have dearly loved to do something about her.

'She's asked me to go along to one of her feminist meetings next week.'

'Feminist.' Graham sneered. 'Well I hope she's not put any funny ideas into your head. They're all lesbians.'

Irina flushed. She feared and dreaded any kind of discussion that might be connected to sexuality. Whenever anything came on the television involving intimacy she either turned it off or found some excuse to leave the

room.

'Don't be stupid,' she said vexed and flustered. 'Anyway, what happened to the work you were going to do in the garden yesterday?'

'Something came up at yard.' Graham's thoughts raced.

Irina scowled. 'More like something came up at the pub.'

'No, one of the lads spilt his load,' he lied effortlessly. 'Derek and me went to help him clean it up and I were buggered when I got home.'

The shrill whistling of the boiling kettle punctuated their exchange. Irina went back into the front garden while Graham spooned tea into the pot. He could feel his heart racing and a tingling excitement knotted his guts. He couldn't wait to get into his den to put his newest souvenir with his collection and he fingered the head of the tiny Jesus in his overall pocket as he waited for the tea to brew.

Graham poured the tea and took a cup to Irina in the garden. She was bending down with her back to him probing between the cracks with a knife. Graham felt a stirring in his groin. 'It's on the sill,' he shouted. Then he went back inside and upstairs to his special place.

The room was small, probably intended as a child's bedroom but in their case never occupied. It was his space, a kind of dressing room. He and Irina agreed that as long as he kept it spotlessly clean she would not invade his privacy. She had never enquired what he did in there. There was just enough room for a single bed, a chair and a small table.

Graham locked the door behind him and opened the door to the built-in wardrobe. It wasn't actually a proper wardrobe but a door he'd fixed across a recess. At the back of the recess was the original closet. It was where he kept his collection. He unlocked the concealed, padlocked inner door and reached into the darkness. His hand grasped the handle of a bag and he pulled it out of the closet. It was an old handbag, black wool with a gold metal clasp. It smelled of face powder and rancid old perfume. He inhaled the sublime scent of his mother.

He loved going through his things. It brought him to his true identity and he felt the power course through his veins. He opened the bag, took out each of the items and lined them up on the table. Then he put his hand in his pocket to retrieve the crucifix. He was rock hard. He put it down next to the other things. Strands of hair were caught around the head of the dying Christ. Dyed hair.

Died hair.

Words slipped and twisted in his brain. He closed his eyes and let his mind drift into blackness and back to clarity.

Then he went through his treasures. There was a ring box with 'Ratners' inscribed inside the lid and, poked into the space where the ring had been, a child's tooth. That piece of shit had been his first. He took the tooth out. It was minuscule in his big workman's hands. He inspected it in the light and put it back into its crease. He picked up the lipstick next and opened it, twisting the bottom until it was fully extended. 'Revlon Red Hot Red,' the tiny sticker on the end said. He sniffed it. It smelled of cheap perfume and animal fat. Just like the bitch who'd used it. He could see where her disgusting lips had shaped the end. His excitement mounted.

The powder compact lay next to it. The catch was broken. It had 'MC' engraved into the heart-shape on the lid. He opened it and looked at his eyes in the mirror, and then at his lips, pursing them. A few grains of powder fell onto the leg of his overall. He rubbed them away and put the compact down. Then he removed his overalls and stripped himself naked, laying each item of clothing neatly on the bed.

Graham went back to his mementoes. As he touched each one a charge went through him. He was in control, the master of life and death. His decision was final. His hand passed over the silver belt-buckle and moved to the letter, never posted but neatly addressed and stamped. He'd read it hundreds of times since he got it. It was his prize. 'Dear Mum,' it began. What a bit of luck that he'd intercepted it. He'd saved a lot of heartache for some chap called Ian. He'd been sorting that little slut out good and proper. Good thing he'd finished the job for him. Graham fantasised about meeting Ian and telling him about it. That thought did it for him. His ecstasy was satisfying and prolonged.

'Graham.' Irina's penetrating voice trilled from the hall.

He quickly attended to his mess with his discarded underpants, hurriedly put his keepsakes back in the handbag and returned it to the closet.

'Just about to have a quick bath, love,' he called.

'Why have a bath when you've got the ceiling to do in the dining room?' Irina had started upstairs.

He opened the door to his room. At the sight of his naked body Irina turned in revulsion.

'Aye, sorry love, slipped me mind,' he said. 'I'll do it t'morrow wi'out fail.'



One

Friday, 23rd November, 1979

Ginny cleared a circle of mist from the bus window with her gloved hand. Outside the dank northern day seeped down from the moors, visible in the murky distance, and cast its gloom across the cityscape.

The bus had stopped outside City College. Ginny watched as students came out carrying their books and files, all long hair and black Levis. Some were hand in hand, young lovers. She felt a stab of envy for their freedom and their learning. These days even girls were staying on in education. Last time she took Michael to the doctor's with his asthma, they'd been seen by a woman GP. She was probably only a few years older than Ginny herself. Ginny hadn't known how to act. She had flushed with humiliation when the doctor asked if there was damp in the home. She felt more judged by a woman than she would have by a male doctor.

The students jostled onto the bus. A young woman sat next to Ginny. She had jet-black dyed hair, thick black eyeliner and a leather jacket thrown over a Ramones T-shirt. Ginny vaguely recognised her. Her boyfriend stood next to her in the aisle hanging onto the rail. His leather jacket had 'Sex Pistols' spelled out in studs across the back. Ginny read the spine on the folder that the girl held on her lap. It said: Art History. She didn't know what that was. Just being near them gave Ginny a terrible sense of inferiority.

The bus was packed now and even more steamed up. The circle Ginny had made misted over again and the buildings blurred wetly into the fading light. A musty smell of old wet coats hung in the air.

'Don't I know you?' said the Ramones fan. 'Didn't you go to Riverside Primary, Mr Gilkes' class?'

'Yeah, I did,' said Ginny.

'I'm Sophie James,' the girl went on.

Ginny placed her then. She used to sit on the top table—the Tigers they were called. Ginny herself had been on the Donkeys table.

'Oh yeah, you used to go round with Judy Hawkins. You at college now then?' Ginny recalled the painful moment when Judy Hawkins had called for her to go to school. Her mum had answered the door in curlers and invited Judy in. Judy perched awkwardly on the end of the sofa and looked as though she could smell something nasty. Ginny knew that their friendship was over when, on the way to school, Judy asked why her parents didn't buy a nicer house. Where would she have started on that one? She'd shrugged and resolved to avoid Judy in the future.

'Yeah, I'm doing Art and Art History.'

'That's nice,' said Ginny hoping she wouldn't be called on to comment further.

'What're you up to these days?' the girl enquired.

'Oh, um, looking fer a job at the moment. Just bin fer an interview actually at a Solicitors' office,' Ginny lied. She'd been for an interview at the meat packing factory. The man had said they didn't take young mothers on because they had too much time off work with the kids. Ginny was sure she could remember her English teacher at school telling them about a new law that meant women couldn't be discriminated against but she didn't know if this counted so she didn't bother to argue. Anyway the place reeked of blood and corpses.

'Here's my stop then,' said Ginny. It was two stops before hers really but she wanted to cut the conversation short. 'Nice to see you again.'

'Yeah, you too,' the girl replied, standing to let Ginny past.

Ginny raised her eyebrows in a smile at the silent boyfriend and pushed her way down the crowded bus.

It was nearly dark when Ginny arrived at her mum's house to pick Michael up. It was the house she'd been brought up in. A red-brick council house on a sprawling estate. She would have liked to get one herself but the council had put her and Michael into one of the high-rise blocks nearer the city centre. So it was a bus ride every time her mum looked after him.

'Has he bin good?' she asked as she hung her jacket on the peg in the hall.

'Good as gold,' her mum replied.

'Mummy,' Michael called from the living room. 'Mummy, see what I've got.'

He raced eagerly into the hall. Ginny knelt down and hugged him. She'd never regretted for a single moment her decision to keep him. When she fell pregnant at just sixteen there'd been a lot of pressure to have an abortion. It wasn't like in her mum's day. Sheila got pregnant at sixteen too but had the baby aborted by some woman in Lumb Lane. She'd nearly died of the septicaemia that had set in later. These days you could get a legal abortion on the National Health, but somehow Ginny wanted this child more than anything she'd ever wanted before. She had stuck out against her family and most of her friends. She had stuck out too against Pete, the baby's father.

Pete was in the same year at school as Ginny. They'd argued and then split up over it. He'd refused to have anything to do with her or the child, and as her pregnancy noticeably progressed he began to spread rumours that Ginny had slept around and that he couldn't be sure he was the Dad. That year had been the toughest of Ginny's short life. She'd done her 'O' levels in the boiling-hot June. She could hardly get her bump into the exam desks, but she was glad she'd suffered the humiliation though, because she passed her Maths and English.

'What've you got there darlin'?' Ginny turned to her mother. 'Mum, you haven't bin givin' 'im loadsa sweets now, 'ave yuh?'

'No, 'e's 'ad a 'nana and evap,' said Sheila defensive, though she thought her daughter's fussiness about the boy unwarranted.

Michael held out his closed fist. Ginny put her outstretched hand under it. He opened his hand and a tiny tooth fell into her palm. A bottom incisor.

'Wow,' said Ginny. 'You're getting a proper big boy now. We'll put that under your pillow and see if the tooth fairy comes.' She knew Michael had been wiggling steadfastly at the tooth since he'd become aware of the rewards on offer for such bounty.

Ginny picked her son up and carried him through to the living room smothering him in kisses as she went. Crackerjack was on the television set in the corner. It was curiously wrong to Ginny because it was in colour and she remembered it in black and white with Leslie Crowther and Peter Glaze. Memory was going to be in colour from now on. Ginny didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

'How'd the interview go? Any good?' asked Sheila hopefully.

'Nah,' Ginny replied. 'The manager thought I'd be off too much with Michael.'

'How d'they bloody well expect women to live?' grumbled Sheila as she went upstairs to get ready for work.

Ginny's dad, as usual, was in the armchair sleeping off a bender. He got his dole money through on Fridays and he went straight to the pub and spent half of it. Sheila had to manage on her cleaning money. She'd done other stuff to get by as well when Ginny and her brothers and sister were younger. Ginny knew she'd been on the game. A lot of women on the estate did it occasionally to make ends meet. Like mother like daughter, Ginny thought ruefully. She wasn't going to be like her mum though. She'd got plans. She was waiting until Michael started school next year, then she was going back to college. She'd got her 'O' levels and that was enough to get her onto the Social Work course at the Polytechnic.

'Pappy snores,' said Michael

'Yeah, I know,' Ginny replied and they both giggled.

As if to comment, Ginny's dad let out such a loud snore that he woke himself up. 'Whaddya want?' he grunted bleary eyed.

'Just picking Michael up,' Ginny responded in a tone that said: and it's got nothing to do with you.

'Start picking your puzzle up, Mikey.' She wanted to leave as soon as possible now.

Ginny despised her father. Stan Hames had never held down a job. He was a useless drunk and nasty with it. She couldn't count the number of times her mum had 'walked into a door' after he'd come home rat-arsed.

'There's a couple of ham sandwiches and a bit of pork pie in the kitchen, Stan,' said Sheila coming into the living room dabbing her nose with a powder puff. She was in her cleaning smock, ready to go to work.

'Get us a few bottles of Newkie on t'way 'ome, pet,' Stan wheedled.

'Gi'us the money then,' Sheila replied abruptly. Stan fished in his pockets and found a crumpled pound note.

'You can get yourself a Babycham wi' t'change.' He handed the money over. Sheila took it from him and raised her eyebrows at Ginny.

'C'mon love,' she said. 'We'll get the bus to town together.'

Ginny finished loading Michael into his coat and shoes. She carefully wrapped the tooth in some toilet paper and put it into the back pocket of her jeans. Then the three generations set off together into the cold damp night.

Michael kissed his Gran goodbye outside the council offices where she worked five nights a week from six until eight. After stoppages she came home with fifteen pounds and thirty-eight pence. It paid the rent and meant she wasn't completely dependent on how much Stan had left after Friday in the Queen's Head.

'Be a good boy for yer mum,' said Sheila picking Michael up and squeezing him to her. His chilly, pink face pressed close to hers. She put him down and, turning to Ginny, took the pound Stan had given her out of her pocket and pushed it into Ginny's hand.

'No Mum,' said Ginny. 'We're alright honest. Anyway, what about his beer?'

'I get paid meself t'night. You get something nice fer y'supper.'

'Thanks, Mum,' Ginny was glad of the money. She'd been trying to think if there were any spuds at the flat to do mash with. Now they'd be able to get pie and chips from the chippie.

'Be careful, Gin,' Sheila added cryptically and headed into the offices.

