

The Fifth Season

M.J. Kazmierski

London

Peacehaven

Warsaw

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BLURB

This novel was the first book MJ Kazmierski ever wrote, after being exiled from Poland to England in 1984 and beginning to study in London. During his literature studies at Sussex University, Strawberry Hill, West London, he realized he wanted to be a writer, influenced by the likes of William Shakespeare, William Blake, Anton Chekhov, Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain, Jan Brzechwa, Jack Kerouac, Sam Shepard and Margaret Atwood. He began writing it in Peacehaven, Sussex, England in 1995 and completed the first draft of this novel in 2000. MJ Kazmierski was 27 years old at the time. The novel as you see it here has not been changed since that time. It is inspired by his experiences of moving to England from Poland in the 1980s and studying at all boys and all girls schools in West London, where he learned to speak and write English. All the places in it are real and existed 30 years ago – any likeness to persons alive or dead is accidental and not intended. The novel is dedicated to a certain girl MJ fell in love with at 16 while studying Sociology and English Lit with her at Gumley House Convent School for Girls. Not a day has gone by since then that he has not thought about her with undying love and affection. Her bookish home and shop in Chiswick, London will be sacred to him until the day his body dies and his mind reenters the infinite quantum realm...

to think of fearing dreams

Friday

Every time the needle nudged fifty, the tiny van bucked and trembled as if ready to shake itself to pieces. Fifty wasn't enough, far below the pace of motorway traffic rushing through the dark morning, the slow lane too quick, the tyres of overtaking lorries level with his head, calmly nudging the van towards the hard shoulder. Metal never met metal, but with every pass they'd catch the hollow little machine in their slipstream wake, the steering loosening, the wheel rattling in his hands, the accelerator suddenly limp and lifeless.

The crawl had gone on all night, round Glasgow, down the Tyne Valley, past Wales' expectant belly, the engine bay beneath his seat keeping the feet warm and the head buzzing. Signs for the coast were starting to appear, lit blinding white by overtaking headlights, the horizon beginning to blush. He tried to remember if it mattered. He'd left the Highlands with some kind of intention, some kind of time span in mind, but most of that seemed to have dissolved in the night.

Nothing answered him. No names belonged to any faces. Nobody chasing. Nobody waiting. Not even ghosts. How much had he forgotten and how much did he simply never know? Was she dead already? And the baby? Did it live long enough inside her to get a name, a ghost of its own, before disease began to claim them all?

The pained whine coming from down-below disturbed all trains of thought. Whenever he tried to remember anything about the world, visions would jump him. The engine falling right out, rolling away in a burst of flame. The van's narrow front nose-diving the tarmac, bumper, lights and windscreen buried in folds of tar and stone. Rear end flipping, launching the tearing machine high into the air, the whole lot collapsing, rolling and dying hundreds of feet on. The more he tried to avoid them, the more outlandish the visions became, the more cartoon-like, no less frightening for it. Another juggernaut dragged itself past. Eyes closed for a second, he waited for the noise and shuddering to start, the van weaving, lurching, the windows and bottles in the back to ring their manic alarm bells. Names. Places. All gone now, almost blanks. Was he really alone still? After months of cruising those northern highland spaces, had he started to haunt himself?

Shock sprung his eyes open as turbulence hit. He held on, the tall doors of a trailer before him rolling up a slow-sloping hill. In the rear view mirror the headlamps of another lorry waited their turn. He stood on the accelerator, ran over 60mph, heard the engine wail and weep in broken protest. There was only 40, maybe 50 miles left, but watching sunshine sweeping stars out of the sky, the desire to fight left with them.

A sign up ahead announced the end of the M23. None of the town names on it meant anything, but he flipped the indicator stalk down anyway. Instantly, the bank of piercing headlights vanished from his mirrors.

Seconds later, he saw them draw level, braced himself for the last time.



The lay-by was quiet, the B-road ahead empty, woods swaying under bright, young skies. A trailer café, HOLYWOOD DINER misspelt in dirty pink letters on its closed window lid, was the only other thing moored in it. No way to tell the time. Seven, perhaps. A pang of hunger cramped his gut, then released, a momentary echo of need. A craving for a cigarette followed, but he knew it would taste like sandpaper without coffee to wash the film of nicotine and road tar

from his throat. There was a camping cooker and a jar of instant in the back, but no way he'd bother setting it all up now.

The cooling engine creaked and pinked beneath him in tired agony. A solitary car sped past. He heard it shifting gears round a bend, long after the gleam of daylight bouncing off its paintwork vanished from sight. Feeling queasy, he rolled down his window, let the smell of pines and winter whistle in over its dirty lip. Couldn't taste the sea yet, but it was close. After an endless night of roadscapes, thoughts of the mirrored horizon calmed him, pictures of waves rolling themselves slowly into oblivion.

Eyes shut, he thought about sliding between the seats onto the mattress in the back, but only had enough strength to draw the zip of his coat chin-high and was gone...

Too tired to even think of fearing dreams today.



Sleep collapsed. Though his eyes remained closed against the morning, he instantly knew where he was. The woods shivered behind the van, traffic on the road ahead whispering to itself.

He opened his eyes, broke the spell of opposing forces. The trailer's window lid was up, plastic lawn furniture set out beside it, a couple of cars parked in the lay-by. Faint wisps of smoke escaped the exhaust of the newer one, someone keeping the engine running, for the heating probably. Remembering the powerplant under his seat, his face scrunched up in involuntary dread, nerves piercing the skin with pins and needles. However long he'd been asleep, it would've gone cold and next to impossible to start.

He tugged at the door, shoulder shoving it aside, literally fell out of the cab, dead legs giving way. Only fingers clasped round the handle managed to steady and save him from crashing to the ground.

Pebbles and broken tarmac crunched under his boots as he stamped life back into his limbs. Having danced a little, he lit a cigarette, eyes squinting, trying to keep smoke and sunlight from blinding him completely. Broken ground broke some more under his step as he walked towards the caff. Sunlight glanced off the white chairs and tables, their edges polished clean by ages of service. The young woman chopping veg inside had her back turned, blonde hair in dire need of re-bleaching, blue jeans tight on bony hips. His chest levelled with the hotplate, piles of frozen, fat-grey sausages and burgers waiting for heat to turn them a palatable colour again. Looking at the body before him, his thoughts instantly crept towards the hot, black metal. The blonde looked nothing like her, not even remotely familiar, but after months of almost complete solitude, any moving flesh was enough to have him seeking a different brand of pain.

But no. He was past that, surely, past doing any old shit to muffle things lying in wait any time he didn't have the strength or will to force his consciousness into submission.

The woman turned, the face paler than the hair, wiped red, oil-burnt hands on her apron.

"No food yet, sorry. Just turned everything on."

He ordered a coffee. Old habits wanted to push a "thanks" through his lips, but the tired mouth refused the effort.

The white lawn chair gave a little under his weight, flexing as he moved around, looking for comfort under open skies. The plastic was cold to the touch, but sunshine warmed his face, skin itching with road dirt. He thought he

could hear one of the other cars, its engine running, hear the radio in the trailer, a song he didn't recognise. It sounded good, like a song he should've known, and didn't. Disappointed, he tried to shut it out, filter through the noise of wind and forest, but couldn't sense anything natural any more. Smoke floated up from a ready-rolled cigarette, along with the stench of reconstituted coffee and burnt engine oil rising from the ground. The last was faint, but penetrating. Burnt engine oil was the foulest smell he knew of, dull, sickly sweet, hi-tech compounds making it cling to nose hairs. Either someone had lost a sump plug, bust a casing, or most likely simply used this wooded spot for a quick oil change, making it smell like orthodox hell.

The stink triggered an image, a bedroom wall, a window-shaped slice of daylight sliding across a painting of a woman in medieval dress.

But his memory was skipping ahead of itself. He stopped, spun it back the way a professional would a reel of film, reviewing, sequencing, retelling. A safe one, he thought to himself. God, for once a safe one.

A pub, college mates playing an overloud gig, a young woman, already an undergraduate, smiling a perfect, pearl-filled smile at him. Staring at her all night, talking loud over the noise, trying to draw something out, something to bridge the age gap between them, to match her knowing calm. Then the kiss, hard, her body stretched right over the table, letting him past those tiny teeth, the smiling mouth eating his like he'd won some kind of prize for naive persistence. Opening the eyes, just quick enough to see hers closed, maybe thinking of him, maybe her own man, maybe someone else altogether. Then the motorcycle ride back along the Thames, her arms round him, safe, intimate. Stopping at a red light, pointing to the car ahead, a bumper sticker with "I SF", her initials. Hearing her laugh, the sound ringing through the fibreglass shell of their crash helmets, arms hugging him tighter. Outside a housing estate, her back, hips, walking away without a word, taking the spare crash helmet with her. A dirty, open-air staircase. A rented flat, sparse, next to nothing for tenants to steal or break. Sinking into an ancient armchair while she made tea, wondering what next. Sitting apart, watching TV, sipping his slowly while she gulped hers down. Listening to her in the bathroom, light clicking off, long brown curls tied back, face gleaming with moisturiser, a sleepy puppy staring blankly at him from an unflattering T-shirt as she disappeared into the bedroom. Springs creaking far off. Left alone. Following, orange light squeezing in through a gap in the curtains. Feeling his way round the bed, her slight body stretched diagonally across, either to discourage him from getting in or keep him from avoiding her when he did. Undressing, wondering just how tidy to make with the clothes. Creeping in under the covers, lips finding his instantly in the dark. No wax left on them now, no smile. Her t-shirt coming off, then his boxers. Worrying about condoms, erections, coming too fast, leaving her unfulfilled. Her hand on him. The strange, faceless sensations, the novelty of another body, the first-time pleasure unfamiliar, the orgasm an age in coming because of it, hers first, quiet, then his, laughing to himself in silence all the way through like you would on a roller coaster, riding out something unbelievable, desiring a cigarette right in the middle of the thing. Strange. The need for a hit of nicotine in that one moment of pure living. Hearing her breathe beside him, refusing to let herself sleep, watching her slip out of bed, into the bathroom, back in another tee, maybe her man's, which'd make sense somehow. Watching her sleep, unable to so much as doze all night, deep in a room he didn't know by sight. Imagining it in the dark, a his-and-hers space. Lying in one position so as not to disturb, his body singing in pain. A sliver of brightening sunlight crawling down from the ceiling at last, over a cheap Pre-Raphaelite reproduction of a woman in a green, velvet dress. Studying the picture like it was a vision of some brand new life. Then seeing her get up, a courteous smile and insincere offer of breakfast the only remains of the previous evening's intimacy. Head unclear, still strangely happy. Dressed, outdoors, the bike where he'd left it, only now lying on its side, oil seeping out of a loose refill plug, both tyres slashed by whoever it was couldn't get through the locks to steal it. Standing the bike back up again, checking the oil window, kicking the engine over just to see if it would. Looking back, her curtains still, head spinning with contrasts, body calm, satiated. Lighting a cigarette, spilt oil cooking on the engine casings, glad in the flesh, in spite of the burning stench, glad that something should've been good had been just that.

