

# **MAD BLUE DUSK**

Short Story Anthology

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## DREAM ROAD

Eight hours of writing and re-writing is enough. I turn off the computer, stare out from my eighth floor flat. Perched on the edge of a suburban tower-block estate, if I ever sat down to count all the windows visible from mine, I reckon the figure'd easily breach a thousand before I lost both heart and count. I could cover about three miles between here and Warsaw city centre before anything like a park interrupted the concrete territory, but, thankfully, all the things I need are in the opposite direction.

Two late-night petrol stations service my neighbourhood, both on the same, out of town road. Though it's been a long time since insomnia's kicked me out the door, scavenging for any place that'll sell me something I can eat, drink or smoke, it's still nice to have these little lighthouses to cater for sudden wants.

Going inside, when they do come, fills me with strange pleasure. I don't like supermarkets. Don't like the music, the method. Petrol station convenience stores are different. Maybe it's something to do with their hit-and-run dynamic, people grabbing what they do and don't need, shoving off before security's had time to clock their faces, the manager to assault them with offers, customers with trolleys and hard looks. Or maybe it's something dating back to my childhood, a time when petrol stations had all you could ever want. Snacks, ice cream, toys. My father, always happiest behind a steering wheel and never too generous with his time, would sometimes take us out at weekends, each approaching petrol station gleaming with sweet possibilities. Always generous with the little treats, my dad. Or maybe they remind me of the years just after that, of the things young money bought. Motorcycles. Cigarettes. Dates. All the things I didn't need permission or parental charity for.

I descend all eight flights of stairs in a strange hurry. Dusk fell ages ago, but the big church outside my front door is still going strong. Loudspeakers carry the lamenting cry of an invisible priest out into a sharp, September evening. A wooden cross in the forecourt, simple and weathered, clashes with the outlandishly modern shape of the building, "In the Cross lies Salvation" etched into the horizontal beam. Round the back, bottle caps and plastics litter the earth, all the glass and tin cleared away by the homeless for cash-on-delivery recycling.

Further on, the fields that were here only weeks back are now walled off with steel fencing, ready for more blocks to sprout. Local kids have already sprayed them with logos of violent video games and football teams. Looking round, wondering why none of the little rebels had the balls to graffiti the tall, perfectly primed walls of the church, I notice someone has mounted an advertising sign on its grounds, an ad for domestic floor panelling covering Christ's back.

I turn my head again, trying to shake it free of contradictions that don't concern me, stumble across a disused set of train tracks running parallel to the road. Don't know where the magic of following train tracks comes from. Without any design, the walk extends itself between the two rails. At a crossroads, one of the petrol stations beckons me from the other side, but, without any physical hunger to carry me its way, a few fags still left in my pocket, I decide not to heed.

As I stumble on in the dark, the town begins to thin, concrete blocks giving way to acres of unkempt pasture and run-down shacks, streetlamps suddenly dimming, their authority diminished without walls and windows to reflect the light.

Then the tracks turn and it's there. The road I've always dreamed of, stretching away from me in a perfectly straight line, further than the eye can see. Marking the border between city and country, belonging to neither. On the right, streetlamps and small industrial estates guard a million bricks and windows and hungry little moments. To the left, woods and nothing beyond, a wall of darkness different to the sky, so black and blank it tickles the heart with something more than menace.

The tracks ran along the right, city side, past an electric transformer station relaying power from somewhere far off. Lit by dim, courtyard bulbs, the giant porcelain insulators, spiral mountings and complex webs of cable and pylon look gothic, humming wildly like a swarm of frying bees. Ten of the tallest pylons are topped with long needles, poking up into the sky like the thin arms of believers, praying for lightning even on this clearest of nights.

Further along, a tall bridge-crane towers over an insulated pipe factory. The huge machine looks so weathered it's impossible to say if it still works or is just a redundant monument to past high times, rusted to a set of rails that really go nowhere. Over the gates, a tall figure made of different bits of piping holds up the company logo, a monstrous clown of Frankensteinian proportions.

Something about seeing these industrial plants makes me happy. Again, must be memories of cycle rides round here as a kid, often late into the forbidden night, these vast, dimly lit places hiding things of an order and power magical to a boy back then.

The two storey block next to the pipe factory houses a beauty products operation, the signs and logos on the steel mesh fencing clearly in need of a new lick of paint. As I pass, two Alsations rush out from behind the building, the volume of their barking shocking the crystal-cold air. They bounce off the fence just feet from me, but look dumb instead of threatening. I swear, if we came to an opening or a gate, the two pups wouldn't know what the hell to do next.

They're not what I'm scared of, though. A few months ago, some kids had themselves an end of summer picnic in nearby woods. The smell of bonfire and barbeque attracted some other kids. With baseball bats and knives. They beat one of the picnickers to death and buried him nearby. Why, people asked, for what possible reason, but though the body's been located and the perpetrators rounded up, no satisfactory answer to the question of motive will ever be found. That particular hole in the gut of anyone who thinks about it all will never be filled. I feel it now, heavy and hollow all at once, as I stumble on past the black woods. There's no one in sight, but if there was, if there were a few of them and heavy, tangible objects weighed down their arms, which way would I run? Right or left? The city or the country side of the road? It saddens me to think I'd run for what I know best, the place the danger came from.

I glance right, back towards the estate, surprised to still see the church I passed earlier. The concrete cross that tops it is only illuminated from behind, the backlit halo round it tiny. Almost right next door, a set of gold McDonald's Drive-Thru arches, mounted on their own tall column, does battle with it. And scares me. I don't know why. A bloody cross versus golden arches. Seems like a no-win situation. Like a clue to the violence in those woods.

Turning back to the wall of tall willows on the other side of the road, I notice lights showing through now, far off. Some kind of life, deep in the night. On the corner of a muddy side street leading into them, a water well with a hand pump stands out in the dark, wrapped in a coat of straw to stop it freezing solid. A little living monument to a time before running water, before factories and Frankenstein and Ronald McDonald.

At the same time, the factories to my right end, the low tree trunks of tiny orchards glowing with white paint. I can't quite remember whether they were painted to keep them warm in winter or to keep hungry animals

from eating away at the bark. I wish I knew, or knew of someone I could ask, someone still in touch with such things.

I've no real idea of how far I've walked, but the stroll has turned into a dark, silent journey. No more ad hoardings here, no more streetlamps, only the rails gleaming with infinite possibilities.

I stop, stare at the black ground beneath my feet. A few of the stones that litter it glow with dim light, a perfect mirror to the night-time sky overhead. Amazing, and yet not, for what else is below us, the other side of miles of earth, if not light years of that same starscape?

The world is transparent for once. I stare, sandwiched between the heavens, smile, look right. The edge of my vast estate is still visible, ten, twenty minutes walk away. Then I stare back down the rails. I could keep following, but choose not to. Not tonight. Tonight I feel like a kid that's found some secret path at the bottom of the garden, the surprise itself enough to satisfy my appetite for wonders. And, something else tells me if I keep going, keep pushing the mystery, it'll run out on me. The road will end, and not only that, I will see it. I will know how, see the junction, the depot, the resting place of something or other, ruin it for myself for ever.

Still smiling, I get back to my block, climb all eight flights of stairs without hurry. A few steps short of my floor, I turn, sit, light a cigarette. The overhead bulb projects my reflection onto the staircase window, my smile blurred, the angles of my face unhappy. I don't feel unhappy, but maybe there's something there, some show of reluctance. I don't want the city to drag me back in my box yet, nothing waiting behind that door save a TV screen and a thousand other tiny windows beyond my own. Nothing to see or touch. Nothing to wonder at.

Then the staircase timer switch clicks off, submerging me in the dark. I watch the cigarette's glowing tip mirrored against the streetlights that line the road, my road, now emerging out of the distance. The factories are still there, minuscule, the woods and black sky beyond them blank, the stars subtle, barely hinting at unimaginable might. But even those tiny ghosts of light are enough. Enough to keep me from the meagre fires of home a little longer.

## BURDEL

Silence wakes me. After twenty hours of autobahn noise, head resting against the coach window, I open my eyes, stare out through a huge, reflected iris. The line of cars below me is still at last, nothing but thick woods beyond them. The sky seems overcast, though from behind the tinted glass it's hard to tell whether the blank slop of colour overhead is cloud cover or clear blue. It looks sleepy, undecided, as if it hasn't yet made up its mind whether to turn out bleak or beautiful today.

Only crows are moving, swerving back and forth over the border, mocking signs in German and Polish threatening death to anyone crossing without permission. Their jarring song is far from welcoming.

Swiecko. In Polish it means 'place of light', but in the bare break of dawn this rust-grey checkpoint looks anything but.

The onboard digital clock shows a five, a three and a zero. We could be buried in these ancient forests for minutes or hours, depending on the mood of the border guards. I try to crawl back into dreams, but after a whole night of being lulled by the hum and sway of the transcontinental rush, the coach begins to wake like some drugged domino stack. Feet stuck out into the narrow gangway are withdrawn, arms and heads suddenly appearing over the tops of headrests. Nobody's happy to wake this morning, and it's not just the hour or the discomfort. Going West, the Warsaw-London line is always buzzing with excitement, most everybody heading for something new. Heading back East though, people are unhappy, their passports about to send them back to their commonplace lives. They reach for them as if for house keys at the tail end of a holiday.

I used to have a key ring with a quote from Yeats - "Home is where you start from". It sounds about right, as in that there's a ring of truth to it, but it's nowhere near gospel on the subject. Waiting to roll over the border, I toy with words. Motherland. Fatherland. Poland, my birthplace, a Never-Never Land preserved in Technicolor memories of childhood, though spent under Communism, full of peace and pleasure. Next to that England seems harsher, the place of exile, where the nucleus of my family imploded and I was schooled in disciplines of new territory, of adulthood. Two passports, a dozen years under one flag, a dozen under the other, producing a bilingual half-breed. Sartre said an exile doesn't have a home, but I feel far from lost, my label of belonging never an issue.

The next three hundred miles are a blur. You can cross all of Germany without once breaching town limits, never off the autobahn, but keep going east and the journey becomes a struggle to keep good time on deadly, single lane roads. Pious Poles build memorials to those lost to them, anything from humble wooden crosses to brick chapels. I try counting, just on my side of the road, but there's too many to keep up with.

The small town architecture and faces staring up at the international comet don't engage me either. Half a century of Red rule has done nothing for the aesthetics of this land, covering it in drab towns and backward factories. Somewhere near by, a large stone marks the centre of the continent, the geographical heart of Europe, but it's no more than a pebble in the pool of history. In a place where borders have changed a dozen times in the last few centuries, the idea of territory is abstract, centeredness foreign to it.

By noon, we're nearing the capital, its skyline blemished by another lumbering stone landmark. The forty storey Palace of Culture and Science is a gift from Uncle Joe, but what was once an antenna for the Party's propaganda machine is now a booster station for satellite television and mobile phone networks, housing, amongst other things, an over-priced department store, a multiplex cinema and a casino.

I watch it crawl towards me for an hour, all the time we made up on autobahns lost in a horrific traffic jam.

Finally off the coach, I have to wait for my rucksack while a monster in a shellsuit and flip-flops has her sons unload a television, a bicycle, three suitcases of varying vastness and a giant check shopping bag large enough to hold both the boys. Waiting, I look around, greet the old place. The West Warsaw International Coach Terminal is still its ugly, dirty self, but apart from the obligatory hot dog stand and a drunk on a wooden bench, there's now a little arcade with a body building food suppliers, a bar, even a sex shop. I glance back at the woman and her load of goodies, wonder about her sanity. This place has it all, the full complement of goods and services, the West nothing on it any more.

Rucksack finally released, I see him absorbed by the sex shop window display, hands forced into drainpipe jeans, an old leather jacket hanging off his back. I've known Maks since we were this high. He's the funniest nice guy alive, but it's always the tough guys, the jokers fall hardest. I take the litre bottle of duty-free tequila out of my rucksack, resist the impulse to shout his name just so I can watch a second longer. The hair is longer than last year, the legs skinnier, the whole of him ganglier somehow. He's started wearing his glasses

again. As he reaches the end of the little arcade, I open my arms, bottle in hand, wait for him to turn this way. He starts strolling in my direction and as I'm about to start cursing his lazy bones he finally sees me, breaks into a run, smashes into my embrace so hard I nearly drop the golden flask.

"It's called te-ki-la," I tell him once we're away, dodging traffic in his rotting Mercedes. He slips me a glance over the top of his glasses, reminding me that should never try attempting 'funny' in his presence, then breaks out into a wide, happy grin.

We talk, but it's not yet conversation. I mumble on about the trip, the wait, anything that won't distract him from driving. It's like a bumper car ride out here, only quieter, faster, death always sharing your turn on the rink. On the corner of Jana Pawla and Solidarnosci, we see it had been driving a bright red tram, the tiny Fiat 126 nuzzling against it a grotesque, extravagant wreck.

Nearing my old neighbourhood, we pass by a whole housing estate cordoned off by the police. Probably a bomb threat, he tells me. Since the mafia extortion rackets have taken to blowing up uncooperative clients, the kids have got in on the act, phoning in fake bomb scares to get out of school. The joke is wearing thin, but the bombs keep going off.

The first thing strikes me after the lift ride up is the silence by his door. She's taken the dogs, no howling to greet us as he turns the key. I used to hate those mutts, their undisciplined, manic yelps. Used to.

Opening the door, he says the customary "Guest in my house, God in my house." I stand in the middle of the small living room, try to get some distance. She's taken none of the furniture, just the dogs and the mess. I take a cigarette from a packet lying in an empty fruit bowl, go out onto the balcony. That's swept out too, the dog blankets and her plants gone.

I shower and feel like I've put on fresh skin for the dinner table. Maks continues the low down on all that's happened since I've been away, crime, politics, everything but Beata. I don't think he's hiding, probably wants to talk about their split, but not over light lunch. I need to hear him talk, ignorant of all that's happened since she left, nothing in reply to my questions so far save his brave face. Even though he's taken to wearing glasses, it looks younger, simpler than when we met last, something childlike reborn into it. As he lifts another beer, cheering my arrival, the smile is tender, the eyes scared.

The doorbell interrupts our meal. Maciek, a neighbour, wants us down on the basketball court. Maks tries to shoo him away, but after almost thirty hours on my backside, I'm more than game.

We climb over the local school fence, a bag full of beers rattling as we go. Bringing them along was my idea. Anything to loosen his tongue and to hell with hand-to-eye co-ordination.

We play for an hour in the shadow of tower blocks, the kids showing off, scoring only on the playground clap-o-meter. They're all style over substance, out of steam quickly, clearly too much into their vodka and Camels to compete with twentysomething old timers like us. Maks, in his old tracksuit and trainers, doesn't care, chucks ball after silent ball through the netless hoop, lost in himself.

A young blond thing is hustling hard, comes down from a rebound all elbows, right into my face. I see nothing but pain for a few seconds, a rod beating against my nose every time I try to open my eyes. Maks explodes, not up for a fight, just tired, mad. My vision still flickering, I drag him away, listen as he rants about kids and respect, how they needed their fathers' belt, only the fathers had long ago pawned their belts for vodka, the kids beating up on the old men instead, not like it used to be, not like the old days, no respect anywhere now. His father left when he was still too young for memories, so I say nothing, let the tirade burn itself out.

"Drink!"

I stare at the palm trees on his yellow Hawaiian shirt, obey, let the tequila burn its way down my throat.

"Haargh! Shit, that tastes shit," I squeal, weeping, Maks grinning wildly. The stereo is on, we've drank, danced like idiots, smoked a little grass. The stupid, sensitive soul in me wants him to pour his heart out, but thankfully he's having none of it, not until I mention the almost-fight down on the courts. He smiles to himself, eyes drilling through the endless homes below us, whispers,

"I was trying to get into the zone, you know, just let the ball flow... Woosh! That weird Zen thing happening... Before you even throw, you know it's good. Feel it in your fingers... I was looking, trying to get it going, but no joy... Tried to puzzle it out and... I realised I was sick. Not from the booze. Sick inside. She's gone. The one person I thought I'd never see the back of. My soulmate... I'm playing basketball and I realise my soul is sick."

He smiles into the distance and I have no idea what to say to dispel the dopey stare. I have no idea, because the only person who knows the magic words one day simply didn't answer when asked if she still loved him. As far as I know, she still hasn't. No yes or no. Only silence. Her CD collection gone, no sound of dogs yelping anymore, no unhollow laughter.

We run down eight flights of stairs, then up another four in the block opposite his. The lifts work, but he's in no mood for the silence they're filled with.

Dance music draws us to the right door. The party is well on its way, the small flat packed with people. Though I'm too drunk and not in the mood to get my Polish into mingling gear tonight, I put on a brave face in Maks' name, follow round for a while.

At some point he smacks plastic cups with a tall man our age, dark hair shaved to a stubble, the eyes sad, like they've seen it all and have calmly stopped waiting for anything else to happen. The girl he's with is stunning, almost matches him in height, her hair a wild sprawl of gypsy curls, sea green eyes resting on the crowd with true benevolence. Her name is Rebeka, and, according to Maks, every man in the place is at least half-madly in love with her. Her boyfriend, whose name I miss, is from Praga, the roughest neighbourhood in town. Though he dresses like a street thug, he's got a PhD in philosophy from the prestigious Warsaw University, runs his own company, DJ's, kick-boxes, a mighty underground renaissance man. Maks is not easily impressed, but here he speaks with level-headed reverence. They discuss their respective businesses, hobbies and habits, people's attention gravitating towards their conversation as it moves onto dance music and the physical limitations of the human ear. The tall man rolls out authoritative statistics on how many beats per minute a track can reach before it begins to damage the cochlea, normally around one-eighty, possibly pushed, though usually with permanent side effects, to two-hundred bpm. Maks, pissed and swaying, is not happy with this theory. The tall man patiently explains that it's not theory, but tried and tested scientific fact. He's mixed and recorded himself, toyed with the boundaries of sonic viability and can experientially confirm that the limits are pre-set and not open to question. Maks is having none of it. He wants to know how those limits are arrived at, what happens when you experiment, push beyond the safe envelope. The man continues to answer patiently, explaining that at one-eighty bpm the subject becomes disorientated, nauseous, permanent damage beginning to occur, while at two hundred the nose and eardrums start to bleed, the sonic assault jarring the brain, death the end result.

Maks falls silent, but is still staring the man down, smiling, swaying. Then he turns and starts to blatantly flirt with Rebeka, before introducing me to the sea-eyed beauty. I ask if he's usually this much of a verbal pugilist. She laughs and says that it's only in present company, just to flex an intellectual muscle or two. Maks the challenger, the guy the elder statesman, the scene just sparring. I've seen the same at Speaker's Corner, established orators spicing up quiet mornings by getting off their own soapboxes to melt into the crowd and heckle others. Speak to them and they'll admit it's all pre-rehearsed, all part of the show. Those guys are doctors and professors too, I say, nodding at her boyfriend. Maks is silent, smiling to himself like a little schoolboy. I ask if he often tries to seduce her after these bouts, and she smiles, says something about how he just needs a good shag, intimidating knowledge of his recent split.

He listens, the cheeky smile never leaving his lips, then sways, winks at me and backs off into the crowd. I stay in the calm light of her smile a little longer, eventually find him chatting to a few mates out on the staircase. He gets me in a playful headlock, then, instead of pushing me back into the flat, starts leaping down the stairs again.

Crossing the space between blocks, he stops, sits on a playground roundabout, staring up at his own flat. "Lovely girl, Rebeka. What a head on those shoulders... Get laid. If only she'd offer... And I'm sure she would, oh yes, a catch like me, if it wasn't for that bastard boyfriend... Why is it women always choose the wrong man? Why never me?"

He injects the whinge with self-deprecating humour, but it still hurts.

"We going home?"

"You beat yet?"

"No."

"Let's go get a drink."

We stumble through the warm night towards some private villas beyond the estate, built by those who, back in the days of abject equality, had the means to escape the thousand pigeon holes behind us. They're all large, one or two storey, each one unique. This one here, he tells me as we pass, iron bars over the windows, dogs tearing loudly at their chains, belongs to a newspaper publisher, an ex-Party bigwig, the tall, Alpine chalet thing at the end of the street to a famous violinist.

We stop next to a white villa with a sloping black roof, garden furniture stacked on an unfinished patio, plaster already peeling from the walls. It looks profoundly uninviting, but Maks presses the intercom buzzer on the gate. The front door opens, a bald heavyweight with a thick moustache, leather jacket over jogging pants, sticks his head outside. He stares for a second, buzzes us into the ill-kept yard. Walking up towards the red face in the door, I try to work out what kind of a dump this could be.

"I don't know you two."

"Just passing by, fancied a drink," Maks explains with a cocky smile. "Heard so many good things about this place, thought I'd bring my friend, show him true Polish hospitality. He's from London..."

"We accept all currencies here."

I don't see which banknote Maks hands over, but whatever it is, it's not enough to buy us a smile. The doorman lights a cigarette, sucks down hard, only then throws the door wide open like we'd pissed him off but he was going to humour us anyway.

I can hardly see at first, tea candles all over the large, low-ceilinged room, the air filled with smoke and a deafening George Michael tune. There are a few tables set around, occupied by men who obviously work out and shop for clothes in the same place as the doorman. A couple of young women sit on low couches set around the walls, separated from the boys like it was a school disco. I follow Maks to the bar, turn my back on the nightmare.

"What is this place, Maks? Some kind of Mafia dive?"

He orders a couple of vodkas and imported Kilkenny beers.

"A brothel."

"No..."

"We've done the drugs, done the rock and roll, now it's time to do the ladeez."

I tell him he's fucking mad as he salutes the fish tank behind the bar, then climbs up on a bar stool to get a better view. This isn't him, so not him, but I haven't seen the stupid bastard for a year. Christ knows what Beata's departure's done to his head. I light a cigarette, stay standing, lost for words. He tells me not to stress as it might affect my and, what's more important, his performance. I shake my head, take a sip of the beer to steady my nerves. This is unbelievable. I was expecting a proper bender on my first night back, but this has gone way beyond the absurd. There's no way he'd try anything with any of these pros. He's a pussy cat, a paper tiger, the gentlest guy I've ever known...

He gets up, walks towards the women by the wall. Over the distance and the music I can't hear what he's saying, but one of them points in the direction of a narrow corridor. He nods and vanishes through it. As I wonder whether I ought to play it cool, let him get things out of his system, or be a real friend, drag him away from whatever horrible mistake he's about to make, a skinny blonde appears out of a huddle of men round a table, comes over. I turn away, praying like a little school boy that she pass, but I see in the mirror behind the bar that she's stopped right beside me. I cringe, because deep down inside there's a fucked-up, macho, moron little voice saying 'Go on. Go for it. Go on, be a MAN. Are you afraid? You're afraid, aren't you. Loser. Chicken shit loser...' and she probably, no, definitely hears it too.

"Interesting." I recognise the voice, turn in my seat. She's no longer a brunette, looks younger, but the smile is all Marta. She leans forward, kisses me on both cheeks, eyes skipping between mine. "What are you up to?"

I could ask her the same question, but don't. She's the older sister of Aga, a childhood sweetheart separated from me by emigration some ten years back. Marta lived in London for a while and Aga came over to visit. By then, the cute teen I'd left behind had blossomed into a stunning and troubled beauty, an attention seeker with perfect freckles and a habit of courting men who were disastrous news. I stopped calling when her craziness became too demanding, even for me, but kept in touch with Marta a while longer. Last I'd heard, she'd fallen in love with a local boxer and swapped her broken life in London for a flat here, closer to her family, somewhere her English was going to be a strength and not a weakness.

"Came in for a drink, with a friend. You want one?"

"No thanks... Such a nice boy, what a surprise." Her smile says she's caught me out, but booze makes me want to turn the tables. I ask about her and she says she's here with her man. I ask if it's the boxer, and the corners of her lips drop an nth of an inch.

"No, Pawel died. Two weeks after I moved back here, in a motorcycle accident. Twenty one years old. Happens..." She asks about me, and I sort of explain, choking. I mention Maks and his predicament, trying to level with the sad subject she's just introduced, and it's the very moment he chooses to slap me on the back.

"Hey, you old devil! Leave you alone for a second..."

I introduce them, my shoulder blades burning. We make a few minutes' polite conversation, then she says it's been great to meet again, but she has to go, her boyfriend not keen on her talking to strangers. But we're not strangers, I say as she tells the barman to put our drinks on her bill. How's Aga? Her pupils skip between mine again, without play in them now, cold and questioning.

"You don't know," she says and, as per script, I mumble No, what? "Two years ago. Two years in November." A dull cramp of grief grabs me by the gut, backed by instant visions of overdoses, self-harm, other wild card ends. "Cancer. Of the liver."

"Cancer?" Two years ago, Aga would've been twenty three.

"Yes... Forgive me." Shame shoves past grief, wondering what the hell I have to forgive her for, but I'm a little too stumped to put my query into words. She glances back into the dark room again, then stares at the

floor. Now I feel sorry for her. Fuck, her younger sister. Her cute, sweet, crazy younger sis. Her baby. Fuck. "Didn't want to call you with the news. Just one of those decisions. Tough time for everyone..."

So she feels guilty about not having let me know before. My brain's gone all sober, but it's also gone all blank, angry at itself for having so little talent in moments like these. She looks calm, as if she's dealt with grief already and moved on, living a new life, new faces, new hair colour. Her eyes are still moving back and forth, now looking for something to say, some words of consolation. We chat for a couple more uncomfortable minutes, questions I don't want to ask answered by the last person wants to have to answer them, leaving me cold, confused and utterly exhausted. Is she telling the truth? Was it cancer, or something else? Drug, sex related?