Ginny watched her go, but her parting comment had left her with a sense of unease that her mum knew how she was paying her rent and keeping Michael in fitted shoes.

Ginny headed home, away from the lights of the town and into the dimness beyond. This area on the margins of the city was the red light district. The girls paced up and down smoking impatiently, their bare legs blue from the cold. Ginny and Michael lived in one of three high-rise blocks, emerging from a much older industrial wasteland. Derelict factories and forlorn, boarded-up terraced housing - remnants of the city's Victorian manufacturing past - surrounded these new monoliths. They had been thrown up in the late 'sixties and, just ten years on, were already riddled with damp.

When Ginny and Michael reached the chippie opposite the flats a scuffle had just broken out between one of the street girls and her pimp. A bag of chips had gone flying and the girl was being dragged by her hair, her head bent into her attacker's grip as she staggered past. Ginny pushed Michael behind her legs and flattened herself to the wall. From what she could make out, the girl owed a tenner but still had the nerve to buy a bag of chips before the debt was paid.

'Take it outside,' Danny shouted from behind the high chip-shop counter. 'Fuckin' whores,' he added to Ginny. 'Oops, s'cuse language. Didn't see you there, Mikey.'

Ginny picked Michael up so that he could see above the counter. 'Look,' he said exposing the small space on his bottom gum. 'My baby tooth come out.'

'Well so it has,' said Danny. 'You'll be getting a visit from the tooth fairy then.' Michael nodded, grinning.

'Two pies, a portion of chips, and some batter bits, please Dan,' said Ginny.

'Anything fer you sweetheart,' Danny replied, chancing his arm as he always did around Ginny.

She knew it was only a matter of time before everyone around the flats knew she was on the game herself. Then Danny's flirty banter would dry up and a cold appraising expression would replace his warm smile. She'd only done it a few times, just enough to scrape the money together to get Michael's warm winter things and pay the electricity bill before they cut her off. It was easier than leaving Michael to go out to some dead-end job, even if she could have got one. If you had a few stiff vodkas before, you could kind of remove yourself from reality. Ginny had actually once seen herself sucking some bloke's knob from above, as if she'd been out of her body.

After the chippie they went next door to the newsagents. Ginny bought a bottle of Coke and a Wall's ice-cream bar. She and Michael were going to have Coke floats after their pie and chips. It was Michael's favourite thing. Mrs Gupta leaned out across the counter and traded a ruffle of Michael's blonde fringe for a Black Jack chew.

'What d'you say, Mikey?' prompted Ginny.

'Thank you,' said Michael busy unwrapping his sweet. This transaction left Ginny with seventeen pence. She made sure she'd got a ten-pence piece, which she figured, with inflation, would meet the tooth-fairy bill.

They headed across the main road. By this time the fog had turned to drizzle. A couple of girls were patrolling the kerb. Ginny knew them both. They lived together in one of the other blocks. Sandra was tall and really beautiful with a Farah Fawcett hair do. Tracy, her mate, had joked about how the three of them should team up as Charlie's Angels on account of Ginny bearing a passing resemblance to Kate Jackson.

Somehow though, Sandra's looks didn't translate into big money. Sandra struggled to get johns in this neighbourhood. Ginny thought she'd have been better off in a posh London hotel. It was Tracy who earned the most and she was dead ordinary looking and never even bothered to dress up. As Ginny and Michael approached, Sandra was busy applying lipstick.

'Hey, Gin. Awright?' said Tracy. Ginny smelled a wave of alcohol on her breath.

Sandra bent down, smothering Michael's face in the newly applied 'Red Hot Red'. It looked like she'd been crying.

'Yeah, good. Just gunna have a quiet night.' She showed them her wrapper of chips.

'Have a good one mate,' said Sandra, straightening as she released Michael from her grip.

'You too. Take care,' Ginny replied as she and Michael headed home.



Two

The same day

Tracy had woken that morning with a terrible sense of doom. She knew that Sandra would be devastated if they didn't get Vincent back. It seemed to her that months and months of being careful and watching every glance had eaten its way into her very soul and undermined her sense of herself, not to mention her relationship with Sandra which she'd worked so hard to keep.

Today they'd know. The custody hearing was at half past two. She switched on the lamp in the darkened room and turned to see the alarm clock. It was a quarter to eleven. Sandra slept peacefully beside her. Tracy didn't want to wake her. She'd been up half the night chain-smoking and pacing the floor. She wanted to let her rest as long as possible. Sitting up, she looked down at her lover beside her, the soft blonde hint of downy hair on Sandra's upper lip, and her smudged mascara, adding pathos to the drama going on behind her closed eyes. Tracy knew that Sandra was dreaming because her eyes darted visibly beneath her lids, and she prayed that she was dreaming something beautiful because so much of her life had been shit.

She carefully pulled back the blankets and crept out of the bedroom. She'd wake Sandra up with a coffee and a kiss. The living room was still strewn with glasses, cans and overflowing ashtrays. Tracy picked up as much as she could carry and took it with her through to the kitchen. A few mates had come back with them to lend moral support to their cause. No one wanted to face the fact that the law wasn't known for its sympathy with prostitutes, let alone one who shared a bed with another woman. Tracy had kept an eye on how much Sandra was drinking. The last thing she needed was to turn up at the hearing stinking of booze. They'd still managed to sink a few though. Clinton alone had brought a bottle of scotch and a dozen cans of Red Stripe, and they'd smoked a fair few fatties on top. It still hadn't been enough to knock Sandra out until it was almost daylight.

Tracy put the kettle on and picked up the papers for the hearing while she waited for it to boil. They set out the unembellished details of Sandra's life. Mrs Sandra Jacques, 27, of 17 Bronte Mansions versus Mr Stephen Jacques, 36, of 42 Milton Street in the case of the custody of their child, Vincent J. Jacques, 8, also of 42 Milton Street. Stephen didn't want the kid; he just wanted to fuck Sandra up. It was all he'd ever wanted to do. He saw something lovely and he had to take it apart and smash up all the pieces. He was with some other poor cow these days and knocking ten bells out of her in months, just like he was with Sandra. Tracy was gripped

by the customary rage she felt whenever his name came up. She knew she could kill the bastard, if she ever thought she had a chance of getting away with it.

She went back through to their bedroom, put the coffee cups down on the bedside table and opened the curtains. A damp grey light seeped into the room, insufficient to warrant turning off the lamp. Sandra stirred and Tracy kneeled down beside her and stroked her hair back from her face.

'Mornin', beautiful.'

Sandra started as Tracy kissed her forehead where the lock of hair had been, and then sat up, pressing her hands to her face. 'Is it time?'

'We've got a couple of hours to get sorted. Don't fret darlin'. What were you dreaming about?'

Tracy placed great store by dreams and had read loads of books on interpreting them. When she didn't smoke too much weed, she had incredibly vivid dreams herself. Often she knew she was dreaming and could even control what happened. It had been happening since she'd been a kid in the Home. It was the one part of her life over which she did have control. She'd long for it to be bedtime so she could escape the constant fear of her waking life.

Tracy had been in care since her mum died from cirrhosis of the liver when she was two. She didn't know who her dad was. No other relatives had come forward with a warm hearth and a cuddly toy to claim the child, and so Tracy had spent fourteen years at the mercy of the care system.

'I can't remember much of it but it was really weird. Really creepy feeling.' Sandra searched for her dream. 'I was down at the bins and there was this big black bird, like a vulture, just sitting there on one of the bin bags. It was hammering at the bag with its beak and making this awful noise, as if the bin bag was full of pebbles crunching. Ugh!' Sandra shuddered. 'It was horrible.'

'Umm.' Tracy pondered. 'Maybe it means we're gunna open up all the rubbish that Steve's bin doin'. An' p'raps the pebbles means we'll be taking Vince to the beach tomorrow.' Tracy strained to find an optimistic reading.

Sandra looked unconvinced. 'Anyhow.' She shook the dream off. 'Run us a bath will ya, babe?'

Tracy went into the bathroom and turned on the hot tap. She held her hand under the running water until it began to get warm. She'd never say so to Sandra but the dream didn't seem to bode well for the day ahead. It had given Tracy an indefinable sense of unease. The water ran suddenly scalding hot, as it generally did.

'Ow! Fuck it.' Tracy withdrew her hand. 'Nothing works proper in these poxy flats.' She left the bath running and went back into the bedroom. Sandra was sitting on the edge of the bed in her knickers and Tracy's old 'Stones' T-shirt lighting a cigarette.

'D'ya think he knows?' asked Sandra.

'What's to know? This is a two-bed place. He don't know I live here. Nobody can prove anything. An' we ain't 'ad no trouble from the filth lately.'

'Oh c'mon. You know what people are like round here. An' he did see us in The Swan that time together.'

'Jesus Christ. You're allowed to have a drink with a mate without bein' a fuckin' lesbian.' Tracy was sick of this conversation. They'd been over it a thousand times. It hurt her so much that the only time she had ever loved someone it had to be a dirty secret.

'Don't use that word. You know I hate it,' Sandra snapped. She loved Tracy, but she wasn't 'one of them'. To her, the word 'lesbian' had a vile ring to it, conjuring images of twisted, fucked-up women in men's clothes.

'Well, that's what it's called when you let another woman fuck you and like it.'

As soon as the words were out Tracy wanted, needed, to bite them back. 'Look, I'm sorry darlin'. Please let's not argue.' She held up both palms. 'Not today. Let's just see how it goes at the court. I honestly don't think he knows anything. If he did he'd already be shouting it all over the friggin' city.'

'I'm just scared. It don't do you any fuckin' good to love someone, 'cause then some bastard's got summat on yer'. Sandra held her head in her hands letting her hair form a curtain to block out the world.

Tracy sat down on the bed and put her arm around Sandra. 'We'll get him back darlin', she whispered. 'C'mon. Go and have yer bath.'

'Do I look like a nice mum?' asked Sandra, after two hours changing and re-changing her outfit. She'd finally decided on a knee-length black crepe skirt and a fitted blue-silk shirt with little puff sleeves and four buttons at the cuff. The bedroom looked as if they'd been burgled.

'You look like a beautiful mum,' Tracy said. She was constantly overwhelmed by Sandra's loveliness. It amazed her that Johns didn't go wild for her. When they worked together it was more often than not she, with her crooked teeth and broken nose, who got the first punter. Cars would slow down, and then, when they saw Sandra, sometimes speed off. It was as though they were intimidated by her. These weak, inadequate men needed a prossie who was rough, somebody they could feel superior to. Sandra's beauty made their dicks limp.

'Come as far as the swimmin' baths with me?' Sandra said.

'Whatever you want.' She'd have gone to Hell and back if Sandra had asked her.

They set out from the flats. For once the lifts were working but they smelled of piss. They tried to hold their breaths for the entire downward journey. Sandra was the first to fail and she dug Tracy in the ribs.

'Ah, you bitch,' Tracy said laughing.

Sandra hugged Tracy tight to her, releasing her grip just as the doors opened on Mrs Higson, the neighbourhood gossip and curmudgeon. Sandra and Tracy stepped out of the lift. Mrs Higson scowled at them both and turned her nose up in an ugly grimace.

'Your ladyship.' Tracy bowed, allowing Mrs Higson's entrance. Sandra laughed, and the moment gave them a tiny reprieve from the dread that they were both feeling.

By the time they reached the swimming baths the drizzle had turned to rain. Tracy was glad because it gave her an excuse to huddle next to Sandra as they shared the umbrella.

'I'll be in the George,' Tracy said, naming a pub where she knew she'd be able to find a bit of privacy in the snug.

'What if it goes against me?' said Sandra with tears welling.

'I don't know darlin'. We'll 'ave to sort somethin' out.' Tracy had no comfort left to give but she took Sandra's hand and squeezed it. 'See you after,' she said. They daren't allow themselves a kiss in public, not even a peck on the cheek. Sandra nodded and walked away. Tracy stood in the rain and watched her go.

When Sandra arrived at the family courts, Stephen was already there with his new partner, Doreen, talking to their solicitor. He saw Sandra and a big, shit-eating grin spread across his face. He was in a tweed jacket and smart trousers, and Doreen looked just about as mumsy as a person could without actually proffering a plate of home-baked biscuits. They looked like a mum and dad off the adverts. It was only Sandra who could discern the thick concealer makeup under Doreen's right eye.

Sandra's legal aid solicitor, Jane, was nice but really young. She came across to Sandra sucking a theatrical breath in through her teeth.

'Think we've got our work cut out,' she said. 'They got married last Saturday.' She nodded her head towards Stephen and Doreen.

'Yeah? Well good luck to her, she's welcome. They're just not gettin' my kid.' Sandra drew on every ounce of bravado she could muster.

'Shall we get a coffee? We've got about fifteen minutes.'