That was the first and last time he'd touched her, her man back in town a few days later, but now he realised he'd missed something other than that avenue of chance. Some fundamental lesson she'd meant to teach him, not about sex, but about the mechanics of greater things, for the future, for the women who would come after. A lesson he'd

failed to grasp, a gift of wisdom it was already far too late for. Staring down at the stained ground, he no longer saw her just as a pretty face from the past, but as a kind of advance angel sent to warn, protect him from the consequences of his own innocence, one he'd ignored, misunderstood and betrayed. In that comfort-less bed, instead of seeing two strangers so far apart from their bodies, he'd lain all night just blindly gazing at her and that awful painting, choosing to keep faith in pleasure in, beauty, in the sanctity of all mysteries.

And now? With the noise of traffic beside him, the smell of oil, coffee and cigarette smoke in his nostrils, just five years between him then and him now? The pleasure contained in the memory of that night vanished as he scrabbled off the pliant chair, rushing for the van. Nothing, nothing he'd seen and touched since was worth feeling the way he felt now. Nothing bore thinking about.

Working the ignition and the gas pedal carefully, he got the engine started, as much in need of the mobility it offered as of the power it fed into the stereo. One hand on the wheel, the other pushing buttons, he bounced his way back towards the road.

It no longer mattered how many miles were left. Only time was of any importance. Only getting through this final month. Twenty five days, counting the rest of this one. Not far. Not far at all.

Drums and a gospel choir kicked in, Dylan's whining voice backed by the wasted engine, doors and windows rattling with a welcome to "the land of the living dead... long ago, long before the stars were torn down..."



Road atlas pages on the passenger seat had long ago turned to some other part of the country. It didn't matter. Ahead, below a high, flat hill, the sea had burst the day's low sunlight into a million shards. He idled down the straight, wind shoving the van aside, forcing its way into the cab. After a whole night of motorway dodgems, it seemed like a warm welcome.

Just before the edge of a cliff, a roundabout swept him east, the engine straining over the landscape, past a mini golf course, a motionless windmill, down through a mass of dull-looking houses sheltering in an amphitheatre valley. He stared ahead, intentionally keeping his eyes from the waters shimmering off to his right. There'd be plenty of time yet to greet them properly.

A double-decker overtook him on an uphill stretch of road, blocking both wind and sunlight for a moment. He made it to the top of a wide hill, rolled past the bus as people stepped off at the beginning of another, self-same town. A pizza place, an off-licence, a newsagent's. More bungalows. A Wimpy. A camper van centre. No building more than a couple of storeys high, sensible considering how many nursing homes lined the coastal road. A stuffed husky stared out from someone's window. A battered basketball hoop in the courtyard of a home made him think of Murphy and the Chief. Nothing of colour, nothing special, nothing to hang an eye on. Two whitewashed pillars flanked the road, "Peacehaven" in thin black letters over a humble coat of arms, a cliff and a seagull, half a mile into the town proper. He flicked the indicator stalk down, towards the sea, waited for oncoming traffic to pass.

The lane was unpaved, bumpy, houses to one side, a wide stretch of sloping grass to the other. Engine killed, he let momentum bounce the van towards the fenced-off edge, brakes squealing in pain just before an eighty foot fall towards shore.

The sea-bed far below, drained by the outgoing tide, was all rugged ribs of white chalk, tinged with dark weed. Waves rolled in stretches of pale foam all the way to the horizon, a line of sparse cloud rolling along like cattle. They blocked the low flying sun for a moment, their bellies grey at heart, rimmed with light that was too bright to be white, silver or gold even. He stared for a while, wondering at the spectacle. Wind whipped blades of grass on the edge before him. Water, far off, moved slowly along. Light ducked and dived along its countless lips. The only thing keeping still was his wasted body, shoulder and back muscles relaxing slowly, the engine pinking beneath him as if heading for a coronary.

He looked for the next moment to register himself in, for some spark of life to tell him what to do next, now that the journey was over. He didn't want to smoke. Didn't feel hungry, lost or interested. Didn't want to think or feel or be part of any time, wished something would take pity, let him dissolve into the endless blues ahead, wallowed in the tired banality of the idea. The sea ignored him, going patiently about its business, dashboard lights glowing with alarming brightness. He turned and withdrew the ignition key, not wanting to move, sure the numb pain immobility had fed into his limbs would only be multiplied by effort.

Empty thought chased empty thought in the absence of action, making him dizzy. Sick with helplessness. Banality stopped being a place of refuge. Wrenching himself away from the wheel, door shoved aside, he stepped out into a cold, hard wall of wind. Wisps of breath shot past his cheeks, the sky overhead clear, only the clouds rolling past at eye level denying light and warmth.

Sunlight emerged after a moment, its tepid touch out of proportion with the force of its brightness. Stomping the frozen earth, he turned away, back towards town.

His eyes blinked, stains of orange negative sliding across the surface. Dull, brown bungalows climbed slowly into nearby distance, towards another curtain of cloud, far off, glowing with white grace. Hands deep in the pockets of his jacket, collar turned up, he stumbled along the lane. The grassy slope to his right looked unseasonably green, as if the earth had dropped its autumnal colour code just to highlight the contrast between earth and town, between that which nature did with ease and that which man could barely manage.

Back on the coastal road, a newsagents' A-board carried a local newspaper headline "SUSSEX AIR SHOW CRASH – PICTURES". His silhouette swayed, reflected in the plate glass window of a derelict shop next door, shoulders hunched, wild mop of hair tossed in the wind, sky bursting with golden light behind him. Third and last in line was a roadside caff, fresh blue paint glistening around its entrance.

Inside, it looked as if nothing had been changed for decades. Fake wood veneer tables, imitation leather cracking at the edges of benches lined up against a beige wall. The contrast between exterior and interior made him think of old wine being poured into new skins, but the twisted metaphor didn't mean anything. The menu behind the counter was all fried breakfasts and lunches, Coke in a household fridge, plastic-wrapped muffins gathering dust inside a glass display case.

"What can I get ya?" The voice was too squeaky for the heavy-set woman the other side of the counter.

"Tea, and toast. Two portions."

"Sit down, I'll bring it over."

A narrow staircase led to another seating area, a converted half-basement. He went down into dim, unnatural light, slipped behind a wall-mounted table, swept the palm of his hand across its fake surface. It was warm, reminding him of the cheap things which had furnished his childhood. Sugar in glass, spout-topped containers. Ketchup in tomato-shaped plastic. Tin saucer ashtrays. Was this why he'd chosen this dead-end town? Some kind of sentiment, a need to re-visit the past before it was too late? On the windowless walls, electric light had bleached colour out of photographs

of local cliffs and towns, the landscapes of long-gone weekends and bank holidays he could recall without effort, flat and indistinguishable. Picking on his younger brother in the back of his parents' car, bored, unexcited by the prospect of arrival, of time to be spent in bad B&Bs, on rocky beaches, under cheerless skies. He hadn't seen his family for a couple of years. Maybe some kind of misguided longing had brought him here. Even now, after all that had happened, he could expect some such conventional weakness from himself.

His tea arrived in a mug, the toast whiter than the marg that covered it, whiter than the plate underneath. He looked up at the woman, but, with a turn of the head, her eyes were gone.

Food kept warming his insides as he stepped back out into the cold. Way off, he could see his van staring out to sea.

Half a mile passed under his boots, the distance measured out along a shallow high street. Another mini roundabout. A small police station, unmanned. A bank. A chemist. Several estate agents, one combined with an undertaker's and a flower shop, offering the full works under one roof. A place to retire, a burial, even a wreath laid on. The bare cheek of it made him smile.

More nursing homes, estate agents, pubs. A tiny video rental shop. An electrical suppliers' window lined with vacuum cleaners and gas fireplaces. He made a note of the off-licence and its unusually short opening hours. There was even a perfume factory further on, Aromance Ltd, the stench of concentrated fragrances hanging dull over the pavement.

Side streets kept teasing with glimpses of the sea, but he didn't follow, the town repeating itself until the road escaped its welcome.

A Bed & Breakfast sign hung on the corner of the lane he'd parked in. The house looked at odds with what he'd seen so far, a one-storey detached, a garden of thinning grass beyond a low gate, headless flower stalks guarding pebble-dashed walls.

Inside, another Fifties time warp. Two-tone wallpaper bleached and shrunken in places, the stairs steep, pictures of birds and railway cars in cheap frames.

Pale light crept in through an open door. He walked into a lounge, old armchairs, unmatched, porcelain figurines all over the place, a little lace and brass. Uniformly coloured shadows everywhere. Looking through a window, past grass, speeding cars and a slate covered horizon, the clouds he'd seen earlier looked tiny, creeping across a minuscule sky.

He walked over, leant his face against icy glass, trying to get a view of the sea. It was there, but almost insignificant. Wondering when or whether someone was going to show up, he sat down in an armchair from which a slim sliver of horizon could still be seen. Sunshine warmed his face, stroking with its usual lullaby touch. Soon it would be time for sleep, another day done with again, logic already leaving his thoughts, strange, senseless images starting to appear.

"Hello." The voice forced his eyes open. Still tasting the first circles of sleep, he felt an instant dislike of the little man standing in the doorway. "Thought I heard the gate a minute ago. Can I help?"

He stood up, shaking the last scraps of luxury from his bones.

"I'd like a room."

"How many?"

"Pardon?" Tiredness made him miss the sense of the question, feeling dumb before the stranger.

“How many of you are there?” The man eyed him with visible fear. The unshaven face, wild hair and road-beaten clothing obviously inspired dread instead of confidence, but he approved of the effect, glad it helped keep people at bay.

“Just me.”

“Come through.”

The room opposite was half the size of the lounge, the wallpaper dark, an old television playing in the corner.

“Scuse the mess. Just doing some paperwork.”

The room was spotless, only the desk a little untidy, the remains of a meal staining a plate on its edge. Flowers on the window ledge looked well cared for, the navy carpet clean. On the wall directly opposite hung a large mirror. He turned his gaze away a split second before his reflection could register itself. The little man fumbled with a biro that refused to work, dragging it repeatedly across a page in a ledger until ink reappeared, only to leave it and look inside his desk for keys.

“Suppose you’d like to see the room.”

The idea hadn’t crossed his mind. He wanted to get the necessities over and done with, get off to sleep, but without making eye contact the man sneaked round him and out towards the hall. He followed up the stairs, stood patiently while the hunched shoulders fumbled with a door lock on the front side of the house.

“Excuse me...” The man, already inside the room, turned and smiled, a bright look of puzzlement on his face. “D’you have anything with a sea view?”

The face dimmed.

“Sort of.” Again, he shoved past, this time to a door on the opposite side of the corridor. “Not much of a view, actually. Just the stupid way these houses were built. Tiny rooms at the back.” The space was narrow, a wooden single against one wall, a wardrobe by the door, a wire-framed coffee table in the corner. It smelled of fresh paint, all surfaces the colour of milky tea. More old wine. “That’s all you get,” the man said, staring out the room’s one window. “But the sea’s only a stone’s throw away anyhow.”