The questions I really want answered remain buried beneath timid conversation. Then she shakes Maks' hand, his eyes not quite yet rid of lust, kisses me on the cheek once and teeters away on high heels that instantly remind me of Aga.

Maks asks about the sisters, and I still don't know what to say, and what's worse, what to feel. Looking at him, I'm reminded of where we are, but he shakes his head, smiles meekly, says he only went for a slash. I crack a joke about his lack of bottle, but though we both smile, it's clear we've ran out of giggles for tonight. Not that I'm grieving. It's something else, something I can't quite get a handle on in this terrible place. We've been here all of fifteen minutes, and it's already making me sick.

I tell him to drink up and for once he lets me take charge, sipping quickly, the first to get off his stool. He looks at me in a sobered, serious way, more of the sympathy I'd seen in Marta's eyes behind those wire frames. I drain my glass, get up, unable to bear the stare. Didn't expect to be on the receiving end of pity today.

The heavyweight opens the door for us and slams it shut again. Out in the night, I hear dogs barking all over the place. Maks is struggling to light a cigarette, but I shove him down the steps towards the gate, realise I didn't even try to catch Marta's eye on the way out. She's gone, is past, and I don't know when, if, I'll ever see her again. Our estate twinkles before us with a thousand multi-coloured eyes, the haystack to her needle, but I don't feel a thing. Christ, is it the alcohol? Something else in me burnt out? Why do I feel no grief, over either of the sisters? This is too much, I think with anger, shoving the back of the Hawaiian shirt forward. This is your fault, for bringing me here, pissing about, but he doesn't get it, just laughs and chucks the unlit cigarette over someone's fence.

I look around the dark, quiet streets, and it creeps up on me. Fear. The need to get this broken-hearted bastard safely through his own door, without accident or attack, without losing him.

Then pain. Empathy at last. His hunched shoulders, no Beata by his side, after so many years. After all these drunken hours, I finally feel what he must be feeling. This man, thrown my way by the same chance as Aga and Marta, but not a stranger, not to me, not ever.

Then something else again. Exhaustion and fear strip it all away and remind me what it is I feel for the lousy fuck stumbling ahead of me on his wonky legs, why I rode that bloody bus all the way here in the first place. It's not warm, not tonight, more panicked, like the love of a parent for a child in trouble, but in spite of the road ache, booze and bad news, I'm glad I came.

## CROW WORSHIP

The end to winter's been on the books for ages, but the dates refuse to translate into Celsius. The novel I'm struggling with is on the ropes, the new city still far from a home and what little time I have left after work's usually spent in the pub with... yes, people from work. Driving a mini-cab's a silent business, leaves you hungry for any kind of face to face contact, but not being able to have more than one before driving home only adds insult to injury. And seeing as alcohol stays in the bloodstream for twenty four hours, I can't even get pissed back in my empty flat, not if I want to keep my job, which I do for a while yet. Cabbings good when writing's good. After half a night of motionless typing, it helps to get out of the house, cruise round, reorder trains of thought.

Since winter kicked in, though, both the writing and the driving have turned into nightmares. Somebody said there's no such thing as writer's block, just laziness. I half agree. No such thing as writer's block as long as you have ideas. Others say no such thing as running out ideas, the world peopled with the damn things. Maybe, but like words, they need to be ordered, corralled in some way, otherwise the pages run with chaos, the best ideas dissolved by effort, the whole alchemy turning to shit.

By March, things get so bad, I ask for extra hours. Driving helps me to think of a way out, and the extra money will cover the ticket. I get put on accounts, moving execs between meetings. They're bad runs, short on tips and conversations, but they fill the days somehow.

Accounts work is rare in the evenings, but it happens, shipping suits home from restaurants, making late airport runs. One night, a woman's name appears on my computer display. Corporate law firm, dead in the city centre. An imaginary vision of a middle-aged legal vulture, glasses hanging off a wrinkled neck, makes me drive slowly. I pull up at the office block late, but there's no sign of her. Ten past eleven. The hours these blood thirsty suckers work, I think, grinning at myself in the rear view mirror.

A quarter of an hour later, I report her missing. Wait, control says, can't get her on her extension, wait however long. She always comes out eventually. I step out to share a fag with the security guard in the lobby. He shakes his head, speaks. They're all like that. The MD or associate or whatever, right top bloke, an exception, but this lady, bad rep. Great. Confirms my suspicions, makes me feel better about calling her names as I stand, staring at the lifts, willing her to finally materialise. Then my mobile rings and I curse her some more when I hear she's going to be late on top of late.

I go back to the car, limply consider driving off in a huff, when the passenger door next to me opens. I lied earlier, describing the vision I had of my future client. There's another, fleeting little picture you always have when a woman's name appears on the contact screen, something from either a fairytale or a porn film. Am I smiling? I must be smiling. I'm not usually a sucker for beauty, but it must be the duckling/swan thing, the element of pleasant surprise. I know from her double-barrelled name that she's part Russian, but I had no idea she'd be a gypsy queen. The short hair glistens pure crow, the eyes warm coal, the cheekbones high. She looks back through wire rimmed glasses, those eyes huge, the teeth glistening, yes, behind a smile, meaning, yes, I have the queen's approval. But no, it's something else, some other bit of good news. She takes a tiny red mobile out of her purse and dials. The computer tells me both her name and destination and I head for the other side of the river, happy again about the long fare, but she giggles and squeals for five, fifteen minutes, until the lustre of her looks is all stripped raw. Christ, the corporate lawyer sounds like a teenage call-girl. The guy must either be a dumbfuck or an OAP if he can stomach this much cheap, baby-voice flirting.

By the time her phone clicks off, the frown is right back on my face, a bridge roaring beneath us. Now she's waiting for me to say something, something entertaining, and not in the mood for fresh ideas I say what I was going to say before, about it being bad news to use mobile phones while wearing glasses, the radiation and the frame together microwaving the brain. She smiles, takes them off and asks, Are you new? I nod. From round here? No. You like this job? Fuck, no, not right this minute I don't, fencing off lazy questions. Don't mind donkey work, long as nobody patronises me for it. It's not just envy or ego rebelling in me, there really is condescension in her voice, in the way she rests against the door, staring at me like I was some curio or servant slave. I wish I had the tongue to turn tables, poke fun at her, or just switch off, small talk some, give me the excuse to take my eyes off the road at times, but I don't, silent the rest of the way to her suburban mansion.

A couple of days later, her name and office address reappear on my dashboard computer. Instructions are to go up.

The fourteenth floor interiors are predictably lush, twin receptionists cloned into navy mini-skirt suits. Marginally prettier clone points to a set of comfy armchairs, meaning Park you arse there. I stare out the window for a while, then at the huge canvases adorning the other walls. The little bio plaques by each frame depress me,

the lives of personal and creative struggle all ending up here, prettifying office space. She appears eventually with a couple of overnight bags, dressed for the weekend, waves an overfriendly goodbye to the receptionists. As we ride down, I mumble something about the drive to the airport, meet the black vulture eyes in the mirrored wall. Not used to seeing her reflection, the face looks strangely distorted, its own evil twin. How old is she? No more than thirty, at a guess. Is she studying me too? 'Course she is. I'm the same age, look all-right, know how to turn in a cute smile.

She lets me put her bags in the boot, then choose the door for me to open. Habit makes me sit her in the back. Nothing is said 'till I get us stuck in a traffic jam. I kill time and embarrassment trying to rebuild bridges. She's quiet, but responsive, the voice all smooth, smart polish this time. Says she's off to France for the weekend. No, pleasure. Cote D'Azur. Yes, she nods, smiling. He's rich enough.

We're friends again, even though the traffic's died and snow has started falling in angry, windblown sheets. Doesn't take long to get through places I've been, jobs I've done to the things I've studied and then books themselves. She pulls a copy of Steinbeck's "Tortilla Flats" from her bag and I'm stumped. What's a corporate lawyer doing reading one of the most socially aware American writers of the past century? Turns out she studied literature and history, before switching to law. I ask Why that? But all I get is Reasons.

The third time I pick her up, a truce has been declared. She calls me direct on the mobile number she'd asked for at the airport. It's Saturday afternoon and I'm off duty, but I'm also a sucker for brunettes, even if they ask me to drive across a snowed-under town in weekend rush hour.

Again, she keeps me waiting outside her firm, but this is my time now. I go into the ground floor lobby, rest in easy silence. Then another call. Come up. She meets me on the fourteenth floor, the lobby empty, says sorry, so busy you wouldn't believe. I follow her to her office, the view, window included, all I could ever wish for. She's studying emails from various European offices, double and triple checking contracts colleagues have sent for her approval. The figures on the screen run to millions, and every time she finds a mistake in something she's read and reread she cheers like a child, another company brownie point in her favour. Seems the teams these guys work in are not to watch each other's backs, but to stab them. She asks my help to reword some of the sentences, then shows me some awful Internet porn she's been sent by workmates who, being male and corporate lawyers to boot, should know better.

I drive her to some top secret hairdressers, sit on the sidelines as she attempts bonding with the middle-aged stylist, working hard at chit chat. We leave an hour later, her hair exactly the same as when we came in.

After the honey coloured warmth of the Italian round the corner, we stand out in the snow, flakes melting on the tip of her perfect nose as it wriggles a No to my invite for a drink elsewhere. She's got to go, get ready for the opera. Aah. The man who took her flying in a helicopter round the Cote D'Azur, I guess. She nods. Nice, I say, ice cold wind suddenly shooting up my trouser legs. She keeps smiling, ebony coals staring at me, leans forward, my face inside the shelter of her coat's tall hood, places a hesitant peck on my cheek. Then she turns, walks away without a word, taking care not to fall on the slippery ground.

Spring arrives soon after. Snows melt into dirty slush, the air warm enough to leave my coat unbuttoned outside. White bulbs bud on trees, bird song I'd forgotten all about making me feel six again. Is it pathetic to admit I wait for her name to appear either on my mobile or my dashboard display? Of course it is. Feels it every time I'm in her area, company Mercs and Beemers sliding past me, Dior and Cartier teasing from shop windows, but she calls. Again and again.

She's mean with her time, but I make room for her in my empty schedule. We meet in cafés in hidden side streets, nibble her favourite imported strawberries in local parks, sandwiches by the river. She does all the talking, tells me about her lovers, about this girl she's been seeing, this Concorde trip to New York, the things she bought on some guy's platinum Amex, this drinks-do at an embassy, this whatthefuckingever. After a few meetings, I stop listening for at least the first half hour. She has to get all the shiny bullshit out of her system, expel it, before she's able to do more than just play eye candy. Then we move on, walk round book shops, markets, once round her old school. Weekends we speed beyond city limits for a couple of hours, away from the noise, from the cloud she's under. In little anonymous towns, in the grounds of castles and farm houses, she tries to open up. The mansion I saw that first night was not hers, but one of her lover's. Hers is a little rented place, back on the ugly side of the river. Law chose itself. An avalanche of things swayed her some years ago, nightmares at home, at college, a whole year ripped out of her life. She tells me this because she feels something when she's with me. A little peace. A connection. Like we've met before, in some time before it all warped on her, some scary, sweet deja vu.

Am I falling for it? The more I learn about her, the less I know, week after curious week. She starts calling almost every night, and when I can, I drive to wherever she chooses, desperate to steal her away from her other world. There's no sex, not much in the way of physical contact, but I start shaving regularly when she complains

my stubble hurts her delicate face. I even cut down smoking, make sure the clothes I wear don't reek of tobacco. She doesn't like perfume, but seems obsessed with hygiene to the point of masochism, spends an amazing amount of money not just on cosmetics but medicines of all sorts, treatments, therapies. We spend sunny afternoons in a physio clinic, seeing to a wrist she says she sprained while playing volleyball. Something tells me she hit or was hurt by someone else, but I sit and watch her receive magnetic pulse therapy without a word. Two days later, she meets me with a bandage on her hand. Spilled coffee on it, she says, takes off the wrapping to prove it's just that. The peeling skin looks innocent enough, but something tells me there's more to these accidents, something more covert than accidental self-harm.

One day, she invites me to her mother's, says she brings all her men round here, just to save herself having to cook. The mother's heard all about me, greets me like I'm a doctor come to save her little girl's life. Her old bedroom is full of books and paintings. It all looks tidy, pretty, too good to be true.

After lunch, she falls asleep next to me on her childhood bed. I watch the trees outside, leaves gingerly testing the warming air, swaying uncertainly. Things are very wrong here, but I don't care any more. Don't care if I'm being toyed with, no more than a plaything on her long list of engagements. After years of feeling next to nothing for no one, I've stopped caring full-stop. Her hair glistens in the warm afternoon light, black waves falling in folds and layers of mind-numbing grace, and I start to ache. She stirs, turns to look at me, eyes moist, and all I want now, after years out in the cold, is to feel love again. Don't care if it's mutual. Don't care about happiness any more, hers or mine. Don't care if it's mad, one-way, suicidal. Women fall for bad guys all the time. Maybe this is my witch. Thinking about all the sweet women I've known, I know why I'm here, with this smart, screwed-up siren. Watching mates settling into inevitable homes, pregnancies, debts they'll never get out of, all I want for is for a bit of pure, uncut emotion again.

She wipes her cheeks, turns over, asks me for a massage. I melt into giving, dangerous worship. Afterwards, lying side by side, she asks if there's anything she can do for me in return. I shake my head. She moves her face away from mine, her mouth on my neck, her hands under my shirt, but I stay still until she stops, falls away, hurt. She wants to pay me back for kindness, be free of emotional debt, but there's no way to set her straight, say what it is I do and don't need, explain the terms of my surrender.

It's like that first silence on the bridge. She has to have control, cover her ego after what she thinks is rejection. After an afternoon shopping for some herbal remedies, she finally agrees to let me visit her place, spends the whole way there taking the piss out of my old Ford. Yes, I know her main other man has a top of the range Mercedes. Fuck, she must be scared, all this bile pouring out of her, all this dark, nasty humour.

The small flat is empty, outmoded minimalism hurting the eye. In bed, she turns into a vicious version of the call girl I heard during that first ride. Giggling, scratching, forcing pain, on me, herself, as if the bed was a place for blood and bitter sweat. I put up with it for a while, but her animal self scares me shitless. She's too weak to rape me, wants me to do it instead. I pull away, light a cigarette, even though she hates them livid, stare at the mess her beauty's become in the tangle of bed sheets. She laughs, brushes back her hair, sweet-talks me back, but it's all a game, a travesty. I pull away again, retreat to the other end of the room. She pretends to sleep, then gets up, gets some vodka out of the freezer. Plunging through dark hours, she spits stories of what the last man she loved made her do. Challenges. Dares. Climbing rooftops. Drinking whatever. Taking whatever. Doing things to herself. To friends. With friends. With strangers. She starts weeping, her voice changed again, beauty no camouflage any more, not with the shame and misery pouring out. I try to comfort her, but she says I know nothing, understand nothing, can do nothing. Not after what's happened. Things she's done. He made her do. She let herself do. Whatever it is, whatever horrors in her closet, I don't care to judge, just want to squeeze them all out with my open arms, and if I can't, then swallow them myself. Yet her body is locked, her muscles seized, like an animal's, fearing or preparing for attack. She stares at me as I sit naked in an armchair, hisses that I look just like him, the face, the arms, everything, everything but the eyes. His were blue, and he had this smile, this smile she says she loved.

I sleep maybe an hour, if that. Not because of stress or fear or anything tangible, light taking forever to penetrate the curtains.

Driving her back to work, she sits up front, her head on my shoulder, says she needs me. Nothing else. Neither of us has strength for any more words.

In the evening, we go to a cinema, watch some ridiculous comedy, silent all the way home, her bed a storm of sweat and tears again.

Again, I sleep next to nothing. This time it's pain. My stomach feels like disease has exploded into it. I'm almost crying. Never get anything like it, no headaches, no complaints, the agony a novelty. I'd laugh about what I said about swallowing her demons, but I can't unpeel the grimace from my face long enough to replace it with a smile. Was it the food she'd cooked? The orange juice I've been sipping all night? Toxins? Acids? My

guts are eating themselves, my head a mess of dazed signals. Pain, emptiness, confusion. What have I got myself into here? Can she tell what it is I want? Is she trying to scare me off, or is this her way of showing love?

After forty eight hours with almost no sleep, I get up, head for the nearest shop. Rennies, paracetamol, mint tea, anything to dull the agony making me limp back to the flat.

I don't say anything when she wakes, have no vocabulary to describe what's happening inside me. The day turns out beautiful, the air shocking with warmth as I drive her to work again. She says nothing either, nothing more about need, doesn't even look at me, as if something was ailing her too.

I call in sick, drive down to the river.

By the time I wake, the pain seems to have dulled, the last few months like a ridiculous dream. I spend the rest of the afternoon on that riverbank, trying to make sense of confusion, if such alchemy is possible. She won't call back in a hurry, I know that little. Made her decision long before she met me. Killed something, and doesn't want it back. Doesn't want love, and why should she, when it's torn her in two already.

I drive around, clocking up hours, days, surprised at how much of the city's got the stamp of our time on it already. Does it matter that she's not returning my calls? Do I feel sorry for her or me? Never considered hurting her feelings much. Never thought it'd be the crow running for cover.

She calls a couple of weeks later, invites me for coffee. She's sorry about not getting in touch earlier, but she's met some guy, a retail systems designer, champion yachtsman and rich to boot. Talking about him leaves her breathless, her whole lunch hour spent trying to convince me just how wonderful he is, how they synch, click, finish each other's sentences, *deja vu* all over again.

Suddenly, she grabs the hand of a young man walking past our table. Someone from a parliamentary committee, she informs me before going back to her yachtsman manager monologue. I look away. Two weeks ago, she would've introduced me to her friend, slipped in something about my writing, boasted a bit. Today, I impress no one, old hat in a world as fast moving, as impermanent as hers. I look back at the cute nose, the glossy lips, the perfectly manicured fingers playing with my lighter, feel only pity for us both. So close. Managed to get her so close to remembering something, now only the surface sheen left. Only that on offer. I try to smile, no pain holding me back today, my ears back on off, but it's hard. Don't want to pretend or prove anything as her mouth hits autopilot, her mind back where we started, her tiny red mobile ringing very quietly in her handbag, ignored.

## KIDS OF KIDS

Dead on six, I put the work phone down, my mind trying to clear itself of the day's business. I get my own, private voice back, pick up, dial. She's home, says nothing about it, and I don't ask. The subject can wait the half hour walk it'll take to get to her door.

Ringling the bell, my back is running with sweat. It's not worry, just a late summer evening in the heart of London.

She leads me up the narrow stairs, then stops, turns, her smiling mouth all over mine. I should guess she's drunk already, but she's been on vodkas and I can't taste the booze on her breath. She pulls at me with her hands and lips and without a word I know the test was negative, or positive, or whatever it needed to be to get our relationship back in some kind of clear again.

We're both smiling through this moment of uncharacteristic frenzy, necking on the stairs, hips grinding, me on the bottom, back being broken by the steps, her hands looking to get the shirt tails out of my trousers. I grab her wrists, pull them up to my chest, thinking that maybe she really does want to do it, here and now, after weeks of stress and abstinence, of silent, sleep-free nights, assurances that it'd be OK, that I'd change plans, stay, take care of all that was needed, the baby or the abortion, anything her heart desired. She looks straight at me, laughing for the first time in an age, and if any smile could melt senses, it's hers. I let myself believe everything. That the scare was real. That we're both relieved. Even the turn-on, believe we're about to rip each other's clothes off, start here and now, fools again, without protection, without any wisdom or learning. And I don't mind. Don't mind missing the point, the danger, the pain now or later, see, smell and feel her heat on me and it's all smoke-screen enough.

But just as I get hard, she tells me there are people waiting upstairs. I calm right down, following cues. Standing a few steps below her, tidying myself up, my eyes level with her hips. Jeans twist, teasing, ideal beauty inches from my face, totally inaccessible.

Rob, Rachel and a guy I don't know are in the living room, watching taped reruns of something, all three along to celebrate freedom so sweet she needs booze and friendly faces to stomach it. I don't want their company, alcohol even less so, yet when she offers, still thrown by the staircase scene, I give in again. They're on iced vodka mixers and the beer I'm given is warm. She knows I hate that, but I asked for it myself, and even though it's not intentional, I can tell she's grateful it'd been left out of the fridge earlier. She grabs her drink, curls up on the sofa next to the guy I can't name, rubs her nose on his shoulder. He squirms a little, looks less than comfortable. She either hasn't got the balls to flirt with a straight guy in front of me today, or the heart, I'm not sure which.

I go through to the bedroom, light a cigarette, swallow tepid Grolsch. Her record collection is immaculate, but for once I can't find anything appropriate for my mood. I finally settle for something raw, smoke, listen to the speakers thump, try not to worry about a thing. It's too hot for earnest stress. Outside her window the city swelters, people milling, problems rushing through their heads, but it seems I'm off the hook for once and can afford to be still, free from thought, sweating for the sake of heat alone. It feels OK. A moment of incomplete loneliness. No, more than that, of incomplete togetherness. Far from great, but I know I've not been making the right moves of late to deserve greatness. Only five minutes back I'd been ready to say Yes to being a father, promise things for better or worse, and now, the other side of what still seems like a fine line, I'm alone, drinking things I have no taste for, wishing for things I can't have. Simple things, like cold beer, like children, like love.

At some point during the Friday night house party we all drag ourselves to, she pulls me out the door and into a cab, doesn't say why, but I know she wants me to ask. She says I've misbehaved. Says I offended her gay friend, the one whose name I still can't recall. Says I made all kinds of allusions to straightness, all night, like I wanted to convert him, like I was Mr Threatened. But all I am is stumped. Never had any such thing in mind, nothing beyond jesting. What else were you going to joke about with most gay guys at a party but sex? It's dumb, but that's the protocol, and she knows it.

Everything simmers. Even the cab driver seems pissed off with us, but we don't seem to have the energy for a fight. It's too hot, too deep into the night, and we started drinking far too early. All I want for now is the comfort of her bed and the gentle silence I know I can wrap her in there.

We ride on without any further words, and all I'm thinking about is those I've said, to anyone, on any given day or night of my life. How many of those have been worth the effort, and how many just dull antidote to silence? What ratio? One-to-nine? Less than that? Am I being too generous with myself? It's a frightening thought, but refreshing. Refreshing to be scared of your own voice for once, of the commonplace uselessness of it.

She wears her ceremonial, unisex pyjamas to bed. Most women I've known, no matter how glamour or self-conscious, had and used them regularly, not necessarily to make any kind of "I don't want to be beautiful for you tonight" statements, just for their own private comfort.

Strangely enough, her bed's cool and comfortable, her skin soft enough to calm everything, and we curl into each other in exhausted silence. It's the tail-end of summer, hot, outdoors and in, not hot enough to burn, but enough to take some of the blame for what we're doing to each other.

In the morning, light streams through a wide-open window all clean and fresh, clearing the dirty air of London without so much as a smudge on it. Her angel-blond hair shines, and I'm just sorry about my continual failure to explain to her how glorious it looks each morning, all splayed and tussled, all gold. She never wants to believe me, always keeps brushing volume out of it the moment she's out of bed, but before then, before the day gets in the way, me awake and she disarmed, she always glows, her skin and hair like that of a child straight after a bath. Moments like these, it's hard to see how this woman can be anywhere near ready enough to be a mother, looking that clean and child-like herself. But she is. For all the plans and time scales we've both got in mind, the speculations, we're both as ready as we ever need be. When was a man really a man, in his own eyes anyway? When any father ready to be a father? A mother to be a mother? Kids of kids, everyone. Torn by problems that aren't problems, just wishes as yet unwished for. Questions without answers. You could explain much, but not the worthwhile stuff. How can I be calm next to her, her clean, soft flesh sound asleep in my arms, when I know the moment we face each other again it'll all blow out like a candle, the greatness gone, the happiness swept away by the day proper? In bed, so close not even sweat can pass between us, I'm missing her already. How? A month yet before I'm out of the country and already I'm living in miserable advance, sure there'll be a hole left in our lives the size and shape of us both. And still, somehow, we can't fill it, can't make it together, rolling round in speech and sex in the absence of real answers. You could know just about everything but that which really mattered. Reason wholesale, and still not know shit. Not well enough to explain to others. Not to share or mend. Questions without worthwhile answers, or answers that dawned on you sometimes, very first thing in the morning, born again into a time beyond the need for explanations. A time before the time you promised yourself happiness, before promises seemed necessary, when you could just look and see, young, dumbfounded and somehow happy to be a million miles away from the moment beauty left your side and barked again, tearing dreams out of her hair with a metal wire brush.

## HELL-BENT

It's one of those Warsaw night bus scenes you know is a permanent threat, like the gangs of burly ticket inspectors hunting for bribes, or drunken students making stupid noise, like it was just quantity of volume made the times of their lives. I'm two stops from home, deep into a book, trying to make my eyes focus against the sway of machine and the drink in my veins, when a muscle-mountain skinhead gets on with a freshly lit cigarette and drops into the seat in front of me. He seems high on something, starts talking to a group of silent twenty year olds, cracking jokes about smoking compartments and other deadweight attempts at winning them over. They do their best to ignore him, but he won't let it go. One of the group sits alone, right in front of the smiling stranger, smoke getting in his eyes. The thug asks whether it's bothering him. The kid says nothing. Thug moves closer, arms over the back of kid's seat, asks for an ashtray. Kid says nothing. Thug takes the cigarette out of his mouth, tips ash over kid's hat. In view of everyone in the back of the bus, kid does nothing. His mates look on, trying to work out exactly how this thing got started, if the point they're at now is already past recovery or whether everything can still be wished away. Thug continues smiling and spouting shit 'till kid snaps, tired of waiting for the next taunt, tells him he's not interested. Thug smiles a curious smile, as if things weren't quite going according to plan, but it's no bother for him to readjust, none at all. He asks if a smack in the mouth would be preferable. Kid looks far off, like he hasn't the patience for this, for whatever words he is literally being forced to utter before a lightning-fast punch knocks them back, stillborn.