There was a vending machine; they got two cups of brown liquid and took them to a plastic table and chairs just off the foyer, out of sight of Stephen and Doreen.

'He beats her up y'know? Just like he used to beat me. An' he raped me after I split up with him,' Sandra said when they were seated.

'Um. You said before that he was violent. The trouble is, without any charges being brought against him it's only your word against his. And with the soliciting conviction against you in 'seventy-seven it'd be really difficult to make the case.'

'Oh right, so prossies can't get raped or beat up.'

'No. Of course I didn't mean that.' Jane tried to placate her client. 'It's just that judges tend to be men and, well, it's bound to colour their view.'

'I did call the police on him before I left. Isn't there any record of that?' asked Sandra although she already knew the answer. She hadn't pressed charges against him because he'd cried and begged her to forgive him. She'd been an idiot and believed the lying scumbag. More important to her then, she didn't want Vince to see his dad for what he really was.

'There were no records of the events you described to me Sandra. I'm afraid the police don't always record domestic incidents where they're unlikely to get a conviction. It looks bad on their clear-up rates. Also, the alleged rape—'

Before she could finish her sentence Sandra leapt to her feet. 'What the fuck d'you mean alleged? I know when I've been fucking raped.'

'Please, Sandra. Sit down. Of course I didn't mean to imply that you hadn't been raped. It's just legal jargon when there's been no conviction.' Jane looked nervously around the foyer worried Sandra's outburst had attracted unwanted attention.

Sandra sat back down. 'Sorry,' she said, disconsolately picking at the skin around her thumb nail. She didn't want to smoke because it might look bad in front of the court officials, so she bit nervously at the skin she had loosened instead.

A clerk appeared and beckoned the adversaries into the court. The judge slowly explained the purpose of the hearing, as if they'd all just arrived from Mars. Then he asked for information regarding the current arrangements concerning Vincent's care. Stephen's slimy lawyer explained that the boy had lived with his mother until she had been convicted of soliciting two years before. Following this, his 'caring' and 'responsible' father had taken over the custody of the boy and was unwilling to allow access to his former partner who, he felt, was a deleterious influence. The lawyer droned on about the good home that Mr Jacques provided and his recent marriage to a woman of exemplary character.

'A doormat,' Sandra thought as she listened to this rosy depiction of domestic bliss.

Then Jane stood up. She began by countering the soliciting conviction. Her client, she said, had been of good

character since that time. And Mr Jacques had been in full knowledge of the way in which Mrs Jacques earned money prior to her arrest and later conviction. Indeed, he had encouraged his former wife to prostitution and lived off the proceeds of her immoral earnings during their relationship. Furthermore, her client had found two-bedroom accommodation and had furnished and prepared a room in anticipation of her son's return. And, while she still relied on welfare benefits, Jane pointed out; this gave Sandra the opportunity to be a full-time mother to her son. She asked the judge to consider the cruelty of Mr Jacques' actions in denying Vincent access to his mother's care. A mother's love, she concluded, was essential for a contented childhood.

'The girl dun good,' Sandra thought, in spite of her youth and her posh middle-class ways. She could taste victory and her temples throbbed with anxiety. Jane smiled and showed Sandra her crossed fingers as she sat down again next to her.

'There is another matter of which Mr Jacques thinks your honour should be aware.' The lawyer was on his feet again. 'Mrs Jacques has for many months been involved in a lesbian relationship and is currently sharing her home with a woman. Mr Jacques understandably feels that, at this time, it would be wholly inappropriate to expose his young son to such a relationship.'

'You fuckin' bastard,' cried Sandra leaping to her feet. Jane wrestled her back to her chair as Stephen's lips peeled back in a smile.

It took just ten minutes for the judge to return his decision that the boy should stay with his father and step-mother, and that his mother be allowed supervised fortnightly visiting rights.

Stephen and Doreen hugged each other and shook hands with the lawyer. Then that grin spread across Stephen's face and Sandra knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this had nothing to do with Vince's welfare. The sense of powerlessness she felt overwhelmed her in a great unstoppable wave.

'Keep quiet,' Jane ordered as they left the court. 'We'll fight it.' Sandra simply stared ahead biting hard to stop her tears. She could not let that scumbag see her weak. 'I wish you'd told me,' Jane said when they got outside. 'At least we could have been prepared.'

'I'm not one o' them,' Sandra insisted. 'I do live with Tracy but I'm not that thing they said.' She wanted to explain her feelings but words failed her.

'Look, here's a number. They might be able to advise you. They're called the Lesbian Custody Group and they're based in Leeds. It couldn't hurt to give them a ring. In the meantime, I think we have to wait and try again next year.'

Sandra took the piece of paper. 'You did your best,' she said. 'Thanks.' It was still raining and she'd left her umbrella in the courtroom.

As she walked across the city Sandra replayed the events in her mind. The only way to get Vince back was to finish things with Tracy. Yet as soon as she'd made that decision she remembered how Tracy made her feel loved and respected for the first time in her life. She thought of how Tracy made everything funny, and how they'd pissed themselves about the johns they'd done, just like normal people at work, except they laughed at bent knobs and bizarre requests. Like the bloke who'd paid thirty quid to sniff Tracy's arse, and they'd cried with laughter and gone to Blackpool on the proceeds. She couldn't understand why they couldn't just be who they were and have her son living with them. Women had been screwing men for the money to raise their kids forever. Why was it immoral? Her thoughts ran round in circles.

Tracy knew the minute she saw Sandra across the bar in the George that she'd lost the case. Sandra bought a lager and lime and came through to the snug. She relayed the details of what had gone down in the court. Tracy raged and ranted, mostly at feeling impotent to change the situation.

'I think we should pack it in,' Sandra said at last. 'I'm never gonna get him back while we live like we do. I don't wanna be 'one of them''

'You're not one of *them*. We're not what anyone calls us. We're just people trying to live our lives. I love you. Please don't say that.' Tracy felt the terrible fear of loss. 'He'd find something else to get you with even if we weren't together.'

'But we are, and that's what he's using to keep Vince. I just can't carry on.'

'Right,' Tracy said setting her jaw against her lover, against the world, against the fuckin' unfair bastard world. 'I'm getting a drink.' So far she'd been on soda water. Now she went to the bar and ordered a large Scotch on the rocks. She downed it in one and ordered another.

By the time they left the George, Tracy had spent all the money they had. Sandra had fifty pence left in her purse and a cold resolve in her heart not to just obliterate the pain she felt with booze. She needed to know what this pain felt like so she'd be able to root out that vulnerable part of herself and kill it. She'd lost her child and she'd pushed away her lover, her only source of comfort.

It was dark and still raining as they walked towards the flats. A car passed them near the kerb and sent a great wave of dirty water onto the pavement soaking Sandra's legs.

'I'll kill the bastard,' Tracy screamed and chased the car ineffectually as it rolled inexorably on, its driver careless of their torment.

Then Sandra wept until her breath caught in painful sobs and mascara streaked her cheeks.



Three

Later the same day

The lifts were out again when Ginny and Michael got to the flats. They had to climb the four flights to their floor. Michael was tired and Ginny practically had to haul him up the last flight. One strip light blinked intermittently on the landing as Ginny rooted for her key. It was right at the bottom of her shoulder bag amongst the debris of old tissues and Michael's used inhalers. The smell of cold and damp hit Ginny's nostrils as they went in. She put the electric fire on to try and warm things up a bit. The central heating didn't work and the council still hadn't sent anyone out to mend it.

Ginny put the ice cream in the freezer compartment of the otherwise empty fridge, and then put the kettle on for a hot water bottle for Michael's bed. She saw the red impression of Sandra's lips on Michael's cheek and performed a cursory spit-wash with the tissue she had wrapped his tooth in. She laid out the pie and chips in their wrapper on the floor in front of the fire, and then she and Michael sat cross legged and tucked in to their banquet.

Michael kept up a stream-of-consciousness interrogation. He insisted on knowing how pies were made, the location of the tooth fairy's residence, even the size of the moon. Was it very small, or very far away? Ginny did her best to satisfy his enquiries. The pie and chips was heavenly. Ginny hadn't eaten all day and she was ravenous. When they'd finished she cleared away the greasy newspaper and went to the kitchen to fill the hot water bottle. Michael followed her, keeping up his commentary; and now his key concerns were the coloured laces in his new Clarks shoes. He wanted to demonstrate his newly acquired skill in tying them up himself. His Gran had taught him how to do it that very day.

'Go on then, let's see,' Ginny said. As she watched his small hands awkwardly fumbling, she was completely overwhelmed by the strength of her love for him. 'You are so clever,' she said with pride in her son's achievement when the laces were knotted. 'Now let's get you in yer 'jamas, then we'll have our Coke float.' She'd decided that the extra-curricular treat would make a good bargaining tool for bedtime.

They went to Michael's bedroom. Ginny put the hot water bottle in his bed, tucking it down so his feet wouldn't get cold. Michael held up his arms, Ginny pulled off his jumper and t-shirt and replaced them with his pyjama top. Then she sat him on the bed and took off his shoes and trousers. As she knelt before him with his pyjama bottoms at the ready Michael reached out and, stroking her hair, said: 'You're pretty, Mummy. I love you.'

'I love you too,' said Ginny and hugged him so tight she thought she might hurt him.

They went back into the kitchen and made two Coke floats. Ginny even found a straw at the back of the cupboard and put it in Michael's glass. They drank them in the living room while they coloured in a circus scene in one of Michael's books.

Ginny made up a story about a boy who was so good at taming lions and tigers that they let him ride on their backs. She noticed with satisfaction how Michael rarely went over the lines. He took such care with things. By the time they'd finished the colouring and the boy in the story was exhausted from too much lion taming, it was half-past nine, well past Michael's bedtime. He was so tired that he let Ginny carry him to bed.

'Don't forget about my tooth,' Michael said as Ginny laid him down and pulled up the covers.

Ginny reached into her pocket, took out the piece of lipstick-smearred tissue, carefully unwrapped the tooth and put it under Michael's pillow. She smoothed back his fringe and tenderly kissed his forehead. 'Good-night, sleep tight, my darlin',' she said switching off his light and gingerly pulling the door to.

Ginny cleared away the colouring pencils and rinsed their glasses in the kitchen sink. She took a small bottle of vodka from the top of the cupboard, poured a hefty slug into one of the tumblers and filled it up with Coke. She took a deep swig and carried it with her into her bedroom where she sat down on her bed to do her face in the dressing-table mirror. She didn't usually wear much makeup but, on the few nights when she'd been out, she'd slapped it on and found it made her feel like someone else, and that had helped.

Ginny examined herself in the mirror. She liked her eyes. They were dark brown and set wide in her face. She'd always been complimented on them. Her chestnut hair was layered, like Chrissie Hynde's, and it suited the almond shape of her face. Ginny had always attracted attention from men and she knew it would be easy to get a regular boyfriend, even with Michael in tow. She also knew that it wouldn't take long before he was telling her what to do, how to raise her son, and just generally cramping her style. She'd seen enough of her mum's life to know that she wanted more for herself. She applied a dark brown eye-shadow to her lids, and a then a kohl eyeliner to add mystery to her open face. Copious mascara and a reddish-brown lipstick outlined in black completed the desired effect: Joan Jett's evil sister. She changed into tight white jeans and a red satin shirt.

A light knock at the front door drew her into the hall. She could make out the bulky shape of Carolyn through the glass panel. She opened it quietly and hushed Carolyn into the living room. 'He's just gone off, I think,' she said quietly, hoping Carolyn, well known for her foghorn voice, would follow suit.

'Oh okay, good,' Carolyn replied in a comically loud whisper. 'Got any fags?' she added.

'No, sorry,' said Ginny, 'but I'll get you twenty Bensons tomorrow.'

Carolyn was the eighteen-year-old daughter of her neighbour on the landing. She was a big, good-natured girl ready to help anyone out. Her mum had died recently and Carolyn hated being alone in the flat with her dad. She'd confided to Ginny that he'd been trying it on with her since her mum had been ill and she didn't know where to turn. Ginny had listened and told her to go to the police, but she could understand that, vile as her father was, he was all Carolyn had in the world. Ginny wondered if his sexual advances to his own daughter hadn't hastened his wife's demise. Carolyn and Ginny had a kind of unspoken agreement. Ginny kept Carolyn's counsel and Carolyn didn't mention to anyone that Ginny went out at night and didn't come back

until four or five in the morning.

'Want a glass of Coke?' said Ginny. She hadn't much else to offer.

'Yeah, ta.' Carolyn plonked herself heavily into the sagging armchair. The few bits of furniture Ginny owned came from the Methodist church Helping Hand Society, and most of it had seen better days. But beggars can't be choosers and Ginny was grateful for their kindness, though not so grateful that she'd succumbed to the subtle pressure that the Reverend Sweet had put on her to start attending Sunday service. 'The Lord 'elps them that 'elps 'emselves,' her mum always said, and Ginny figured that this nugget of wisdom was probably good advice.