He nodded, realising the man was trying to push the larger room, joined him at the window. A concrete backyard, a couple of sheds, trees, bicycles out in the cold. Same on the other side of the fence, the neighbouring house built of identical brick, a scrap of cliff and sea visible beyond it. Turning away, he noticed a gas heater and cash box by the floor.

“It’s not expensive. Just need a couple of fifty pence pieces a night. Heats a treat...”

“That’s fine.”

“You like it?” The man enquired, surprised.

“I’ll take it.”

“Don’t use it often. Not much call for singles here. Mostly couples come up for a few days, summertime... More of a cupboard, really.”

They both looked around again, contemplating separate things. He thought asking for a price might make him seem like a respectable customer.

“How much is it?”

“Fifteen per night, including breakfast. And a tenner deposit on keys, in case you loose them. You get keys for the front door as well, so you can come in and out as you please.”

Another thing had never crossed his mind. No curfews. Sleep daytimes, live at night. He thought of asking if it was OK to stay in during the day, whether there were any restrictions, any cleaning times, but couldn’t quite put the query into words.

“Have you been in the army?”

The question threw him.

“Your jacket.”

He looked down his olive green sleeve.

“No. It was a gift.” He hoped the continuing shaking of the head would kill any further questioning, but the enquiry was only an intro to a well-rehearsed ramble.

“This whole place, you know, started as a town for soldiers. Used to be called New Anzac-on-Sea. Nothing here before the First World War. Somebody gave all the land to soldiers out there, but only a few of them sailed over.” The man’s eyes were gone, tour guide machinery on auto-pilot somewhere deep inside the glassy spheres. “Still an empty plot of land couple of doors down belongs to one of ’em. Somebody a million miles away. Dead probably. Then they changed the name to Peacehaven. Nice, innit?” He nodded. “They had a competition to find a new one, when none of the soldiers showed. Someone won a house somewhere round here just for thinking that up. Peacehaven. Of course, it used to be a lot quieter before the council built flats out the back of town, moved the unemployed in, city families, other shits, pardon my French. Good class of people used to live here before that, come down on holiday. Now you got kids hanging around, scaring old folk. Drinking, fighting. Estates out back of town full of ‘em... You’re safe round here, though. Safe as houses... Show you where the bathroom is, then we get you signed in.”

They crossed the corridor, the door behind them left open.

“Toilet at the end there. Bathroom here.”

There was no need for the man to pull the string switch. Pale strands of sunlight, spliced by marbled glass, filled the cool room.

“Can I use the bath?” An old, steel tub sat on stumpy legs by the far wall, half covered with a plastic curtain.

“There’s a power shower there.”

“What about the bath?”

“Not enough water in the boiler.”

He paused, thought about the possibility of filling it using the electric jet.

“I’ll pay extra.”

“Come, let’s not talk about it now...” The sentence trailed off unfinished as the man shuffled back down the stairs.

In the dim office, ledger in hand, the landlord was pretending to watch the silent images on the TV screen.

“All right?” The tone of voice was that of someone not interested in an answer. “Just fill in your name and address here. Phone number, if you’ve got it. In case you leave something behind.”

He took the ledger, put it in a space among the papers on the desk, picked up a pen. Thoughts crawled at the pace of days. Should he write a false name and number? False one, but not the other? He started writing, the hand shaking, mind on lies even as he slowly scribbled the truth. Name, surname, most recent address. Writing the last letters of the post code, the realisation that lies were unnecessary steadied his hand. Nobody at his last bedsit knew anything beside his name anyway. There was no way of tracing him back, or forth, beyond a single address. No way anyone could get close.

“Z. Moore... What’s the zed for?”

“Zenon.”

“Where’s that from?”

Time opened up, and he watched, listened to it repeating familiar moves.

“Poland.”

“Are you Polish?”

“No. My mother was.”

“Your father English?” He nodded, making sure his expression discouraged any further questioning. “Right. Here’s your key. That’s for the room, and that one’s for the front door. Breakfast is eight ‘till ten, and after that I can maybe do you a sandwich, if I have the time... So that’s ten for the keys and fifteen for the room. Twenty five altogether.”

He reached into a zippered jacket pocket, fumbled inside, not wanting the man to see the roll of notes within.

“Fifty five. ‘Till Sunday, if that’s OK.”

“Yes, certainly.” The man nodded without emotion.

“I sometimes lie in late. Any time of day I have to be out?”

“Not if you’re staying the next night. The day you go you have to be out by eleven, but this time of year there’s no hurry. Not like there’s crowds hammering at the door.”

He nodded, checked the zip over the pocket again, turned to go. The man said nothing in the way of welcome or parting, just turned up the volume on his TV.

Only the loud chatter of the set the other side of the office door greeted him as he pushed his way back in, arms weighed down, hands full.

Upstairs, he put a black briefcase flat on the bed, a packed rucksack on the floor, pulled out his towel. It was rough and rigid from not having been cleaned for too long. A bath, a shower, any kind of wash would have done, but holding the heavy bundle in his hand, glancing down into the pile of old clothes in the rucksack, the desire faded quickly. He didn’t want to dirty the sheets with skin and hair which hadn’t seen water since the public baths in Fort William. Tomorrow was Saturday. He could wash and do laundry then. Buy food. Alcohol. All that was left of the basics.

Jacket off, the coarse blanket rubbing the back of his neck, the mattress felt huge after months in the cramped confines of the van’s cargo hold. Eyes closed, he found the sharp edges of the briefcase with his hands. Curling himself round it, he felt the bed expand until it was massive, spinning round, out of control, same as it used to when he was a child, forced to let the world go for the night, afraid one of them wasn’t going to be there in the morning.



He woke, aware. Of the dark. The B&B. His whole history. The world had not gone. He could hear what must’ve been his own breathing, but couldn’t tell if he was hearing it from within or without. Felt like he’d only just closed his eyes, like that one blind instant had been enough to extinguish the day.

It might’ve been six, might’ve been midnight. He felt round the bed for his case, found it pushed a little way off. There was a watch inside, but it hadn’t been wound in ages.

Thirst turned him over. Light seeped in under the door, telling him nothing about the hour. In films, hotel corridors were always lit round the clock, but this wasn’t a hotel. It was someone’s house. Different rules applied here.

Thoughts of drink and food raced past, but he couldn't hold on to any of them. In the familiar dark, he rummaged through his pockets, lit a cigarette, scanned back through whatever traces of dream may have still been floating round his conscious mind. There were no faces, no names, nothing come back to life, her features, as ever, denied him. Springs creaked as he dropped his legs to the floor, groped for the ashtray he remembered as the only other piece of furniture in the room. Rubbing his smoke-sore throat, he felt crumbs of either skin or dirt roll off beneath his fingers. He dropped them down with the ash. There was wine in the car. Plenty enough of. Cigarettes. Some food.

With one hand he felt for the roll of money in his pocket. His boots were still tied to his feet. He stood up, too quickly, had to steady himself in black space.

The corridor exploded before his eyes with a bare, mega-watt bulb. He closed the door again, waited for the worlds either side to balance themselves out.

More lights and silence downstairs. Nothing giving time away as it pulled him outside.

The roof-hinged rear door creaked and lifted. Sounds bounced around the empty van as he groped for a flashlight, crisp packets crackling, bottles ringing, light found, the wine glowing a moody red. He stuffed it all into a carrier bag, stared right through the hull, wondering where to sit himself for the night. Here would be warm, but he'd had enough of those seats for one day.

There were no clouds up in a sky coloured somewhere between black and blue. Stars were doing their best against pollution from street lamps, the air so cold he could taste it, sweet and solid on the inhale. Carrier bag in hand, he walked towards the hip-height fence at the cliff edge, turned, walked down along the green. To his left, a little way off, a low, modern pub gave off meagre signs of life. No noise of movement or voice. Only a song crept out, floating in and out of twisting air currents, old, simple in tune and arrangement. It made him think of juke boxes. A self-repeating menu of music. The needle both stuck and moving.

Wind whipped it out of earshot as he moved along, up another incline, towards more bungalows. At the top, against a clear sky, the outline of a small concrete shelter stuck its flat roof out to sea.

Carrier left on a bench inside the shelter, he approached the fence. Only now did the sound of waves rolling in reach him over the lip of land. Wind rose up, hit him square in the face. He held on, individual lights twinkling along an invisible horizon, ships as constant as stars. He breathed, stared, sucked salt out of the air, tried not to think or thirst too much. Survive in suspension for a while.

Moments passed. Time became a sensation, empty of thought. He stepped back towards the bench, gaze still cast out, sat under the simple roof. Wind blew, all its sounds coming straight at him, cold seeping through jumper and shirt from the concrete at his back. A lit cigarette hanging from his lips, he twisted in the corkscrew, pulled, swallowed smoke and liquid, fire on fire. Time and time again he drew from it, bracing himself against the cold and dark.

The bottle half empty, shoulders shaking with anticipation of the familiar, he stared into darkness, trying to tell the edge of the world and the black sky apart. Somewhere out there, beyond the horizon, the sun was still making its rounds, the dawn waiting. He waited too, eyes open to nothing, the wine working out of sight, arousing his imagination. Her three Christian names cruised through it again, taking on shape and volume with each gulp. He didn't know why three, why he needed them all, but they were there, like a permanent liturgy stuck on repeat, ushering in another night.

mirrored horizon

Saturday

Hunched over a portable gas cooker, he listened to the flame whistling beneath a pot of baked beans. A chill ran up his spine. Looking back through the van, he saw the sun creeping clear of the horizon, cracking the line between sea and sky like an eggshell.

By the time he had the beans and a spoon in gloved hands, it had broken free of the earth's edge, smudging everything in sight with pink cheer. Ivory cliff faces glowed proud, far off to the east.

Breakfast over, he washed the pan out with mineral water, let the dirty, brown soup seep into the lawn by his feet, turned the burner on again for coffee. Pan lid in place, the water boiled quickly.

Rear door closed, he walked towards the edge, steaming cup in hand, wind whipping hair across his eyes. Light rose up through the world. Some quarter of a mile off, a white pillar marked the high point of a cliff, an old, post-and-hay-basket lighthouse beside it.

The concrete pillar was a monument, two, maybe three times his height, a green-brass globe crowning it. A straight line of steel inlaid into the ground ran through its base and out to the edge a few feet away. Bright light, bouncing off the white paint, made him squint as he read the inscription – King George V Memorial, The Prime Greenwich Meridian.

What was it? Coincidence? Blind chance? Steaming cup in hand, he set a foot either side of the line, his body between England and Europe, his present and his past, desperately trying for balance.