Kid's eyes close, lips drawn tight, mouth instantly swelling where tooth ripped cheek. He looks like he's thinking to himself, or praying. Thug asks if he'd like another, fist hanging in mid-air, ready.

Kid's eyes open. Six pairs of hands from nearby seats descend, shoving the cigarette out of the way. The beating's strangely silent. I can't hear any voices, only distinguish the sound of fabric and flesh clashing. A groan escapes someone. Thug's trainer kicks out through the crush towards me, unaimed, kid's eyes staring blankly, the same frustrated, tired face trying to avoid the flailing limbs. The driver pulls over, kills the engine, lights inside dimming, doors folding open with a pneumatic sigh. The largest of the group reaches in, straight into the throng's heart, pulls it out, receives a headbutt in reply. In the heat of battle, it doesn't register. As they drag the struggling body outside, the face appears for a split second, unbloodied, the eyes trying to recover some thought to cling to. Mates pile out the other exits, covering escape routes, followed by kid, me and a couple of others. It's not snowing anymore, but there's a fresh white blanket on the lawn to break the fall. Mates scramble over each other to get stuck in. They try kicking, but it's too awkward, too chaotic, feet clashing. Thug never once makes a noise, as if none of what is being done to him deserved comment or reply. It's hard to say just how many calories or kilojoules a punch takes out of the puncher, but it's a lot. That's another thing they're learning today, a lesson he knows all too well, waiting for them to burn out, silent, saving his strength for future recovery. Kid too is speechless, watching the proceedings from a studied distance. His swelling lip excuses him from making a further effort, but he's enjoying the spectacle, like a boxing fan, eyes scanning, telepathically guiding the hands of others.

Then, one by one, as if in prearranged order, they fall back, trying not to pant too loud, not show tiredness or temper. The diesel engine behind us starts up again and some others get on. The driver waits a few moments, lets the mob know they're still welcome aboard, but they don't take any notice. The doors slam, roll away with a hiss of air-fed suspension. The baggy jeans and baseball jacket on the ground look remarkably unaffected, if a little twisted in places. Only the limbs inside them, rolling about without purpose or strength, convey real damage. No one seems to know what to say or do next. Kid lights a cigarette, looks like he's torn between tipping ash over the man and offering it down. The moment needs character to finish in style, character none of them have. Thug's face is still unbloodied, but it seems crooked, eyes shut against pain, the mouth no longer smiling. He looks tired. A leg makes a chaotic lunge at the attackers crowding round, receives a furious penalty-kick in reply. The thud of boot striking denim and muscle is terrible. The tallest youth grabs the kicker

by his coat and drags them all away. I see them break into a little jog, then slow back down, tired shoulders shifting in the distance, asserting pride in a bad battle well won.

I hold onto my book like it was a badge of immunity. I've nothing to fear, from the man lying in his bed of trampled snow, his kind, or the police. Nobody can connect me. I feel like an observer without presence, even though I know it's philosophically impossible. The heat of the spectacle leaves me almost as quickly as it sprung up, leaving in its place the quicksilver rush of cold reason to dull my thoughts. The anti-climax. I consider turning Samaritan, calling for help, but don't. Don't know what the right thing to do is. Violence jumps me, the fights, the crashes, the breakages of my life, and I know that the right thing those few moments ago would've been to join in, same as the right thing now is to go get help, but I wasn't mad enough to lash out then and I'm not calm enough to care now.

Starting to stumble home through unmarked snow, Monkey Mafia's "Retreat, Wicked Man" soundtracks my thoughts, but there's now way to tell if the tune is playing for thug or for me tonight.

Back in the comfort of my flat, I sit in drunken, sleepless stupor, watching Seventies film of US Marine jets on cable. With the sound off, the awful beauty of Blackbirds, Hellcats and Phantoms parades before me, the hard-set faces of pilots in close-up, naive colours in every shot. The blues of sea and sky, the whites of smoke trails and proud teeth, the reds and yellows of nose cones and jet exhausts. The film is old, colours washed out like memories of childhood, but the camera angles are so tuned into the aesthetic power of the images, it's hard to tell whether they were made as archive or art, a fuck-you to the Soviets or to god himself. Horsepower. Firepower. Afterburn. Supercharged. Deadly words stomp through my thoughts, their power and glory something god never even dreamt of, and the only thing scaring me now, muscles thawing, my own mouth twisted in a smile, is that I'm not watching the Wildlife or Fashion or Playboy Channel, but this crazed glamour, loving every hell-bent shot.

Warsaw 04/01

## FACE-OFF

How'd you get lost in a city you were born in? A capital city? Dead in the heart of it, a heart stretched across the biggest square in Europe, dominated by a monstrous landmark visible for miles around?

The Palace of Culture, built in honour of Uncle Joe, still towers over Warsaw with its joke name and bulk. It's just a giant, dirty lump of stone, but others, of the modern, glass-fronted kind, have surrounded it of late, their polished backs turned on the relic, ridiculing it with its own reflection. The lot of them loom over this clear, March day, sucking the sky into their mirrored faces. Looking up, I try to picture the crowd of rooms and faces behind them, but can't, can't make my imagination penetrate. Standing below, I'm crowded in by fast-food booths selling microwaved hot dogs and burgers, bus stop ads for mobile phones and French underwear, McDonald's Golden Arches everywhere. A Coke-red-faced girl winks at me from the world's biggest advertising billboard half a mile away, while right in front of me a twenty foot, stone-cast youth looks bravely out from an alcove in the side of the Palace, a book under his arm, the names Marx, Engels and Lenin etched into its cover. He's no longer guarding the old revolution and its pin-headed temple, but a restaurant, casino and cinema complex planted into it by someone with more of an epic sense of humour than I'm in the mood for today.

I see all of this as I stand next to my father, the two of us here to meet a stranger about a car the man was supposed to deliver and now can't, but will collect the money for anyway. Why that is is my father's business, and way out of the range of my cares. He's come all the way from London, an immigrant back for a few days to deliver some things, collect others, someone else's ill-fated car among them. The English-plated Beemer I'll now never see blew a valve some months ago, just past the border, and like everything else here, setting the damage right has taken longer than promised. My old man's already got his return coach ticket. We've only come to hand over money for whatever work's been done so far. It's not his money. Never is. He's only running errands for others, and, as sometimes happens, I'm here playing fifth wheel to his middle-man affairs.

The two men are standing beside me in the middle of the car park, discussing the absent machine. The stranger is small, full of friendly chatter and excuses, an apologetic grin beaming from under a large moustache. They stand swaying in the cold, the stranger smoking a cheap brand of Polish fags, my father an effeminately thin, white Vogue, both of them killing time before money exchanges hands, talking diesel engines and used car prices. My father knows the answers to questions before he asks them, often making intentionally false observations just to give the man something contradictory to say in reply. I watch their faces, my father's that of someone trying to act wisely aloof, a bland little smile playing on his creased lips, the other looking through his shaded glasses at him, acting over-friendly as compensation for the failure he's played a part in.

Standing by, out of the deal, I try to find a face for so senseless an occasion. I've worn so many of them today. The blank stare of a nameless stranger during several long lift rides. The smile beamed at some student handing out leaflets in the street. The glare of an impatient customer meaning business at a travel agents messing us around. One of studied distance during a call to a woman I'm keen to get close to. It was only a phone conversation, but even so, I felt my face setting hard in preparation for a complex game we'll play with each other soon enough. Got to know you've got your guard up, even if only to be able to drop it the moment you mean to.

But here and now, amongst strangers of various degree, I'm lost for any kind of self to offer up. There is nothing in sight I can hang my eyes on, nothing to cling thought to. The penetrating cold feels like the only thing connecting me with the tangible world right now, everything else seemingly unreal, dead, or at least two-dimensional, which amounts to the same inane thing.

Even the thought that I might at some point try writing about this hollow, sorry moment gives up nothing worthwhile. Waiting for the two of them to stop wasting my time, I know that soon enough I'll be back in my flat, father long gone, wondering how to put a sharp spin on the tail of this story, how I can leave you satisfied with its relevance to your life and the time you've given up to it. Words cross my mind - car, deal, father, foreigner - but they all piece together into a picture far more romantic than the reality of what is actually happening, or rather not happening, here. Writing about this scene will inevitably bless it with qualities it lacks. The very act of writing will give it substance,

and not accidentally either. I'll do it to cast a spell against meaninglessness, lie through my teeth, tell it as an open-air exchange of fat cash between strangers, set within a cute picture of a schizophrenic city with allusions to similar forces within relationships. It's not like that, nothing like that at all. It's dumb and small and the vacuum of it sucks life from me with every breath I expel, but I'll lie, right here and now, to keep at bay the instant when the echo of these few words stops ringing through your mind and the instant after, when their spell vanishes from memory as suddenly as pages closing and you move right back into something not even the finest literature can tear you away from for long, the place I'm in now, silent and trembling, desperately searching for a face to meet the world with.

## COULDN'T SAY I CARED

Can't thank my father for dying when he did. Apart from the logistics of arranging such a conversation, I can't muster up the sympathy. I wish I could, wish his death had been the first selfless act of his life, that he was thinking of others when the end came, but none of that would be true.

His stroke was unexpected, painless and settled all doubts about his claims to have had cancer. The autopsy showed years of fag addiction had ravaged the lungs, but no sign of the tumours he'd talked about, his medical records documenting none of the examinations or diagnoses he'd near enough boasted of. His GP looked unpleasantly unsurprised when I quizzed her, forced to tell bitter truths beyond the death of one of her patients. She said my father kept asking for oncological tests to be done, always getting the all-clear, then looked at me as if that should've been enough for understanding between us. I asked if the stroke could've been brought on by the stress of living that particular lie, by almost wishing his own bullshit to be true, but she shrugged, waxed lyrical about bodies and souls and the complex relationship between the two, at which point I paid my thanks and let her get back to business.

But, regardless of what else happened then or since, I can't show my father the same gratitude. Don't want to start prettifying his memory, like a mortician would a cadaver. He wouldn't have approved, this business of speaking ill of his dead self, but that is one more reason why it ought to be done.

It was always a marker of sorts, the question Would he have done it this way? Can I see my old man in this move I'm about to make, in this word, this smile, this gesture? If the answer was ever even near Yes, I'd double back. Anything not to follow in those footsteps.

The very first memory I have of him is a bad one, on holiday somewhere by the seaside, watching him balancing theatrically on the edge of a cliff. I was in hysterics, screaming, trying to get him to get back to safety, but all I can remember in reply is his grin, smug, loving the build up of hysteria in his name. I bet he wasn't anywhere near the edge, or there was a safe shelf right below, but I wasn't to know that then.

He loved being the centre of attention, as much as he hated his own lack of talent for attracting it. A charmless man, desperate to please, racked by unimportant contradictions. A failed academic, born into a family of dodgy dealers. Married late to someone much younger, better looking and meaner than him. A lazy entrepreneur. A careless liar. Not a bad man, not by far, but then that's never much of a compliment. Not coming from your own flesh and blood.

When I passed on his news about the cancer diagnosis, my mother, his ex-wife, shrugged, lit up, then went into one. Sentiment, regret, anger, fear. It all just poured right out. By then the two of them had managed to warp each other's characters so profoundly, they were incapable of direct, natural responses to news of one another. She told the truth when she said she thought he deserved it, lied when she said she didn't care. After fifteen years of marriage, almost forty of hanging round one another, such news, no matter how much you try acting your way out of it, will rock the axis of your world.

She didn't once ask me how I felt. No matter what had happened, how far we all were from one another, he was still my father and I should've felt something. And she should've asked. But she didn't have the strength to look beyond her own world of anger and thwarted need. Had long forgotten how to. Forgotten it was possible.

Had I mentioned this, she would've instantly gone on the attack, would've said she wanted to reach out, wanted to ask and care and mother me, but that it was all my fault, and my father's, that I was just like him and she just as afraid, just as swamped and choked and powerless around her own son.

A tragic tale, and only half true, two good reasons not say anything, just let her ramble on about how he'd brought it all on himself with his smoking and drinking and hateful nature, how he'd

leave her with even less than he had already, how his own death would be the most selfish, egocentric thing he'd do in his whole lousy life.

Betty was unlucky enough to be my mother's replacement. A plain, plain-chocolate skinned refugee from the Ivory Coast, she satisfied my father's fetish for dark skin and servitude.

In her role of concubine, she helped in his shop, kept the upstairs flat, cooked and smiled and never said no, but most of all she listened to the empty chatterbox he'd become in his final years. He quit making the effort to look or sound like appearances or words mattered. Turned unkempt, distracted, ignorant. Stopped reading, started whining, airing all kinds of bullshit opinions that come to tired old people. Mean, lazy, racist. Betty spoiled him with her patience. Her heart forgave what her frail head did not like, and I don't doubt she disliked plenty, but when you have horrors behind you and ask for nothing but peace from the world, you'll pay dearly for the status quo.

I felt sorry for her in a way I never felt sorry for myself. She was small and silly and liked telling jokes dirty enough to make both me and my father cringe, but what little of her there was in the world was gold and deserved better than the old codger he'd become.

The cancer lie was what I'd call His Style By Then. She phoned one day, in tears. I felt both angry and guilty, thinking he'd done something awful to upset this dear woman, but she finally spat the news out of her sobbing throat. Or rather let me say it for her. The evil c-word. God knows what sweet, superstitious little Betty must've felt, but whatever it was, she was not handling it well. Still struggling with her English, fearing for his and her life also, when she eventually got it past her lips, it sounded like a wondrous thing, like Knighthood or Jackpot or Love.

I should've smelled a rat from the off, what with his vague answers, his deathly silences, his refusal to have anyone accompany him to hospital, but, to tell the truth, truth was the last thing I wanted to pursue. I feared it. Feared he wasn't lying, feared a long, drawn out illness. Feared I would be forced to nurse him, fight outrageous waiting lists, pretend I really was on his side, really cared about him going through chemo, drugs, diets, alternative therapies I knew he'd fight harder than the disease itself. I wasn't sure I had that kind of marathon performance in me. I feared failing to pull it off as much as I feared succeeding, only to find out he really was lying all along. Or hearing him say the therapies had worked, without ever knowing if they had or if it was just him quitting the deception. He'd lied so many times before, about his finances, his other women, his true feelings. All those conversations we never had, the Christmases he'd skipped, endless promises broken as far back as I can remember, but I kept quiet. Didn't challenge him, nor share my suspicions with anyone else. My mother didn't care, Betty didn't need to know and there was a third party I wanted to keep in the dark.

I think my father would've wanted Simone to know, would've desired her sympathy. From the moment I introduced them, she got his nod as my partner, another black mark against him. Of the few women I let him near, he always cheered the wrong ones. The one I did love he hardly noticed, while Simone got his instant approval, but then Simone you couldn't hope to miss. She had the kind of beauty could stop the day in its tracks, could turn mean old bastards like him into bashful schoolboys, spin a man's head 'till there was nothing left in it save her siren song.

I met her when I was twenty, a time of heavy losses. My mate Tom, wiped out in a hit and run. My beloved aunt Maggie, gone after a lifelong battle against multiple ailments. Dave, my boss, a cold and hard-humoured little man, leaving me his café and backlog of debts in a will uncontested by his family. Laura, my first real love, did not die, but after I lost her to heartbreak and schizophrenia, I threw myself into saving the ailing café like it was symbolic of something. Going for some arty/antique look, I had it done up with house clearance cast-offs, bookcases, sideboards, an old piano. One day, a customer got off his chair and started playing. First, his native Brel and Aznavour, then Beatles and other sing-alongs. Within minutes, had the lunchtime crowd laughing like children. Amazing. He came back a few times and I offered him a job, jamming evenings to attract trade away from pubs. His name was Simon, but he never let anyone call him that. Preferred his second name, Louis. Thought his first made him and Simone sound like a cheesy double act, though, in secret, he loved the synchronicity of it. The way it reeked of destiny. The perfect match. Joined at the hip.

Together forever. They matched in beauty too, small, wiry, thick black hair falling in effortless folds round honey-coloured faces, more Latin than Gallic, more siblings than lovers. Yet while that lithe, long haired beauty made him effeminately handsome, Simone was near enough perfect. Sapphire-cut eyes hiding behind a long fringe, fabrics dyed a deep red, her permanent colours of choice, wrapped round elfin curves. The colour was far from a cry for attention, rather the opposite, almost a dare for any man to notice anything but that beatific stare and smile.

The first time I saw her, I turned red myself. It was impossible not to when she looked at you, not to reveal every naked thought, every ounce of need, of hopeful, romantic soul. Within weeks, my new pal Louis and his musical mates were playing in my café most nights. Simone did nothing. Her mother was a PR consultant in London, her beloved father a painter of international renown (some time later, once she'd switched beds, we found him strolling round Place du Tertre, up on Montmartre. He was drunk, in some awful disguise, offered to sketch her portrait for a hundred franks. Didn't recognise his own daughter. She thought it was hilarious. Couldn't put a foot wrong with her, even when he went off to hawk with the rest of his sketchpad mates, abandoning us like a couple of strangers). Although neither provided their only daughter with means of support, she was not used to having to earn her way. That was Louis' concern. Most days she hung around the café doing nothing, sketching sometimes, or reading. I tried not to think anything of it at first, but it became impossible. Her movements, her glances, her little requests and jokes and conversation non starters.

After six months of this wonderful idleness, something I would gladly have paid her for anyway, Louis suggested she ask me for a job. Said it as a joke, but she just smiled her Sphinx smile, showed up the next day with a cardinal-red apron, asked where I wanted her. With those very words she kicked off a year of the maddest foreplay. Louis, for all his cosmopolitan charm, was just a laughing boy. Happy, funny, lovable in a cute, matey way. The only serious thing about him was his obsessive love for Simone, and that only because she made him suffer for it. He liked confessing, especially after a few drinks, just out of her ear shot. Told me all about her moods, her bad habits, her little cruelties and affairs. Did he know everything else? How she danced round me, how she talked, the little compliments, presents, bought with his money, all digs at his expense? He must've noticed, must've regretted ever mentioning the job idea, but what could he do? He was a slave and knew it and what hurt he felt he kept in check, for the sake of keeping her a little longer. I think he also wanted to test me, see which way I would swing, the way of friendship or easy sex. But easy was not the word. Because of what I'd seen of my parents and the endless layers of lies between them. Because from Laura I'd learnt you don't make love through flesh alone. And because I wanted Simone all to myself, wanted her to love me, wanted her to leave Louis, wanted her for life.

I wanted her because she was clever and beautiful and laughed at my jokes, and because of the way she moved. Often, after closing time, we'd either hang out in my flat upstairs, listening to music, drinking, dancing 'till early light, or hop in a cab and go to some cheesy club in Ealing or Hammersmith. Little Louis was a golem on the dancefloor, I could bop with the best of them, but neither one of us, nobody mattered when Simone stepped up. What words can get close to what happened when she wrapped her lithe curves round music? I'd known plenty of girls by then, watched many a woman in that café, in pubs, clubs, all the places it was so easy to get to them if you looked, smiled and sounded right, but not seen anything like her, before or since. She had that amazing something, that Nijinsky, Fontaine, Ginger and Fred gift separates the pearl from the chorus line. Not skill, not mere talent, not showy or sexual, some pure grace in her hips and wrists made me grin every time she moved. In slim, hipster trousers and tight red tops, she shamed everyone under the lights. Everyone. Needed no partner to shine, just stole the show, every time. Bent the rules of gravity, made time stop and stare, seduced me like I was a schoolboy and she the original Eve.

I wish I was exaggerating. Wish beauty wasn't as rare and thus mean to us as this, but it is and Simone was a walking, spinning embodiment of its mad magic. I could've been sick, could've been dying from work and stress and the drugs in my veins, but I'd never turn down Louis' invitations, not if there was a chance of having those limbs trap me in rapture.

Did I know she was performing for me? Maybe I did. Maybe only too well. Looking back, I see through her act, through all her stillness. The way she would stand, pretending to melt into a wall, eyes down, silent, seemingly unaware of her graces. Or laugh at jokes, stupid jokes even, so cute, so

innocent. She must've known how it enhanced her beauty. All that sweetness. How hard she must've worked, like a spinning top, a whirling dervish, trying to make the eyes of men gravitate towards her without once giving the game away.

So good. So good at it. In spite of Louis' stories, of her attempts at cheating with me, of all my heart was telling me to fear, I fell.

One morning, sunshine slicing through the café windows, the smell of fresh pastries and coffee and her perfume spinning the world, I took her hand and just said "Leave him". I felt like a child, a simpleton aiming for stars with trite words, but you should've seen those eyes melt. Should've felt her next to me, felt her breath on my neck. Should've felt what I was feeling then, after a year and a half of waiting, all that beauty finally in my arms.

Me, I should've felt what Louis felt when she said she was leaving. For me. How well prepared was my then-best pal? What were his defences like? After a year and a half of our friendship, I knew something of his heart, but less of his psyche, of its skills at dealing with such blows. I justified it to myself, saying she was too much for him to handle, that she made him miserable, that it was best for all in the long run. That he'd get over it, that it was me she wanted, not him, that I had responsibilities that went beyond my own needs.

That I couldn't quite yet say I loved her didn't seem to be an issue. I admired, adored her, thought the rest would follow, and if it didn't, if I never loved again like I had Laura, then that was just the way of the world. Never thought I'd get another chance like this, another beauty such as her to claim as my own. Confused and still guilty, I made myself think corrupt, bitter thoughts, forgetting most of what I had learnt, just thinking with ego, like my father, like most men, like I thought all ended up thinking in the end.

But you can only do without love when love is a dirty word, and it was far from that in my lexicon.

When we did finally come to touch, bad things happened. Don't know which came first, what caused what, but for a start, the grace she showed on the dancefloor did not translate to the bedroom. She seemed wary of my hands, uncomfortable touching. Not scared uncomfortable, not like the survivor of some sexual trauma, just uncomfortable in herself, her movements sharp and awkward, like those of a teenage debutante unsure of what her mother will say. Trust. It was absent from our bed, chilling the mood, affecting me too. Where she was all harsh angles, I, for the first time ever, had gone soft. Could not perform. Strange. Stupid. After all this time, this year of watching, suddenly handed my prize, I was unable to penetrate, my erections short and unconvincing, my orgasms all too quick. I couldn't figure it out. My sex life with Laura had been ideal and the relationships I'd chosen since, though none of them delivering love beyond other acts of romance, fulfilling. I didn't blame myself for this new failure, feeling as calm and comfortable as ever. Didn't blame Simone either. Even though she lacked her usual graces, she certainly tried to please. Tried hard. Didn't like it when I wanted to return her favours, utterly selfless in bed. Worryingly so. With Laura, there had been no question of selfishness or balance. Loving just took care of itself. Trusting monogamy, we used condoms as sex toys, just for a taste of something new. With Simone, most times I could not get enough of an erection to even put one on. She didn't seem to mind. I knew that though she was on the pill, she was having problems choosing a brand that suited her delicate organism, but even when I tried to avoid penetration, careful to protect her freedoms, she insisted on going all the way, every time. Seemed hungry for orgasms, mine as much as hers, which were dark and explosive, almost as if pleasure was a secret she didn't want to share with the world.

Yet, in spite of the awkwardness in bed, she seemed honestly happy. We took on a new waitress, blonde and plain. Simone withdrew into the financial security the café offered, spending just below the amount could've caused friction between us, as much on books as she did clothes or bits to prettify our now shared flat. I thought Louis might have been a worry, for the first time in years gone from the landscape of her life. He had withdrawn completely, but she seemed satisfied, never once hinting at regret, never uncomfortable talking about him or what was now their past. I don't even remember anyone in the café once asking what had happened to the house musicians.

And me? I wasn't happy, but I didn't have enough wisdom to admit it. I had her. We still went dancing, her moves as heart-stopping as ever. Knowing what I knew of her time with Louis, I watched her eyes, watched those of other men, but there seemed to be no correlation. Nothing to worry over. I just waited, for my heart to warm to her, my body to return to form, my mind to stop asking endless questions.

But I was too close. Too near beauty. Where before I was always watching from a small distance, or glancing across a table or following her, those hips and narrow thighs putting all kinds of angelic thoughts in my head, now she was beside me, barely in the corners of my eyes. Now we sat together, walked together, beauty out of sight, lost somewhere. In her absence from the café, in the awkwardness of our bed, I couldn't see it any more. Couldn't find peace, or a comfortable position in our bed, and I don't just mean in sex. Couldn't fall sleep with her next to me, lay there most of every night, emptied, staring out the window, watching this angel beside me, calmly waiting for the hour or so sleep the nights now offered. Didn't stress, didn't fear anything, didn't dream when sleep came.

Half a year into our subdued idyll, she mentioned fears of a pregnancy. We kissed, did the tests, saw the plastic windows turn red, time and time again. I said I loved her and she cried for a week, a week in which nothing was said or done, regardless of what was happening between or inside us. Then she said she loved me too, wanted to have the child. Said she'd had two abortions already and feared another. I said anything you want, anything.

That I still didn't feel a thing when I said loved her, that sex was still a one-way deal, that Laura began to visit me in dreams which had returned as suddenly as sleep, did not matter. Truth as I chose to see it was we looked better than any couple around, had a home, a foetus and everyone's smiling approval to push on through any tomorrow the world could throw at us.