Ginny went to the kitchen, picked up her own glass and poured the rest of the vodka into it. Then she poured a glass of Coke for Carolyn. She didn't have enough vodka to share and she decided her need was greater.

'Guess what? I've got tickets for The Boomtown Rats at the Empire next Sat'd'y,' Carolyn was saying as Ginny came back into the living room. 'D'you wanna go wi' us? It's a true story, y'know. Some girl in America got pissed off 'cause she didn't like Mondays and shot a loada people.'

'Yeah, I know,' said Ginny. 'I'd love to, but it depends if I can get me mum to have Michael. Anyway, dunno if I'll have the money.'

'I got 'em off Jonesy fer havin' his kids last week, so it'll be my treat.' Carolyn looked up to Ginny and took every chance she got to spend extra time with her.

'That's lovely of you, Car. Ta very much. I'll ask me mum about Michael,' said Ginny before slinging back the last of her drink.

'You gunna be alright t'night? It could be a late one again.'

'Yeah, no probs. I'll get me 'ead down here anyway,' Carolyn cheerfully replied.

'You're a godsend,' Ginny said, putting on her bomber jacket and picking up her bag. 'See ya later.' She went into the hall and opened the front door. Then she remembered the tooth. She rummaged through her bag for the ten pence she'd saved and silently opened Michael's bedroom door. Gently and without a sound, she lifted the corner of his pillow and replaced the tooth with the money. He didn't stir. Ginny leaned over and smelled the back of his head, brushing her lips against his hair. Then she closed his door again and went back to her bedroom. On the dressing table was the ring box for the signet ring her mum had given her for her twentieth birthday last May. She put the tooth into the ring box and put the box in her bag.

'See ya later,' Carolyn called as Ginny closed the front door behind her.

There was only one woman out when Ginny arrived at the bit of kerb she'd been using near the old woollens factory. It was still drizzling. Tracy had given her stark warnings about taking someone else's patch and Ginny didn't want to make any enemies. The shops had shut and a single streetlamp cast a damp yellow circle of light, which only seemed to emphasise the darkness. Ginny recognised the woman across the street but didn't know her name. She nodded to her and said: 'Quiet t'night?'

'Too bleedin' cold,' the woman replied. 'I'm givin' it twenty minutes then I'm going up the Caribbean Club.'

'Freezin', ennit,' Ginny agreed.

A car pulled round the corner—a green Morris Minor. 'Thank Christ,' the woman across the street said. 'It's one of me regulars.'

The car stopped and the woman got in. It pulled away leaving Ginny alone on the pavement. The Caribbean Club did sound like a good idea, but Ginny hadn't got the price of her first drink so she stayed put. If she could just get herself one punter, maybe cop ten quid, that would get her through till Giro day on Tuesday.

Ten minutes went by. A few cars had gone past but they were just people on their way somewhere. It was easy to tell a punter, they slowed to eye the merchandise. Sometimes tourists did this too, just for the thrill. That was really annoying.

Ginny felt the November cold seeping into her bones, thought about giving it up and asking her brother Gary for a loan. If she could get him in private his grasping wife needn't know about it, and she'd be able to pay

him back before the miserable cow found out.

Another ten minutes, and then an old Hillman Hunter began to slow as it approached the kerb where Ginny stood. As it got closer she could see that there were four people in the car. That was a bad sign. Gangs of lads didn't usually pick up working girls. A young man on the passenger side wound down the window and shouted, 'How much to suck my dick, you fuckin' slag?' Ginny heard the other passengers whoop with laughter at this dazzling wit and she gave them the finger. Then something hit her shoulder. An opened tomato ketchup portion. It splattered Ginny's jacket and caught in a sticky mass in her hair.

Fuck this, Ginny thought as she snagged the gloop from her hair with her fingers.

She decided to chance the Caribbean Club. There'd be bound to be someone she knew and could borrow the money off for a couple of drinks. She was nowhere near pissed enough for this caper anyway.

Ginny could hear the music well before she got to the club. 'Police and Thieves' came throbbing at her from fifty yards away. It was one of Ginny's favourite tunes and it lifted her spirits. A couple of black guys at the door were passing a spliff between them. They parted to let Ginny through and she caught the pungent odour of the weed. By way of greeting, one of the men said, 'Hey, where you bin hidin', pretty lady?' Ginny smiled but kept on walking.

The main room was packed and thick with smoke as Ginny entered. 'Exodus' was playing now, so loud Ginny could feel her chest vibrating. She spotted Tracy on the dance floor, pushed sideways through the crowd. Tracy looked completely hammered.

'Couldn't lend us a couple of quid till Tuesday, could ya, Trace?' Ginny bellowed. 'I'm absolutely skint.'

'Yeah, no worries,' Tracy slurred lurching in Ginny's direction. Ginny managed to steady her and they made their way to the bar. Sandra was perched on one of the tall bar-stools talking to Clinton, their pimp. Clinton was a flash bastard but he was well-liked by the girls and did actually treat them fairly. To him it was just a business like any other. He looked after the girls, provided good contacts with regular customers and always had a ready supply of weed. Ginny wanted to avoid getting to the point where she needed the services of someone like Clinton, but he'd be the one she'd have gone to if things ever went that far. Most of the pimps, black or white, were violent bastards.

'What'll you have, honey?' Clinton asked Ginny.

'Vodka and Coke please,' she replied, 'but I can't get you one back.'

'You'll find some way to re-pay me, honey,' Clinton said in his thick Jamaican accent.

'Leave her alone,' said Sandra. 'She don't need a bloody pimp. Do ya darlin?'

Clinton chuckled and shouted the order up to the barman.

'Get us one an' all,' said Tracy.

'Haven't you 'ad enough,' Sandra cut in.

'Mind yer own fuckin' business,' Tracy replied.

Ginny hadn't seen Tracy like this before. It was obviously the drink talking, but there was an underlying antagonism between the two girls.

'Don't mind her,' Sandra said to Ginny. 'We've 'ad a bit of bad news t'day. Who's got your Michael anyway?' she added, changing the subject.

'Carolyn along my landing,' Ginny replied. 'She's ever so good an' Mikey loves her.'

Clinton handed Ginny what looked like a large vodka. She downed half of it in one gulp. Then a dub track came on that the DJ played every week and it filled the floor. The little party of four raised their eyebrows at each other in mutual agreement and joined the throng.

'Tell me something good!' Tracy mouthed the words to Sandra as they danced and Ginny felt a little needle of envy that at least they had each other. Clinton, meanwhile, had gone into his Rastaman zone. They danced the next three numbers too, and Ginny had begun to feel the effects of the vodka and the weed that Clinton had been surreptitiously passing her as he danced closer to her. Her head was buzzing nicely and she was loosening up.

'Fuck it all,' she thought. At least she had Michael and a place to live, and some good mates and a lovely mum. As she counted her blessings a commotion broke out at the door. Six burly policemen pushed their way into the club and started herding people to the back of the room. Everyone appeared to know the drill. Joints were mashed out on the floor and some people were already holding up their arms ready to be searched. A couple of guys had been cuffed. Ginny thought they were the cheeky ones she'd encountered at the door. The women were told to go home. Clinton passed Sandra something as she pressed past him on their way out. A young policeman grabbed Ginny's arm as she put her jacket back on in the entrance.

'Nigger-loving cunt,' he spat through gritted teeth.

'Fuck off you racist arsehole,' said Tracy defending her mates.

'Like to spend the night in a cell, slag?' The policeman rounded on Tracy, put his hand in the middle of her chest and pushed her roughly against the wall.

'Sorry officer, she's had a bit too much to drink.' Sandra tried to calm the situation.

'Go on and fuck off the lot of you. Fucking load of filthy whores.' The young man had asserted his power and now he wanted a piece of the action inside the club, where several more black men had been handcuffed.

The three women left the club. The rain that had been on and off all day had finally stopped, but a bitter wind cut into their faces as they walked home towards the flats. Tracy was still swaying a little but the bust and the cold night air had sobered her up no end.

'Those fuckin' wankers,' Tracy said. 'If it's not the Caribbean Club it's The Swan every other bastard week. Haven't they got any fuckin' crimes to solve?'

'Is that the gay bar up Cable Street?' Ginny asked.

'Yeah,' Tracy replied. 'It's a good night up there on Sat'd'ys. They have a drag act on. It was Diana Ross last week.'

'It is funny,' Sandra agreed. 'You'll have to come up there with us sometime.'

'Ta, I will, thanks,' said Ginny, adding, 'Is everything alright? Only I couldn't help notice you looked upset when I seen you earlier.'

'I lost the custody case to get my Vincent back t'day,' Sandra explained with a 'life sucks' expression.

'What a bastard,' Ginny said with real feeling. If anyone ever tried to take Michael off her she'd kill them.

'D'you wanna come up for a smoke?' Sandra asked, tapping the pocket where she'd slipped the little package Clinton had passed to her in the club. They'd reached the flats and the three towering monstrosities loomed above them. It was half-past one and the lights that were still on made a patchwork reaching up into the night sky.

'Thanks, but I need to get some money,' Ginny said. There were still plenty of cars about and a couple of women in sight, working a patch a bit further down the road.

'We're gunna call it a night,' Tracy said. 'But watch yerself. Poor old Maisie got fuckin' near strangled by some bastard just last week. She's still not well an' the filth ain't bin anywhere near.' The recollection revived her disgruntlement with the police.

'I will,' Ginny said as they went their separate ways.

Ginny dug her hands deep into her pocket and kept her head down as she walked towards the old woollens factory. The two women she'd seen from up at the flats had disappeared by the time she got there. She wished she'd asked Tracy for a fag before they'd parted. The factory behind her had stood empty since she was a kid. Its blackened walls were interrupted only by a row of long narrow windows toothed with jagged shards of glass. Ginny thought they probably made them like that so they let in enough light to work, but nobody could see out. She imagined what life would have been like for the people who worked there all that time ago. Not much different to now, she decided. Though Ginny didn't know it, women had been selling themselves from the very spot where she now stood since before the factory was built. The damp and cold cut through her as she tried to fasten the broken zip of her bomber jacket. She was just about to give it up and ask her brother for the loan when a car came round the corner and slowed at the kerb where she stood.

It was a Ford Capri. The driver wound down the window and Ginny leaned in.

'Get in then,' the man said. He looked in his thirties and wore blue workmen's overalls. It gave him a kind of homely air.

'Don't you want to know how much?' asked Ginny.

'I'll gi' you what you ask for,' the man replied in a hoarse local accent. Ginny thought he seemed nervous. She hesitated. The car smelled of sweat and something else that Ginny couldn't place, a sickly cloying smell. 'Ten for a blow-job, fifteen for sex with a rubber.' Ginny added a fiver to the going rate half-hoping he'd turn her down.

He reached into the breast pocket of his overalls and took out two ten pound notes.

'We'll get change from the garage,' he said.

Ginny thought she'd get the fags for Carolyn while they were in there. 'Okay,' she said and got into the car. She'd probably be able to get a few bits in for Christmas as well, now.



Four

The same day

Irina adjusted Graham's tie. His Adam's apple bobbed just above the perfect knot as he swallowed back emotion. He brushed a few flecks of dandruff from the shoulders of his black funeral suit and turned to stare at himself in the hall mirror. He touched the bruise on his cheek, still tender from the week before. His brother had punched him on the day their mother, Catherine, had died.

The deathbed scene at the hospital was surreal. His father, Jack, had been casually reading 'The Sun' while his brothers were discussing Leeds United's performance against Coventry the previous week. Graham had no interest in football. He had sat silent by Catherine's bed as her breathing faltered and long, aching moments passed between each respiration. When at last there were no more, Graham stood and closed his eyes tight. His brothers, unaware of Catherine's demise, had been invited by Jack to look at the page three girl, and Billy was at that moment saying: 'Look at the tits on that.' Graham began to bang his head against the wall. The congregation of male relatives looked up at him from the paper.

'Ah well. She's gone,' said Jack, adding, 'The King David, or the Saracen's?'

His brother, Dave, took hold of Graham's shoulders. Graham looked at him uncomprehending. 'Get a fuckin' grip, mate,' Dave said and led him away.

A young nurse came in and closed the dead woman's eyes. 'There's nothing to be done now,' she said kindly. And then, turning to Jack: 'Are you the lady's husband? Perhaps you could sign the necessary papers tomorrow?'

'Will you be here to help me?' the bereaved man replied, winking at his eldest son, Billy.

The four men left the hospital and made their way to the Saracen's Head. Graham had recovered his composure and walked steadily in front of the rest, although not so far that he couldn't hear their banter. They'd fallen back to their analysis of Leeds United's chances this season.