At the bottom of the cliff-face staircase, beyond a wide concrete walkway, a lip of storm wall stood between him and the rolled-out tide. The undercliff stretched along for a mile in either direction, covered in bits of flotsam and black seaweed from storms past. A strange, prehistoric plant lay by his foot, twisted into an s-shape like a piece of frayed rope. He looked back at the walls towering overhead, their faces far from white, brown and rusted, like the swill of breakfast he'd poured into the earth earlier had seeped through, along with other town waste. Some ten or twenty miles east, out where the sun was still climbing, other cliffs, without buildings on their backs, shone clean and pink in the early light.

A sign by a ramp down to the drained sea bottom warned him not to dive off the slippery surface. Though the rough-cast concrete was bone dry, he took care walking down with the coffee. The undercliff curved inwards at the bottom to absorb whatever pounding the waves dealt it, the sea floor rough and pot-holed, pools of barnacles and seaweed everywhere. In grooves stretching as far as the nearest waves some fifty feet away the water's sculpting hand had imprinted itself on the earth.

Trying not to fall off the ridges, he followed its design until foam lapped gently at his feet, day colours returning to the surface, pale green and navy, tainted with grey silt. He could hear and smell the sea clearly now, sipping the coffee, smoking, not even the faintest sound of civilisation reaching his ears. Turning back, it dawned on

him that he could just stand still for a few hours, do nothing. In however long, the waves would be done resting, turn back, start on the coast again. Judging by sight, at full tide they would cover him whole, and then some. Soon enough, tossed back and forth along the jagged floor, he'd just be bones, mixing with all the other restless souls for whom lighthouses hadn't been enough.

With his back turned, the sea sounded louder than before, as if trying to get his attention, reminding him that he'd be first to go before all those ageing bodies up on the cliffs. Concrete protected them. Glass, brick and mortar. There they were, literally, as safe as houses. He thought of his own life, torn down, turned back to dust, each day spent sifting through the rubble, listening to the echoes that lived there still, all seeping through his fingers like dirt. The metaphor came alive as he flexed his chilled hand, tiredness running him through with shivers, another night, empty of sleep, behind him. He looked up at the antique lighthouse, the Meridian pillar, the homes full of fear. Fear of light and dark. Life and death. Waves waited, lapping at the feet of all those who looked out each day and counted hours, or rather tried to ignore the count, fearing the tide, the calendar, sunset and sunrise both. Shivers rushed him harder still, skin crawling with the pins and needles of mad anxiety. He didn't want to be scared any more. Failing life was bad enough. He didn't want to be a fuck-up in the face of death too.

But death would have to wait. Whatever else was left in between was just ceremony, but ceremony was all he had left. Tossing the remains of the coffee out to sea, the sound of waves fading in his footsteps, he felt as if it was him leaving time behind for once, him teaching it patience.

The landlord was waiting as he came back down the stairs.

"You missed breakfast."

"Sorry."

"It finished at ten, like I said." Something seemed a little hurt in the voice, something twisted in the wrinkled features. "But that's OK. What would you like?"

"Nothing, thanks."

"Breakfast's included in the price."

"I know, but I've eaten already." He shifted the weight of the laundry-filled rucksack across his back.

"Maybe tomorrow then. What's the plan for today?" The polite tone of voice squeezed for an answer.

"Not much. Laundry. Shopping."

"Any sightseeing to do?"

"No."

"If you want, I've got leaflets here," The man pointed to a half-empty display stand under the stairs. "With a car, there's lots to do. Drive up to Brighton, Lewes, Beachy Head. There's zoos, and gardens and the South Downs Way. If you like walking, got maps for all the local trails."

"Not today. Got this laundry." He made the rucksack jump on his back for emphasis.

Out the door, crossing the garden, he imagined the man's eyes following him. At the gate he heard the front door close, turned to look through the office window, saw something move in the shadows.

The engine didn't want to start. Only after he turned his eyes level with the cliff edge, scraps of grass tossing disinterestedly in a breeze, hope gone, did it finally catch. Working the manual choke, he kept staring at the edge of land, the mind on other things. He could worry about mechanics later. Today he'd eat something decent, wash, get under clean covers. After weeks of roughing it in the cold belly of the van, of washing under public pool showers, changing, sitting, eating on the single mattress behind him, this town was his last chance for luxury.

Apart from the heat and sickly smell of detergent, the launderette was empty. A clump of white shirts turned circles inside one round window, trousers, towel and jumper in another. On the wall directly opposite, an ad for liquid softener consoled “Just because you’re feeling blue, doesn’t mean your clothes should too”.

After the womb-like warmth, the air outside tasted like frozen milk. He moved along for warmth, a chill wind creeping in under his jacket.

Walking down the high street, small stationer’s-cum-bookshop caught his attention. In one window, a kitsch canvas hung over a display of ready-mixed colours, the boxes branded with the face of a paint-by-number television presenter. In the other, all book covers carried yellow sale price stickers. Biographies of sports men and women. Leftover brand authors in impressive hardback. The Times Atlas of The Second World War down from twenty quid to eight. “Every campaign in full colour”. His imagination struggled to stretch and fit reality. Monuments to kings and time lines. The world at war with itself. History going well cheap.

Two young mothers shared the barber’s bench with him, their boys separated for safety’s sake. The sea sparkled between letters on a plate glass window. Two mirrors, two customers, two men over them, all of it doubled again, expanded by the reflection. The filthy mess covering his scalp itched, pressing against coats hanging on the wall, but no one was paying him any attention. Everyone was glued to a morning kids’ show on a small TV set hanging in the corner of the room. Cartoons and pop stars done with, the late segment had turned serious. Two skinny presenters, one for each gender, sat either side of an overweight teenager, the audience perched on tiered seats above them. The girl had a microphone in one small hand, the other keeping a toddler from falling off her lap.

“...Nobody knew.”

“Nobody?” The female interviewer asked patiently, looking up from her notes.

“A PE teacher thought... After trampolining class. She thought I looked like I could be... Some mates too. But they never said nothing, not ‘till after.”

“How did you found out in the end?” The man’s considerate tone of voice pressed for more, his body bent forward over crossed knees.

“I got sick... Stomach cramps. Thought they were stomach cramps. Couldn’t sleep, so Mum took me to hospital. Doctors did some tests, found out...”

“Found out what?” The elder barber cut in, his voice mocking without malice. “You was so thick, you didn’t know you was in the family way ‘till the poor tyke poked his head out between your legs and introduced himself to the world?”

“Deena from Hull...” The presenter now had his face turned towards the camera, a digital map of the country next to it. “Would like to know if you have any advice for teenagers in...”

“None.” The barber interrupted again, everyone else sniggering on cue. “The blind leading the blind, the dumb the dumber. Turn it off, Si, would ya?” Looking at the younger barber, scissors snapped quietly in his hand. “Can’t take this much shite before breakfast... Eh, Keef?” He turned to the reflection of the old man in the chair before him. “None of this in your day? Well behaved, wasn’t ya? Bet you’re making up for it now, though. Getting yourself dolled up for Saturday night.” The old man shook his head, lips drawn out in a big grin. “What’ya got, Alzheimer’s or something? Keep your head still, else I’ll cut an ear off, and then what’ll’ya do when lovely Brenda wants to whisper sweet little nothings in there... My old lady wanted something too last night. Sooner give’er triplets then one of them multiple orgasms she keeps harping on about. Shagged us both out and still got nothing but a polite whimper. You ever

give lovely Brenda one of them multiples, Keef, old boy? Had plenty of practice, ain't ya? Don't shake your head, speak, man... You heard the one about the ant and the knickerless housewife? Can't tell it, though, what with kids in the place."

All ears were tuned into the barber's rasping voice, captivated. Something in it held affection for them all, even the uglier jokes hitting a sweet spot without offending a soul. It kept on and on, filling the room with warmth. The two mothers giggled like schoolgirls. Holding a rectangular mirror behind the old man's head, the barber winked at their reflection. Someone new came in, nodded a greeting, took his place in the queue.

"All right, you're done, Keef... Oo's up next?"

He waited a few seconds, not wanting to move from his spot on the bench, do anything other than stay suspended in the cosy limbo of the place. It was like the ideal bar with the ideal, gift-of-the-gab barman, only without alcohol to twist a man's character rotten. He didn't want to break its spell, face his own wasted features in that mirror, but nobody else stirred, the other barber working on the head of a pre-teen boy. He got up, moved around the old man, took his place.

"Si, when you're done there, call Sal, get her to bring us a couple of coffees... All right there? Wash, little trim maybe?"

"A wash first. D'you do shaving?"

He looked over the dirty mop in the mirror, the barber expertly tucking a sheet into his shirt collar, the smile hinting at ridicule.

"Only for old codgers who can't hold a razor no more, and you don't look like no old codger to me."

The barber spun the chair round, tilted it, forced his head back into the washbasin. Eyes shut, hot water came down over his scalp, massaged in by forceful fingers. They rubbed and rinsed out portion after portion of shampoo.

Just as the action started to melt its way through locked shoulder muscles, the barber sat him back upright, towel-dried his head with the force of a father taking care of a restless child.

"Right, how d'you want it?"

"D'you shave heads?"

"You serious?"

"Yeah."

"It's winter. What happened, shampoo prices shot up since I last been to the cash and carry? But since you ask, no, we don't. Too much hassle, what with Si here and his steady hand. And I'm an artist... No artistry in shaving heads, is there, Si?" Si shook his, never taking his eyes off the boy before him. "Can do you a quick whizz round with the clipper, see how you like it, and if it's still too long, you're just gonna have to find some Buddhist monk to do it for ya'."

He watched the barber get the little machine ready.

"Where you from?"

"London."

"Really? What a coincidence. You, me and half the folks in this town's from the old hamlet... What brings you down our way?"

"Just travelling."

"That's what I said fifteen years back. Air's supposed to do wonders for your sex life... Does it fuck?"

Escaping the eyes in the mirror, avoiding his own, his gaze wandered over the collection of cards tucked into the mirror frame. Pannini football stickers. Postcards from Mediterranean islands. A couple of saucier ones from home.

A flyer for a Brighton nightclub. A calling card, advertising another local bed and breakfast. "B's B&B - Comfy rooms, radio, TV". That caught his attention. It'd been a long time since he'd killed any in front of his own television set.

"Where's that?" He nodded carefully in the card's direction, the clipper buzzing over his scalp.

"What?"

"The B&B, up there."

"Chris' place? Not far. Up by Telscombe Tye."

"Where is that?"

"You know Telscombe Cliffs?"

"No."

"Town other side of Peacehaven, just down the road. Two are sort of joined together. You drive out of here, for Brighton, see it on the right, big hill, that's Telscombe Tye. Opposite that you'll see a couple of houses. Old Water Board property."

"Any others nearer?"

"Used to be, once upon a time. Not no more. Tourist trade dying out with the old generation, less and less of 'em coming back each summer. Ain't exactly the new Ibiza, this place."