But the world never says No this kind of challenge. Simone's pregnancy was one hell of a bad trip. Some women waltz through them without drama. Some blossom, bloom, turn the kind of goddess they've always dreamt of becoming. Simone and her poor little body showed nothing for a while, then bloated like some evil, tropical disease had struck. It didn't matter that it wasn't death but new life was forming itself inside her. Her face was her own, her legs their old selves, but her midriff and ass suddenly doubled in size. I never realised how much of her calm came from confidence in her looks. Those gone, calm went with them. Instead of eating for two, she starved herself. Instead of talking, she screamed in incomprehensible fury, hiding behind her native tongue. I wanted to put it down to hormones and other physical revolutions, but suddenly, as if someone had shown me old pictures I had long forgotten, everything Louis had forewarned me about materialised. The sullen child. The screaming banshee. The mean bitch, perfectly skilled at hitting targets. My bedroom failures. My lack of education. My coffee shop triumphs. It hurt, sure, but not as much as it disappointed. I'd naively hoped she'd grown out of her princess phase, no longer worshipped by Louis, had found enough harmony in our home not to repeat those miserably clichéd performances.

I'd had too much of my parents wars and too much peace with Laura to let myself be caught in such an old, tired web. Many say tiffs are good, keep things on the boil, and many are right, but they must be surface rifts, the ground beneath the partners solid. We didn't have that luxury, couldn't turn anger to our advantage, each fight as impersonal and wild as the thing happening to her body, seemingly as unstoppable. These were not summer storms, in and over quick, leaving sunshine in their wake. They felt like the autumn setting in outside had crept into our home, the darkest, meanest kind of grey skies descending, each day worse than the one before.

I even begun to see her wardrobe in a different light. She couldn't find any maternity things she liked, went back to making her own. I bought her a sewing machine and all the crimson material she needed, but her attempts were not successful. It wasn't so much lack of skill or practice as the fault of shapes. After a lifetime of being slim, nothing that fit her new body fit her tastes. Watching her ripping thread from trousers and dresses, recutting or discarding them, viciousness the only end product, I was overcome by a huge tiredness, huge lethargy. Huge sense of hopelessness.

And then Betty phoned. I couldn't believe it, didn't want to, thinking it another bolt from the blue, but when I told Simone, it instantly tamed her. The idea of my father, any father, dying, was enough.

Loving her own so much, she couldn't quite imagine anyone feeling different, not consider his loss the ultimate horror. It meant she grieved not only with me, but for me also.

The transformation was as sudden and heart-warming as late Indian summer, Simone back to the calm, caring woman I remembered from the early days in my café. I didn't once consider using the new found silence between us to open up, share with her my true feelings, or rather lack of them. She would not understand the difference between our families, between the things which had shaped us. Telling the truth made no sense, not for me nor her nor our unborn child. What was the truth anyway? That she was blind? Didn't know me? Didn't know my father and the things he was capable of? That the same applied to her own? Watching those eyes soften, that belly move, feeling the ease with which secrecy came to me, I found I had no desire to pursue truth.

Things settled. Daytimes, while she was out with her friends or phoning her mother or Betty even, chatting away in French, I'd be busy running the café and overseeing the opening of my new place in Crystal Palace. Evenings, I'd visit my father, which pleased Simone and got me out of the house. Tired and in no mood for company, sometimes I made it to his, others I'd tear off on long walks, just like I used to as a kid, running from home wars or school. I did see him a couple of times a week, but the meetings did neither of us any good. He kept working in his little stationer's, making a subtle song-and-dance of not leaving Betty with all the responsibilities, and by the time evening rolled around, he acted, and looked, even more haggard than usual. A man of few acquaintances, he received almost no visitors beyond me and a cute little Bangladeshi neighbour, apparently untouched by his host's openly racist attitudes. My father kept him around and the old man stayed, helping Betty with his antidote cheer. I had the feeling he preferred the neighbour's company to mine. Whether it was down to his own guilt trip, his fear of being found out or the bad, tired vibes I must've been sending out, I can't say. Everything seemed to be getting to him. Betty's endless fretting, business worries, the alcoholic's fear of a pain and old age.

Was it too much to ask of him to ask about me, or Simone or his future grandson? Maybe he thought that was Betty's job. Concern for others. I didn't care, didn't say a word when we found out Simone had a rare blood type, one that necessitated special post-termination injections to avoid future complications. She couldn't remember having had these. The nurse then told her that the baby's blood type was different to hers and that, due earlier lack of antidote, there was a chance that it might be rejected as an alien, harmful presence in her body, be killed by the mother's own immune systems. She froze, and cried, and froze again, the cycle endless. I did my best to comfort her, try to explain she couldn't possibly blame herself for what was happening, what her own body was up to, what others had failed to do in the past. She couldn't hear me, fear and guilt warping everything into hateful angles.

I spoke to various people, experts in natal depressions and haematology and all. Took me weeks to find out the scare was bullshit. The conflict between mother and child was possible, but only in case of severe internal bleeding and even then, the stage the pregnancy was at, they would still be able to keep the baby safe. I had a proper go at the original nurse, got us another one, Simone relieved, then angry, then back to fussing and fighting and stressing herself sick.

I didn't know what to do next. I talked my mother through the scare, and though she was overjoyed when it was over, I didn't even know how to ask her for help. When I called the old man, he didn't answer. Betty said he was too tired to talk, the first, second and last time I phoned.

The next time we spoke, it was Betty calling again. In spite of the renewed hostilities between me and Simone, December had turned out beautiful, that particular morning sunny, full of colour. Betty wailed and wailed on the line, mumbling things I could not decipher. I told Simone to keep her on the line, threw on some clothes and jumped in the car.

My father was on the living room couch, his back turned to the world. Seemed they hadn't slept in the same bed for years. She'd found him in the morning, gone. I smuggled Betty out to the neighbour's for tea and tenderness, called the ambulance, sat down. I remember his hair. The rest of him looked fine, normal, but the hair had somehow changed. Don't know how. The deadest thing on a human body, that morning it looked like the hair of a mummy, dry, sticking up at alarming angles.

Bill, the uncle who'd had an affair with my mother some ten years before, organised the funeral. Even laid on guests, people who knew nothing of my father but came anyway, egged on by Bill's don't-take-No-for-an-answer invites and the prospect of a proper booze up. Simone was by then just weeks from the due date and too emotional to attend. She didn't cry the morning of the funeral, just looked at me with immense sympathy, helped choose my clothes, even made breakfast and shared some with me. I found myself dragging my heels, not because I wanted to avoid the funeral, but because I wanted to be with her when she was like that, that calm, that sweet, that smile reminding me of what she was like before she became mine.

By the end of the day, my father had been compressed into a pint-sized tin capsule, and I found it impossible to grieve. Funny. I'd had no problems crying when Aunt Maggie died. Turned my eyes desert dry when Tom was killed. Here, the more I thought about it, the less I cared, about his death, about my response to it, about what anyone else thought. Even those who had known him couldn't have possibly cared. None but Betty, who was given the absolute cold shoulder by all but me and Uncle Dave, Maggie's widower. Dave was good man, special to me, and I was glad it was him staring at his brother's remains, not the other way around. He wasn't crying, but I knew he wanted to. No matter what he'd thought of his kin, no matter how distant they had been, love had grown when they were small and had not died, his face a cramp of pent-up emotion, terrible to see. Terrible to see them both suffering that sunny winter's morning, facing the rest of their widowed Christmases alone.

At the grave, an anonymous slab of granite waiting to cover my father's remains, Bill made a speech. It was solemn, full of lies, some of them white, but I was glad it was him talking and not me. What would I have said? I couldn't think of a single word, a terrible curse, having nothing to remember my father by. Once everyone had departed, a couple of workmen in blue and orange overalls wrestled the slab over the tiny, tin sized hole, the sight of two clowns burying him finally squeezing me for tears. But even then I didn't cry long.

The wake was just like the others I'd been to. No one mentioned the Dear Departed. No one stood around, nursing humble drinks and silences. The meal was calm, satisfying, the drinks afterwards a relief, people easing inevitable tensions, smiling a lot, making the odd self-deprecating joke. The light outside was almost that of spring, warm and proud. Kids were running round the place, no one chastising them for once. They made me feel both calm and miserable, mournful of the past before Simone became mine, fearful of the future.

Back home, I milked the funeral for all it was worth. No false tears, no theatricals. Not what I would call My Style. I just let Simone believe what she wanted to believe, and I believe she wanted to convince herself I was suffering. I think she knew my real feelings, for her as well as my father and his departure, but, understandably, chose to keep the truth from herself. At heart, she didn't want to be mad, rage against anything, knew it was bad all round, let herself grieve for me as a means to easy anaesthetic. And I'm grateful to her for that. Act or no act, it wasn't easy, having to go through that time as alone we all were then.

Two weeks later, the waters broke. I remember her gripping the steel bath in the middle of the windowless delivery room, suffering, wondering how long she could put off asking for the epidural. People tell me four hours in labour is not long, but four hours means nothing when timing agony. Holding her hand, blood splashing round us, for the first time ever I cared about nothing and no one save her. It was a free, universal kind of love, backed by desperate desire to see the little head become a body, hear it cry, release her from all these months of otherness. I didn't care that it was not enough to love her like that. Not anywhere beyond that room. Didn't care or believe the baby would change anything between us. Just wanted her pain to stop. For seemingly endless hours, I was nothing but a wish, a breathing prayer, a plea for an end to her suffering. I didn't matter, the baby didn't matter, her petty idleness and betrayals didn't mean a thing. Watching those clear blue eyes staring at me in terror, pleading for help I could not deliver, stripped of all she had ever imagined was important, I just wanted to stop her pain. And couldn't. Couldn't do a thing about it.

And yet the boy was born, Simone relieved, happy even. In the post-delivery room, I stared out its huge windows as the paediatrician complemented our new arrival, ignoring the way he eyed her flushed, divine face.

The hospital was right across the river from the Houses of Parliament. It was around three, the sky a deep, innocent blue, torn in places by pink and neon red clouds, the sandstone might of Westminster Palace glowing yellow in the throes of sunset. I had never seen London look more stunning, felt more calm, more exhausted, more certain I had to leave Simone, leave her beauty behind. It was no moment of epiphany, just self-awareness finally rising to the surface. That it happened there and then, in that most inopportune of places, was beyond my control. I knew I would love our son, no matter what. And at the same time knew I could never say the same about Simone. Never again.

I recently visited my father's grave for the first time since the funeral. Sam was beside me, almost four, not comprehending what a cemetery was all about, not keen on any of it. Simone was not with us, but in her new house with her new baby and husband, a sweet, wealthy chartered surveyor who has no idea she still, when drunk or depressed, calls me up to say things she oughtn't. I stood there, feeling the little man wrestling my knee, wondering if I'd done the right thing telling her some truths when Sam was two, surrendering custody, selling up, moving to Brighton, finding new friends and peace and Jess, the woman I'm living happily ever after with.

She thinks kids should have their time of pure innocence, but I don't agree. When we come to have some of our own, I know I'll let her tell them fairytales with happy endings, invite Santa and the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny into our home, avoid the subject of death and promise It Will Be All Right when anything goes wrong. But I don't agree. The world is a crazy place, full of light and shadow, and kids know. I knew, long ago, but didn't know how to handle knowing. Nobody ever told me I was not responsible for feelings as well as actions, could not be blamed for not loving everyone, like the Saints, like Santa, like Mum said she did and didn't. I left Simone not because I couldn't hack fatherhood or commitment or the tedium of the everyday, but because I couldn't lie. Couldn't say I loved her any more. Couldn't pretend I hadn't fallen for someone new. Couldn't pretend we didn't have a history, what with her leaving Louis, of painful goodbyes. Couldn't go on pretending I didn't know about her old ways being back, her hunger for new men as long as her beauty held, couldn't lie and say I cared.

Standing there, looking at that grave in a sea of stone, I asked Sam how many Grandpas he had. He said Two, not quite grasping where we were and what that meant. I asked if he'd like to have two Daddies too. He thought about it, said All right. I said it'd be really cool if he called his new dad Dad, and meant it. I think Simone's new man is a child of naïve, fairytelling parents. He doesn't know what he's got himself into, can't believe his luck every time he opens his eyes in the morning, will have his heart broken soon enough, but it's a good heart and I trust it with my son. Trust it will be a good thing for Sam to love him, to love a two, three, four parent family.

Dancing amongst the weathered stones, Sam instantly forgot the subject, off looking for a suitable stick with which to smack the little bench beside us. He'll have to be reminded of this re-christening time and time again before it all falls into place, the names, the homes, the world he's been brought into. He'll want to know why Mum is with one Dad and not both, why the one she's chosen to live with is the one she shouts at, while Jess smiles and gives him no presents and no sweets and yet he likes her too. He'll want to know when other kids ask, when they laugh and sometimes sneer and maybe beat him up for it. For having two Dads, two homes, two stories to tell.

They will come. The confusion. The hurt. I don't know how he'll deal with it. Don't know how I'll deal with it either, how much to give and how much to let go. How to be what he needs and not what I want to be. How to make sure he feels something tugging at his heart when staring at his own father's grave one day, something that'll hurt, something good.

## COMPLETE LOVE

She takes her toothbrush and night cream from the bathroom, leaves me with a request. “Just don’t write about me in any of your stories...”. I nod, holding the door open as she steps through with her overnight bag, words being hard to come by in contracts like these. Is she asking out of pride, pride which nevertheless wants to model for me? Or is it an honest appeal, one I ought not to make the mistake of dishonouring? Locking the door behind me as I walk her out, I know it doesn’t make any difference. I will keep my unspoken promise, not out of obligation, but because in the short time we’ve known each other she’s left me with nothing to say. That’s the truth. That’s why I agree without a word.

Another door closes behind her with an gentle thud. She stares dead ahead, past the driver, her eyes never off the future, letting me know my place.

By the time the cab turns the corner, I see she’s already dialled someone else’s number and put the mobile to her ear. I know we’ll bump into each other again, but also know that a hundred times I’ll sit alone in my flat, wanting to call her up, and stop myself. Not out of pride. Just because loneliness is no reason to call anyone, not when compromise turns no worthwhile tricks.

Instead of going back in, I step away from the house, across a plot of derelict land, towards the neighbouring woods. There’s nothing beyond them, no more city. I stop, caught for a moment by the setting sun. Paper-thin clouds veil it, streaked wisps of vapour just about saving me from being blinded. Some of the trails, curving and twisting in real time, are dark enough to block out parts of the star. Others burst with light, slashing wildly, radiating brilliance. It’s just hitting amber, not like the traffic signal but like the jewel, and the colour bursting from it is so feminine, I instantly think of all the women I’ve been with and left and the reasons why. The beauty suspended before me, still way off the horizon, is absolute. The day, regardless of whatever’s happened to its actors, at peace with itself. I bask in it. The glow of completeness over everything. Rich. Warm. Letting me feel some semblance of what had found me before. Of what I’m missing right now, in this house of half-conscious loneliness. Reminding me again that I’m not asking for too much.

## **CALLED TIME**

I turn the two corners between my front door and the late shop. Ten to eleven. Enough time to safely make the beer cabinet. As I walk in, the man behind the counter gives me a smile my expression doesn't warrant. The isles are long, chock full of goods. Seems a shame there is only one thing on my mind in this galaxy of colour, the cold, silver can like a tool in my hand next to the toy-town packaging surrounding me.

The big Safeway's across the street is long shut, but the grassed-off area by its doors is buzzing with drunks and druggies. A triumvirate of pubs surrounds the green, but these guys prefer the open-air action, the pavement littered with cans and plastic cider bottles. I park myself on a wall just short of the drinker's patch, crack open the Grolsh. It tastes strange after all the knock-down vodka and other rubbish I usually buy wholesale. I wonder if it's that stopped me short of the benches. Almost like walking in with a bottle of Bolly, but no, it's not the brand. Something else has made me pause. The street is as busy as ever, souped-up Beemers and Toyotas crawling about their business, pub doors starting to creak for the last time. An underground water main has cracked beneath the pavement, water seeping through with a strange, metallic stink. The smell is more noticeable than the spillage, reminding me of Tennant's Extra or some other super-strength shit, as if the dribble wasn't there to wash the place clean but to join the libation. It flows slowly down the street, past the bus stop still covered in tiny cubes of glass left by a double-decker inferno earlier in the day. Some absentee school kids had set fire to it just as I came out for my afternoon stroll. I stood and watched flames leaping out of the popping windows, even the attending cops gaping up in awe. It was an amazing sight, but thinking about it now, I realise traffic never stopped. Not even for a second. Rubber necks snapping right back to the dead-ahead, the extraordinary not warranting the price of their time.

For some reason, the cigarette I light tastes disgusting. I stare at it, draw a blank. A complete absence of ideas. Amazing. I came out expecting the usual. Some memories to creep by, some thinking to be done over a book or a story or an experience from somewhere down the line, but nothing, my mind hollow, for the first time ever.

I glance at the bank across the street, the cash-point blinking at me to come feed, lines of anti-pigeon and anti-homeless spikes sticking out of appropriate parts of the facade. The Safeway is to my right, the ghosts of clean-up crews strolling dreamily along the isles. A woman gets off a bus, my height, sheepskin coat, majestic...

None of it means anything. No stories left. No depth. The bleeding pavement. The ivy trembling in synchronised waves on the church wall beside me. The thump of sub-woofer stuck on a red light. All of it within reach, yet barely two-dimensional. All sounds and colours transparent, like celluloid. Nothing in me to receive. No need. No planning, no musing, no remembering to be done. No past, present or future. I try mustering up thought, trying out my internal voice, but no sound echoes in my head. It seems that for once I'm in the perfect now, my journey through time stalled. The beer tired. The next cigarette languishing in its pack. No longer an observer, but someone watching someone observing. The mind evaporating, too tired to plan, too bored of history, no longer rooted in the flesh, but hovering a few steps behind myself, staring right through, as if I too had dissolved into a transparency. Not even an opinion forming itself in the vacuum. All explorations ceased. All ends.

## NOT HALF WAY HOME

Three hours is enough to fly from here to the other end of Europe, direct, through two time zones. That's how long it'll take me to get home tonight, across most of London, and that's only if the tube gets me to Victoria before the last south-bound bus leaves. If it doesn't, it may be more like three or four, which is too long at the best of times, and tonight is not the best of times.

We played pool in a pub overlooking Hampton Court, but nobody was interested in winning, just messing about, ashamed of showing competitive spirit. I'm no expert, but what's the point? My time, my money, my wasted evening.

Then there was a woman, her hazel-brown eyes making me feel warm and dizzy the way I'd always hoped alcohol would and never did. We chatted, testing wavelengths, but from word go she asked big, awkward questions, about life, love and the meaning of Christmas, the kind of probing can show you're genuinely interested in someone only when intimacy's been established. As it was, it just seemed instant, rushed, stripping the scene of whatever charm her beauty had promised into it. I wanted to entertain, make her lips turn up in laughter, make like I really cared, but not one thing, not a word she'd said in the space of an hour made me laugh or think or wonder at anything other than contrast between surface and substance.

Then a friend arrived, someone I could trust not to let me down game and conversation wise, whipped me on both counts. The balls never rolled my way, the talk full of semantics and references I was too pissed to work around. Shakespeare, Wayne, Aquinas, Kissinger, the drunken exchange rushing between vengeance, morality, violence and truth, KO'ing me on the count of absolutes. At some point during the game, I said there were things could always be proven true, things common to all people. Needs, ideas, sensations. He shook his head and asked me to prove the existence of the pool table between us. I hammered at it with my fist, cracked ball against baize, named all the colours rolling across its surface. Touch, hearing, sight, he denied them all, just stood there grinning like an absolute idiot or maybe a patronising mentor, calmly refusing to acknowledge the half a ton of steel, wood and marble between us.

And he was right. Nothing, no word or gesture could force my truth down his throat. Could prove jack. Subjective idealism. That's what he called it. The term sounds sweet, hurts like fuck, especially at half eleven, pissed and alone under the glare of the tube carriage's strip lighting and suddenly aware that if all is indeed subjective, all processed by and therefore in the mind, then nothing is as real as lonesomeness in the world.

Desperate to escape themselves, my thoughts turn to a young man in skinny jeans and Morrissey t-shirt sitting directly opposite me. He's maybe twenty, maybe forty, his features already set in that hard mould tells the world it is known and forever despised by him. A young, round faced woman in a goth mini and bovver boots sitting beside him has, for the last fifteen minutes, tried everything to get his attention. Her arm is threaded though his, her voice desperate, but he won't acknowledge her presence, utterly exclusive to himself. Morrissey, his head about twice life-size, stares back at me from the man's chest, uninterested. She just looks hurt, desperate to get any kind of response, but nothing. He gives and shows her nothing.

The grief is there, in her eyes, but it seems stale, like this master and servant thing between them's not tiff, but status quo. I stare back, just to see what happens when my drunken temper meets the vacuum of his gaze, but still nothing. No response to me either. Instead, she notices me glaring and the hard angles of my face instantly soften. I have no right to bridge anything, suddenly afraid she'll blank me too, or worse, but she smiles as if to say "I know it's awful, yes, but...", her eyes gone, back on his cheek, back in their rightful place.

But I can't stop staring. It's amazing how addictive disgust can be, how magnetic the hate for a human likeness. How strong the need to feel can be, how explosive.

Sometimes, when people ask, they get, especially when asking for trouble. We pull into the last stop before Victoria. Something's happening on the platform. Men are shouting, passengers stumbling onto the train for once not looking for a seat but back out to where a couple of homeless

black guys, one of them with a Big Issue bag on his shoulder, are arguing with a group of skinheads. The two dread-locked men are obviously drunk and giving as racist as they get. They board eventually, but instead of letting the train carry them off to safety, they force the doors open again, shoving and roaring. The scene carries on for a few moments, everyone on the train upset by the viciousness coming from both sides, but when the skins start laying into the pair, several men on the train make a move to even out numbers. Yes, fault lies on both sides, and no, another pair of fists can't possibly do any good here, but the way I feel tonight, none of that, nothing matters. But just as I get up towards the mess of shoving limbs and bodies locked in the jaws of the closing doors, I hear a voice to go with the face at last,

"Oi, you fuckers, get inside..."

Morrissey man mumbles under his breath, just loud enough for me to hear as I get up off my seat. I'm stumped. The look of disgust and frustration directed at the two black guys is unbelievable, totally unchecked, a third set of racist insults suddenly entering the fray,

"C'mon, you black cunts, get the fuck off,"

loud enough for others to hear now, not caring about that, as if the wrongs of others gave him the right to throw in his bile.

He sees me pause over him, paralysed, struck dumb by this new depth of scum.

Then everything happens real quick. With assistance from behind, the two Dreads pull back inside, let the doors shut in the hot, red faces screaming outside. Insults continue to burst like heavy flak as the crowded train starts moving again, fists bouncing off the windows. I'm still staring down Mr. Morrissey here. For what I and the others here just heard him say, I should turn him over to the black guys, like a field court, have him torn apart by men behaving exactly how you don't want them to, like thugs. His eyes slide off mine and work their way round the carriage, everyone giving him a stare he hasn't the heart to comprehend. Glancing back at his companion, I see in her eyes the last thing he deserves right now. Sympathy. Plain, old sympathy. For him. Her love.

It shatters all my righteous rage in an instant. If I lay a finger on him, which I right now no longer feel like lifting, it'll be her, the little gimp, who'll most likely put up a defence.

The tube pulls into Victoria, the whole sorry scene making me gasp for the surface. On the platform, one of the Dreads stumbles through the crowd ahead of me. Suddenly, riled by its tired pace, he takes off, his huge courier bag trailing, smashing into everyone.

I get outside, feeling worse than nothing. Is that possible? To feel beyond a vacuum? That's meant to be nirvana, the absence of all sensation, but that's a hard one to swallow standing by the bus stop in a dirty passageway of Victoria's shops and sandwich bars, wondering whether I've missed my last ride home.

I'm still in the West End, but it already feels like the South, the poorer, uglier half of London. Different rules apply here, different people waiting for different things. You start to watch yourself, careful whose eyes you might meet.

Trouble is, I don't feel all that wise tonight. Don't feel any more careful than I did on the tube. My eyes, drunk, tired, wander the empty, litter-strewn streets, the myth of the city that never sleeps well and truly shattered. They clock a man approaching slowly from my right, the direction my bus is meant to be coming from, but the greying beard and small, skinny overcoat don't hold my attention. Not until he stops right in front of me, swaying. He's studying me, but his eyes are absent, confused. Wondering what it is he wants, I look him up and down, note the battered hat, the miserable beard, the knife in his left hand barely glistening under the city lights.

Strange things happen in moments like these. You think something, it's done before the thought has realised itself. I take a step back, just out of his reach,

"Go away,"

my words quiet, no fear or fury in them, only command. He bats an eyelid, takes his gaze off me as if all along he thought I was the one but now he's not so sure. Is he drunk? His movements are slow, but controlled. Medication?

I watch him head off towards the train station in unsteady, hesitant steps, adrenaline and fear competing for possession of my mind. What the hell? What the hell next tonight? But before I have time to brace myself for the answer, two double-deckers growl hurriedly round the corner. I make the

second, jump on last. As it pulls away, I hang off the open platform, watching for the grey overcoat on the crowded station concourse. Can't see a thing. No knifeman. No commotion. The bus rushes round a bend towards a set of traffic lights on the apex. They're turning red. If we stop, I'll run back, find a cop, play good citizen. If we don't, then damn it all.

The bus makes it through, the driver in a hurry to end the last run of the night. Climbing the winding stairs, I wonder where the hell my conscience's got to. I feel no remorse or regret or anything I would normally identify with myself. Half way home, I fall into an empty seat, let my stare be swept past the sparkling city, wishing desperately everything was different, every bit of tonight somehow something else. The game. The girl. The dickhead on the train and my wasted energies. The knifeman and my escape.

But staring into the countless windows sliding past, buildings full of computers, mouths and endless other weapons, I realise the dumb should stay exactly that. Say nothing, careful what they wish for. Like I could change anything for the better. Conjure up utopia, for everyone. The skins, the dreads, strangers the lot of us, already doing our best just not to kill one other.