They'd started drinking whisky at three in the afternoon. Graham rarely touched the stuff, so he'd said more than he'd meant to. He'd gone on about how much he'd loved his mother, and how she'd loved him much more than her other sons. Jack Hindle had menace in his eyes as he warned him to 'Shut it!' but Graham had kept on.

'She was a slag,' Jack said at last. 'Now just shut the fuck up.' It was as if he needed to keep his hatred alive, because it relieved him of any sense of guilt or responsibility for his own philandering, which had been continuous throughout their thirty-six-year marriage.

Graham felt tears hot on his face and the scarlet blouse incident played itself out in his alcohol muddled brain. He remembered how, when he was eighteen, Catherine had bought a new blouse. She'd rarely spent money on herself so the scarlet blouse with a big ruff-collar had impressed itself on his memory. Wearing it, she looked different, her usual clothes drab by comparison. Jack had come in as he lay on the floor with his chin resting in his hands watching Top of the Pops. Billy and Dave, being older than Graham, had the sofa, and no one was allowed in their father's chair. Jimmy Savile was introducing that week's number one, The Rolling Stones' 'Satisfaction'. Mick Jagger strutted and pouted his discontent as the scene played out in their living room.

'Is that for yer fancy man, you fuckin' old whore?' Jack had raged, and then grabbed Catherine by the ruff on the front of the blouse. He ripped it from her and left her standing in her bra as her three sons looked on. Someone Jack worked with had told him they'd seen her with a man in a pub in Elland. Jack didn't need to ask questions. The blouse was evidence enough. 'Look at the piece of shit, boys,' he invited, as his wife tried in vain to gather the shredded material across her breasts. 'Never trust a woman. They're all lying fuckin' tarts.'

After that, Jack had replaced the contempt with which he'd habitually treated Catherine with something akin to revulsion. She'd become no more to him than a menial employed to keep house and provide sex on demand. Graham had often heard her screams when Jack came home drunk from the pub on Saturday nights. He'd been paralysed with fear, as if he'd been the one getting the beating, or worse. His brothers had soon benefitted from this new, utterly subservient role that his mother now played in their lives. They enjoyed complete freedom from washing, or even picking up, their clothes; from ever having to explain when they'd be in or where they were going; from asking before they finished the last of the biscuits. Only Graham still treated his mother with any respect at all, and then only when his father and brothers were out.

As he recalled the scene, Graham felt his head swimming with a mixture of drunkenness, grief and an anger that seemed to reach into his soul. He swayed slightly on his feet.

'Look at the fuckin' state of him, will ya?' Jack sneered, and then continued his withering assault with: 'Great big useless pansy.' Graham leapt forward swinging his clenched fist at his father. His brother Dave intervened and, with one hard punch, knocked Graham sideways. He crashed into a table full of drinks and onto the floor in a heap, where he lay sobbing among the spilt ale and broken glass. Billy and Dave picked him up, ashamed of their fraternal connection to a man who'd behave in such a way.

The landlord had thrown them all out after that. When he hit the fresh air, Graham threw up. The acrid taste of vomit burned his throat. When he looked up, his father and brothers were walking away. Graham gathered his jumbled thoughts and followed, like a wounded dog. He wanted so much to be part of their brotherhood but something stood in his way, something vile that he felt a need to eviscerate. Thoughts crowded his brain in random snatches as he walked.

Graham was always the brunt of their jokes, always the 'mummy's boy'. They despised him for it. Just as they despised Irina, his wife, and the way he allowed her to dictate his life. They'd nearly made him lose her once. Billy had pinched her bum, and she'd turned and slapped his face. Billy responded in kind, but twice as hard. Graham had managed to smooth things over with Irina but she never visited his parents' house again. She'd always looked down on them anyway and this gave her the excuse she'd needed to sever the connection. In some ways, he knew, she looked down on him too.

Irina was from better stock. Her Polish parents had been professional people in Krakow. They had fled the

country in the early fifties, fearing Stalin's persecution of 'subversive elements', seeking a standard of living Irina's father had thought commensurate with his standing as a doctor. He railed against 'socialism' and tried to instil in his two girls a belief in their 'superior social status'. In Irina's case it had worked, and she prided herself on her family's erstwhile grandness.

Her father never recovered from the shock of the treatment he'd received in Britain or his failure to find employment in his specialist field of orthopaedics. He'd spent more than twenty-five years as a ward orderly at the city infirmary. He opposed Irina's marriage to a mere warehouseman but he'd been impressed by Graham's loyalty to his daughter when she'd had her 'illness'. He had finally relented and agreed to their union when Graham paid the deposit on the semi-detached house.

Irina, with her refined ways and her fragility, made Graham feel strong. Women like that needed protection and he'd been there to provide it. He would always protect her from the shame of being a woman. She was more than that to him. Irina was his shadow, just as his mother had been when he was young.

Now, passing beneath a streetlamp, Graham watched as his own shadow foreshortened and disappeared. Now, he would find the strength to be a man.

Alone in his thoughts, Graham had lost sight of his family. And he'd sobered up enough to know he didn't want any more to drink. He walked back to the hospital car-park filled with disgust as he relived his humiliation in the pub. His trousers were still damp with beer and his face throbbed. When he got back to his car he decided to drive around for a while to clear his head. He found a cassette in the glove-box and put it into the player. It was his mother's favourite song: 'Bridge Over Troubled Water'. Graham turned up the volume and drove. Tears streamed down his face and Art Garfunkel's high, feminine voice made his skin tingle. He clenched the steering wheel as his grief gave way to anger and self-pity. He drove to the old industrial centre of the town, to the red-light district. Graham had driven there often before with his friend Derek. They'd had a right laugh talking about the slags parading up and down. Derek had confided in him how he'd roughed one up once just for the crack. Graham felt himself getting an erection now at the memory.

The woman was walking slowly, her miniskirt stretched skin-tight across her buttocks. Graham passed her. There was no one else around. He pulled off the road onto the derelict ground behind one of the old factories. The woman reached his car. His heart was banging in his chest. When she got into the passenger seat he saw she was plastered in crude makeup and much older than she'd looked on the street; probably not yet forty, but wearing the script of her life on her face.

'Fiver for a blow job. Ten for sex with a rubber, fifteen without,' she said matter-of-fact.

Graham made as if to look for his wallet in the glove compartment. Then he turned and punched the woman hard, right between the eyes. She retaliated, catching him a painful blow to his already injured cheek. He grabbed her by the throat and squeezed as she struggled and lashed out beneath him. He was much too strong for her and, as he pressed harder against her throat, he felt the woman go limp. Then Graham was kneeling above her. He was the one who'd decide how much and for what. He let go of her neck, snatched up her handbag from the seat beside her and rifled through its contents. Her social security payment card gave him her name, Maisie Nicholls, and her purse held ninety-two pence. He emptied the money into his hand and put it in his pocket. Then he opened his car door and pushed the woman out onto the waste ground. She rolled away onto her side and Graham threw the handbag and its contents after her.

That had been a week ago. He'd looked in the paper but he hadn't seen anything about the attack. Prostitutes were always getting beaten up; why waste column inches that could be more lucratively filled with adverts?

Graham had not seen his family since then. He and Irina had done most of the funeral arrangements. Catherine had been a Catholic and a service was to be held at the cathedral before they went on to the crematorium. First, they were to meet the funeral directors at the family home. When they arrived at the

house, Jack and Graham's brothers and their wives were already there. Dave held out his hand and said: 'No hard feelings mate.' Graham shook the hand, grateful, and flushed, knowing that the wound on his face was a reminder of his thrashing the previous week.

The hearse pulled up outside. Catherine's coffin was decked in a wreath of white and pink carnations spelling MUM. They'd all chipped in for it. Irina thought it horribly undignified and working class. She thanked God that they were all travelling in their own vehicles. That way, she reassured herself, people might easily imagine it possible that the car she was riding in was just caught up behind a random funeral procession.

'Take something of your mother's. Would Irina like a piece of jewellery?' Jack spoke as if Irina wasn't there. It was as if he couldn't bring himself to address her directly.

As the rest of the mourners filed out and got into their cars, Graham went upstairs to Catherine's bedroom. Irina tugged at Graham's sleeve, indicated with a shake of her head that she didn't want his mother's old tat, and had gone to wait in the car. He knew what he wanted: the black woollen handbag with the gold clasp. He found it at once at the bottom of the dresser drawer. Graham remembered the bag from his earliest childhood. It contained everything his mother seemed to need in life, yet was forbidden to him. He had longed to know what was inside but it was always out of reach. It was her special place containing all her mystery. Now he opened the clasp. It was empty, unused for years. He slid the bag into the back of his trousers and covered it with his jacket. Then he took his mother's blood-donors badge - she'd given twenty-five pints - hurried down to the car and, pretending he needed a rag, slipped the bag under the boot-rug. Then he got into the driver's seat and set off.

'Mum's blood-donor's badge.' Graham handed the little silver heart-shaped trinket to Irina. They caught up with the funeral cars before the end of the street. The procession crawled slowly through the town towards the cathedral.

'I didn't know your mother gave blood,' said Irina, dabbing at a tiny spot of dirt on the car-seat.

The service at the cathedral was a miserable affair and very poorly attended. Catherine had a few acquaintances but no real friends. After the scarlet blouse incident, she'd only gone out to shop for food, and occasionally to mass. It seemed the priest didn't actually know his mother well, though, and appeared to have her mixed up with a woman from the choir, since he waxed lyrical on the beauty of Catherine's singing voice. No one in the family had ever heard her sing. The uncomfortable sacrament went on for over an hour. Graham thought he would faint but managed to hold himself together for long enough to escape into the cold damp day. After this they moved on in solemn convoy to the crematorium.

Graham had chosen 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' as the funeral music. He'd given his own tape to the funeral directors as they filed into the chapel. A mercifully brief rite was followed by the curtains closing slowly and inexorably around the coffin. A clunk could be heard as the tape was switched on and the song began. But it wasn't the one he had chosen. He'd forgotten to rewind the tape and the next track came on instead. The impossibly taut strings at the start of 'El Condor Pasa' filled the little chapel and Graham felt his brain tighten in response. He closed his eyes, almost losing consciousness. No one else even noticed. No other member of her family would know Catherine's favourite song from a hole in the ground.

Graham could not remember, when he thought of it afterwards, if he had actually been conscious. He fell into a trance-like state. Those looking at him would have seen a man, eyes wide open, staring at the ground. He saw a bird pecking at the shell on a snail's back in vicious blows. Then a hammer smashing into that shell, obliterating it. The great forest would overwhelm the street. A boundless force of nature. Destructive and cleansing, he would glide like the swan—here, and gone.

After the funeral Graham felt a kind of weightlessness. He needed to be away and alone. He and Irina said their goodbyes and left.

'Drop me in the centre,' Irina said in her usual, slightly irritated tone.

Graham was glad. He needed time to think. They drove in silence to the city centre. He pulled up outside Richard Shops and leaned over to give his wife a kiss. She turned and offered him her cheek.

'I'll make my own way home,' she said.

As had been his habit since boyhood, Graham headed onto the moors. He used to bike it. He could still remember the near-sick exhaustion he felt as he reached the highest point. Now he was comfortably behind the wheel of his car and, as he gained altitude, the fog closed around him like a curtain. His headlights lit only the mist in front of him. He pulled over to the side of the road and switched off his engine. Silence. He watched as headlights appeared dimly through the shroud of mist and moved slowly towards him. The car passed him and disappeared. The longer he sat the clearer his mind became. The confusions he'd felt seemed to evaporate into the haze and a wonderful sense of clarity wiped out his fears. He knew what he had to do; the message had been crystal clear. He had a purpose, a way to make a contribution to the world. He would be that force of nature, the street cleaner of his vision.

When Graham started his engine again it was nearly eight o'clock. He'd been sitting for two hours. He drove back towards the city, and as he descended the fog cleared slightly and the moors gave way to streetlights and clusters of houses. He decided to call for Derek and take him up on his offer made yesterday as they left the yard. 'If you fancy a bevy or two after the funeral, gi' us a knock,' Derek had called after him as they'd gone their separate ways.

Derek's mum answered the door when Graham arrived, and ushered him into the parlour muttering her condolences as they went.

'How did it go, mate?' asked Derek.

'Yeah. All went off alright. Just thought I could do with that pint.'

'I'll get me coat.' Derek returned his copy of Front Page Detective to the magazine rack. 'Equal Rights Got Cath Killed!' read the lurid headline above a picture of a woman screaming in a dark, male shadow.

'Don't wait up, Ma,' Derek called as they left.

They went to Derek's local and sank half a dozen pints of IPA. Graham told Derek about the funeral, and they talked about work and cars, and Derek's true-crime magazine stories.