Outside the barber's, his feet felt like they were taking him down a steep slope. Cold wind slapped his temples, the near-naked skin in shock. He stopped round the corner, nobody around, leaned against a wall, hands on knees for support. Along with the wind, the realization that this was the last of a series of ordinary actions which had now, suddenly, begun to stand for the flesh of life itself, hit him hard. The last haircut. The last tip. Pins and needles came back in force. He had a hard time catching his breath. Eyes squeezed shut, mouth gasping, this farewell to the everyday assaulting with a reminder of the good lost and the bad to come.

A convenience store was first across the high street. The place was almost empty, patches of merchandise far forward on the deep shelves. He filled a plastic basket with familiar things. Tins of red beans. Bread. Cheese sticks so stuffed with preservatives they didn't need refrigerating. By the condensed milk, he looked out to the scrap of sea and sky visible from his darkened spot. Dust floated in the light between him and the plate glass front, the rays warm, glowing with mellow orange as if the sun was, even this early on, readying itself for descent. Flat town roofs looked like no more than shadows. Clouds did their mad colour trick at the edges again, the effect intensified by tinted glass, their rims ragged, hearts black against the light, determined to get in its way.

In the toiletries section, colourful detergent labels whisked him to Tyrolean valleys and Devonshire meadows, plastic smiling up at him like a rabid rainbow. He dropped a bottle of shower gel, a can of deodorant and a bag of disposable razors onto the floor. The deodorant wasn't about appearances, rather the opposite. He didn't want to leave any trace, not even his smell, behind anywhere.

A tall, stocky man, dark hair greying already, stared out to the street from behind the counter. He thought about what the barber'd said about this place being infested with Londoners. There were mountain people he'd known who'd lived all their lives at the feet of peaks they'd never climbed, couldn't even name, not for certain. He wondered if this local was the same. Wondered how often the man ventured onto the undercliff. Whether he knew if the tide was now on its way in or out. How much of him was native and how much tourist in this place.

He put the rucksack down next to the heater cashbox, its contents still warm from the launderette, propped carrier bags full of shopping against it. Same as yesterday, his possessions made no impact whatsoever on the small room. Retrieving the black briefcase from the wardrobe, he took the full rucksack, stood it inside, sat back on the bed

by the case, palm of one hand flat on its lid. His eyes were elsewhere, between the edge of floor and wall. Without moving his gaze, he kicked one of the carriers standing by the bed, heard a bottle topple and fall with a carpeted thud. He reached down, broke the tin-cap seal, swallowed a mouthful of transparent liquid. It was the cheap stuff that burnt the throat and made the eyes water, but he forced them to stay open, letting bitterness swirl round sore gums, amplifying the fiery flavour. After a few mouthfuls, cigarette smoke tasted sweet. He let it seep out through clenched teeth, palm back down on the briefcase.

Plastic carrier full of fresh toiletries in one hand, clean towel over the other, he locked the bathroom door behind him. Walking towards the bath, he stopped, sat down on the rug. Light came in through the marbled window as if through stained glass, spinning his head, adding to the alcoholic daze. He had to pause, catch his breath, regain some control over space and time. Brush teeth first. No, run the bath. See how much water there was. Shave. Put a pack of cigarettes on the bath's edge, within reach, the sink close enough to serve for an ashtray. Brush teeth, make sure no physical pain came to disturb sleep later. Then wash. How? When the bath was full, or later, under the shower, once all the dirt had drained away?

Still down on the floor, he unbuttoned his shirt, pulled it off his back, limbs twisting with effort. He undid his belt, took off the trousers, socks, boxers, sat naked, knees together, staring at the floor. Bottles and cans stood in a huddle by the toilet, covered in dirt and dust. Cleaning things, liquids, detergents. Pink, yellow, green and blue, like toys, like the things he'd seen back in the convenience store, only here they looked like the colours of home, half used symbols of domesticity, of habit, of the struggle to keep things in simple order. He couldn't bear to look. More than anything he'd seen for months, any other objects or faces, they brought home an overwhelming sense of all that was lost, were props in a scene he was no longer part of.

He fell back on his hands, scrabbling up off the floor, head spinning with booze and pain. Taps squeaked as he ran the bath. The carrier bag was sticky inside, smearing his hand with shower gel as he tipped the rest of its contents into the washbasin. A shelving unit hung over it, three mirrors, one in the middle, two angled either side, showing his reflection threefold. The eyes were blank discs of brown. Awkwardly, using only fingers, he covered the bottom half of his face with shaving cream. Even under all the stubble and road dirt he'd imagined some semblance of his old looks had remained, but as he slowly scraped away the foam, his own ugliness repelled him. Nothing to do with curves, lines or angles. Something else, some set to it was all wrong. Impoverished. Drawn. Deformed. The near-naked scalp didn't help.

Face rinsed, he turned back towards the bath. Hot water tumbled into the pale jade body of liquid, no signs of the boiler running out. He shut it off, broke the surface with one hand, heat shooting up the wrist, drawing it down the way temptation drew a child's hand towards pans and kettles and pain.

Knee deep, savouring the tender agony of heat against wasted flesh, he thought back to the last bath he'd had, the far-off country, the flat, the woman, but before so much as an image could form itself in his mind, he dropped down, fire momentarily disturbing the orbit of conscious thought, shocking him with pain. Hands on the edge of the bath, he held himself down, forcing the baptism to keep him safe from memory. The agony was sweet, for once physical, tangible, the kind you could trust to diminish with time and familiarity.

Careful not to get his fingertips wet, he lit a cigarette, watched smoke floating into streams of light coming in over his head, mixing with the faint cloud of steam rising up. Looking down, he saw his silhouette reflected in the surface, dark and featureless. Then, sinking down to the neck, knees folded, head resting against the enamelled rim, he watched his chest heaving with each inhale, each breath causing the water to ebb and flow, excess seeping down the overflow below the taps, draining away with each heartbeat.

Hot liquid held him in its tender grasp, sunlight bouncing round the distorted depths, clear greens and yellows, a subtle spectacle. He put the cigarette out, turned sideways in the bath, warmth moving, settling whenever he did, wrapping itself round every inch of him, like love. He ducked all the way in, only his knees out in the cold, rose up again. Water trickled down from his scalp, past his eyes in tear-like streams, littering the rocking surface with cut hairs. He drained some off, refilling from the hot tap, raising the temperature again, submerging, dissolving. There was no way of telling how long before the landlord or some other guest came to kick him out, how long the water would last, but for now he was free of worry, free of anything but need for its hot, flesh-like embrace.

Standing in the middle of the steam-filled room, towel in hand, he realised he'd brought no clean clothes to change into. Wondering what to do next, he caught sight of himself in the long dressing mirror on the back of the door. As heat cleared its surface, his silver-grey scalp emerged. Then the sharp face. Arms hanging down, the sunken chest, ribs showing same as the ones he'd seen exposed by the tide earlier, the stomach bloated by a hunger he couldn't feel. He pulled his trousers on quickly, but couldn't take his eyes off the reflection. In a matter of months his body had shed all excess fat, leaving little more than skin. It reminded him of pictures he'd seen from concentration camps, past and present, bodies collapsing beneath blank faces and shaven heads. He thought about his grandfathers, the only thing in common between them the German camps they'd both survived, one as Royal Navy officer, the other as Polish scum, both back with their wives after the War, each fathering a child that would then cross the continent and give life to the pale ghoul in the mirror. All he knew of them was through stories, all third and fourth hand. Neither man had ever talked about his experiences, both gone with their lips sealed.

Faced with a body he didn't recognise, he couldn't help thinking of faces he'd never seen in the flesh, faces and names he'd never find in the Times Atlas of World War Two. From what he'd heard, they'd never brandished medals or epaulettes. Never asked for their names to be etched into whitewashed pillars. Died in silence. And here he was, a product of peace, of unchecked freedom, of hope, alone, head spinning, heart threatening to beat itself to death.

He needed them now, needed to know how ordinary men had survived those places, what sense they'd made of life, reality, in the then and the after. Standing in a steaming bathroom, rolls of cash stuffed in pockets, fragrant soaps and gels and foams in a plastic bag beneath his feet, what was he to imagine? What was he to think of them, his own flesh and blood? What had helped them survive those places of constant death? A god? In those torture chambers of human conscience, was god the thing? Was it blind hope? Blind enough not to flinch and dissolve before the things they'd witnessed? And the lives they'd been offered afterwards, the ongoing struggles? The money, politics, ignorance? He needed to know what made their blank faces last through it all. Would they forgive him? The comparison? Yes. He was sure of that.

Standing alone in the cold light of day, he didn't feel ashamed of his own half-nakedness. How could you ever compare pain with pain, darkness with darkness? If there ever came a day of final reckoning, in whatever holy fiction, a chance to meet, exchange horror stories, he was sure they'd understand.

Stiff sheets whispered as he moved around the bed, trying for comfort. A draft hissed a lullaby through the gas heater. Curtains drawn, the day felt far off, the thought of death pressing him into the bed, weighing his eyelids down. He shifted round, crawling in and out of foetal position over and over again, not for any kind of natal echo, not for warmth, just to keep from thinking until sleep came and rescued him again.



Saturday night, the pub on the green was empty, everybody either home or elsewhere. Everything inside was new and brightly lit, the buffet closed and polished clean. Sky Sports screamed over the young barman. He got to within speaking distance before turning and walking back out again.

The stumble through town was a fight against cold, jagged wind. His feet carried him towards the barber shop. Close by, he found a small pub, yellow, cottage-style windows glowing calmly in the dark.

Inside, music hummed under a low ceiling, the bar old, same as the tables and their little lampshades. He walked over, waited for service, a few middle-aged folk sipping their pints and sherries without a word. All seemed to be busy tending their own little worlds. He feared just opening his mouth would have them shooshing it shut again, cold-staring him down for disturbing their senile peace. Looking with longing at the beer taps, he asked for a bottle of house red, got given two glasses, took them both to a table in the darkest corner. The table lamp had its own switch. Flicking it off made little difference, so he turned it back on to avoid attracting attention.

The wine was cheap and not half bad. He was sipping slowly, going over the day's events, when the juke box forced itself on his thoughts with a new song, Freddie Mercury asking "Who wants to live forever? Who wants to love forever?", stunning him for a couple of seconds. Should he laugh, or grab the wine and run? Somehow, he couldn't stretch himself to either. The song was not quite offensive enough, and the night ahead too long to start getting twitchy this early on.

The bar clock said quarter past seven. In the van he had other music, other liquids with which to burn away the taste of this place, but for now he wanted to be with people. That was why he was back here, after all. To get back in touch, back in the thick of all, all of them, had built together.

no time before You

Sunday

The hill towered over all landscape, a solitary house cresting its flat peak. Nearby, perched on a little mound, his jacket over a manhole cover, he waited for the sun to creep along and touch his uncovered shoulders again. They shook uncontrollably, the bottle of medicinal grace beside him drained ages ago, but it no longer felt like his body suffering. Inside, he felt nothing but dumb stillness, only the external shell reacting to sub-zero temperatures.