## Mad Tongues

First he makes loud, neighing noises, and it's impossible to tell if it's only for show or for his own crooked pleasure. Then he laughs a regulation crazy laugh, breaks off suddenly, and again I'm not sure if that was only because he felt he'd made his point, his intended impression on the tram full of passengers, or whether it was an honest product of an abandoned mind. He sits directly behind me, words coming at regular, thirty second intervals, voiced in a harsh, guttural bark, the incomprehensible mumble of a professional drunk who can't equate his need to speak with the fact that he has nothing to say. He howls "Izzaaagh!" a couple of times, his voice unconcerned with its own lack of human quality. "Iza" is a woman's name, but when he roars it, it sounds unaimed at any living thing.

He falls silent again. I hear him fumbling with a hollow beer can. When his mind is totally at loss for anything vaguely speech-like to spew, he laughs or whinnies again, drawing the noises out for effect. Sounds like he's enjoying himself, though it's clear he has some awareness of what is and isn't publicly acceptable. When his voice raises to a certain volume, past what strangers will stand, or ignore rather, he shuts it off. It seems there's an unspoken limit to the kind of craziness people will tolerate before barking back, and something tells him not to push beyond it. Some kind of educated fear.

Suddenly, he starts speaking in clear, sharp French, and even though I don't speak the language, I can hear perfect sentences break off and twist without end or form, every so often appearing out of nowhere, floating for their own sake alone. His voice then is human, though without individual character. I keep losing thread of the book I'm reading, wondering whether I should turn around, get a look at his face, assert authority. I feel like it's my business to make eye contact with him so that if he does anything, touch or spit or hit, I'll at least have the satisfaction of knowing I hadn't just tried to ignore him away.

But before I can make up my mind, he starts speaking Polish, his voice changed again. It is now calm, warm and cultured. Reminds me of a popular singer this country once had, an old-world theatrical type, Rosiewicz. Keeps switching between the half-human growl of the bored outcast to the posh accent echoing a past he can't always outrun. Again there are long spaces between outbursts, but their contents are surprising. "You know the truth, all of you... You know the truth so well... Europe is coming, and there's nothing you can do to stop it. You should. You know you should...". He both is and isn't speaking to us, pretending to be addressing someone absent from the scene, but his voice, the way it cuts off, is not rhetorical, not crazed. He is aware. An entertained laugh follows our silence. Another "Izzaaaggghh!". The roar bursts behind me again, but again I don't turn, partly avoiding confrontation, partly because I don't want to turn him into a spectacle. I know something about mental disorders, about how hard a million-strong city of cold looks can be on an abandoned psyche. "Kalashnikovs for a fiver. Anyone here can get them for you. Oh yes...". Another pause. More French, then growls, voices switching between the animal, the man and the showman. An unconvinced, apologetic neigh. "I didn't choose myself, did I? I didn't want any of it, eh... Izzaaargh!"

I hear him get off a few stops before mine, still don't look up. Don't look behind me or out the window, my eyes on the book, even though I don't recognise any of the letters, too busy trying to work out why I still don't want to see his face. Part of it is in defiance of my own weakness. I didn't meet his gaze while he was within reach, and it would be cowardly to do so now. But there's something else too. His face may be that of a beaten bum or a pattern of distinguished features twisted out of recognition by the unmanageable, and I'm not sure which I'd rather not see. A picture of textbook tragedy or some other, extraordinary failure? Does it make any difference? To me or this story? The man himself is only a figment of his own imagination, and however measly an honour it seems to a life roaring with mad tongues, I want to leave it at that.

## No Gift Enough

Talking hasn't helped. Not once. Not even a year of therapy. Holidays have ended in sad fiascos. The piano lessons I arranged for her cancelled, the keyboard I bought dusted over soon enough. Even the portrait I slaved over for a month never made it onto any wall, hidden under the stairs, turned from the world. Fear has not left her heart, the whispers in her head barely muted, the silence of our home stretching into years. It's taken years just to get her to talk, get the battered child inside the proud, broken woman to gasp for the surface. Her insides are covered in scars, scored by a hand wicked enough to make sure they didn't show, the kind of force destroyed homes, lives and futures and still came into the kitchen and asked How was school? Years of him reappearing in every male limb, jaw-line and voice. Every man an echo, a threat to her, even me, after all these ages of shared effort. Every trick in the book tried, this approach, that technique, all of it piling up into a useless monument to the futility of the loving touch, of giving it time while she's put through the full spectrum of suffering without any end in sight. Time's asked for patience, but we can both hear the floorboards creaking as it moves for the door, getting ready to run out on our home and, what's worse, whatever's left of her sanity.

So here we are, on our rented couch, unsure whether what we're about to do next makes any sense or whether it'll just bring more harm. It seems crazy, trying violence on violence, crash-course therapy, but times have got desperate enough, the pain too much, words far too long on empty.

We've agreed the rules. No matter what happens, I'm not to fight back, not lift a finger in self defence, play punch bag while she puts all her heart into this exorcism, all her rage, keeps at it until there's nothing left to fight with. If I manage this, let her have her vengeance and at the same time prove that something with an Adam's apple can be trusted not to hurt her back, then maybe we can recover from this. Maybe.

I smile, trying to hide fear. It's not fear of pain, but of seeing her hurt finally unleashed, seeing her familiar features twisted into a Medusa mask. I'm desperate to help, but also desperately afraid I won't be able to handle it, handle the ugly truth. For the moment, she just looks pale, the eyes blank. After years of concealment, she's better at it than me. Doesn't have to smile, show anything other than a perfect poker face, all that's left of her vulnerability buried somewhere not even I can see any more.

But how to start such an exercise? How to choreograph it? Be nice, ask her to hit me, or the opposite? Tease, act the vile bastard she is to take me for, work the hinges of that particular Pandora's Box?

The room is silent, the props of home round us an ironic stage set, but who should shout Action?

Thoughts hum in perfect tautness between us until the first blow is finally struck. Don't know what sets it off, don't see it coming, though it is soft, to the shoulder. I keep my eyes open, self-preservation stronger than fear, but shame casts them down. I feel responsible somehow, for what someone else has done. I haven't hit anyone for years, would like to think I'm innocent and my sacrifice totally selfless, but maybe it's right that shame takes possession of me, that I'm some aspect of him now, some guilty part she can seek justice against.

The second blow is to the face, but it's even weaker than the first. The sound of it seems to frighten her even more than me.

There is no third. She's breathing hard, the air between us charged with something just begging for release, but after all this preparation, all the doubt and discussion, we're both forced to admit this isn't the way. I look up, meet her dejected gaze. Her mouth is stabbing at a smile, but the look in her eyes is hopeless. I smile back anyway. She's done her best. She should be proud. Should be a million things have nothing to do with demons.

After a long while of tension dissolving round us, I go make tea. When I come back, she speaks calmly, hiding tiredness. It's not me she wants to hurt, she says. Just the opposite. Violence against someone she loves can't make pain go away, can only add to its maddening excess.

We rest for ages afterwards, from explanations as much as anything else, and I grieve over not being able to give her shelter from herself, to reach in and wrench the past right out of her terrified heart.

Before sleep, we make love with an intensity and abandon her hurt psyche has never allowed before. I can't believe the strength pouring from her as she nurses and teases me to a climax of unbelievable power, my mind projected right out of the flesh and into a higher state of awareness, surrendered totally to the might of someone else's will. It's an out-of-spirit experience, the orgasm absolute, too much for the mechanics of mind. Her gentle smile hangs over me like a benevolent deity, raining down grace like I deserved it, like I deserved to be blessed by beauty. She's never believed in it, in anything other than the ugly status quo, but for once she reaches right into herself, right through me, deep enough to release a final little spark from the ashes of our bed, a tiny, perfect thank-you.

## **SOMETHING TO GO ON**

I'm trying hard to come. Maybe too hard. It's difficult to judge, first thing in the morning, brains still awash with drink from the night before, her slender body on top of me doing all it can to help get them fucked again. There's no hangover, just a mild sense of distortion and queasiness, not enough to account for the absence of feeling, positive or otherwise, anywhere else in me.

At first, I'm only mildly puzzled by the lack of sensory feedback, wondering when the first waves of pleasure are going to reach my slowly waking brain. Some five minutes have passed already since she'd disturbed my deep sleep with tender, smiling kisses, her skilled hand working on my morning erection. By the time my eyes opened, she was already wrapping it in the pleasant tightness of a condom. But that pleasure's only an echo of familiar anticipation. Five, ten minutes gone already and still nothing more, physically. Literally nothing. I sense the flesh making contact, sense the motion and the fiery wetness of her insides impaled on me, but feel no pleasure, no arousal. She's doing everything right, right as ever, swaying and grinding her hips down into mine, moving side to side to a music I just can't pick up on myself.

There are few highs I know of that compare with drunken lovemaking, but even if I am still under the influence, it is not enough to strip me wholly of sensitivity, while leaving the mind active and increasingly sober. I stare up at her flushed face, try to feed off the pleasure rippling across its features, skim something off her ecstasy for myself. My eyes travel down from her mouth, skin drawn tightly across the tip of her chin, bottom lip bit, along the neck and the sweet v-shape formed by her collar bones, her slim breasts and the taut, strong belly. Chin pressed to my chest, I try to get off on the sight of our bodies rocking together. Then, eyes closed, I try shaking all thought, shutting out everything but the mood of the flesh. I move my hands down under her hips, pressing from all sides, trying to squeeze pleasure out of myself by amplifying hers. Scooping her up, I move her light body back and forth in slow, controlled movements, knowing she loves this, this sensation of floating, of riding in the palms of my hands. A breathless sigh escapes her lips, above and beyond my closed eyelids. She seems to be reaching a familiar high and the awareness of it is starting to work its way through my numbness at last. Slowly my body begins to respond, my skin to resonate, not quite with pleasure yet, no more than relief, but it's enough to go on.

Letting her down onto me fully, my hands move over her waist, fingertips ploughing across the back of her ribcage, shooting shivers of grace up her spine. I force my hips hard off the bed sheets, hear her squeal through gritted teeth, find myself driven to make a noise, an involuntary moan escaping my lips even before the first pulses of gratification hit. But just as my body begins to ease back and receive, hers suddenly goes stiff and still as she tries to restrain, selflessly, the onset of orgasm. She knows I'm not ready to join her yet, changes the angle we're at to withhold her climax a while longer. Her torso drops down on me, mouth giggling into my ear, and I want to laugh too, not with her, but at myself. At my own, stupefied flesh. Her delay tactics, for all their generosity, have brought me back to numbness again. Embarrassed, I consider the possibility of having to fake it. I'd be more than satisfied to let her peak alone, but also know that would defeat the point sex had for her. If I don't come, she'll know and it'll turn inside out any pleasure she'd've experienced herself, will make things twice as bad. I care for her and her sense of pride in being a capable lover, and want for nothing now, nothing but for us both to come and be still again.

We lie still for a moment, as close to each other as skin will allow. I take this time to look for a way back into myself. Until now, our short sex life has been perfectly tuned, our physical intuitions matched. But I still doubt her almost continuous desire for lovemaking, not sure if it's a true aspect of her nature, or an attempt to force beauty on me, please in the way the men in her past would've demanded from her the most. I don't yet know her intimately enough to decide, but already feel my instincts drawing away from her as a partner. I don't have anything tangible to say to her on the subject yet, yet even in this moment of bodily togetherness, there is distance growing between us.

Eyes still shut, I slowly start to make sense of this unusual paralysis. My flesh is rejecting what my mind's too slow to close in on. Rejecting the insecure woman she is when clothed and the over-keen girl when not. The more the mind tried to escape into the intense oblivion of an orgasm, the more the flesh refused to betray the unspoken meter of trust between us. We may both be on the run from talk right now, but sex is no refuge from the problems, the difficulties we can't bridge outside the bed, not when the body has, it would seem, an unconditional honesty all of its own.

Time passes as I muse, but it seems no such doubt or inner conflict exists in her flesh. She pulled back too far from the peak those few moments ago, and now, in the sudden urgency of her reawakened movements, I sense her desire to climb back to a climax. I've no idea how long we've spent in combined motion, but whatever my body's up to this morning, hers is blatantly ready for the finale. Before I'm again able to doubt my ability to join her there, she moves to finish us both off. Her hips twist and buck and my hands grip tighter, my own

movements forcibly keener and faster. She's forcing out of my subconscious the response I've been unable to achieve myself, catching my body unawares with fury and urgency. Her arms wrapped round me, she draws us together, too far gone now for eye or even mouth contact.

The moment of orgasm rushes me suddenly. I try to close in, let it swamp me, but in spite of myself, feel no pleasure released with it. My body contorts and pulses in all the right places, intentionally sliding over the sheets, mindful of making the effort to heighten and prolong her pleasure. I make sure she sense nothing amiss in my experience, nothing absent from hers, but my mind is way out if it. Within moments the flesh is done, exhausted, yet still tense, not having peaked but flat-lined, leaving my mind painfully unsatisfied.

I hold her close, squeezing out of her shivering body the last few ripples of orgasm, keeping her head close to mine, her gaze off my own features.

We lie like this for a while, wrapped in the usual pleasure of listening to each other's breathing coming to rest. I keep my hands still, unwilling to let them wander across the hyper-sensitive surface of her skin, to perform the usual post-coital caress. I don't want my touch to betray her, make moves of false intimacy and attention. All I want for now is silence. No smiles, no bed talk.

She lifts her torso off my chest, her gaze skipping back and forth between my pupils, smiling, but her arms, still tired, collapse her back down again. I wonder what kind of expression occupied my features just then, whether she'd seen me smiling or stern. I find I can't tell. Can't sense anything of my own skin and guts, floating out with my gaze somewhere near the ceiling, unaware of her weight pressing down on me.

I wait until she's seduced back into sleep before climbing over her pale, limp body and off our wasted bed. As I pause to pull on my jeans on the way to the bathroom, the high, morning light spins my sobering mind for a second. I stand still, staring intently at nothing. The room looks white-washed, winter sun glancing over the wall paper, the bed sheets, the halo of blonde hair spread across them, her long back half-turned my way. Everything is still and colourless, bleached out by white sunlight filtering in through the net curtains, all a sweep of thin, sharp edges, all light without warmth. An early urge for a cigarette tugs at me, but I know it'd just be more of the same.

The bathroom's cold, on the shaded side of the house, and I run the hot tap clear of cold water before doing the same for my sore bladder. Right over the toilet cistern a huge dressing mirror forces you to look up. Back at my place I've only got a shaving mirror, and it feels odd to see myself whole, half naked, the waistband of my jeans hanging limply off bony hips. Winter time I always seemed to put on a few pounds, the body naturally clinging onto warming fat, but this year, working two jobs at once, spending my nights drinking and keeping her company, I'm burning through whatever foods I remember to lay hands on without effort. Just thinking about the pace of my life of late makes me feel tired and ill-tempered. At least I feel I look all right, fit enough to give me one less superficial thing to worry about when climbing into her bed again.

Zippering up, my shoulders fall forward, and in the dim light I see scratches and bruises swelling in colour over them. It's almost a habit of hers, biting in bed, even though it usually inflicted more pain than pleasure. Even in the heat of orgasm, she remembered to mark the surface of me with these little pained mementoes. But the thing that bothers me most about them this morning is that I can't recall the point in our coupling at which she'd struck. I can't feel the pain, much less the pleasure, even in the cold light of a new day. Next to the blue bites, scratches creep across my arms like the claw prints of wild birds in snow. Looking them over, all I can find in myself is a lack of desire to go back upstairs, much less to wake her in anything like the way she'd done me. Anger swells my chest. Not at her, or myself, but at how quickly it was possible to turn from desire to dissent, from wanting to be with someone to wanting to be anywhere else but within their reach.

The option of simply walking out and not returning, myself or her calls, is something I toy with for about a second. Maybe it'd be kinder to dump cruelty on her, make her feel a sense of good riddance, but the idea of just vanishing without a word reeks of cowardice. It's not even a matter of personal principle. I seem to have no choice. Some part of me wants to walk out, just to see if I can. If I have it in me to wrong her and then repent. Make doing the right thing a conscious decision rather than an act of blind, kind-hearted instinct. But none of it's strong enough. I feel physically unable to let her down that hard, turn on her, as if it was programmed out of me. As if I'd simply been born into decent flesh.

Back in her bedroom, on the night table, amongst make up and her other pastel-coloured things, there's an open box of cigarettes. I light up and slowly slump to the floor, back against the wall, eyes level with her smooth, pale calf. The ritual of smoking had for me its own blessed, free-floating dynamic. Busy days, in hectic work places, it was often the only way to put the brakes on for five minutes, be alone for long enough just to tidy up some thoughts. Most people liked to take them together, have a chat, but I never minded solitude, always happy to be forced outdoors by no smoking signs, even in winter, to spend a few moments under whatever sky

was up on the day. But this place is too small and crowded for me to feel at ease. I can't escape the itch of mental and physical dissatisfaction, of stupid expectation that the beauty stretched out before me is not just that. Not that simple. The weight of two individuals occupying the same space, wanting to fit, fit in, fit together, presses hard.

As much as I want the nirvana of a thoughtless smoke, it's her body now won't let me escape into ignorance. Looking her half-covered nakedness over, I can't feel anything other than deep appreciation. Nothing more potent. Nothing I can use to cover a bet on our future as lovers.

I study the fine blonde hairs on her shins, the way her toes curled up into a little fist when asleep, the lattice-work of bone and vein along the top of her foot, and have no answer to the pressing question of why I don't desire her any more. Flesh and bone. That's all the complexity I'm wishing for now. To live like most animals, in a world of easy match-making, of seasonal desires. Of being on and off heat, the direct, uncluttered mechanics of their couplings. That would be civilised. To discharge desire a few times a year, come with a bang, then be at peace, get on with other, simpler things instead of chasing the tail which hung between the thighs, and the heart which craved some kind of communion. Stubbing out the cigarette, I wish for a little of that, of that peace, that easy attachment, just enough to get me back into bed, to want to press my chest against her back, lay my arm across her waist and ease into the calm of shared sleep. But all I want right now is to get home, jump in the shower and relive myself of the orgasm still bottled up within. Somehow my mind alone, my imagination, the memory of others even, is more real than the woman before me, more capable of fulfilling the basest needs.

I wait a little longer, in silence, not sure what it is I'm waiting for. I don't want to wake her, don't know what to say in parting. Leaving a "C U Later" note is not an option, but I'll have to do something, call back, arrange a time when we can talk. I wish for a moment that she'd wake, show some subconscious connection to me, be disturbed out of dreams by the proximity of my searching mind. Her backbone rises and falls before me in steady motion, but the rest of her remains unmoved.

I get up, gather the rest of my things, pause for one last second. Sunshine, sliding into the room, has warmed together with the passing day, a window-shaped blanket of light covering her naked body in a skin-tight sheet of comfortable colour. She looks safe and peaceful, like she needs nothing any more, not even my presence in the room. I slip out half-naked and barefoot, clothes in hand, sure anything I did for her now could only make it worse.

## Soul is Sick

Silence wakes me. After twenty hours of autobahn noise, head resting against the window, I open my eyes, stare out through a huge, reflected iris. The line of cars below me is still at last, nothing but thick woods beyond them. The sky seems overcast, though from behind the coach's tinted glass it's hard to tell whether the blank slop of colour overhead is cloud cover or clear blue. It looks sleepy, undecided, as if it hasn't yet made up its mind whether to turn out bleak or beautiful today. Only crows are moving, swerving back and forth over the border, mocking signs in German and Polish threatening death to anyone crossing without permission. Their jarring song is far from welcoming.

Swiecko. In Polish it means 'place of light', but in the bare break of dawn this rust-grey checkpoint looks anything but. The onboard digital clock blinks a five, a three and a zero. We could be buried in these ancient forests for minutes or hours, depending on the mood of the border guards.

I try to crawl back into dreams, but after a whole night of being lulled by the hum and sway of the transcontinental rush, the coach begins to wake like some drugged domino stack. Feet stuck out into the narrow gangway are withdrawn, arms and heads suddenly appearing over the tops of headrests. Nobody's happy to wake this morning, and it's not just the hour or the discomfort. Going West, the Warsaw-London line is always buzzing with excitement, most everybody heading for something new. Heading back East though, people are unhappy, their passports about to send them back to their commonplace lives. They reach for them as if for house keys at the tail end of a holiday.

I used to have a key ring with a quote from Yeats - "Home is where you start from". It sounds about right, as in that there's a ring of truth to it, but it's nowhere near gospel on the subject. Waiting to roll over the border, I toy with words. Motherland. Fatherland. Poland, my birthplace, a Never-Never Land preserved in Technicolor memories of childhood, though spent under Communism, full of peace and pleasure. Next to that England seems harsher, the place of exile, where the nucleus of my family imploded and I was schooled in disciplines of new territory, of adulthood. Two passports, a dozen years under one flag, a dozen under the other, producing a bilingual half-breed. Sartre said an exile doesn't have a home, but I feel far from lost, my label of belonging never an issue.

The next three hundred miles are a blur. You can cross all of Germany without once breaching town limits, never off the autobahn, but keep going east and the journey becomes a struggle to keep good time on deadly, single lane blacktop. Pious Poles build roadside memorials to those lost to them, anything from humble wooden crosses to brick chapels. I try counting, just on my side of the road, but there's too many to keep up with.

The small town architecture and faces staring up at the international comet don't engage me either. Half a century of Red rule has done nothing for the aesthetics of this land, covering it in drab towns and backward factories. Somewhere near by, a large stone marks the centre of the continent, the geographical heart of Europe, but it's no more than a pebble in the pool of history. In a place where borders have changed a dozen times in the last few centuries, the idea of territory is abstract, centeredness foreign to it.

By noon, we're nearing the capital, its skyline blemished by another lumbering stone landmark. The forty storey Palace of Culture and Science is a gift from Uncle Joe, but what was once an antenna for the Party's propaganda machine is now a booster station for satellite television and mobile phone networks, housing, amongst other things, an over-priced department store, a multiplex cinema and a casino.

I watch it crawl towards me for an hour, all the time we made up on autobahns lost in a horrific traffic jam. Finally off the coach, I have to wait for my rucksack while a monster in a shellsuit and flip-flops has her sons unload a television, a bicycle, three suitcases of varying vastness and a giant check shopping bag large enough to hold both the boys. Waiting, I look around, greet the old place. The West Warsaw International Coach Terminal is still its ugly, dirty self, but apart from the obligatory hot dog stand and drunk on a wooden bench, there's now a little arcade with a body building food suppliers, a bar, even a sex shop. I glance back at the woman and her load of goodies, wonder about her sanity. This place has it all, the full complement of goods and services, the West nothing on it any more.

Rucksack finally released, I see him absorbed by the sex shop window display, hands forced into drainpipe jeans, an old leather jacket hanging off his back. I've known Maks since we were this high. He's the funniest nice guy alive, but it's always the tough guys, the jokers fall hardest. I take the litre bottle of duty-free tequila out of my rucksack, resist the impulse to shout his name just so I can watch a second longer. The hair is longer than last year, the legs skinnier, the whole of him ganglier somehow. He's started wearing his glasses again. As he reaches the end of the little arcade, I open my arms, bottle in hand, wait for him to turn this way. He

starts strolling in my direction and as I'm about to start cursing his lazy bones he finally sees me, breaks into a run, smashes into my embrace so hard I nearly drop the golden flask.

"It's called te-ki-la," I tell him once we're away, dodging traffic in his rotting Mercedes. He slips me a glance over the top of his glasses, reminding me that should never try attempting 'funny' in his presence, then breaks out into a wide, happy grin.

We talk, but it's not yet conversation. I mumble on about the trip, the wait, anything that won't distract him from driving. It's like a bumper car ride out here, only quieter, faster, death always sharing your turn on the rink. On the corner of Jana Pawla and Solidarnosci, we see it had been driving a bright red tram, the tiny Fiat 126 nuzzling against it a grotesque, extravagant wreck.

Nearing my old neighbourhood, we pass by a whole housing estate cordoned off by the police. Probably a bomb threat, he tells me. Since the mafia extortion rackets have taken to blowing up uncooperative clients, the kids have got in on the act, phoning in fake bomb scares to get out of school. The joke is wearing thin, but the bombs keep going off.

The first thing strikes me after the lift ride up is the silence by his door. She's taken the dogs, no howling to greet us as he turns the key. I used to hate those mutts, their undisciplined, manic yelps. Used to.

Opening the door, he says the customary "Guest in my house, God in my house." I stand in the middle of the small living room, try to get some distance. She's taken none of the furniture, just the dogs and the mess. I take a cigarette from a packet lying in an empty fruit bowl, go out onto the balcony. That's swept out too, the dog blankets and her plants gone.

I shower and feel like I've put on fresh skin for the dinner table. Maks continues the low down on all that's happened since I've been away, crime, politics, everything but Beata. I don't think he's hiding, probably wants to talk about their split, but not over light lunch. I need to hear him talk, ignorant of all that's happened since she left, nothing in reply to my questions so far save his brave face. Even though he's taken to wearing glasses, it looks younger, simpler than when we met last, something childlike reborn into it. As he lifts another beer, cheering my arrival, the smile is tender, the eyes scared.

The doorbell interrupts our meal. Maciek, a neighbour, wants us down on the basketball court. Maks tries to shoo him away, but after almost thirty hours on my backside, I'm more than game.

We climb over the local school fence, a bag full of beers rattling as we go. Bringing them along was my idea. Anything to loosen his tongue and to hell with hand-to-eye co-ordination.