'Remember that slag you roughed up?' said Graham, prompting Derek to relate the story.

'Oh that old bag. She kept tryin' to get me t'go wi' her, so I give her a fuckin' good slap. Horrible diseased old bitch, it was.'

Both men had laughed then. 'Fuckin' whores,' Graham said. 'Don't hardly deserve to live.' They'd finished their pints, and it was long after closing time now.

When they got back to the car, Derek fished a packet of Juicy Fruit chewing gum from his pocket and offered a stick to Graham. 'Cover up the smell of the ale a bit,' he said.

It was close to one o'clock when Graham dropped Derek back home and headed into the city. He knew where he was going. He stopped at a bus stop pull-in and got out, loosening his tie as he walked round to the boot of his car. He took off his suit jacket, folded it neatly and placed it with his tie in the boot. Then he took out his blue work overalls and slipped them on over his trousers and shirt. He rummaged in his tool box and found his claw hammer and a large screwdriver. He put these in the right leg-pocket of his overalls. Then he drove directly to the red light district. As he passed the new flats he saw two women standing close together. He circled the block. He was looking for a woman alone. She was there on his next circuit. And, as if God himself ordained it, she was wearing the scarlet blouse. He could see it beneath her jacket.

Graham wound down the window as he pulled over to the kerb. 'Get in, then,' he said.



Five

The same day

Selene left the Leeds University campus in the certain knowledge that she had failed to land the part-time fellowship she'd applied for. It had always been a long shot. Now she was back in her hometown she was struggling to find a space where she belonged, either economically or emotionally.

She had finished her degree in History at The London School of Economics three years before and, with no clear idea of what to do next, drifted into an MA course and a squat with her boyfriend of the time. She'd written a thesis on Victorian Prostitution for her masters' degree, and had spent two years steeped in the lives of the denizens of Whitechapel. On the day she'd been awarded the second degree she'd gone home to find her boyfriend in bed with one of the other women at the house. He'd behaved as if she was a reactionary threat to the revolution as she packed her things and told him he was a cheating fuckwit.

After that she had little choice but to go back to her parent's house up north. They'd been overjoyed at first to have their baby back with them, but their pleasure in Selene's return was soon replaced with disapproval and nagging. She'd chosen to study in London to get away from them in the first place. They harped on constantly about getting married, getting a job, getting on in life. They compared her unfavourably with her sister, Irina, who had been educated too but had made the sensible decision to marry and settle down nearby.

'Yes, but look at what she married,' Selene had countered, knowing her father's barely concealed dislike for Graham.

'Well she's got a lovely home,' Selene's mum, Beata, said in a tone that was final and conclusive.

But Selene couldn't let that one lie. 'She's got a severe obsessive compulsive disorder, actually.'

'Some people care about having a clean home.'

'It's not about having a clean home, Mum. Irina's terrified of something. She's not well.'

Discussions like this invariably ended in a bitter screaming match. Selene suspected they were fuelled by guilt, on the part of her parents, that they were somehow responsible for Irina's illness. Irina had suffered from mental health problems since she'd been a teenager but her father had been unable to countenance the idea that any child of his should be so afflicted. She'd fallen in love with a boy at university called Simon, and when he'd dumped her it had triggered a breakdown. Irina had been hospitalised, and it was during this time that Graham had insinuated himself into Irina's life. He'd been hanging around Irina for a while and her illness had given him the chance to be the knight in shining armour. After that he'd just behaved as if their engagement and marriage was a *fait accompli*, and Irina was too delicate to resist him. She'd just gone along with it. Her lack of ability to stop it seemed to characterise their union. Selene loathed Graham. She'd hated him on sight and nothing he'd said or done in the intervening years had altered her opinion. He gave her the creeps. It was one of the few things on which she and her father were of one mind, though they seldom ever openly shared their views.

After three months at her parents' home, Selene could stand no more and moved out. She'd started going to a feminist consciousness raising group in Leeds and had met a new friend, an artist called Izzy. It was through

her that she'd been invited to take up a spare room in a recently acquired squat. It was separatist, and men were not allowed across the threshold, but she wasn't that bothered about another relationship in the near future so she'd jumped at the chance. Anyway, if she did meet a bloke she fancied they could go to his place. At least it was cheap and she'd be away from her parents.

When she first got back up north Selene did some temping in random offices. Her mother, Beata, was furious at the waste of her five years in higher education. The agency found her a short stint at the dole office, but that had ended after a couple of months when she'd called her manager a sexist. He routinely expressed the view that married women should leave their jobs and become full-time housewives. The argument they'd had was fierce, and after it the whole office seemed to turn against her, even the women she'd thought she was defending. Her qualifications seemed more of a hindrance than an aid to finding work, so eventually she'd decided to try to return to academic life.

The fellowship Selene had applied for had been in the History faculty but they'd seemed disinterested in her ideas on the history of sex work in the Leeds/Bradford area. She'd banged on for ages about her work on prostitution in Victorian London and the need to also reveal the neglected lives of women outside the capital. One of the men on the interview panel had yawned visibly, and another wondered if something on the impact of the 1842 Mines Act on the lives of women might not be more pertinent. Anyway, she'd left knowing that the bespectacled young man with his thesis on Lenin tucked under his arm would get the post.

Now, as she walked away, Selene felt relief that she wouldn't actually have to do something she wasn't all that keen on anyway. She was sick of study; it had begun to feel as though she was living her life vicariously through her books and articles and interminable analyses. She wanted to experience life at first hand. Academia kept her at a distance from everything real.

Selene walked towards the city centre wondering what to do next. She didn't want to go back to the unheated squat and the chance of running into Jenny. Jenny was the founder of the Lesbian Separatist Movement in Leeds and she brooked no arguments about men or heterosexuality. Sleeping with men was sleeping with the enemy and all men were rapists. Jenny was one of five other women who lived in the squat and, when Selene had been put forward by Izzy as a possible candidate for the spare room, Jenny and her partner Nicola had voted against it, on the grounds that Selene was heterosexual. The vote had gone three to two in Selene's favour and she'd been invited to move in, but she always afterwards tried to give Jenny a wide berth.

It was just before four o'clock now, the end of the day, too late to do any daytime activity but not yet evening. A dead time. She drifted into a Wimpy Bar and ordered a coffee. It was wet, warm and frothy, but there any resemblance to coffee ended. She cupped her hands around the mug and stared out onto the damp city street. The waitresses were starting to wipe down tables and straighten salt and pepper pots as they talked about their Friday evening plans. Selene felt her own emptiness sharpen. She had no plans for the evening, or for the weekend that would follow. She was enjoying her novel, although it was deeply depressing, and she thought she would finish that.

Selene was reading F. Tennyson Jesse's 'A Pin to see the Peepshow'. It was a novelisation of the Edith Thompson case, a cruel miscarriage of justice in which a young woman was hanged for adultery. The final chapters, describing Thompson drugged and terrified in her prison cell awaiting her fate, were a gruelling read; a kind of semi-conscious haze in the approach of death. The plight of Edith Thompson seemed to resonate with the timbre of Selene's life as she saw it at that moment.

The streetlights were starting to come on and the pavements glistened with rain. As she sat contemplating her life, Selene saw Irina approaching hunched beneath her umbrella. Irina looked so much older that at first Selene had not been sure it was her sister. She knocked on the window and Irina looked up startled. She had always been troubled by unexpected events. Selene beckoned her into the café. It had been over a month since they had seen each other, though they had spoken on the phone, and Selene knew that Graham's mum

had died. Irina carefully arranged her three bags of shopping on the seat beside her before ordering a strawberry milkshake.

'Ugh.' Selene pulled a disgusted face at the thought of the gloopy sweet drink.

'I'm trying not to drink too much coffee. I think it might be causing my heart flutters,' Irina explained, engrossed in aligning her bags.

'How's Graham taken his mum dying?' Selene was solicitous more on her sister's behalf than any feeling of concern for Graham.

'Oh, he doesn't say much but I think he's been quite cut up about it really. He thought a lot of her. I've just come from the funeral, actually.'

'Did it go okay?'

'There was only the immediate family there, poor woman didn't seem to have any friends, and the way they treated her was horrible. You should have seen the wreath. It was pink carnations spelling MUM.' Irina rolled her eyes scornfully.

'Oh don't be such a snob. It sounds fine to me,' Selene snapped. When Irina was like this she seemed to embody everything that Selene hated about their parents. Since she had been married to Graham this part of Irina's personality had appeared to intensify. She never asked Selene anything about her life and she, in turn, tended not to volunteer information. Her sister would only look vaguely disappointed and uncomprehending. They talked instead about the clothes that Irina had bought, though she would in all likelihood never wear them. Irina had a wardrobe full of brand new clothes that once worn, she felt, would be forever sullied. This was another of Irina's strange obsessions.

When the milkshake arrived, pale pink in a tall sundae-glass, Irina pushed it away in distaste.

'Didn't fancy it after all?' enquired Selene.

'There's a chip,' Irina replied indicating a tiny imperfection in the pedestal of the glass. Selene knew better than to argue or try to persuade. Her sister's eccentricities had started to emerge after her breakdown and had gotten progressively worse since.

They left the Wimpy and walked together to the bus station.

'I like your new haircut, by the way,' Irina said.

Selene touched the nape of her neck. She'd had her long, straight brown hair cut and feathered at the back, and a fringe instead of a centre parting. 'Do you? I can't make my mind up,' she said grateful of the compliment.

'Yes, it really suits your face.'

Irina's bus came first. As it pulled away, she gave a little wave at Selene waiting behind the barrier. This gesture sent a swell of sadness through Selene. She recalled their childhood, and how patient her sister had once been.

Irina was four years older than Selene but she never once pulled rank or refused to play with her baby sister. For a few years they'd been close, but as they grew they drifted apart. Selene had become the prodigal daughter. While Irina had been shaped by her father's bitterness and her mother's fear and distrust, Selene had escaped. She'd found a way to be her own person and, at least in part, that was because Irina bore the brunt of their anxieties. Now Irina was stuck with a man who, in some way that Selene couldn't name, was dismantling her. As she thought of the word 'dismantling' it seemed exactly right. It was as though Graham had taken out all the screws that held Irina together and looked on, satisfied as she fell apart. Whenever

Selene had any dealings with him she'd got the sense that he enjoyed his wife's troubles because it made him feel more powerful.

Selene arrived back at the squat at a quarter to six. She saw, as she approached, that the windows were lit. That meant some of the women were already there. She was glad at the thought of companionship. The house stood in a row of fine old Victorian mock-villas. They'd been built at the height of the city's industrial prosperity and, more than a century later, had fallen into disrepair. This area of town had ceased to attract the wealthy middle classes even before the nineteenth century was out. Successive influxes of immigrant communities during the twentieth century had been housed here as unscrupulous landlords turned these old family homes into warrens of shabbily converted flats. The district had become synonymous with deprivation, though it still bore the remnants of a more illustrious past, fine architecture and open parkland. Their house had once been a rich man's home with servant's quarters. The old bell-system was still on the wall in the kitchen. By the early seventies the windows and doors were boarded up. There was a hole in the roof and the staircase had completely decayed. The women squatters themselves had made the place habitable. Though it was cold in winter, the big, communal living room was cosy, with an open fire and walls hung with tapestries and art, a lot of it made by Izzy.

Selene let herself in the front door. A waft of cooking smells led her into the kitchen. There she found Izzy with Rachel and Jo, the other lesbian couple who lived in the house. Rachel was a lawyer and Jo a social worker, and between them they ran about a dozen different committees and groups. They were like two perfectly fitting halves that formed a seamless whole, both chubby and full of kindness for the world. Rachel was dark haired and Jo was blonde, like positive and negative ions. They epitomised the old joke: What do lesbians take with them on the second date? The furniture.

Selene was glad to see that Jenny and Nicola hadn't come home yet. She still felt awkward around them, knowing their opposition to her living there. There was another guest at the table who she didn't recognise.

'Hi,' Selene said. 'Smells lovely.'

'Howdy,' Izzy said. 'I'm just knocking up a frittata out of some leftovers. How'd the interview go?'

'Um. Not so good, I think. They didn't seem to go a bundle on sex workers. I'm not that fussed to be honest.'

'Oh well, their loss. I don't think you've met Kim.' Rachel indicated their guest.

Selene held out her hand. Kim stood to her full six-foot-two and took Selene's hand in hers. Selene stared down at the huge hand that held hers and then back to the face, a warm round face with deep brown eyes and wide sensual lips. 'She's our donor,' Rachel explained.

'Oh. I see. Well congratulations,' Selene stumbled on as her brain clunked into gear and she processed the information. Izzy wore a smile as broad as any Cheshire cat's.