Far off to the west, Brighton's dim lights still struggled with the dark. The other way, beyond Peacehaven, the sky was starting to turn yellow, green and the most brilliant of blues, a half-rainbow heralding the coming day. Overhead, the stars were withdrawing. He stared straight up until his neck cramped, helplessly watching their departure, trying to focus on each one in spite of the shakes.

Their light went out quickly, the sun climbing at speed. He waited for colour to return to the waking town below, but nothing of the sort happened. It remained a featureless brown, flat, without any distinguishing marks, like a muddy field torn up by rugby boots. Grass turned a fresh green, the sea a shimmering silver, the sky a spotless blue. Only the strip of town at the edge of land stayed dull, painted with an incomplete palette.

A mile or more of sloping grass below him, the main road ran the length of the coast, houses close the edge. Sometime during the night, sifting through his memory, he'd remembered the card at the barber's. One of the houses must've been the other B&B.

He got up, muscles reluctant to obey, picked up the coat, headed back down the way he came. Below his little mound, soft mud had been eaten into by off-road tyres and caterpillar tracks. He followed the man-made scars towards town, the South Downs' multi-coloured ridges emerging slowly into daylight behind him.

The muddy trail led to a road, empty, heading straight down towards the cliffs. He traipsed past flat little houses, all adorned with little stabs at uniqueness. On some the plaster was painted and covered in grooved patterns. Others were covered in ornaments, plastic birds, butterflies, cartwheels, flowerpots. Absurdly exotic names, like Kismet, Delagarde, St. Katherine, were nailed to some. Gardens filled with little statues and crazy paving, a pond here and there. He came across one with a duck floating in the middle. Suddenly, the bird dived, only its tail sticking out, then emerged, plastic and paint dripping with water, dived, emerged again, on and on, perfectly mechanical. Mesmerising. He looked inside the window, past porcelain figurines and elaborate net curtains, but everything within was asleep.

A little way off, a house of shrub and hedge hid from the world within its dark, thorny cocoon.

Further on, a derelict wreck of a bungalow clashed with its well-kept neighbours. He stood by it a while, staring up at a sky unchecked by stunted architecture. The higher the sun climbed, the more the complete lack of sleep told on his senses. He hoped the B&B wasn't far.

Remains of dusk crept in under drawn curtains, the room filled with cold smoke and echoes of dreamless sleep. Sitting back in bed, pillow against a wall, he waited for it to finally fade. Only then would movement come. Nothing to pack or unpack. Just the clothes at the end of his bed waiting. He'd pick up the bags, leave his keys on the little coffee table, the door open. The tenner key deposit seemed more like compensation for running out. He'd pay more just to get out of there without having to face the little landlord again.

But for now he felt an utter lack of capacity to act, nothing, no motive that could make him move. The sense of lethargy was immense. He knew it would last for an age and then stop, just wasn't sure where the change would come from. Would it be him mustering up the will or something unconscious moving him along? Would the decision be his?

No. There was no way to get off time's merry go round, no way to step back and just watch. He had almost managed it in the Highlands, in months of solitary wanderings, but the sense of stillness and escape from the world at large had been temporary, fake, had brought him back here, to making civilised rounds again.

Cigarette out, he sat up and reached for his trousers. If he couldn't decide if, at least he'd decide when.

Squeezing in behind the wheel, he felt welcome. The engine started without too much complaint, still needing a lot of choke. Eyes closed, he made a mental note to find a mechanic tomorrow. Reverse took three strong tugs to engage, the gear stick shuddering wildly in its housing as he pulled away from the fence.

The coastal road was quiet. Rolling along, past an empty shop, a Wimpy bar and the hill which'd been his home last night, buildings suddenly ended, opening a gap of bumpy grass between him and the cliff. The sea was a screen of utter black. Looking through dirty glass, it seemed as if land was floating on an ocean of dark space, literally nothing anywhere beyond it.

Ahead, another steep incline, a single storey house before it, lights on downstairs, raised letters on the wall. B's B& B. He slowed, pulled off the main road, stopped by the steel gate. A small sign hanging off it said "Self Service". He got out, released the catch, parked up behind the house.

Sitting with the engine off, impossible darkness stared back at him from beyond the nearby, fenced-off edge. For a moment, he wondered whether there was any point going through the whole signing-in process again. Things would be no different here, or anywhere. No less friendly. No less tiresome. But at least movement was distracting, kept him unstuck. And a glance at the briefcase on the passenger seat was argument enough in itself.

The front door was locked. Before he had the chance to get to the bell, dogs howled the other side of it, then shut up, or were silenced. Nothing happened for a while. He wondered whether the place was closed, no card in the window saying anything about vacancies. If not for the lit sign out front, he'd have given up, but eventually the door opened.

The woman was around fifty, hair greying and dry, glasses hanging from a neck strap. Disinterested eyes stared him down as if he were a hawker.

"Hi," both the voice and breath were tainted with fags and brandy. "Come in."

Two identical alsatians panted behind her, staring up as if ready for the word to shove past.

“Can you wait in there?”

She pointed to a side door and the lounge beyond, disappeared with the dogs down the corridor.

The room had a small bar on the left, a mirror set into the wall behind the optics. Seeing his clean-shaven, skinhead reflection made him turn away. Shelves full of books covered the walls, and where those were missing, paintings and prints fought for space. An old television set chimed in the corner, comfortable-looking armchairs set around a coffee table, glasses nestling round a half-empty decanter. He wasn't sure if the smoke hanging over it was pipe tobacco or marijuana. A man, sixty maybe, nodded a greeting, thick glasses tipping off his nose. He nodded back. By the door, a set of keys with coloured tags hung in a neat row. Only one was missing. He was about to take a closer look at some of the paintings, but the woman came back into the room.

“Sorry about that. Sophie.” She extended a veined hand, the action revealing a little drunkenness. “How can I help?”

“I'd like to rent a room.”

“Just for one?”

“Yes.”

“Well, all the rooms have a double bed, radio, television, and they're all twenty quid a night.”

“D'you have anything with a sea view?”

“Sure. With and without. They're all free, except Kevin's,” she glanced at the man down in his armchair, “but that one's locked. Go upstairs, choose one, come back and sign in. Just... Make yourself at home.” She looked keen to get back to whatever she'd been doing before being interrupted. “Bar is open 'till ten, but you usually find me or Kevin down here later than that... Don't worry about the dogs. They don't bite paying customers.”

He nodded again, smiled, remembering protocol. Turning, he saw himself again in the bar mirror, a skinhead thug in an army jacket, ashamed of something in himself he couldn't quite name.

“Planning to stay long?”

He turned at the stairs.

“Couple of days maybe.”

“Good.” Her voice was loaded with excess cheer, as if she wanted to make “long” sound like a welcome thing.

Bags in hand, he stood at the top of the stairs, groping for a light switch. All doors, bar one, were open, nine altogether. In the south-west corner of the house a green label marked the last room.

Inside, one window looked straight out to sea, Brighton Pier twinkling six miles off in the other. The timed corridor light went out. Without moving, he stared right through the open door as plumes of wave, tinted orange by town lights, curled furiously over one another in the distance.

The man and woman, both their names already forgotten, hid deep in their armchairs, still busy smoking, drinking and reading. He stood in the hallway for ages, wondering whether to make his presence known, but something in the silent air of the place put him off saying good night. A set of keys with a green tag hung by the bar. The ledger on it remained empty.

On his way up, he realised he hadn't paid.

Back downstairs, his voice sounded weak and alien.

“Hi... Just leaving some money.” He dropped some notes on the bar. The woman’s head appeared from behind one of the chairs, smiling blankly. “Twenty quid, if that’s all right.”

“Perfect. You found a room?”

“Yes, the green one.”

“Good. Need towels, sheets, just come and get me, all right?”

Without waiting for an answer, she turned, glasses back on her nose, and was gone.

The new room felt more comfortable, the extra window and larger bed making a difference. No net curtains, just simple, pale green material to match the key ring. The wardrobe large and solid. In fact, all the furniture seemed made of sterner stuff, second hand orphans, survivors of other homes. A heavy wooden bed in the very corner, under the windows. A small desk with a lamp and a chair. A tiny table with a fourteen inch colour TV and radio stacked on top. He walked over, tried the radio, left smooth accents from somewhere deep in the country to whisper quietly on. The wardrobe had a drawer by the floor, lined with wrapping paper, a couple of ashtrays inside. He took one out, lit up, put the rucksack in the wardrobe, case on the bed, sat down next to it. A large watercolour on the wall opposite showed the base of a cliff being eaten away by spectacular waves.

A teenage couple were the only other customers in the Wimpy back up the road. It seemed like a tough place to romance anyone. The kid had a look of worry on his face, the girl leaning back, away from him.

Breaded fish and fries arrived on an oval plate. It’d been some ten hours since he’d eaten last, but his hands were slow to reach for the cutlery, his mind on the bottle and case back in the B&B. He thought about the magic going on within, liquids, acids, gases, muscles grinding, swallowing, swilling the whole chemical magic show, then cut the thought dead. Today was no time for savouring simple miracles.

He started on the meal, chewing without tasting, looking without seeing, thought following thought without sequence, a game of mental chase that bought time and saved strength for later.

On the bed, feet on the floor, elbows on knees, he kept a hand running over his bristly scalp, lost in the texture. The smell of soap and shampoo seemed boosted by the movement, but there was another purpose behind the action. Stalling time. After months of waiting for the untouchable again, here it was, the moment itself. It terrified him senseless. For a second he thought his feet were pointing inwards, instinctively looked down just to check they weren’t. There seemed something weak, childlike in the posture, something he couldn’t stomach in himself.

The heart beat without making a sound, but he could feel it, rocking him from the skeleton up. Feel the blood pounding against ankle, collar and temple, adrenaline racing as if ready for god-knows-what. Involuntarily, his toes clutched at the carpet, but he let them, watching himself from a distance. The old, solitary self fading away to make room for the real thing, the main, massive heart, beating like a drum at the start of ceremony, getting ready to pump drug and vision through the body. He had a bottle opened, ashtray, lamp and case all set up on the desk, but didn’t yet dare touch any of it, not even a cigarette. Music was necessary, but only with him in charge. The TV and radio wouldn’t do. He needed a CD player, but hadn’t yet thought beyond the car stereo. Tomorrow he would go out, buy the best, the latest, or, if he could find it, just like the one she’d bought for him once. He took the briefcase handle, worked the codes with it in his lap, heard the once familiar snap of latches releasing. Lid open, he put his hand inside. Let it rest on its contents a second. The envelope full of photographs. The watch, clipped into the pen holder, its movement silent. Sketchbooks. Ticket stubs. A cigarette packet. Keys. A little wooden sculpture of a rustic Christ sitting on a rock, crown of thorns carved softly into the head. A piece of amber with two names etched into it. A set of hand-decorated

birthday cards. A candle with the picture of a stork, a new-born baby wrapped in cloth hanging from its beak. Her face drawn in pencil, behind glass, in a humble frame. He stared for a moment before turning it over, face down. It wasn't it. Not what he wanted to see. Better than a photograph, but still no more than a picture. Still life. Worse than memory.