We play for an hour in the shadow of tower blocks, the kids showing off, scoring only on the playground clap-o-meter. They're all style over substance, out of steam quickly, clearly too much into their vodka and Camels to compete with twentysomething old timers like us. Maks, in his old tracksuit and trainers, doesn't care, chucks ball after silent ball through the netless hoop, lost in himself.

A young blond thing is hustling hard, comes down from a rebound all elbows, right into my face. I see nothing but pain for a few seconds, a rod beating against my nose every time I try to open my eyes. Maks explodes, not up for a fight, just tired, mad. My vision still flickering, I drag him away, listen as he rants about kids and respect, how they needed their fathers' belt, only the fathers had long ago pawned their belts for vodka, the kids beating up on the old men instead, not like it used to be, not like the old days, no respect anywhere now. His father left when he was still too young for memories, so I say nothing, let the tirade burn itself out.

"Drink!"

I stare at the palm trees on his yellow Hawaiian shirt, obey, let the tequila burn its way down my throat.

"Haargh! Shit, that tastes shit," I squeal, weeping, Maks grinning wildly. The stereo is on, we've drank, danced like idiots, smoked a little grass. The stupid, sensitive soul in me wants him to pour his heart out, but thankfully he's having none of it, not until I mention the almost-fight down on the courts. He smiles to himself, eyes drilling through the endless homes below us, whispers,

"I was trying to get into the zone, you know, just let the ball flow... Woosh! That weird Zen thing happening... Before you even throw, you know it's good. Feel it in your fingers... I was looking, trying to get it going, but no joy... Tried to puzzle it out and... I realised I was sick. Not from the booze. Sick inside. She's gone. The one person I thought I'd never see the back of. My soulmate... I'm playing basketball and I realise my soul is sick."

He smiles into the distance and I have no idea what to say to dispel the dopey stare. I have no idea, because the only person who knows the magic words one day simply didn't answer when asked if she still loved him. As far as I know, she still hasn't. No yes or no. Only silence. Her CD collection gone, no sound of dogs yelping anymore, no unhollow laughter.

We run down eight flights of stairs, then up another four in the block opposite his. The lifts work, but he's in no mood for the silence they're filled with.

Dance music draws us to the right door. The party is well on its way, the small flat packed with people. Though I'm too drunk and not in the mood to get my Polish into mingling gear tonight, I put on a brave face in Maks' name, follow round for a while.

At some point he smacks plastic cups with a tall man our age, dark hair shaved to a stubble, the eyes sad, like they've seen it all and have calmly stopped waiting for anything else to happen. The girl he's with is stunning, almost matches him in height, her hair a wild sprawl of gypsy curls, sea green eyes resting on the crowd with true benevolence. Her name is Rebeka, and, according to Maks, every man in the place is at least half-madly in love with her. Her boyfriend, whose name I miss, is from Praga, the roughest neighbourhood in town. Though he dresses like a street thug, he's got a PhD in philosophy from the prestigious Warsaw University, runs his own company, DJ's, kick-boxes, a mighty underground renaissance man. Maks is not easily impressed, but here he speaks with level-headed reverence. They discuss their respective businesses, hobbies and habits, people's attention gravitating towards their conversation as it moves onto dance music and the physical limitations of the human ear. The tall man rolls out authoritative statistics on how many beats per minute a track can reach before it begins to damage the cochlea, normally around one-eighty, possibly pushed, though usually with permanent side effects, to two-hundred bpm. Maks, pissed and swaying, is not happy with this theory. The tall man patiently explains that it's not theory, but tried and tested scientific fact. He's mixed and recorded himself, toyed with the boundaries of sonic viability and can experientially confirm that the limits are pre-set and not open to question. Maks is having none of it. He wants to know how those limits are arrived at, what happens when you experiment, push beyond the safe envelope. The man continues to answer patiently, explaining that at one-eighty bpm the subject becomes disorientated, nauseous, permanent damage beginning to occur, while at two hundred the nose and eardrums start to bleed, the sonic assault jarring the brain, death the end result.

Maks falls silent, but is still staring the man down, smiling, swaying. Then he turns and starts to blatantly flirt with Rebeka, before introducing me to the sea-eyed beauty. I ask if he's usually this much of a verbal pugilist. She laughs and says that it's only in present company, just to flex an intellectual muscle or two. Maks the challenger, the guy the elder statesman, the scene just sparring. I've seen the same at Speaker's Corner, established orators spicing up quiet mornings by getting off their own soapboxes to melt into the crowd and heckle others. Speak to them and they'll admit it's all pre-rehearsed, all part of the show. Those guys are doctors and professors too, I say, nodding at her boyfriend. Maks is silent, smiling to himself like a little schoolboy. I ask if he often tries to seduce her after these bouts, and she smiles, says something about how he just needs a good shag, intimating knowledge of his recent split.

He listens, the cheeky smile never leaving his lips, then sways, winks at me and backs off into the crowd. I stay in the calm light of her smile a little longer, eventually find him chatting to a few mates out on the staircase. He gets me in a playful headlock, then, instead of pushing me back into the flat, starts leaping down the stairs again.

Crossing the space between blocks, he stops, sits on a playground roundabout, staring up at his own flat. "Lovely girl, Rebeka. What a head on those shoulders... Get laid. If only she'd offer... And I'm sure she would, oh yes, a catch like me, if it wasn't for that bastard boyfriend... Why is it women always choose the wrong man? Why never me?"

He injects the whinge with self-deprecating humour, but it still hurts.

"We going home?"

"You beat yet?"

"No."

"Let's go get a drink."

We stumble through the warm night towards some private villas beyond the estate, built by those who, back in the days of abject equality, had the means to escape the thousand pigeon holes behind us. They're all large, one or two storey, each one unique. This one here, he tells me as we pass, iron bars over the windows, dogs tearing loudly at their chains, belongs to a newspaper publisher, an ex-Party bigwig, the tall, Alpine chalet thing at the end of the street to a famous violinist.

We stop next to a white villa with a sloping black roof, garden furniture stacked on an unfinished patio, plaster already peeling from the walls. It looks profoundly uninviting, but Maks presses the intercom buzzer on the gate. The front door opens, a bald heavyweight with a thick moustache, leather jacket over jogging pants, sticks his head outside. He stares for a second, buzzes us into the ill-kept yard. Walking up towards the red face in the door, I try to work out what kind of a dump this could be.

"I don't know you two."

"Just passing by, fancied a drink," Maks explains with a cocky smile. "Heard so many good things about this place, thought I'd bring my friend, show him true Polish hospitality. He's from London..."

"We accept all currencies here."

I don't see which banknote Maks hands over, but whatever it is, it's not enough to buy us a smile. The doorman lights a cigarette, sucks down hard, only then throws the door wide open like we'd pissed him off but he was going to humour us anyway.

I can hardly see at first, tea candles all over the large, low-ceilinged room, the air filled with smoke and a deafening George Michael tune. There are a few tables set around, occupied by men who obviously work out and shop for clothes in the same place as the doorman. A couple of young women sit on low couches set around the walls, separated from the boys like it was a school disco. I follow Maks to the bar, turn my back on the nightmare.

"What is this place, Maks? Some kind of Mafia dive?"

He orders a couple of vodkas and imported Kilkenny beers.

"A brothel."

"No..."

"We've done the drugs, done the rock and roll, now it's time to do the ladeez."

I tell him he's fucking mad as he salutes the fish tank behind the bar, then climbs up on a bar stool to get a better view. This isn't him, so not him, but I haven't seen the stupid bastard for a year. Christ knows what Beata's departure's done to his head. I light a cigarette, stay standing, lost for words. He tells me not to stress as it might affect my and, what's more important, his performance. I shake my head, take a sip of the beer to steady my nerves. This is unbelievable. I was expecting a proper bender on my first night back, but this has gone way beyond the absurd. There's no way he'd try anything with any of these pros. He's a pussy cat, a paper tiger, the gentlest guy I've ever known...

He gets up, walks towards the women by the wall. Over the distance and the music I can't hear what he's saying, but one of them points in the direction of a narrow corridor. He nods and vanishes through it. As I wonder whether I ought to play it cool, let him get things out of his system, or be a real friend, drag him away from whatever horrible mistake he's about to make, a skinny blonde appears out of a huddle of men round a table, comes over. I turn away, praying like a little school boy that she pass, but I see in the mirror behind the bar that she's stopped right beside me. I cringe, because deep down inside there's a fucked-up, macho, moron little voice saying 'Go on. Go for it. Go on, be a MAN. Are you afraid? You're afraid, aren't you. Loser. Chicken shit loser...' and she probably, no, definitely hears it too.

"Interesting." I recognise the voice, turn in my seat. She's no longer a brunette, looks younger, but the smile is all Marta. She leans forward, kisses me on both cheeks, eyes skipping between mine. "What are you up to?"

I could ask her the same question, but don't. She's the older sister of Aga, a childhood sweetheart separated from me by a thousand miles of emigration. Marta lived in London for a while and Aga came over to visit. By then, the cute teen I'd left behind had blossomed into a stunning and troubled beauty, an attention seeker with perfect freckles and a habit of courting men who were disastrous news. I stopped calling when her craziness became too demanding, even for me, but kept in touch with Marta a while longer. Last I'd heard, she'd fallen in love with a local boxer and swapped her broken life in London for a flat here, closer to her family, somewhere her English was going to be a strength and not a weakness.

"Came in for a drink, with a friend. You want one?"

"No thanks... Such a nice boy, what a surprise." Her smile says she's caught me out, but booze makes me want to turn the tables. I ask about her and she says she's here with her man. I ask if it's the boxer, and the corners of her lips drop an nth of an inch.

"No, Pawel died. Two weeks after I moved back here, in a motorcycle accident. Twenty one years old. Happens..." She asks about me, and I sort of explain, choking. I mention Maks and his predicament, trying to level with the sad subject she's just introduced, and it's the very moment he chooses to slap me on the back.

"Hey, you old devil! Leave you alone for a second..."

I introduce them, my shoulder blades burning. We make a few minutes' polite conversation, then she says it's been great to meet again, but she has to go, her boyfriend not keen on her talking to strangers. But we're not strangers, I say as she tells the barman to put our drinks on her bill. How's Aga? Her pupils skip between mine again, without play in them now, cold and questioning.

"You don't know," she says and, as per script, I mumble No, what? "Two years ago. Two years in November." A dull cramp of grief grabs me by the gut, backed by instant visions of overdoses, self-harm, other wild card ends. "Cancer. Of the liver."

"Cancer?" Two years ago, Aga would've been twenty two.

"Yes... Forgive me." Shame shoves past grief, wondering what the hell I have to forgive her for, but I'm a little too stumped to put my query into words. She glances back into the dark room again, then stares at the floor. Now I feel sorry for her. Fuck, her younger sister. Her cute, sweet, crazy younger sis. Her baby. Fuck. "Didn't want to call you with the news. Just one of those decisions. Tough time for everyone..."

So she feels guilty about not having let me know before. My brain's gone all sober, but it's also gone all blank, angry at itself for having so little talent in moments like these. She looks calm, as if she's dealt with grief already and moved on, living a new life, new faces, new hair colour. Her eyes are still moving back and forth, now looking for something to say, some words of consolation. We chat for a couple more uncomfortable minutes, questions I don't want to ask answered by the last person wants to have to answer them, leaving me cold, confused and utterly exhausted. Is she telling the truth? Was it cancer, or something else? Drug, sex related? The questions I really want answered remain buried beneath timid conversation. Then she shakes Maks' hand, his eyes not quite yet rid of lust, kisses me on the cheek once and teeters away on high heels that instantly remind me of Aga.

Maks asks about the sisters, and I still don't know what to say, and what's worse, what to feel. Looking at him, I'm reminded of where we are, but he shakes his head, smiles meekly, says he only went for a slash. I crack a joke about his lack of bottle, but though we both smile, it's clear we've ran out of giggles for tonight. Not that I'm grieving. It's something else, something I can't quite get a handle on in this terrible place. We've been here all of fifteen minutes, and it's already making me sick.

I tell him to drink up and for once he lets me take charge, sipping quickly, the first to get off his stool. He looks at me in a sobered, serious way, more of the sympathy I'd seen in Marta's eyes behind those wire frames. I drain my glass, get up, unable to bear the stare. Didn't expect to be on the receiving end of pity today.

The heavyweight opens the door for us and slams it shut again. Out in the night, I hear dogs barking all over the place. Maks is struggling to light a cigarette, but I shove him down the steps towards the gate, realise I didn't even try to catch Marta's eye on the way out. She's gone, is past, and I don't know when, if, I'll ever see her again. Our estate twinkles before us with a thousand multi-coloured eyes, the haystack to her needle, but I don't feel a thing. Christ, is it the alcohol? Something else in me burnt out? Why do I feel no grief, over either of the sisters? This is too much, I think with anger, shoving the back of the Hawaiian shirt forward. This is your fault, for bringing me here, pissing about, but he doesn't get it, just laughs and chucks the unlit cigarette over someone's fence. I look around the dark, quiet streets, and it creeps up on me. Fear. The need to get this broken-hearted bastard safely through his own door, without accident or attack, without losing him. Then pain. Empathy at last. His hunched shoulders, no Beata by his side, after so many years. After all these drunken hours, I finally feel what he must be feeling. This man, thrown my way by the same chance as Aga and Marta, but not a stranger, not to me, not ever. Then something else again. Exhaustion and fear strip it all away and remind me what it is I feel for the lousy fuck stumbling ahead of me on his wonky legs, why I rode that bloody bus all the way here in the first place. It's not warm, not tonight, more panicked, like the love of a parent for a child in trouble, but in spite of the road ache, booze and bad news, I'm glad I came.

## THE TRAP OF LIMBS

Comedians always talk about how laughter not only got them girls in school, but saved them from playground violence. Tonight, it's turning the shield trick for me too. Three a.m., almost everyone happy enough to let me ramble over the noise of the dance floor, only his eyes on cold fire, demanding my attention. My mouth motors on, buying time with cheap laughs, time in which to work my way out of this. Is he mad because or in spite of her? Am I going to get away unbloodied? Doesn't he get any of the irony? Whatever happens, however it ends, tonight's going to have me in stitches for a long time yet.

Tonight is mostly his fault, but bullies are like that. Like muscling their way out of responsibility. Can't even remember how we got to be mates, at which seminar or party, but hanging around with this hard-nosed clothing emporium heir means I'm never short of weekend engagements. Premieres, press launches, private do's. Some loud, some intimate, sometimes someone interesting to talk to, usually free booze to be had. The coattails thing's cheap in more ways than one, but there are other benefits. Her. A sweet faced economics student, a waif next to his six-foot-two quarterback build. They've been together since school and most say they'll marry, just as soon as his career demands a wallflower wife.

The only time she breaks free of his shadow is on the dance floor. There's no real way to describe the transformation, what happens when she starts to move to music. It's not sexual, not showy, some pure grace in her hips and wrists makes me grin every time I'm near. Perfect rhythm mated to perfect limbs. She shames everyone under the lights. Needs no partner to shine. He moves all right for his size, but next to her he's a golem. Christ, even when she sits, leg folded over the knee, lithe neck craned up with that silent, worried smile, the curves and angles make me want to weep.

Six months I've been trying to puzzle it out. Six months and still no real answer as to why her and not one of the mass of other beauties people their world. Some inner gift elevates her above the crowd, the kind of quality separates the pearl from the chorus line. Can't help staring, night after night, as she steps on pavements, away from bar tables, those hips, arms, calves, in whatever garment of choice, from his parents collections, from the back of her wardrobe, the gym. Something about her is tinged with absolute perfection. Some echo of original Eve.

I know it's only flesh and bone. Listened to her whenever drink's loosened her tongue. Either talks about economics or him, his work, family, what she suspects he gets up to after his political club meetings and business trips. They often fight, but it seems to be something he allows, an outlet for her frustrations. The tiffs never lead anywhere, change anything. Her complaints leave me cold, her eyes unmoved, but the moment she leaves the table my eyes are glued again. Is it voyeurism? Maybe, but I'm happy just to watch, far from the caustic noise of their voices, in a gallery of god's own making.

He's too in love with himself to notice me watching. Likes to drink, snort, top the occasional night off with a smack in someone's mouth, but more than anything, loves being the life and soul of every party. Talking, singing, stripping his shirt off at the slightest excuse, parading the fruits of his weights room labours. It's a stupid, ugly quality, his exhibitionist streak, and the very thing's got us into this mess we're all in tonight.

Six months ago, some friends complain about the expense of hiring a male stripper for their hen night and I jokingly suggest he step in. No need to go starkers, I tell him, just prance about in your undies. Girls go nuts, you walk away a hero, cross another item off the Things To Do Before You're 30 list. Even she's keen on the idea, hoping he'll make a tit of himself, but after days of making out like it's in the bag, he pulls out.

Nothing's said about it for months, not 'till a fortnight ago. I get a call from a bar to come over. All the usual faces smile at me like I'm the proverbial sacrificial lamb. She asks if I want to make some quick cash, a big sum for the fifteen minutes mentioned. I get a beer, stare without shame for once as she explains a friend is getting married soon and needs someone to provide the hen night delights. Why me? I'm not the one likes stripping off at the drop of a hat, but seeing as I called the original challenge, it's my turn to show what I'm made of.

So tonight, mask, hat and other props in a bag, I meet the boys for an early dose of liquid courage in a bar up town. Sore about being shown up for once, he's keener than most to take the piss, drunk already, but I have other things to worry about. Around ten, she calls to say the party's already dying, wants me to get there quick, do my thing so we can be in some club by midnight at the latest.

By eleven, I'm in my Zorro outfit, fighting her pet dog off with a toy rapier. Ten minutes later, there's just the mask and the boxers left, the bride to be only interested in prancing about in my cape, the girls in fits, no weapon left with which to fight off the nineteen year old thinks I'm a pro and therefore on the menu. We have a put the condom on the banana race, play pin the tail on the stripper and a drinking game that involves confessions about naughty pasts. The more you've transgressed, the more you drink, the party becoming delightfully unladylike.

By the time I get tired of hearing them talk about their sex lives, it's almost one. I try calling the boys on their mobiles, but they're waiting for us in some underground club and there's no reception. I manage to recover my clothes, pack away the rented props, find her helping a friend aim her puke in the toilet bowl. Everyone grabs cabs back into town, back to the boys, everyone except Zorro, Eve and the legless one in the bathroom.

It takes the cabbie a while to find the right address, for us to shove the friend in the lift, through her door and into bed. By the time we get back outside, the cab is gone. Waiting for another, she plays drunker than she is, dances round me in the ridiculous Zorro hat, making like she's about to fall, like my superhero job isn't done yet.

Then she's in my arms, head in my chest, her own pulsing against me like something terrible's just happened. Looking down, the hat strap hanging off that perfect neck, I wince at the blast of beauty. She puts her hand in mine, rubs my palm. Then puts it to her lips. After weeks of watching, I let her, my mind suddenly tired of the back seat, feeling he wrapped round me, the intoxicating smell of cigarettes and perfume on our clothes, the street empty, the night not watching.

For the first time ever, we're alone. I put my hands on her waist. It feels tiny, no thicker than my wrist. A work of genius. I keep my hands there, even when she tries to pull back, untangle the hat from her hair, meet my eyes. I don't want her to look. Don't want those needy eyes to ask me for anything.

It takes us half an hour to get back into town. She lies curled up beside me in the back seat, perfect curves within an arms reach, but I'm paralysed. The radio's on, that dire Enigma tune wafting through the night, "Principles of love, easy to understand, blah, blah, do what you feel until, blah, you find, blah, love...", but nothing is clear. Feeling her hips twist and curl round me, her lips breathing fire against my neck, I try to wish her away. I was happy being the spectator. No, that's not all true. I'd be sick not to want all that stunning flesh, ache to possess all that she is without, the grace, but I know it's impossible, know how shallow the magic is, what the consequences of finally moving with her would be, even if I'm not quite sure what it is she wants, how base or complex her expectations. Maybe she just wants this moment to make up for all his betrayals. Or maybe she's looking for a new hero, someone to save her from her prince of old. Doesn't matter. Don't care. Certain lines should never be crossed, if only to keep principles, and beauty, from ruin.

By the time we get to the club, she's mad, stumbling towards the basement staircase. Inside, the night seems unchanged. The girls are still in a little huddle, having a high time, the boys waiting to ask me sneering questions. I tell them about the condoms, the fruit, enough saucy details not to betray confidences. Everybody's happy to give me my moment's celebrity, everyone except him. He's smashed, tries to drag her over for a dance, but for once she shrugs him off like he's just a bland stranger.

Me, I want to freeze the moment. Had her wrapped round me not long ago, and that's enough, enough to know what could've been. Some of the girls pull me onto the dance floor, flirting happily in full view of their boyfriends, but the one person I'd like beside me is busy. Their argument can only be seen over the thumping music, but it looks mean.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes, I'm swallowing booze, my mind gone, exposed, happy. What a night. The Zorro thing, the wicked party games, the breath of Eden still on me. Didn't put a foot wrong once, and, in this world, you just can't ask for more than that. Sweating in my heavy black shirt, I go back to the bar, find her alone. All right, I say, grinning like an idiot. She won't look up. Others join us, all high, happy, all except him. He wonders over, says nothing, just stares at me. His glowering eyes are a sobering contrast to the glow in everyone else's, no friendship left in them, no words. Just unmistakeable, unstoppable hunger for violence. Maybe he's put two and two together, challenged her. Maybe she said nothing. Or told some lie to avenge my rejection. Set her heroes on one another.

A girl mentions my act and I jump at the chance to hide in the spotlight, my mouth going, my smile fixed, joy leaving me with every word. I start doing what I promised myself I wouldn't. Boasting, bragging, cowardice making me hide behind the presence of others, hide from both beauty and brawn. He sees it and it's like a red rag to a bull, fists desperate to make up for loss of face, loss of his rightful place in the limelight.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes, my ego bloating, my mouth turning me into him, his equal. All the brownie points I'd earned myself earlier, all the smug self-satisfaction, burst like the hollow bubble it all was. Glorifying in beauty. Dressing it in all the pretty words. Everything suddenly spoilt, tarnished and getting worse by the second. There's one person here who can help, can put the brakes on the ugly climax that's brewing, but when I steal my usual glance, she's motionless for once, not lifting a single, perfect finger to save me.

## WHO THE KINGS AND QUEENS ...

**Capoeira** ;      *Non-contact sport, a cross between dance and martial arts. Brought to Brazil by African slaves during the Colonial era. Developed to train the body in a fighting discipline under the guise of a balletic dance form.*

I wake for the fifth time since six. It's not insomnia, more a kind of hangover disturbing me, though it's nothing to do with alcohol. I get up by eight, tired of fighting myself back to sleep. Third day off in a row, a very rare treat in the restaurant business, but I start it restless, despondent, pissed off to the point of pain. It's not depression, not unhappiness, something in between, something I can't place or name, a dense spell over me. Same as with a hangover I know it'll get better as the day goes on, but same as with a hangover, the knowledge doesn't help against the ache itself.

I pull the sheets back over my bed, notice the coffee stain lingering on the white surface. There's that, and the half-finished bottle of expensive vodka still on my desk, the only trace of her left on this place. But then that's about right, about representative of all that's passed through here.

People say opposites attract, but what happens when you put chalk and cheese together? Something in human nature will push for it, even though it's a sickening combination. If it doesn't kill you, it might make you stronger, and that in itself is sometimes worth the effort. Worth the hangover.

I put the sheets in the wash and make breakfast. Hunger leaves me with the first mouthful. I distinctly remember feeling hungry only a moment ago, even if I don't remember when it was I lost my appetite. The two are not nearly the same. I feel full halfway through the sandwich, but keep on eating, though it's more effort than it's worth.

The day outside looks blustery, but it's definitely mild, sunny. Almost May.

This time last year I was still living alone in a small town on top of a cliff, a few miles outside Brighton, working on a novel. Writing, walking, spending the weekends in London. It was good, as far as hermit lifestyle choices went. The best of both worlds. I knew the coming and going of tides like most people know their train timetables or TV schedules. When things got boring, I'd take my mountain bike down some of the breakneck descents in the area, or play chicken with thirty foot waves crashing along storm defences below the cliffs. But all artwork and no play can make a young man something worse than dull, so I up and moved to Brighton, the transit, party capital of the country. Chalk and cheese again. Took the first job I could find, waiting tables at a newly-opened restaurant, meaning to be out of there in two weeks flat. A year later I'm running the place. My typewriter, hidden under its plastic lid, hasn't seen the light of day since. I work a sixty hour week, and like everyone else I know, party in what spare time I get. It's called „Living the Life”, and living it has been infinitely more fun than writing about it.

While on platitudes, this New Year's I made a resolution to start keeping a regular journal, in the hope of reawakening any cerebral juices still left in me after a winter of occasional sex, recreational drugs and incessant dance music. I do well at first, chart the whole of January, but by February things start to tail off, then stop all together. The start of February, Mina walks into the restaurant. By March the plot's pretty much lost.

I'm writing this now, straight after breakfast, both to catch up and to take my mind off this blind, sleepless ache I'm left with. The last three months are both a blur and a blank, literally, as far as the journal is concerned. It's the only thing I can think of might blow away some of the cobwebs I feel wrapped round me still.

Never had a thing for blonde hair, but since I moved to Brighton, nothing but blondes have come my way. It's nothing to complain about, but when I see a sweet-faced brunette sitting at one of our tables a couple of weeks before Valentine's, the auburn hair draws my attention all night. The mesmerising, short haired blonde dining with her does not distract. Unlike most men, never had a thing about blondes or redheads. Like big boobs, just one of those aesthetic things always left me cold.