'Hello. Lovely to meet you,' Kim said still holding Selene's hand. 'I'm saving up for a trip to Denmark but Jo and Rae persuaded me to make use of the old equipment before it finally goes.'

'She's always wanted to be a mum, haven't you?' said Jo indulgent.

'It's true,' Kim smiled and finally let go of Selene's hand.

'Well, three mums. Imagine that.' Selene sat down.

'Jesus. Sounds like a nightmare. One's bad enough,' said Izzy, and Rachel responded with a good-natured cuff around the ear.

'Actually, it's not congratulations just yet. We've been trying for ages to get pregnant and it doesn't seem to be

working. I think it might be because I've been too tense at Kim's place, so we're giving it a go in our own bed,' Jo said. Selene's mind boggled slightly. She was grateful that she'd recently borrowed 'Tales of the City' from Izzy. A fictional experience of trans-sexuality was better than none at all, especially now that she was sitting opposite a trans person.

'They're not actually shagging,' Izzy helpfully explained. 'Kim's gonna do the deed with a magazine in the vestibule, then Rachel's gonna dash upstairs with the turkey baster.'

'Good plan.' Selene nodded, making a mental note never to use the turkey baster again. 'Well, I'll leave you to it then. I've got to sort my room out. It's a midden.'

'I'll come with you,' Izzy said turning off the veg she'd been frying. 'Dinner about seven, seven thirty?'

'Excellent. Wish us luck,' said Rachel.

Selene and Izzy went up to Selene's room, closed the door and then both heaved with silent laughter, holding each other until tears ran down their faces.

'It's lovely for them,' Selene said. 'It's just—'

'Fuckin' hilarious.' Izzy finished Selene's sentence. 'Also, Jenny is gonna go mental if she finds out a transsexual's been in the house.'

'Well I'm not about to tell her,' Selene said. 'Anyway, Kim's a woman all bar the shouting. Everything about her seems female except the physical stuff.'

'No. I know. I agree. But Jenny reckons you've got to be born a woman to really understand sexist oppression. Anyhow, her and Nicola are picking up a polisher for the living room floor over in Hebden Bridge, so what the eye doesn't see and all that.'

'I'll bet Kim's been through some pretty oppressive shit,' Selene said.

They heard Rachel and Jo coming upstairs and going into their room. And then Joan Armatrading on the stereo. This precipitated another bout of the giggles.

'Rae's trying to get her in the mood,' Izzy said, stifling her laughter with a fist.

The vestibule was a small room off the hall where the coats were kept and a few bits of furniture stored. They heard Kim close the door.

'At least it's nice and warm in there,' said Selene, wondering what kind of magazine did it for Kim. She thought she'd better change the subject. 'By the way, d'you think that poster's too gruesome for a bedroom wall.' She indicated her print of Beardsley's 'Salome' on the wall opposite her bed.

'Not at all,' Izzy replied. 'I love Beardsley. A good old beheading never hurt anyone.' She slumped down on Selene's bed with her head propped on one hand.

'Umm. I love it too but it's kind of sombre.' Selene was still uncertain. She too sat on the bed with her back against the headboard, staring at the image, and saying: 'I bumped into my sister Irina today in town. You know she gives me a feeling of such sadness. I can't quite put my finger on it.'

'Is she the one that's married to that bloke you don't like?'

'She's the only one, and yeah she's married to him. It's the way he looks at you that gets me.' Selene shuddered. 'He's got these horrible little beady eyes, and this way of just staring.'

'Like he's mentally undressing you?' Izzy offered.

'No. Not really. In a way, I wish it was that.' Selene shook her head. 'Anyway, it's her life, I suppose?'

They heard the front door open and Jenny's voice shouting: 'Nicola, hold your end up.'

Selene and Izzy sat up rigid.

'Oh, fuck me, it's Jenny,' Izzy said, her eyes widening in panic. Selene's mouth opened into a perfect 'O'.

Downstairs, Jenny called out again. 'It's only us. Got the polisher.' Then she opened the door to the vestibule and found herself staring confused at the back of a long, crocheted cardigan. 'Sorry, I didn't—' she started to say and broke off strangled.

Kim turned, her erect penis bobbing vibrant in her hand, a look of shock on her face. Jenny screamed and rushed at this monster using the polisher as a battering ram. It banged painfully into Kim's shins and she shrieked as she pushed the rapidly deflating object of offence back into her knickers. Jenny flung herself back against the wall. Her hand flew to her throat and a grimace of murderous horror locked her jaw.

Selene and Izzy dashed downstairs, arriving to find Kim, stricken with embarrassment, smoothing down her dress and saying, 'I'm so sorry. But there wasn't a lock on the door.'

Rachel and Jo arrived moments later looking flushed. 'Oh uh--hi Jenny,' Jo said in a strangled voice. 'This is our friend, Kim. She's kindly agreed to be our donor.'

'She,' Jenny practically howled. Her horror had evolved into furious rage. 'That's not a she.'

'I'm leaving now,' Kim said. Her face was a practised impassive mask and Selene realised how right she'd been about the abuse Kim must have suffered.

'How could you bring a man into this house?' Jenny turned her wrath on Rachel and Jo.

'Kim is a pre-op transsexual for your information, and she identifies as a woman,' Rachel defended.

'I don't care how *she* identifies. That's a man, with all the benefits and privileges of that status. He can't just decide to *identify* as a woman. He's not one and he never will be.' Jenny added an ugly emphasis to her words that made Selene fill up with repugnance for her.

Kim had gone to get her handbag and coat but she'd heard the entire exchange. 'We'll talk later,' she said to Rachel and Jo; and then, turning to Selene and Izzy, 'Nice to meet you.' Then she put her head in the air and left, sailing down the hall on a great wave of dignity. Nicola flattened herself against the wall as she passed.

'You too. Bye,' Izzy and Selene shouted after her.

'It was agreed that this house is separatist by everyone.' Jenny's tirade was set to continue.

But Rachel had heard enough. 'Oh do shut up,' she said. 'You're a rude and bigoted woman, Jenny Dean, and you've just wounded a very good friend of mine. Kim is a woman in possession of a penis, and bloody good luck to her, I say. Now go and fuck yourself.' Rachel's posh southern accent rounded beautifully on the words leaving Jenny wide eyed and speechless. She shouldered past Selene and marched imperiously upstairs with Nicola in hot pursuit.

'Anyone fancy frittata?' Izzy said, as first she and Selene, and then Rachel and Jo, subsided into uncontrollable laughter.

Jenny and Nicola didn't show up at the dinner table, much to Selene's relief. Rachel had been to the off-licence hoping they could sort things out over a few bottles of wine, but when she'd knocked on Jenny and Nicola's door, Nicola had answered saying: 'Jenny and I are considering our position.'

'She'll come round,' Jo said. 'Remember that time at the Lesbian Custody Group, when that woman said she was bisexual and Jenny threw a fit. She had her little tantrum and then she got over it.'

'I just feel rotten about calling her a bigot. She's done such a lot for the women's movement and I hate falling

out.' Rachel looked concerned.

'Honestly Rae. Don't worry. She'll be right as rain in the morning. I'll give her some stick about voting for Thatcher. That should give her something else to get her teeth into.' Izzy tried to cheer things up a bit but Rachel still seemed out of sorts.

'Anyhow, it's us who should be doing the tantrum bit. That could have been the moment we've been waiting for and she was vile to poor Kim. I'm ashamed of her behaviour,' Jo said righteously.

'Yes, I suppose, if you put it like that. She was definitely in the wrong.'

'Totally,' Selene agreed.

After dinner, Rachel and Jo cleared the plates and washed up. Selene and Izzy went through into the living room. 'You build a fire and I'll skin up a joint?' Izzy suggested, producing a packet of Rizla from the back pocket of her jeans.

'You're on,' said Selene, thinking it had turned into quite a Friday night after all.



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Stories from “Wilful Misunderstandings” a short-story collection by Richard Foreman

Beast

Alison had spent much of the morning cleaning and preparing their meditation room for the interview. She was still arranging the last of the floor cushions in what she could remember of the pattern that the feng shui consultant had stipulated when she heard the chiming of the front door bell.

Gentle and melodious as they were, the chimes could not actually be heard in much of the house, so she could not rely on Dominic to answer even though he was downstairs. Alison dashed, less mindfully than she would have liked, to the front door.

He had arrived exactly at the time of their appointment. He wore an elaborately pocketed denim jacket and a patchwork cap over cords and a brightly striped collarless shirt. Shaven headed – unless he affected some sort of topknot under the cap – his face was etched with deep lines, yet somehow his skin did not appear aged. There was an old, scuffed rucksack across his shoulder.

“Hello,” she said, “you must be Phlon.”

“I must be.” His eyes seemed to ripple with amusement. “And you’re Alison. And, ah, Dominic, yes?”

She hadn’t heard him, but became aware that Dom was standing behind her. She ushered Phlon up to the meditation room, while Dom returned to the kitchen to fetch the *maté* he’d been preparing. She gestured to the cushions. “Have a seat.” Phlon made straight for the one cushion she had not yet arranged and sat himself down in the lotus position with an ease she had to admire.

Ali sat cross-legged, trying to keep her back as straight as Phlon’s, while Dom arrived with the pot and the cups. Phlon sniffed appreciatively. “Mm... It’ll take a few minutes to brew. Shall we get going?” His voice was cultured, pronunciation careful and precise.

“Yes, let’s.”

“Good. The interview has just finished, by the way. I hate interviews, don’t you?”

Bewildered, Alison looked at Dom. He was smiling, apparently unfazed. “Well, that one passed painlessly,” he said.

“I work intuitively,” said Phlon, directing his words primarily at the still confused Alison. “Your manner, your environment and your auras tell me all I need to know. So now we can just relax, get to know each other a bit, drink the *maté* and I’ll tell you how you will be united with your parapet...”

“Oh!” said Alison, in a burst of relief, “then you do consider us suitable!”

“Eminently!” Phlon laughed. “You’re just the kind of people we’re looking for. So, once we’ve dealt with one or two rather tedious financial matters, you can prepare yourselves for a life-affirming symbiosis.”

∞

Billed as a ‘ritual’ by the Parapet People, it took on the trappings of a fine old party. Dom and Ali were told to invite as many of their friends as they pleased, whilst Phlon brought half a dozen of his colleagues. Everyone provided food and drink, musicians played and two of the Parapet People, in dazzling harlequin costumes, performed their finest juggling routine as a prelude to the main event.

At last everyone gathered in the meditation room, huddled around the space at the centre. There Phlon sat on the same cushion he’d selected before, apparently in a trance, his rucksack beside him. A murmur of talk stopped instantly as Phlon opened his eyes, peered all around him and smiled. From his rucksack he pulled a stick of dried green herbs wrapped in something like cheesecloth, to one end of which he applied a lighter until the herbs were smouldering. He waved it slowly around and passed it to the nearest hand. Then, as he spoke, each person in the room took the stick in turn and the pungent smell of the herb smoke wafted throughout the candlelit room.

“Friends, we are about to evoke. Now there’s a word! Evoke! Call up! Manifest a spirit creature, not of this world but... not out of this world either. And of this creature we will make a request. We will request that it forms a bond, a lifetime bond of support and companionship with our hosts, our seekers, our good friends Dominic and Alison...”

∞

In the early hours, when they finally got to bed, Alison clutched Dominic tightly and looked into his deep, steady eyes. “I wasn’t expecting anything quite so... big. I mean, I was thinking some kind of little bird, or a dog, or a little monkey, or... you know, a *pet*.”

“Well, to be fair, they’ve always told us that this would be a lot more than a pet,” he said, “but yeah, I wasn’t expecting a lynx, either.”

From somewhere outside the bedroom they heard creaking floorboards. Alison wasn’t sure, but were there also soft, padding footfalls? She drew herself closer to Dom.

“Don’t be afraid, Ali. Remember what Phlon said, it’s here to give us protection and guidance.”

“Yes, yes. That’s why we wanted a parapet, isn’t it? Our familiar. Our spirit beast companion. But now it’s here, it uh... it’s going to take some getting used to.”

∞

The next morning they cleared up what was left of the party debris.

Mundane activity, it made the evocation ritual and manifestation of their parapet seem dreamlike

and distant. At the height of the chanting had there really been a concentration of mist around Phlon at the centre? And, when Phlon could no longer be seen, had the appearance of the lynx, with its tufted ears, chin ruff and broad paws, been some kind of collective hallucination? Had it truly prowled the centre space returning steadily the awed gaze of every onlooker, until it found the garlanded Alison and Dominic, lifted its head and growled a greeting?

In the light of day, there seemed to be no hint of the creature's presence. It was easy to believe that it had all been smoke and mirrors. The only thing they could be sure of was the substantial amount of money that had passed from their bank account to that of the Parapet People. This thought crossed both their minds but remained unspoken.