Heart beating faster, lungs out of synch, he swallowed cold vodka from a bottle saved for this night, straight from the belly of the van, hand grabbing at a cigarette in panic. Slowing himself a second, he stared ahead, feeling the mouthful penetrate, cringing at the heavy dose. He took out the candle with the stork, lit the reluctant new wick, started whispering a tune. The words, someone else's lyrics, were like a chant against personal madness. He whispered them over and over again to save him a little longer from all the might of her memory could do to him. Then he remembered all that time had claimed already, grabbed the bottle before the thought could reach any kind of conclusion, braced his whole body for the shot, the mind a desperate blank, refusing to let emotions through, the whole boiling, choked by the bitter liquid, eyes not sure if they should stay shut or start open with the force. He felt the heavy dose hitting the brain, running amok. The shakes came. He drunk some more to silence them. The cigarette left no trace of taste in his burning mouth.

The sound of the song had faded from thought, exposing the permanent echo of her three names. Something told him to use the case itself as an ashtray. In the coming weeks he would try to fill it whole, turn the lot into a dirty tomb, bury the past in the remnants of a deadly habit. He tapped the cigarette over it, sucked in deep, tapped again, put it out in the ashtray, lit another. The candle refused to hold steady, flame skipping with life. Laying the case gently back on the bed, he took out a large sketch book, placed it in his lap. Bottle down, he let his eyes spin behind closed lids for a second before focusing on it. The cover was dark brown, the paper heavy. He sucked on the cigarette, stuck a bitten fingernail in, opened, checked the date on the first page. A year ago to the day, his own handwriting perfectly familiar, the first few words kicking off an avalanche of recital he didn't need eyes to continue. Yet in them, in those molecules of ink, hid something more permanent than memory, something he could touch, something still left of a time already so far away it seemed a part of some awful myth. And touch, after a year of absence from the world, suddenly felt like it could make a difference.

It's already hours ago, but it feels like minutes. I can still taste Your coat against my lips, kneeling, kissing Your belly goodbye at the airport. Or does it feel like ages since I saw You look down, smiling back, trying not to cry?

Christ, measure time for me. There was no time before You. None. Only now has it taken on shape, dimension. Now it is real, related to the world. Now time is either with you or apart. I know when I'll see you next, and time between us is a mountain to be scaled, a journey.

And now this, this monster climb, a month apart. Can't see the top yet, much less over it. The phone will not be enough, I know already, so I'm turning this sketchbook into something new. I will write, keep words for company. In this journal I will talk to You. Air the voice talking to You always. Maybe I'll show it to You when we're together again. Maybe I'll save this document for some better 'later', ages on, when memory of what our youth was like starts to fade.

Already You are safely back in London, while I'm still here, listening to the echo of all that passed by in this little flat. Coming back from the airport, Warsaw looked viciously ugly. My heart is tearing right out my ribcage to get even an inch closer to You, but my mind knows it is not possible. A month 'till Christmas, 'till we are all reunited. Like a child, I cannot wait, but I also understand perfectly how necessary it is. What kind of a test, a challenge to surmount.

I've discovered time, at last.

My god, where was any of it before You?

back to man

Monday

Behind the wheel, half empty bottle in his lap, he wondered whether to work the stereo with or without the engine. With would probably wake the whole house, dogs included, without run the battery down in a couple of hours. Drunk, not thinking straight, he released the hand brake, let the van roll down as far as the fenced-off edge, turned the key. It caught first time. The dashboard radio burst into Gabrielle's "Rise", the middle section lifted straight from "Knocking on heaven's door", lyrics turned right round, no longer verses of finality but of some kind of personal rebirth.

The high-tech display was all minuscule dials and buttons. Eyes spinning, it took what felt like forever to silence it. Head down, trying to pick his CD case up off the floor, he nearly threw up. Even after he got his gut to calm down, it was still hard to choose a song for a night like this. Hard to focus the eyes on the shiny discs slipping through his fingers. Hard to think, imagine any sound that could soundtrack the beauty tearing through him. If he could stand up, he'd dance, out in the open air, try to burn off some energy, forget for a second what was long gone and yet filled the heart with a grace that could not be silenced either.



Something woke him. Some shadow passing through. His eyes opened to a horizon utterly lost in the dark, a song ringing in his ears even though the engine and stereo had long ago been turned off. Shutting the briefcase on the seat beside him made the ash burst out the edges. A clear, little thought at the back of his mind said that turning it into an ashtray had been a stupid idea, but it was too much logic to deal with then.

The near-empty bottle rolling about on the floor between the pedals, he grabbed the case and got out. Another thought advised against leaving the van on the edge for all to see, but again, reason failed to impress itself. All he could hear was the sound of the rear door opening, legs crawling across the mattress, then the echo of his own collapse.



Plumes of breath floated up towards the metal ceiling. Everything was still, except for a piece of cobweb hanging from it, battered by invisible air currents. He watched it float against morning light, puzzled. The van was obviously home to other things, the air inside alive with a pattern of movement he could only imagine. The thought of a spider somewhere near by, sharing his little cell, warmed him a little.

He sat up, feet swelling inside the hiking boots. More cold air rushed in as he slid open the side door, looked out to the clean cliffs off to the east. The sky was its usual bright and clear self. Rows of evenly spaced clouds crawled over his head like sheep going to war, their path cut by jet plane trails dissolving slowly, miles high.

He let his mind dissolve too, like a child's, without language. Sleep had exhausted it completely, catching him at night for the first time in months.

The sound of dogs barking downstairs came up through the floor, but he didn't pause to listen, grabbed some clean clothes, toiletries, went out to the bathroom opposite. The room had a shower cubicle by the door, no bath, all the furnishings sky blue. His hand shook as he moved the razor across his chin, as much with anxiety as with alcohol. In a moment he would have to face people, would have to speak and make sense to them again. He longed for the solitary silence of the Highlands, but for now, they seemed not days, but years behind him.

The smell of soap and deodorant followed him into the bar lounge. He felt clean, and that seemed important somehow, as if cleanliness was camouflage. The dining room next door had six square tables and a sea view. He wasn't the first in. Kevin, a broad-sheet covering most of his table, looked up from his cornflakes, nodded a greeting. He nodded back, chose a place where the low sun would not blind him. The cloth was clean, but the cutlery was piled in the middle of the table, round a tiny vase, a dried-out rose drooping from it.

"Sleep well?"

It was the first time he'd heard Kevin speak, or had a proper look at the man's face. The thick glasses and lanky, thinning hair suggested shyness, but the voice was strong, full of warm song.

"Yes, thanks."

"Did you dream anything?"

"Pardon?"

"Dreams. Whatever you dream on your first night in a new place is supposed to be prophetic."

Zen stared at the smiling stranger, the distance separating their tables seemingly unbridgeable, had no idea how to reply. Kevin seemed unfazed.

"Anyway, you've made a dream of mine come true. Brought all this fine weather with you. Amazing for this time of year. Is this your first visit to Peacehaven?"

"Yes."

"Well, I hope it's not your last. Weather like this continues, Sophie should let you stay here for free, a kind of good-luck charm. A totem against the gods of wind and rain."

"Glad to be of help."

Looking away, he saw the van still parked on the edge of the drop-off. Cold chills shook his whole torso. What would they think? A guest, first night, driving across their property, parking just inches from that lifesaver fence? He thought he'd lost it all, along with the capacity to feel shame, but no, the hard lessons were not over yet. Face on fire, eyes as far from Kevin's as he could manage to turn them, he excused himself and almost ran back for the front door.

As if responding to rare need, the van started first time. He ran it a little, warming the engine, fearing it might stall on the slight incline before the gate. The bottle he'd left on the floor earlier got stuck between the pedals, and it took him an awkward while to get it out.

The slope and gate proved no problem, but the sounds coming from below his seat made him shiver with concern. He drove back into town, past the café, B&B and pub, looking for a repair garage. A little further on an old Morris Minor sat by the side of the road, a sign with a cornering supercar and an arrow on its roof, bright yellow letters screaming "Batteries and Clutches guaranteed FOREVER!". He turned up the lane, found the lorry-wide garage mouth gaping out to sea.

The office was in a small, built-on extension, a radio playing loud, work-along rock. A solitary mechanic listened, took a smoking cigarette from an ashtray, stood up.

Outside, he looked up into the bright sky with distaste, before turning his attention to the beat-up van.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing, really. Just needs a service."

"It's left-hand drive."

"Belgian import."

"Can't do it. Don't do vans. Definitely not imports. Parts'd be a nightmare. Sorry mate..." He turned to walk back in with a near-invisible shrug.

"D'you know any place round here that might?"

"Try the camper van place up the road."

The suited salesman took one look at the sorry machine and calmly explained that it was Monday, their mechanics not in yet, and even so, they only serviced camper vans. Not cargo vans. Not ever. He was sorry, though his smile said otherwise, and no, he didn't know of anyone else that might help.

Walking back to his mobile home, he thought about the salesman's tie. Burgundy, subtle squares of grey and gold across it, a thing of expensive beauty. It didn't fit the place or the man, seemingly at odds with things. Maybe that's why it stuck in his tired mind as he turned the ignition, half-wishing the engine wouldn't start this time. Maybe they'd work on it then. Then he could walk back to the caff, order a breakfast, enjoy this renaissance of hunger instead of driving round in circles.

Stepping out of the caff, he looked across the road at the modern pub he'd passed through on Saturday. Someone had wrapped lines of fairy lights round the windows, the whole building twinkling with its back to the sun. It was the first warning of the coming of Christmas, and it took a second of his breath away, twisting his full gut. Remembering the holiday season a year ago, every single bit of tinsel and sprayed-on snow now synonymous with her final phone call, her goodbye, all the other deadly news she'd delivered, he just about managed to hold it together.

Turning back towards the high street, he had to remind himself that this was only the beginning, only a warning shot, with many more such colours to be flown soon.

The home entertainment section of the electrical store was tiny compared with the household equipment showroom next door. It was easy to see where people's priorities lay in this town.

The interior was cramped, air-conditioned, nothing remarkable on the shelves. No DVD or MP3 players, nothing yet to herald the switch of centuries. A thirty year old with a nondescript face, short hair and glasses acknowledged him with obvious reluctance. First impressions, he thought again, seeing himself through the other's eyes.

"How can I help?"

He explained, listened to the sales pitch, changed his mind about the nondescript face. There was no such thing, he decided. Every face said something, told a story, no matter how slim. This man, with his half-passionate, half-resigned expertise, what did he stand on? Was he happy, heading for middle age in that one spot? On the chair behind the counter lay a pile of glossy men's lifestyle magazines. Did he still dream the James Bond dream, the Playboy fantasy, the car and money and women pipedream? He wasn't a bad looking bloke. Not dumb. Not all together graceless. But the talk, the manner, dull as the specification leaflets he was searching through, how comfortable it was, how sweetly stupefying. Nothing interrupted the role. No schism. Professional patience seemed to take the salesman out of himself and into a little passion.