It's the brunette I remember when they both come through the door a week later. She's interested in the advert for waiting staff hanging in the window. I give them both applications to fill out, and they sit together at one of the empty tables in the place. Only Sarah, the brunette, comes over to talk. She dresses, speaks and acts like the young English Lit graduate I read about on the form, needs the job to pay off debts while she thinks of what to do next with her life. The answers to my questions are pretty much all on the page before me, but interviews are never about confirming facts, rather getting a feel for personality, trying to guess whether it fits the bill I have in mind. I know I'm going to say yes from word go, and hope she knows it too, not because I want to flatter or impress, but 'cause I hope she has the smarts to see through the subtext I've just mentioned. When I tell her the job's hers, she turns and squeals at her friend in proud surprise. The blonde is smiling right at me. I ask her to have a go. She doesn't bother filling out the form, goes straight for the face-to-face. I'd skip those motions too, but Sarah's watching. The second interview of the day is not about facts or even guesswork, but a stimulating exercise in seeing how long we can keep up eye contact without it becoming unprofessional.

She's half Italian, half English, a philosophy graduate from the same university as Sarah. Doesn't want or need the money, but is happy to keep her friend company a few nights a week, which is perfect for the slim wage and hours on offer. I don't ask why this particular job, not even after she's been there for a couple of weeks. Lots of people I know in this town are still trying to find their feet.

Mina's not her first name. Her first's a lengthy mouthful her wealthy father dreamt up. Mina's the one her mother chose, and the one she's decided on for herself since. In my native tongue it has two possible translations. "Mine", as in land mine, and "facial expression", as in a grimace or a frown. None of this comes to me until I see her CV a few weeks later, by which time I'm already putting her tax details through our payroll.

It's a remarkable document for a twenty three year old. She's had a prime-site education, jobs both at home and abroad, paid and voluntary, held just about every position of authority everywhere she's been. Some of it may or may not be faked, she later admits, but in a tone of voice that says she's not the least bit embarrassed by it, as if her CV was not just a document of what she's done, but of what she feels she's capable of doing.

Sarah turns out to be a tidy little waitress. Her tips are poor. Something to do with her fragile sense of humour.

Mina works hard when she feels like it, works even harder when she doesn't, as if trying to prove something to herself. The business of managing her when she's not in the mood, or rather in one, is a bitch. She could run that place with her eyes closed, both hands tied behind her back, and still cover tables on busy weekend nights. Shows me up so often, all I can do is laugh along at myself, which seems to be the only way of disarming her furies. We choreograph round each other nicely.

Something about the way she carries herself brings out a sense of wonder in people. Unlike Sarah, she plainly looks like she belongs somewhere better, yet still takes home twice the tips of

anyone else in the place. Her constant, confident smile flatters rather than sucks up to customers. It makes my day to see her working it. She towers above people in a way makes men go visibly weak at the knees, even when they're sitting down, and women too humble for any concerted envy. There's more to it than just her physical stature, more than mere body language.

I know I say she towers above others, but then there's this other angle. Sometimes I watch her at work, her gestures, expressions, catch her moving with the light-limbed frailty of a little girl. The way she twists her wrists, or turns lightly on the balls of her feet, or cocks her head to one side when she's in the mood to smile and show someone she likes them. I can't work out whether it's something she lets slip unconsciously, or whether she knows exactly when to play the cute card with people.

We make what instant, intense conversations the workplace lets us. They only whet my appetite for more. Sarah complains we talk too much. She is as charmless in person as she is charismatic in the flesh. I try to bring her along at work, but all Mina does is give a hard time, hard enough to see their friendship is already on the ropes.

There's something captivating, spellbinding in the mixture of brains, beauty and no-bull character Mina radiates, something takes my head for a spin every time I'm near her. Don't know how, though. She's got no artistic temperament to speak of. Pays little attention to music, less to film, and none at all to literature. Scoffs at the mention of it, in a sharp tone of voice makes me suspect she feels her lack of creative sensibilities a handicap. She's a specialist subject kind of girl, computers and philosophy her innate fields of expertise. Even now, across all this time, these months, I still don't know what we ever see in each other.

\* \* \*

Noon, and again I'm falling asleep at the typewriter. It's too early to nap. I go out, stretch my legs, buy some fruit. On the high street I bump into Will, an ex-chef of ours. Young kid, tall, handsome, wickedly unhinged. Always talks about himself in the third person, as if his adventures were already, at the time of happening, a minor legend. He says he's coming back from Kemp Town nick, shows me the wrist marks from the recently removed cuffs. Just a minor disorder charge, he sniggers. Most of his stories sound like bull, but he'd pulled so many stunts when I was still a waiter there, it's easy to forgive his personable exaggerations. Throwing knives at the prep chefs, then trying to kick in the door of the restaurant office when fired for it, are just some of the misdemeanours I can vouch for personally. He asks how I'm doing and I find myself frustratingly, painfully short of a clear answer. I tell him something useless, something lame and half-serious, but afterwards find I'm glad we bumped into each other, something of a surprise in a town already crawling with people I'll only ever get to half-know.

Get home, feeling as restless and tired as I did when I woke. I try to keep writing, but I'm falling asleep at the keyboard.

Never lost sleep over anything in my life. Not even in my darkest moments past. No matter what nightmares went down daytimes, sleep was always a reliable refuge. Slept sound, anytime, anywhere. At college they nicknamed me Tsetse Fly. Even the lecturers got used to it. But recently, though I still get off to sleep fine every night, I wake, every night, five, six a.m., into pitch darkness, as if done with rest. Doesn't matter what time I lay down, whether at ten or at three, the internal clock always doing its own, early bird thing, as if my brain needed to get up, start processing, start on something unnamed. It's not stress or diet or depression. On the surface, nothing's changed in my life of late, nothing but Mina's fleeting appearance in it, so in the absence of other, more easily digestible explanations, I'll lay the blame at her feet.

A month after the job interview, I find out she's already got someone to spend Valentine's day with, but only when I break my so far solid „work, not play” rule and ask her if she wants to take our

conversations outside. She smiles an unusually honest smile, and declines on account of already having been taken. I smile back and walk off with my tail between my legs, feeling envious of a man whose name I don't even know, but kind of like at the same time. He must have his fair share of plus points if she's chosen him for a partner.

Two weeks later, she asks if the offer of a drink's still on. I nod and ask no questions in return.

She brings a female friend to chaperone the lunch time date, and I don't yet know if the other guy's out of the picture, or if I'm just being toyed with. Turns out he is, and soon her friend makes herself scarce too. We eat, drink and talk for eight hours straight, cover a few of the smarter topics under the sun, study enough of one another to know we have as many things in common as we have setting us apart. The art/science angle may be something to do with it. The evening's a mind-fuck, hard work getting though to her suddenly hesitant persona, but still the most stimulating time I've had with a woman for longer than I care to admit. She feels different though. Drives me home, and after a distressingly drawn-out, embarrassed silence parked by my front door, when I can't decide whether to say something or let the other sex make the move for a change, she says it's been nice, but nothing's going to happen. I smile, even if only to myself, and once again withdraw.

By the time I hit my empty bed, I'm laughing to/at/with myself. Wake at eleven, relaxed, call her at one just to say that despite the final lack of chemistry, it'd been a great evening, one which deserved more than the lame close we'd given it. I tell her I wanted that honoured, save us having to go back to work the next day, struggle though uncleared air. She says something equally grown-up in reply, and I consider the subject closed.

She calls back the same night, but I'm out. There's a message on my machine.

Two days later, I cook for two in my own kitchen. Never cook for myself alone, not really, just one of those bachelor things, which is a waste, 'cause I'm a blinding cook. It's a talent women appreciate, and one that's never let me down yet. Not 'till I cook for her. I forget to buy some things, overcook others, manage to implode a Pyrex jug full of sauce while it sits on low heat. The sauce is irrecoverable, what with broken glass mixed into it, but the evening itself goes smoothly. Hard work, just like before, Mina more than ever with her guard up whenever a subject remotely personal rears up, but for some reason the effort feels worth it. She's never this quiet at work. I don't know what to make of the intense fun I'm having.

Earlier that same day I found out a friend of mine is going to be a dad again, so I start drinking before she gets there and then carry on with the heady momentum. Mina's driving, playing it safe with the booze. We talk a few hours more, the atmosphere ever thawing, her guard dropping all the time, but I get carried away. Don't know what it is I say to kill her smile, but sometime around midnight she whispers that she doesn't like me any more, in a broken tone of voice makes the puny little words sound like total condemnation. The way she says them's like a wounded curse, and it freaks me out. Some days later she'll own up, admit I'd said nothing wrong, quite the opposite, said something that touched her in a way she wasn't ready for, but I don't know that at the time. All I can do is let go again. We smoke in her car while she waits for the engine to warm up, and I'm wondering whether I'm just sport for her, whether she's just fucking with my head. She tells me it's not going to happen. Meaning us. Repeats the words as if trying to be heard by someone far away. Maybe someone else, maybe herself. I'll hear the same words said, same hour, same place, many times over in the coming weeks, but don't know that yet either. She won't look at me. Tired of the silence and confusion, I get out, put my hands on the bonnet, but it only makes her hesitate a few moments longer. I watch her drive off, again sure I've blown it, especially when I go back in and see how much of the vodka's gone from the day-old bottle. Feel angry, but philosophical at the same time. Calm enough to drop straight off to sleep.

That's the night my sleep pattern goes to hell. I dream the most intense dreams of my life, for hours, in real-time, beginning, middle and end. Dream right though the whole evening again, but the conversation's subtly different, less strained, like the trust missing from real life is there, working a saner kind of trick for us. I wake at four in the morning, fully rested, still drunk. Get up, buy cigarettes and a four pint container of milk at a 24-hr petrol station up the road, walk down to a railway bridge where the panorama of the whole of Brighton and the South Downs beyond shimmers in the dark. It's still below zero outside, freezing as fuck, frost whispering underfoot, but I feel intensely, blissfully at peace. Don't know why, seeing as it's only hours since she left. I'm there for ages, laughing to myself, watch first a jogger, then a blind guy cross the bridge, following its contours with his stick. The sky shifts gears over Racecourse Hill, from star-lit navy to green to pale white and blue. As stars fade away, I head for the beach, sure no sleep will come now. The sun creeps over the mirrored horizon, bright as hell, stopping everyone in their tracks, enthralled. I stumble in to open the restaurant at nine, three hours early and high as a kite, but by the afternoon my sleepless head's in purgatory. Mina's not on the day's rota, and somehow, despite another unsatisfactory end to our meeting, her absence only makes me miss her more.

I hit bed the moment I get home that evening, only to be woken by the phone an hour later. It turns out she didn't sleep all that much either. I apologise for whatever it was I'd said that upset her, but she shrugs it off, just says she doesn't want a relationship. We talk for over an hour and a half after that. I know, 'cause it's the last thing I make a note of in my rapidly thinning diary.

Christ only knows how long we spend on the phone in the few weeks that follow. I hate the fucking phone. Don't mind driving a thousand miles, either way, to see friends and family back in Poland, even if it only be for a couple of days, even if the trip itself takes longer than the stay. Anything's better than the phone, but I persist, because it transforms her. Where face to face she's so distant I'm always out of breath trying to keep her within reach, on the phone she'll actually talk, for hours, say things about herself she'd never do otherwise. Things about me. Says how she felt when we looked at one another in the interview. How she feels at work on the days I'm there, and those I'm not. How she feels when we accidentally touch in the passing. The words seem to exhaust her. When I hear her fade, I talk, say whatever, just to keep up the connection. I talk 'till her cordless runs out of power, then call her mobile while the cordless recharges, then back on that again. She says she loves the sound of my voice. Doesn't matter what I say, as long as it keeps on ringing in her ear, it's OK. When we're both done, we check the messages people left on our machines while we were otherwise engaged.

On the phone we talk through all the things we never manage otherwise, this strange time we're in, between the disappointments found the other side of youth and the faint hope we still hold for the future. She whispers once, late at night, that these conversations are something else, something new and special to her, sounds stunned by her own admission. She has as many close confidantes, as many pals of both sexes, as I have solitary months of work on the novel behind me. We only ever come this close on the phone though, and I can't shake off the feeling that something is profoundly wrong. The compliment's too good to be easily believed. Too good to be true. I don't know who's casting spells on who anymore.

I find myself shaking whenever we talk, whether in person or on the phone. The shivers go after a few minutes, but I can't shake off the sense of disturbance, can't keep the reins on my own reflexes. Never been nervous around women, not ever. Not a boast, just a fact, like the talent for cooking or for sleep. Something else is going on, something that drills right through me, right to the bone. Embarrassing, more than anything else. I try to fight the shakes each time we get close, but nothing seems to cure them. Not drink, not cigarettes, not even telling her about it.

Part of the reason I've never had a problem getting close to women is 'cause I've never been driven by sex. Never tried to seduce. Like the cooking, it's an honest, easy going thing which seems to be appreciated. But since the start of this dalliance with Mina, my sex drive's gone completely. Don't

know what's wrong there either. Another first. Don't know what it is I really want from her, but I feel nothing, no physical attraction towards any woman I come near of late, not even brunettes with slim waists and small busts. Takes the breath away just looking at her, but I feel nothing below my heart and lungs.

Every time she comes over, she moves closer, only to pull away again, night after every night. In my bedsit, watching TV, she'll start at the opposite end of the room, then transfer across it slowly, through hours, from the solitary comfort of my bed to the sofa next to me, 'till she's lying with her head in my lap, eyes never off the screen. Lets me put her wrist to my mouth, and it's as near to „first base” as she'll let me get. Later, she'll say that even that one moment of contact was enough to know what sex between us would be like, but every time we come close, she runs, like she's scared of loosing control over something other than just her flesh. When we touch, it's only gingerly, not like kids or teens or cowards, but like lost adults.

She tells me she can't be trusted. The way she says it sounds like both a casual statement and an offhand warning. I don't know why the warning though, not when she keeps repeating her subdued mantra to me at the end of each meeting. „It's not going to happen...”, though I never ask what or why, „...whatever you think this is, it's not going to happen...” Midnight, one in the morning, she in her car, me outside, smoking, both of us repeating ourselves.

Affection. Don't know why I'm looking for it here and now, of all places. After years of solitary comings and goings, she's got me rattled, and where I'm rattled, cracks are starting to show, and through those cracks something's starting to seep in, get to me, right under the skin, a need I can't shut off around her, no matter what tricks I try.

I use the word “communion” to describe the connection I've had with a couple of women in the past, but however close we come to something akin, she seems to find the word distasteful. It becomes the “c-word” between us, taboo, funny for a while, but the joke wears thin soon enough. She says sex is sex, and conversation conversation. In the language she uses, neither the body nor the mind have any extraordinary properties to them.

She has about her the world-weariness of those born to wealth. Done too many wild and glamorous things as a matter of course too early on in life. It's burnt something out, aged her prematurely. In contrast, I find in myself the strange, naive idealism of one who's never had or cared much about money, especially when it comes to my feelings for people. I care about them, more than Mina, much more, maybe only 'cause I've never been envied by anyone for that base, shallow something, never seen real money do its dirty work first-hand.

The absence of any kind of physical desire anywhere in me's starting to disturb. I try seducing her eventually, just to show I'm not dead inside yet, but she's having none of it. I don't know whether it's because she can smell fear on me, though when I ask, sure she's one of the few people with the guts to answer a question like that without flinching, she won't answer at all. The last time I approach, trying to act confident, but likely coming across all juvenile, she shakes her head and draws away. As she leaves the room to get some drinks, I hear her mumble with a smile „It would be so easy to give in to you...”, but for all the possible readings, I still don't get it, don't get why we don't just get naked or bored of each other.

This last moment of approach happens the one time she invites me over to her place. I ask for a reading from a pack of Tarot cards I know she's got hidden there. It's a strange hobby for someone of such a pragmatic, Newtonian nature, but she's good. I don't ask about the future. Not interested. Visions of the future are all too easy to fake. Past and present are the things I always want more insight into. Card readings are like job interviews, just a matter of reading people and your own guesses about them, but it's always interesting to look into an alternative mirror. Mina takes her time, says little about my past, a couple of fun things about the future, and nothing about the present. Then again, I

didn't expect any assistance from her with that, and it seems pointless to ask for more. Not even the most detailed map can help ride out certain roller coasters.

She shows me the few pictures she has of herself, three, four maybe. Her pale blue eyes look dark, almost brown in every single one. We try reading different things into the strange trick of light, but it defies our attempts at reasoning. She looks different in every single picture, depending on which year, part of the world or mood they'd been taken in, but though they all do her beauty justice, every one captures the same winsome, blue-eyed darkness.

The last time we meet alone, we drive up to a pub on Devil's Dyke, the inland cliff a few miles behind Brighton. The hills there drop off to a wild expanse of windblown space, stretching as far as the the North Downs some thirty miles away. We sit out in the cold sunshine, spring teasing with light, a colourful crowd of paragliders above us in the empty blue sky. She lies back on a bench with her head in my lap, unimpressed with the sights. She's seen better elsewhere, in the States, Ireland, the Middle East. Me, I'm high on the view, huge peaks of incandescent cloud dwarfing the horizon ahead, mile after square mile of field and village sweeping out of sight hundreds of feet below us. In a rare moment of inquisitiveness, she asks why I never take my own bad experiences seriously when we talk. I shrug, say that it's no dark horse act, not bravura, just one of the things I've never been good at. Griping. Some people had a talent for making the problems of their world sound interesting, others didn't. I was one of the others. It was a weakness, as much as anything else. I tell her that was why I wrote, how I communicated. Angst always seemed to have more purpose on paper. Hearing that, she lifts herself off my lap, stands up, looking sad, as if something in what I'd said distressed her. As she walks slowly away, I ask if she's any better at asking for help. She stands right on the edge of the sharp drop-off, directly between me and the low-flying March sun, turns back, cocks her head and shakes it without a word. A sharp wind tears through her blonde hair as she does so, and whatever it was I'd seen in that landscape before is nothing next to the blinding, back-lit aura flaring about her face. I forget my question instantly, desperate to burn the moment into memory, sure not many such visions come by in the course of a simple lifetime.

\* \* \*

The effort of piecing all this together beats me into an inevitable sleep. I dream nothing, woken at five by some fresh wave of abstract anger, eat again and get back to the typewriter. The sound of its energetic hammering seems the only thing capable of pacifying me today.

There's a letter on my desk, been there two months now. A friend's struggling, back home in Poland. Mean stuff. Drugs, gangs, family blues. But the things he writes are precious. He tells me he put up a prayer for me at Xmas Eve midnight vigil. Tells me about breakdowns, about hope, about blood and blood ties. I sat down to write back the day I got it, but left that and the two replies that followed unfinished, none of my words even close to communicating accurately where I've been or what I've felt of late.

Mina's gone. I called work yesterday, just to check up, got the news from one of the chefs. Said she'd called to quit the day before, just before she flew back to stay with her mum in Milan. It comes as no surprise. All she'd talked about of late was her need to get away, get somewhere warmer, somewhere less English. After all the comings and goings of the last three months, I'm not sure if I'm more relieved or cut up by her departure. Don't know which colour I should paint this.

After the trip to Devil's Dyke, things disintegrate quickly between us. Nothing out of turn's said, no foot put wrong, but all the same, it's as if we'd exhausted one another, exhausted the pull of opposites. The sudden vacuum seems to take us both by surprise. At work she talks about little else but her hate for it, how she's skint and cold all the time. Her calls stop, as do our meetings. My phone

goes real quiet, and my kitchen's redundant again. I realise just how much time and effort I'd given up to her, how much unspoken expectation had been riding on this thing between us.

Her birthday happens along a few weeks later. I get her a book on Latin American dance, solely for the chapter on Capoeira I find in it. The in-joke's obvious, but she still gets off on it, and it keeps some semblance of peace going between us a little while longer.

Joining her on a night out to celebrate her big day turns out to be a bad idea. She's always had a little harem of men around her, but then that's always been a known and the merry dance between us over, the presence of other suitors is not what distresses me. I keep to a couple of mates in the pub where the celebrations begin, watch her from a slight distance. Counting on her popularity with people, I'm betting on a wicked night out, but that's not how things pan out. The atmosphere seems spoilt, not just by the presence of one of her ex's still hanging round, pining, but in general. It seems like everyone wants her attention, wants her spotlight on them, rather than the other way round. Everyone has their own agenda to maintain, either not talking, or talking too much, saying the wrong things to the wrong people, picking petty fights. She's made to work too hard at juggling everyone else's mood to enjoy the evening herself. I keep out of her way, save for the occasional instant of eye contact, just to let her feel her predicament's been understood, her need for empathy, if there's any there, seen to. For some insane reason no one's drinking. I don't let that stop me, but it turns out to be one of those nights when sobriety just won't let itself be drowned, no matter what I put away. Everyone hits a nightclub afterwards, and I hit limbo, neither bored nor entertained, unmoved by the conversation or the music or the sight of bodies moving round me. Soon enough, some of her ill-tempered party force her to leave her own bash early, but before they vanish, I feel a tug at the back of my shirt, turn to see her beam a sober, thousand candle-power smile right at me. Still don't know what the name of the game is, but it melts right though my heart even now, through this month of cloudy, uncertain distance.

I force myself to stay in the club for another hour. It's all I can manage. The very thing I don't want to happen, happens. I'm not having half the fun I was pretending to while she was still in the same building, even though we'd only exchanged a few knowing, strained words all evening. It's her and it's me and this whole house of fun. The same music, the same conversations, the same faces starting to grate against the need for something new. I spend the last half hour talking to a girl I know from another restaurant. The more twisted my mood and jokes get, the more she seems to get off on it. I keep looking her up and down, blatantly, the bare arms, bare midriff, sweet face lit up with whatever drug of choice, feel nothing, not even boredom. My heart just drops out. I leave, ears pounding from the sound system, under a cloud I can't shake off even during the long, starlit walk home.

In the shop where I'd found Mina's book there's an advert for a local group which practices Capoeira. On the first warm evening of the year, thirty young, smiling people sweat together in a cramped community hall, the twists and kicks moulding as gracefully as the space and everyone's varied physical conditions allow. Every accidental moment of contact is followed by an embarrassed laugh or apology. I join in, but draw the line at being asked to chant or play the simple instruments which accompany the exercises. The teacher seems a little bored, advises us to let „The Spirit” move through us in a tone of voice makes it unclear whether he's truly in tune with it himself, or just taking the piss.

I don't go back, even though a couple of weeks later I meet a couple of guys from the group practicing on the beach. In short conversation they come across as some of the sanest people I've ever met, but there's still something in the blend of choreography and hinted-at violence makes me uncomfortable, something threw me every time a fist or a foot came within an inch of my face. It's a reflection of my own awkward lack of mental and physical discipline, but I can't help wanting to just dance or fight, not fuck around some grey area.

Mina starts an unsubtle, frustrated assault at work, sniping at me and all the other blokes like our presence, our continuing attention, is an affront to her. That most of them treat her either like an idol or a piece of meat is not her fault, but not all their's either. None of us know how to handle a banshee. We shadow-box one another more and more, Mina on the attack, me on the defence. She's got me on the ropes, but it's not half the fun it used to be, and only mildly personal. She's already half way out of the place, and it's making her mad, like the trap it's become is more of a burden than she wants to admit to herself.

Sarah beats her to it. Just doesn't show up for work on evening, marking the end of her employ with me and her friendship with Mina. She snipes at everyone with well-primed jibes, but even though it's my job to keep her in check, I find I haven't the teeth to match her claws. Each time I reach out to her with a peace offering, she bites the hand, and each time she does, I take the ice and the punishment, even though I know I'm doing us both an injustice. I have a weakness, a soft spot for her, and it's exactly that she's attacking.

During a momentary truce, we speak about extremes of loyalty. Where I measure the strength of my passion by whether I'd be prepared to give up my life for someone, she measures hers by whether she'd be prepared to kill in the name of their defence. Reviewing it now, the polarity of our answers sums up nicely the conflict of our natures. Art and science. Compose versus compute. Create versus compete. And it doesn't matter who's right. Doesn't matter whether it's about a show of force or a show of strength, what the pacifist, the nice guy in me wants to happen. I realise too late that when she said she didn't want a relationship, she meant all the way, meant we were worlds apart. What matters is who's stronger. Who's left standing at the end of this clash of personalities. Who the kings and queens of this world really are.

I loose it for the first time ever at work, and it takes everyone aback. Running a busy evening shift, I find out two hours too late that half the grills in the kitchen are gone, leaving me with a restaurant full of hungry punters and half a dozen waiters nothing to do. I make my way round a hundred and fifty seats, making personalised apologies for someone else's incompetence. Everyone's happy enough, save the two drunk men at the door want seating and serving now. They're not listening to me, giving it large about who they are and who they know, the owner, the mayor, whatever, every comment coming my way starting to get more and more personal. I bite the bullet, watch them walk out without saying anything, but when I see them and their pissed-up bravado reappear five minutes later, I walk over and tell them to piss off. Even though it's suddenly gone wonderfully quiet in the place, I have to repeat myself before their dumbfounded brains clock what's just been said and comply. Seems like it does the trick for everyone, staff and customers alike sweet as lambs for the rest of the evening, but I feel ill with rage, sick of verbal sparring, hungry for action, any kind of bonehead sport into which to vent my anger.