Tasks completed, Alison took her usual morning retreat in the meditation room, anxious to find perspective on her thoughts. She went to her own customary cushion, but the one at the centre of the room, where Phlon had sat last night, caught her eye. She settled there. Attempting a lotus, she hastily decided the pain in her legs was too distracting, so sat cross-legged, closing her eyes and attempting to maintain a focus on the process of breathing alone. Bouncing, irrepressible thought and encroaching lower back pain soon began to plague her.

"Keep eyes closed."

The urge was to do the opposite. Ali fought it. The voice that spoke to her had the quality of an old door creaking on its hinges. It was followed by a sound, somewhere between a deep purr and a grunt, then soft but heavy footfalls until the presence was directly behind her back. A musky smell infused her nostrils. Her shoulders tensed. It was all she could do not to cringe.

"Have not fear," it said, "lean you back."

"You mean until I'm—"

"Speak you not."

She could feel its weight on the cushion behind her, and warmth from its body that seemed to curl around her. She let herself trust and leaned back until the beast took her weight. There, the slow movement of its breathing rocked her. Her back pain eased. Her thoughts slowed.

"Breathe with me," it said.

And she did.

∞

Dom held Alison, patiently awaiting some explanation for her mix of laughter and tears. In time she mustered words. "It's incredible... Oh Dominic, it's there for both of us. Go up there now. Go up and feel it!"

"Sorry. Go up where?"

"The meditation room. And whatever happens, keep your eyes closed."

"Uh! Right! This is—"

"Yes!"

∞

“Fantastic,” said Phlon, “we’ve been buzzing ever since the ritual. A lynx? Wow.” It was the first of his ‘support’ visits. “Male or female?”

“It doesn’t say,” said Dominic. Then, turning to Alison, he added, “We talked about that, didn’t we?”

“Yeah,” she said, “we figured it’ll let us know when it wants to.”

“Well, I’m beginning to understand why you guys were chosen. It’s known as the ‘keeper of secrets’, the lynx. The silent type, yeah? But it doesn’t just guard secrets; it knows them... because it has the power to see through, to penetrate.”

“Hang on,” said Alison, “I don’t know if I understand why we were chosen. Okay, Dominic teaches tai chi and meditation, but me, I’m just a beginner, really.”

Phlon grinned, eyes sparkling. “Perhaps it sees your potential.”

∞

She was hungry. When last it was light she’d stalked and killed a goat, but before she could tear off more than a mouthful or two of its sinewy flesh she’d heard the wolf pack approaching and run for her own life. She’d returned to her one surviving cub in the rocky den. The cub was hungry too. Now she had resumed her hunting, in the dark time.

Rabbits. In a clearing. Unaware of her, as yet. Stealth essential, she advanced by increment, each forepaw poised aloft before its careful lowering to the ground. Waiting patiently in cover, minute after minute, for one of the long-ear beasts to wander close. Calculating by degrees the exact moment at which to launch herself and pounce. Muscles tensed, ready.

Then, faster than thought, she threw herself forward at maximum acceleration, eyes fixed on her target. The rabbit had barely begun to run when her teeth reached its neck, sinking deep, her mouth suffusing with the taste of blood.

Alison woke instantly, breaking the dream. Dominic snored softly by her side. She could still taste the blood.

∞

“Ough! I had a rabbit for a pet when I was a kid!”

Dominic looked at her squarely over poised wholemeal toast. “Well now we’ve got a parapet. It’s a different ballgame, Ali. Okay, it’s kind of a visceral dream, but we have to look at what it’s saying, what it means.”

“I know...” Alison took a sip of her tea. “And I think I know what she’s telling us, in her own sweet way. We always said we’d go for it when we’re ready, didn’t we? Well, I think we’re ready. I think we need... cubs.”

He broke into a broad grin. “All *right!*”

∞

Was feng shui appropriate in the case of floor cushions? Alison had never quite remembered how

to distribute them after the night of the Parapet Ritual.

It seemed to make no difference. The art in her meditation practice was clearer to her now. She would sense the presence of the lynx at times; at other times not. But, either way, she could feel herself going deeper.

∞

“Enhancement of your hunting powers,” said a visiting Phlon, with a graceful tongue in his cheek, “so native Americans say a lynx dream brings. What do you think you’ll be hunting for, Alison?”

She was thoughtful. “Lost things. I’d like to find lost things and bring them back to this world.”

“Ah,” he said, “I can get you on a training course for that.”

∞

Occasionally the lynx, in its syntax of triplets, gave voice to words. What did it mean when it said, “Bird, friend enemy,” to Alison one day as it rested beside her? Was she still required to honour her general agreement not to speak?

She thought for a while and then spoke slowly: “See it not.”

The lynx drew closer and, in a flicker, licked her ear once with its coarse tongue. She felt the brush of its ruff on the back of her neck.

“See you will,” it said.

Friendly Smiles and Calm Voices

There are bright, exquisitely designed banners hanging over the entrances that catch your eye with their sunrise colours as you take the short, pleasant walk from the plane to the terminal building. ‘Welcome,’ they say. ‘Welcome to Analgesia.’ And somehow – wherever you come from, whatever your tongue – the signs read in your own language.

Beyond the terminal are green shrouded hills, dotted with scintillatingly picturesque buildings designed in harmony with their surroundings. You breathe air scented with honeysuckle and a hint of some exotic spice. You feel the warmth of the sun on your skin, the absence of excess humidity, and – whatever the rigours of the journey you’ve taken to get here – you begin already to relax.

Inside the terminal, staff with friendly smiles and calm voices whisk you efficiently through minimal

arrival procedures. At each stage you are offered refreshments and comforts.

Then, it seems all too soon, you are in your sleek, fuel-efficient courtesy car and driving along elegant, smoothly surfaced boulevards, your destination clearly signposted. You arrive at your accommodation with a feeling of absolute confidence. Justifiably so. It is perfectly suited to your individual needs and desires.

By the end of your first evening in Analgesia you have discovered the unique excellence of the local cuisine, the easy-going yet respectful friendliness of those whose task it is to serve you. You've taken a rest on the padded lounge and watched a rich and splendid sunset from your balcony. You've listened in the bar to talented musicians playing the lively yet gentle music of this region. You've considered at least some of the many and varied landmarks, sights and vistas you might check out during your stay here. Now you're ready to sink into the soft comfort of a large and inviting bed.

∞

You wake from a deep and restful sleep, shower, dress lightly and go in search of breakfast. Soon you're comfortably settled at a table in an open air space that functions as both eatery and exotic garden, with a selection of fresh fruits, local breads and cereals in front of you, as you take your first delectable sip of fresh brewed coffee. And yet, for all this medium of perfectly judged luxury in which you have exulted since your arrival in Analgesia, you realise you have woken with a sense of unease.

At first you can't place it. A bad dream whose feeling lingers though its content is forgotten? Or a premonition of the mundane and stressful life to which you will inevitably return when you've had all that you've paid for here?

Hey! Lighten up. It's the first day of your holiday. Enjoy!

∞

You can't resist the sandy beach, the inviting crescent of the palm-lined bay. There are plenty of shades and tables for your convenience and from time to time tempting light refreshments are discretely served with easy grace. You gaze across the lazy waves at a clear, bright horizon and you realise that still, you do not feel entirely at ease.

What's wrong? Your mind returns to the problem and a possible indicator presents itself. You are, it occurs to you, in a kind of heartland where the sun shines to order and all is as it should be, ever was and ever will be. But how can this be so? We are human. Our nature is flawed. How can anything of human creation be as perfectly pleasant as this?

Like an Arabian rug, this place requires an imperfection. Find that and you can relax. A bit of plumbing that doesn't work perfectly. An irritable official who will only cooperate when bribed. An idiot on a motorbike driving too fast across the beach. Just one example will do. Then the disturbing feeling will abate.

∞

You make a few enquiries amongst the staff and discover that minibus trips are available, and

amongst them there is one to a nearby fishing village and a small town. Its purpose is to give the curious visitor a sense of life as it is lived in the communities here, outside of the tourist-oriented aspects of the Analgesian economy. It all sounds educative and worthwhile, though you don't doubt that it will be a little stage-managed at least.

That would be flaw enough. A bit of obvious play-acting.

So a driver whisks you and a few other more thoughtful tourists off in a luxurious vehicle (with cocktail bar and videogame consoles) to the dainty little port of Aspiri and the charming market town of Ibupro. There you discover that the fishing folk are all happily synched into a smoothly running workers' cooperative which distributes wealth equitably throughout the community. In the town you hear of similar enterprises and their success. From praise for the government's provision of exemplary medical and educational services to enthusiasm for a range of colourful cultural activities, you speak to no one who does not appear to be genuinely happy and contented with their lot. If this is a performance, you can only say 'bravo' to the performers.

∞

On your second night you do not sleep so well. You are content enough with your first day's activity. It has been good to get a sense of life here outside the holidaymakers' bubble. You've nothing but respect for Analgesia's loving and resourceful people. But this 'just right' quality to everything you encounter is beginning to feel oppressive. There's something in you that wants to stir it up, to disturb the placid surface of these waters and see what lurks below.

It seems curious, in the most comfortable bed you've ever had the opportunity to occupy, that you toss and turn through much of the night. But the time of your wakefulness is not spent idly. You conceive of a number of experiments to be conducted the following day.

∞

The experiments, however, fail to provide the result you seek. You cruelly and vindictively insult a waiter, only to find that he responds with such winning wit and unaffected good humour that you end up apologising and offering to buy him a drink.

That lunchtime you drink heavily and rapidly until you are incapably drunk. This will surely cause some stress, you think, as thought itself becomes incoherent. Just then your friend the waiter approaches you and offers you a drug, which he says is legal in Analgesia and acts with alcohol in a way that restores calm and capacity but enhances the euphoria to the point of ecstasy. It sounds irresistible, and once you've taken it, proves so delightfully effective that you completely forget the remaining experiments you planned.

∞

It does occur to you the next day that if you simply relaxed, chilled out, accepted the place for what it apparently is, you could have the finest holiday of your life. The experience would rub off on you and you would return home happier and contented. Perhaps the world has a great deal to learn from the exemplary inhabitants of Analgesia.

No! You baulk at this blissed out thinking, no doubt engendered by yesterday's drug ingestion. It just can't be true and you'd be a complete fool to let yourself buy the lie. Something needs to be

done to expose it, something drastic. And soon – so you can get it over with and then relax.

But what? The answer comes to you swiftly. All it requires is a bit of research on the Internet and a series of purchases at some of the shops you observed in Ibupro on the minibus trip. You are not by nature a criminal or violent person, so it must be done with care.

∞

Some hours later you return to your accommodation with the requisite chemical fertiliser, a small can of diesel and the other equipment you need. You feel a little nervous, unsurprisingly. You've never made a bomb before.

But the instructions make it sound quite simple and the target you've identified is a public memorial, well away from any habitation. It will be an act of vandalism, no more, but the slogans you intend to spray paint in the vicinity should stir up ill feeling, enough to disrupt the façade.

Obviously from what you've observed, the response will – in the main – be calm and rational. But there should be a degree of outrage. And people seldom retain their better nature when outraged. All you need is a little glimpse of the crazy edge of the Analgesian psyche.

You are just re-reading the print-out notes on fertiliser bombs when you hear a firm and urgent knock at your door.

∞

Through the reinforced glass window you can see the airport and the green shrouded hills beyond. The sun still shines brightly, but you have been gently yet firmly advised to remain in this room until the arrival of the flight that will take you home.

Everything, from your discrete arrest at the resort to the serving of the deportation papers, has been done with the utmost civility. Officials with friendly smiles and calm voices have whisked you through the minimal legal procedures. At every stage you have been offered refreshments and comforts.

It has been quietly and clearly explained how your good friend the waiter had reported your increasingly erratic behaviour to the authorities and you have been under observation for the last 24 hours. They are quite used to this sort of thing in Analgesia. They recognise that a certain proportion of their valued visitors will react in the way that you have. Not only do they recognise this, but they show a fine understanding and even a degree of sympathy for your motivations.

Nevertheless, they obviously cannot permit you to go through with your plan. You or anyone like you. Since there is no crime whatsoever in Analgesia, they are able to devote their security forces exclusively to this kind of problem and invariably, as they like to put it, 'nip it in the bud' before any unpleasantness occurs.

Shortly before your plane arrives, you dine for one last time on the exquisite local cuisine – a superbly spiced fish dish – and browse through a number of brochures that they have thoughtfully provided, detailing possible holiday destinations that might be a little more suited to your psyche.

And they're right, of course. They always are. You begin to seriously consider a couple of weeks in the lively state of Neuralgia. Or possibly the quieter island resort of Lumbago...

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