I shut the restaurant early, take all the staff clubbing, get thrown out a couple of hours later after sabotaging a limp, leather-and-glitter drag act which interrupts our dancing fun around midnight. The pearly queen's so bad it's not even funny, but it's not the absence of star quality makes me snap. I butt in during a „Audience with..." session, when the only questions being taken from the floor are those asked by the members of his entourage hidden in the crowd. I recognise them as the people who'd skipped past is in the queue for the door, while security made everyone wait in the cold 'till the entrance fee shot up at eleven. To add insult to injury, the half-price beer runs out by half eleven. Too sober by the time the panto begins to take any more half-hearted pisstakes, I walk through a mass of clubbers seated on the dance floor, take the mike from the dumbfounded artiste, ask a couple of perfectly polite, humourless questions about what it is he wants from us and whether, regardless of what the doped audience will swallow, he thinks the act he's trying to pull is funny. His blank, petrified stare makes it clear he's not up there with the Boy Georges and Julian Clarys of this world, incapable of a single improvised comeback. I hand him back the mike, and while his people rewind his god-awful backing tape right back to the beginning, sweet-talk the head of security into letting me stay. A minute later some pissed girl starts throwing homophobic insults and baby-punches at me, but

by then, listening to the same crap all over again, I don't need bouncers to encourage me to leave. There are far more boos than cheers following me up the stairs towards the exit, but by then I'm too lost in my own thoughts to give a flying.

The next night an ex invites me over for dinner. She's tired, unhappy with her career in publishing. The only thing keeping her going is her plan to travel round the world later in the year. She cooks and I say nice things, make her laugh, make assurances about the future neither of us believe in, but which help keep her buoyant anyway. A couple of bottles of wine later, in her bedroom, she puts her arms round me from behind while I sit on the edge of her bed, thanks me for listening to her complaints. She holds on for a long time, says she'd like to fall asleep there, the small gesture of tenderness thawing and arousing me for the first time in weeks. Even though I know nothing else is going to happen, it feels much better than nothing. After a winter of a struggle that's led nowhere, it feels like a breath of warm, honest air on me.

My boss hears about both the restaurant and nightclub incidents, but though the two pissed idiots call back to complain, he is amused enough to give me these three, gold-dust days off in a row. I'm pleased at the time, but thanks to them, that night's the last I see of Mina. I'm not sure if I'm happy for her to remember me that way, buttering up customers with free drinks and sending half the staff home early, but at least she hadn't been there later to see my to-do with a drag queen. Things had gotten bleak, iced-over between us by then, but regardless of how the magnetic pull of opposites got reversed and warped, the little epicentre of intimacy is too good not to miss, and miss hard.

Early evening, I play tennis with a couple of guys from work. On a warm, April day, we drink beers out of an ice box and try to look like we don't give a damn about winning. My mind not on the game, I fall asleep by the side of the court while they play a decider, only for two minutes or so, but I dream about her, wake feeling... It's over too quick to remember what the dream's about, but it pushes sore buttons, makes me fight through to an exhausting, wildly satisfying win. Afterwards though, I miss several shots and in frustration throw my racket against the wire netting around the court, smashing the carbon-fibre frame against one of the support posts. Dumping the expensive piece of kit in the bin, I'm neither angry nor elated, just puzzled. The stupidity of others is one thing to loose your rag over, but wrecking inanimate objects in reaction to your own inadequacies is far too rock'n'roll a fit for the orthodox me, way out of character.

Don't feel like drinking any more tonight. The half-bottle of vodka she left here remains untouched. As I stuff my clean duvet back into the freshly dried cover, the coffee stain barely visible, I wonder what the hell happened, wonder where to put the full stop. This story's about me, not Mina. After all, just like she always promised, nothing ever happened between us. There was never any "us" to talk of in the first place, which, knowing what I know about the forces involved, is only right. But still, wired with thoughts and sleep deprivation, I can't stop the typewriter from hammering away, a thousand, ten, twenty thousand hits against the black ribbon. The pile of sheets keeps building beside me, and the sense of all that mental mess taking some form, even if it only be two dimensional, the only thing capable of satisfying me right now.

Each shred of memory, each image I recall gets its own paragraph. The Capoeira practice. The halo of hair. The blue-eyed darkness. I know it's going to take me weeks to sort through them, to order, to reason away. Will it all just fall into place in the kind of random flash of inspiration both artist and scientist are condemned to wait for indefinitely? Or do I have to hunker down and tie it all up myself? Natures clash and the hard-nosed, kaleidoscope-eyed Muse will not stop pushing, my head still spinning, the full stops doing their own roller coaster thing...

## YOU SAY YOU WANT THE HONEST TRUTH

Suddenly, everybody's on their feet, scooping fag packets off the table, their coats off the seats. We've only gone a couple of rounds, but no one's got the strength to conjure up post-work pub bull. They pause by the door, ask if I'm coming, but my neck's so stiff I can barely shake my head. Spring came, then turned back last night, a damp breeze creeping in through the open window over my bed, disturbing sleep all night, disabling me throughout the day.

Snow's falling past the windows, my back drilling holes in itself and it's not 'till now, on my third, that I feel any sense of relief from the day-long ache. Once the door swings shut behind them, all that's left by me is a fresh pint, a half-full ashtray and an empty packet of Marlboro Lights. I get up, buy another from the bar, ask for a light. The barman picks through his kit, comes up with a hollow box, a single match rattling inside. He strikes it with apologetic courtesy, cupping the flame in his hands, and though the cigarette catches, I wonder if I should smoke it with a sense of good or ill luck. There's one other table occupied in the far corner, smoke hanging over it, but that doesn't change this lack of fire into a good omen.

The thing with the single match is funny, but philosophical jokes just don't do it for me tonight. I know better than to try and relish this final smoke of the night, in no mood to force myself into any concessionary states of satisfaction. It's Monday, my spine is gone, and suddenly I find I've no stomach for alcohol any more. There was a little patch of chemical bliss I'd sailed through only moments back, but that's over, even though the cigarettes are in plentiful supply and the glass still half-full, gas cheerfully bubbling up from somewhere near the bottom.

The week's hardly begun, and already I'm hiding in here, staring down into the centre of the heavy wooden table, between the ashtray, the tea candle and the straw coaster it's resting on, down into its polished surface. Working nineteen floors up above the city, each day I stare out from a balcony, smoking, feeling safe as houses until the moment I step towards the guard rail and look down, stomach clenching, balls tightening, all vital organs rebelling against the pull of instant death. Now, staring down that table top, something similar opens up in the vacuum left by all those who've just departed. A kind of blank space drawing me towards it, towards a moment of drugged stillness where I can contemplate everything that is true, in its presence or absence, from my life and the lives of others. It's amazing, right here, within an arm's reach, as tangible as anything I've ever seen. A dark little pool of truth opening up in this slick piece of oak. A mirror of sorts. Pure clarity. Everything there, like a collage just waiting to be unveiled. All I have to do is keep drinking and staring to see the people and problems that need to be sorted, weighed and put to rest, all the facts clear as day, the puzzle whole for once. No trick of the senses. Not tiredness. Nothing dumb or hollow. I can see them right here, the faces and places in the dented surface of this table, life, showing up, in near enough 3-D. Women, speaking from the past. Snapshots of my daily life put in context. The lives of others, still echoing around me. Their hearts. The homes they've all scattered to. Their personalities, characters, and thus destinies, like the proverb says. And mine too. Not that hard to make out. To fathom.

But I look away. Without making a single move, I draw back from the mirror's edge. It's not an unpleasant feeling to be asked to sit at truth's own table, but tonight I leave well alone. Tonight is just one of those tired nights when, like old drinking buddies who know each other's stories only too well, we can't, for once, stand each other's company. It's not fear or any kind of stab at blissful ignorance makes me turn away. I'm just not in the mood for honesty tonight. With one glance I see the same old, same old. No new angles, new moves, and, more importantly, no solutions to the problems bearing down on me. Just rehashed facts and words of well-worn advice. A newsreel of platitudes.

I pocket my fags, gulp down what I can for the road, leave without making excuses. Truth is, truth can't do anything for me tonight, and, being what it is, can't bullshit me into staying.

Opening the door, icy winds shove me back in a last ditch attempt at delaying the inevitable, but truth knows I've lost the taste for it. Knows I only came in here for a stupid drink anyway.

## THE HARD BOUNCE

That morning song is screaming through me for the nth time this summer. I don't want to move from my bed, upset my alcohol poisoned body. Yellow light creeps round the curtains, trying to lick my face awake, but I don't have the energy to turn away, eyes blinking, searching the room for something to rest on.

This place has been no more than an overpriced changing room for months, an endless mess. Clothes, books, records everywhere, bottles and cans waiting to be taken away, everything that should be somewhere else on the floor, used up. The first thing I usually look for on a morning like this is my wallet, but today there's no point. Wherever it is, it's empty. A month gone without work or pay, nothing but time on my hands and a bitter little hole waiting to be filled with bitter liquids, in Brighton, the perfect con artist, sucking disposable cash from suckers like me long before they realise it's not half the fun it was just a while back.

The moment I manage to calm my aching insides, my mobile rings, shattering the still morning. I fall off the bed, start scrabbling through the fallout of my possessions. I've seen people in films play at not being able to find the phone, but this is no joke. I want to silence the damn thing, its sound, ricocheting off the walls, playing hide and seek with my baffled senses.

After ten volleys, the answering service kicks in, leaving me stranded and breathless in the middle of the room.

Then it kicks off again. By the sixth or seventh ring, I manage to dig it out of the pocket of my dust-covered jeans. Pressing the green 'answer' button, my mind has a split second in which to wonder at the dust. Dust? Where the hell did all this yellow dust come from?

"Hello," I croak into the mouthpiece.

"Morning. You all right?"

"Hi. Yeah, I'm fine. How's it going?"

"You tell me." Before I can force any kind of answer out of my spinning head, I hear her smile. "Bloody hell, you still sound drunk. What happened to you last night? You'd gone by the time I woke up." She slowly clocks I'm not yet capable of coherent speech. "Look, I'm meeting Em later, then I've got to get back to work. I'll pop round on the way, we'll have a coffee."

"Yeah, sure..." is the last thing I feel like saying, but it's seems politeness is the second strongest instinct in the human body, prizing pretty words from me when polite's the last thing I feel like being.

"See you in half hour."

I collapse onto the bed, groan as damage announces itself along my lower back. "What happened to you last night?", she asked. Cheek against the pillow, one hand on the floor, too afraid to yet look over my hurting body, I squeeze my booze-logged memory for an answer.

A warm, sunny evening. Crossing the birthday boy's doorstep with a bottle of JD. Balloons with threes and zeros on them, bits of food all over the place, a drop of coke on a downed mirror. Everyone heading for a bar, but by the time we eventually pile out, the bottle I brought empty, a strange, sheepish feeling of "Xmas over too early" knocking on the gates of my brain. At the Walkabout, on top of their two-4-one bottled beers there's butterscotch schnapps for a quid a shot. Hours go by. We eat in some friendly joint, another party's unfinished bottles of white duly collected and drank with our steaks, everyone lording it up on chemical bliss. Closing time, the streets full of people all pissed and dressed up, a local landlord's car parked in the Lanes, the man an enemy, two of us all over it, glass flying, roof sunk in. I fall off the bonnet, right on my arse, the cuts and bruises only now announcing themselves properly. Running, laughing, a police van crawling past us, down to the beach, into a club, more rounds, jokes and grins. A Pixies tune sends the crowd manic, a Prodigy track skews the mood. Squaring up to some bloke hassling one of the girls in our party, more scuffles and scars, the last few from another hard, pavement landing, this time courtesy of security. Off to the beach, a cold wind off the sea, shaking, my coat left behind on the club floor. Then a miracle, coming across a burning mattress, strangers round it playing drums at a pace and deep frequency I think is going to shake my skeleton apart. Then a blank. Nothing, not 'till I'm somehow barefoot, boots gone, in the fire maybe, or in the sea, up on my feet, heading across a million stones for the smooth, kind surface of the seafront pavement.

My eyes shut in an involuntary grimace. Enough. I roll over, fold up, look across the floor for a way out of here. Mourning the loss of my boots, my money and all my good sense, I try to figure out how, once again, I'd managed to combine the best of times with the worst of moves. I'm having too much fun fucking up, that little's for sure.

I stand up, courting toxic pain. Residual booze stops me from thinking clearly at a time clear thought is essential. My mind produces nothing but curses. I pull on my jeans, realise the dust all over them is fallout from the salt-covered pebbles, but that's all. All I can think of. I've no idea what to do next, what simple action to take, like an amnesiac who forgot all of the mechanics of living.

Drink means dehydration. I stumble down to the kitchen. There's milk on the counter, but I never buy milk.. More recollections. I cabbied it back to hers, the complete dick, the useless, fucked up child that I am. I only remember hailing a cab, nothing of the ride itself. Not which way we drove, how much I paid, how I got up the three flights of stairs to her flat. I do remember her apologising for not joining us as promised, something about emergencies at her restaurant, not being able to get away or call. I remember her smiling, crawling back into bed, waiting for me to follow. And the TV screen flickering in the dark room, head spinning, not being able to take my eyes off a Mark Thomas programme about the rape and

death of the English countryside. Three a.m., the man talking to nobody about something absolutely vital to all, the mismanagement of billions of pounds, the mistreatment of mice and men, the ignorance of the city about the world without. By the time the credits rolled, the idiotic scheduling and the bitter facts had riled me so bad I up and left, running from god knows what. At the bottom of her street, I found a milkman doing his old-school thing out of everyone's sight, bought milk and juice, beamed the guy a smile he couldn't possibly comprehend.

Now, the cheer is gone, only self-disgust left. That and the tepid milk. I swallow it down, waves of nausea coursing through my head, veins pumped full of booze and nicotine and guilt. My chest begins to tighten, the pulse racing, heartburn at gas mark nine. Lungs gasping for breath, I stumble out into the garden, needing more oxygen than they can momentarily deliver. Entering mild shock, I suck in air, waiting for the palpitations and fear to subside.

"What happened to your lip?" she asks, keeping her distance as I hold the front door open. I glance in the hallway mirror for the first time this morning, see the split flesh, flinch, follow into the kitchen.

"Knocked the cap off a beer bottle last night, cracked the neck. Cut myself drinking from it." Not a good start, with lies, but whether she believes me or not, there's calm on her face. "Sorry about the vanishing act."

"You were wanked."

"I know. Sorry."

"Just wanted to make sure you're OK." She glances round the kitchen, then up at me. "You don't look it." The smile creeping across her mouth gives me permission to go from attention to at ease. "You mumbled something, but I was too knackered to listen. Sorry I couldn't make it, didn't get out 'till half twelve. Had fun?"

"Sure."

We take our mugs out into the sunlit garden and make stabs at conversation. She tells tales of work, of mates, of strangers. Doesn't once ask why I left her bed last night. This is unpleasant, but as I listen, the illness in me begins to dissolve. It's not sunshine, not the coffee, something else working on me as she launches into a story about a guy who'd come in to eat at her restaurant last night. Someone from her past, from college, someone she hadn't seen in years. I bend my wasted mind to polite questions, but the answers are as unimportant to me as the guy seemed to have been to her. Which is weird. She doesn't seem to want to go into details, not out of coyness, just out of honest distance. Just says he once did something to make her angry. Not mad. Just angry. Just an old wound playing up.

Her voice trails off into silence, reaching for a private past I can't hope to hear through it. We sit without any more words, sunshine on the white table between us, blinding. Being still like this means escape from physical pain, from all the marks of last night, but there's something else soothing the sickness in me. The story about the old flame. What was that all about? Was there anyone there last night or is it just a mini-parable? A joke with a moral?

I look up, try to focus, but her eyes don't want to answer, skipping across the clouds overhead. The tree behind her twists in the wind, trying not to shed leaves. Not just yet. Autumn's only entering the air, but she's leaving already. How do I know? I don't, but she is. I feel it in my bones. Pre-de ja vu. That's what this is. This instant of uncommon certainty. I suddenly see us bumping into one another some time down the line, see myself, through her eyes, someone who once made her feel something, maybe good, maybe bad, rather unimportant. And I don't feel anything, though it's OK. It's OK, because I don't feel anything. By the time the leaves are gone from that tree beside us, the summer will be history and we with it, this hangover long forgotten.

She won't look up, won't meet my eyes, and it's good, a little blessing, because I'm smiling and I don't want her to see it, because I was an asshole yesterday and I should be sorry, not about her leaving, just about leaving her bed last night. I'm being an asshole right now, grinning like an idiot, my lip sore, my hurt arse shifting in the garden chair, my heart completely out of order, out of character, out of hand.

This is the first comfortable silence we've ever shared.

I shouldn't be smiling, not if I don't want to hurt her, not if she cares about these months of us. But she doesn't. I see that clearly enough. Her eyes move across mine, then back down at the sunlit table. Then she smiles. Just for a second, but it's there. The little moment of weakness that tells it all. Tells me it's OK to share something at last, even if it is just the last laugh.

## The Animal Quixote

She gave me a knife for my birthday. I'd never asked. No idea where she got the idea. She'd wrapped it in her usual, meticulous way - metallic blue paper, a matching ribbon, a hand-made label. As always, a shame to actually tear the thing open. Inside, a heavy-weave canvas pouch, black, mean looking. Inside that, a gun-metal grey handle, small enough to hide in my clenched fist.

I held it there for a moment, along with my embarrassment. What to say? I'd never seen a knife like it, the handle cut from a single block of alloy billet, a file-pattern grip carved into the sides, cold and infinitely tough. I pushed the penny-sized rubber button set in a recess of the grip. The matt-grey blade swung out, locking in place. I pushed the button again to release the lock, folded it shut, then pushed the button once more. Like some razor-minded genie, the blade reappeared instantly, the blink of an eye too slow to follow its trajectory. I nearly let it shoot out of my hand.

It weighed at least twice what the handle did, dominating the weapon. I had no doubt if I was to toss it up in the air it would land point first, embedded in whatever it hit. I sliced through the torn wrapping, the sigh of parting paper clearly audible in the now curious silence of our living room. I still didn't know what to say, suddenly feeling like a kid who's been given a grown-up toy by mistake.

Confused, I shoved it deep into the pocket of my jeans and pulled her close. Kissing a thank-you onto her lips, I felt it sandwiched between us, right where our hips met.

Later the same day, over a pint, her brother asked if I liked the gift. His smile said he had something to do with it, and if he had something to do with it, it meant it was nicked. He and his mates fenced stuff sometimes, things brought in off the Continent on ships and trucks carrying cheap fags and alcohol. Random things, like power tools, antiques, and now toy-sized weapons.

Didn't quite know what to say to him either. I don't hunt or scuba dive or fish. Commute through central London on a pushbike. Smoke a little. That's all the danger I like to invite on myself. Working in a day centre for young offenders, kids from places so broken you'd never call them homes, each day I'm called on to diffuse violent situations, pre-empt flare ups in rooms full of feverish, fearless youths. I've been trained to disarm attackers, treat the victims of stabbings and overdoses. The last thing I need in my walk of life is a switchblade with a belt-loop pouch.

At first, I carried it with me out of obligation. Didn't want her to find it just dumped somewhere in our small flat. The silver bullet lay in the pocket of a waterproof cycling jacket she'd bought me as my proper, sensible gift, even though the blade was about an inch too long to be carried legally in the street. Had the police stopped and searched me in the rain, it could've meant trouble, but for some reason I didn't want to leave it lying around our home either.

On the way home one day, I popped in to a local weapons shop. The ageing fella behind the counter put on his glasses, looked up with distaste. He wanted to know where I'd got it. Something in his stare made me tell the silly-sounding truth. "My wife gave it to me for my birthday." Without blinking, he asked how much I wanted for it. No, I told him, it really was a gift. All I wanted to know was where I could buy another one, for a friend. The knife lay on the glass counter between us, its curved handle smiling. He picked it up, told me it was army issue, a self-sharpening blade, matt-grey to stop it reflecting light on night-time missions, then fell silent again, staring me out, as if I wasn't worthy of the tool or full disclosure about its nature.

Someone else came in with a query about a crossbow, the shopkeeper happy to forget all about me. I glanced around, through display cases full of knives of every shape and size, everything from key-ring penknives to knuckleduster machetes. Nothing quite like my little blade, though. Not there or in the pile of specialist magazines on the counter, publications on guns, knives, crossbows, every mad little toy given the trainspotting treatment, the faces of dead heroes, Wayne, McQueen, Heston, advertising new brands.

The gift, she confirmed later, was a kind of joke. At my expense. Most of my days are spent talking and listening and filling out reports, and so at home toying with tools relaxes me. Mechanics, carpentry, cooking. In the kitchen, I sharpen knives every time I use them, like any half-decent chef, even though she considers the habit childish, macho, definitely anal.

But whatever the truth, I also know she's scared of them. Scared of the threat they represent, whatever people say about blunt blades being more dangerous.

One night, I repeated what the man in the weapons shop had told me, embellishing the story some, adding things I assumed he'd left out. Special ops. Single purpose. Silent kills. Things meant to shake her up a bit. She finished washing up without comment, then, passing me in the kitchen door, said with a smile "You can cut my undies off in bed later..."

Somehow, she didn't look too happy when I sliced her bra in half as she undressed. Went right down the centre of her chest, blade edge towards me, did the same to an old pair of weekday knickers she'd worn for the last time. She said nothing, but I could see it had given her a humourless fright. A cool question formed itself between us as she stood naked before me, afraid to look up, checking my smile for signs of vicious pleasure. The moment was mildly erotic, at least for me, standing there, fully clothed, staring down as her slight flesh waited for me to make the next move. Cute. Comic book pornography. Cowboy erotica.

Afterwards, sweat cooling slowly under the duvet, I asked with mock seriousness whether she thought the knife had actually seen real action, had killed before being smuggled out and sold on. She lifted her head, bit down on my arm, let me know she didn't think I was being even remotely funny.

It did nothing more for our sex life after that. Don't remember its subject ever coming up again. The knife moved from coat pocket to coat pocket, always on me, but the few times I could've used it for mundane tasks like stripping wire or opening parcels, there was always something else at hand. Something less forceful.

And yet I kept finding it every time I reached for my keys or a lighter. Silent and unassuming, it felt loaded in my hand, the sprung scalpel not at rest in its housing, under constant pressure. Knives loose their keenness if left unused for long. Can't leave a good blade dormant without it going soft. Without inviting doubt.

There was something niggling about it, a hint of Tolkien's ring of Power. A predatory, animal sense about it made me think of it as a living thing. It came out and sat in the palm of my hand sometimes, when I was still and thinking and didn't feel like a cigarette. Something to finger, to help focus my mental wanderings, though I never pressed the genie button. Didn't know what it was about the purposeful design, but it felt like letting the blade loose would make something bad happen. I don't believe in karma or curses or any such crap, but the damn thing had me spooked.

I wanted to leave it at home, but never did. Didn't know why. Not 'till yesterday.

On my way to work, I shot past a bus on a downhill slope, pedalling like mad. Even stuck my hand out to indicate as I overtook, but I heard the driver shout something ugly, had him tail-gate me all the way down. A ten ton bus ten feet from a twenty kilo bike. At the bottom, I had to bunny-hop onto a pavement to save myself from being run over. Got off and stared back as he waited on red, my heart steaming, hammering. He nodded at my shirt and tie, mimed scribbling something on the palm of his hand. Don't know what he wanted to achieve, trying to scare, and more, the life out of a suspected pen-pusher. I was about to go up and ask, a fury of expletives boiling the tip of my tongue, but I stayed put. Just shook on the spot, trapped and fearful. Not of the man. Not of what had just happened. Of the knife.

I wanted to go get that sneering bus driver. Wanted him to feel fear, exactly the kind of fear he'd just put me through. Didn't matter that he'd most likely badmouth me and drive away, or clump me into next week before the day had even begun, or end up clumped himself with me standing over him, looking at a spell inside for ABH in possession of an illegal weapon and the end of my life as it had been so far. My home. My career.

But not my life full-stop. And that's what mattered, to my bones, my flesh, the things doing my thinking for me just then, under threat of being squashed under a two-storey death train. One thing being a bad driver, another being careless, but what that guy had done was criminal, deadly, and I wanted to kill before being killed.

And yet I didn't. Didn't move a muscle, not beyond those fingering the little tool in my coat pocket. Let the bus pull away, let myself stand there, cooling off, let it all blow over before climbing back on the bike and continuing my commute.

And it wasn't until sometime later that I finally heard it. Not the knife talking, but the echo of my old self. Sitting in my office, listening to lads shoving and squabbling in the corridor, I thought back to the time before whirlwind romances, before workplace successes and promotions, before mortgages and joint accounts and in-law blues. There are reasons for why I'm good at the job I do. Reasons why I was chosen in the first place. My all-too-recent history, no more than a few street corners from the life my current charges lead. No better or worse. None wiser.

Now I should be different. Now I should be out of it. And I am. Most of the time. It's only in the storm between the haven of home and the discipline of work that my old self rears his ugly head. Almost every day, pushing my fragile machine past dead-end queues of grid-lock, I'm assaulted, and every time it turns me that little bit more animal. Animal honest.

Almost every week I lose it. My rag, my senses, whatever you want to call it. Every week I snap. Scream at drivers. Chase after some. Challenge them to fights. Sometimes I ride, sometimes limp away. Sometimes my ego swelling with pride, sometimes my body with bruises. Never know what I want. Apologies. Justice. A win in a no-win situation. Never seems to matter. That it's wrong. Insane. That whenever someone charges at me with their fool-proof bullet, it's always the same story. The same deal. The raging diplomacy of Don Quixote.

If she knew any of this, she'd've never bought me the knife. And she'd've been wrong. It's become a talisman. A good luck charm. The one thing capable of holding me back, protecting me from my Mr. Hyde self.

Standing there, seconds from extinction, seeing that fat face laughing at me, my few, fragile bones at the mercy of his right foot, I felt all my righteous fury trapped in that hard little casing, held by that loaded spring. All my naïve spirit.

I've never used it, not even to trim a fingernail, but that's not the point. I was scared stiff. Scared of my capacity for dying, but not as much as of my own, all too real, capacity for killing.

I never think about it at home. Never have it anywhere near me at work. I don't fear death there. I fear it on the streets. Any death. Anybody's. Mine or yours. By either hand. The knife pressing against my flesh, scaring me into thinking smart, protecting me from the pursuit of blind justice. From the animal Quixote.