For some reason, he decided he wanted to make the man's day. Choose the most expensive machine. Buy more than he needed. Tip even. He didn't know why, something in the figure inviting sympathy. Behind the school boy frames, the ugly tie, the face starting to slowly drop into irretrievable age, lay a helpful soul, someone anyone could warm to. But all the stereos were roughly in the same price range, everything else useless to him. He bought a dusty Hitachi that reminded him of the first he'd bought as a kid, a pair of large headphones and enough batteries to last a month. He was advised to get a lens cleaner for the CD, but there was no way to say why there was no need, no way of telling the man the shortest straw was not his.

All boxes deposited in the van, he turned down one of the side streets, followed the cliffs east. Buildings begun to disappear as land grew in elevation, the sea to his right. A radio mast crowned the tallest rise a couple of miles on. Beyond it, a long, greedy scythe of wave-break reached out to sea, guarding a port town the other side of the ridge. He stumbled towards them, along two uneven paths, the first older, collapsed in places where the edge had drawn too near, a new one trampled into being a little further from the drop. His stomach cramped looking down, the height immense, cold, emerald waves glistening within what seemed like an arm's reach.

After an hour of the ankle-twisting trairpse, he reached the highest point of this section of coast, a hundred feet from the antenna and coastguard building below. A slim beach had formed in the nook of the wave-break's arm. Protected from collapse by its sands, the hills he was perched on nevertheless bowed humbly before the sea, as if resigned to their inevitable, naked fate.

A WWII fort nestled in the bluffs. He stopped short, sat down to smoke and stare. Far off, somewhere near the eastern horizon, a hi-tech ferry sped along, trailing a massive plume of water. Here and there on the hilltop he noticed huge, concrete disks set into the earth, each with a knee-deep circle sunk into the middle. They looked like anti-ship gun turret placements, the guns themselves long gone. Staring at the strangely redundant forms, the thought of building a campfire came to him. Where else was he going to find a spot as safe and isolated as this? The deep centre would provide perfect cover from the wind, the ledge a seat, nature the rest. He hadn't built his own fire in weeks, firewood next to impossible to find in the Highlands, longed to have the pleasure of watching flames snap in the dark.



Dusk hit hard around four. From behind half-drawn curtains, it seemed as if winter had called lights-out, colour leaving the sky fast. He'd unpacked some of his clothes, taken and dusted off everything from the case, only the ash waiting to be emptied out. The stereo sat next to the old radio, already plugged in.

He went back down to the lounge to look for a copy of the local Yellow Pages, but instead, in one of the armchairs, he found a little blonde girl struggling to read a book in the faltering light. She looked up, lowered her eyes again, unconcerned. Staring, unable to move, he wondered how many more surprises the world could serve up, how many more horrors to worry him with. But before he could react, even pose the question regarding ghosts, the landlady rushed in through the wide doors to the dining room, dropped a little red coat and matching hat into the girl's lap.

"Hurry up, Sian. Your mum's waiting..." She looked up. "Hi. How's it going..." His eyes were still fixed on the girl, the little hands sliding into the coat sleeves as slowly as possible. "My granddaughter, Sian. Hurry up, you little monkey... We're off shopping. If you need anything, Kevin's around to help. D'you have any special dietary requirements concerning breakfast?"

"No." He desperately tried to get his mind back to the present. "D'you have a Yellow Pages?"

"Sure. What are you looking for?"

"I need a mechanic."

"There's a garage just up the road, next to the Seagull."

"Think I went there this morning. They couldn't work on it. Needs special parts..."

The woman nodded, following the story.

"Hold on."

For a second, he was ready to go with her, just not to be left alone there with the child, but before he could force himself into action, the woman was gone. The girl stared at him, coat on, hurt feelings twisting her little features.

"Mum always says not to put clothes on before going outside, 'cause you get hot and then catch a cold." He had the impression that in the absence of others, she blamed him. A nod was all he could manage in reply, the girl instantly losing interest in him, throwing the little beret up in the air, unable to sit still. Eyes closed, he tried to comfort, pacify himself. He should've known there would be little kids even here, in this place of slow dying.

"Here you go." The woman handed him the Yellow Pages. A car horn sounded outside. "Payphone's just there if you want... C'mon, Sian, mummy's waiting."

He stepped backwards, turned, hurried back up the stairs.

By the time the door closed behind him, he was grinning. He got it, got the joke all right. A fake chuckle swelled in his throat, bubbling behind drawn lips. Ironies and tests, all the way. The world would not leave him alone, not even here. No peace, no haven, not anywhere any more.

I went to the post office today. The woman behind the counter barked at me, but I felt no anger, only pity. I know I shouldn't have, but it wasn't cold pity, watching that face lined with infinite trails of disappointment. In her eyes, a life without warmth, without light. I just felt sorry that fate would deny her the strength You give me, would turn her against simple strangers.

On the wall there was a poster advertising a savings plan, a photograph of a woman in a garden chair, short blonde hair, so unlike Yours, wearing a summer dress, a field in bloom in the background, a little blonde girl in her lap, their heads together, noses touching, faces literally aglow. So natural. So unlike an ad. It wasn't just me, any kind of projection. There was something in the eyes of the woman looking at the child, so real.

The ad was for a pension savings scheme. I work, move, breathe just so that one day I can have that, that promise made good, that scene before me with You and our child in it. God, let there be some signs and wonders that don't age.

snow out of a blue sky

Tuesday

In a stupor, he watched air currents searching the room, sifting through a cloud of smoke. On his new CD player, a Balkan lament was stuck on REPEAT, a woman bidding her man sleep tight while she runs off in the night, afraid her love for him is too strong, leaving her nothing of herself. The song had played so many times already it'd become part of him, or he'd become part of it, didn't matter which. Either way, it was nice to have someone else in the room grieving with him.

Eventually, listening and drinking tired him. He pressed STOP on the remote control, stared at it in silence. MADE IN MALAYSIA. A Polish singer singing Balkan songs on a Malaysian stereo in England.

The journal lay open beside him.

Went shopping, the day amazingly bright, a few solitary clouds high up. Snow started falling out of nowhere, sun shining, the flakes beautiful, suspended without wind, like snow in the middle of summer. Dry and light, refusing to fall, like they were enjoying themselves.

I felt delighted and sick. It's incredible. The highs and lows I'm going through. Missing You, just two days gone. Your absence bearing down on me, yet feeling as light as air, looking at people, knowing what it is I carry inside me. This thing I feel. Christ, I never knew happiness was going to be this hard to stomach. This exhilarating. My head is spinning. I'm having a hard time keeping thoughts straight. Reading through this, nothing makes sense. None of what I'm writing. None of what's happening.

Walking back, I was laughing out loud. Snow was falling and I felt so happy I could hardly breathe. Snow out of a blue sky.



Cutlery lay piled up round the vase, same as yesterday morning. That he wasn't hungry didn't matter. The mixture of vodka and wine he'd sipped on through the night hadn't done his gut any favours, filling it with a liquid sense of sickness he hoped might be alleviated by a solid intake. Waiting for service, he walked around the room, admiring the watercolours which decorated its walls. He recognised the same hand as in the seascape in his room, the subjects unusual, pieces of water-worn flotsam wood, unkempt shrubs and trees on the edges of land, parts of earth and sky streaked with mysterious light.

Outside the door to what must've been the kitchen he heard Kevin shout "Sophie...", turned around, saw her come through.

"Morning. Slept well?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Hungry? What'd you fancy?"

She took his order for eggs and toast, nodded when he declined the offer of a morning paper. Soon after, he heard Kevin's voice again, talking over something that made them both laugh. Just for a moment, he tried to pretend he was beyond envy.

His freshly washed face itched in the cold morning air as he stepped outside, pulling the woolly hat low over his eyes. The wind was fierce, curling round as far as the land-facing side of the house. Leaving the van behind, he walked out the gate, turned left along the coast, in the opposite direction to yesterday. Brighton looked far off, but the question of time or distance didn't even cross his mind. Any number of miles would be good under the feet today.

A path led him along to the edge outside Sophie's property, towards a set of steps leading down to the base of the cliff. A large sign "NO NUDISM allowed on this beach", the "NO" covered with white paint, stood at the top of the steps, backed by another outlining local bylaws forbidding nakedness in public. He walked far from it, wondering who, in a windblown area populated by so many retirees, would need encouragement to keep their clothes on.

Another little town lay over a steep hill, an outdoor pool in the valley, steps below it leading to a pebbled beach.

A couple of warmly dressed kids were playing on the concrete undercliff. He walked across the stones, watched waves trying to soak the tips of his boots, the sea brown and silt-laden. Brighton still looked miles off. The undercliff snaked round the cliff base, its floor littered with black seaweed, stones and bits of chalk from the faces overhead. He stared along at the places where, the tide in deep, waves crashed against the concrete, shooting plumes of foam and spray high up in the air.

Moving slowly along the walkway, he listened to heavy waves milling to his left, waited for the next strike. It came soon enough, a dozen steps on, thundering against the curved wall, the snap ricocheting off the cliff face. A great swarm of sun-dazzled drops flew twenty feet into the air, spray turning into solid mass, gravity crashing it back down. Though the lip of concrete and metal guard rail meant he would never be washed away, a dozen steps on he would have been soaked to the bone.

The beauty and mad force of the spectacle took his breath away. Further on, whole salvos of wave after wave struck with even greater fury, driven by eye-watering winds, but he pressed on, playing chicken with the sea.

An hour later, he reached a bulbous wave-break, a forest of masts sheltering behind it. Turning up a driveway cut into the cliff, away from the loud, green walls of water, his head was full of their sound and smell as he climbed high over the sea.

At the top, the cliff sloped back down towards Brighton, but he stopped. Cars streamed past rows of Victorian terraces, lawns and mini gardens serving decorative duties. Two piers twinkled in the distance, a fairground at the end of the nearest one, cars and rides spinning like mad. After the sport he'd just witnessed, their cheap glamour did nothing to draw him further.

He turned onto the path that ran back towards Peacehaven. Where grass closed over, recovering worn earth, he found his feet looking for the trail again, a city boy at heart.

Elevated by the landscape, wind battered him straight in the face. He stumbled over the grass verge towards pavement and road, then to the other side. According to the bus shelter timetable, all the numbers stopping there went through Peacehaven. An old woman in a brown overcoat and matching beret kept straining to see herself reflected in the plastic windows of the shelter, repeatedly adjusting her hat, pulling it this way and that.

"You look lovely, ma'am."

The woman looked up, smiled, a little surprised.

"Thank you, darlin'. This bloody wind..." In spite of the compliment, she kept right on fiddling.

He took his eyes off her just in time to see a bus driving up, stuck out a hand.

On the top deck, a group of teenage schoolgirls kept shouting, jostling, generally making a self-conscious nuisance of themselves. A couple of others, wearing the same uniform, talked quietly amongst themselves, closer to where he sat. One of them looked back, clearly ashamed of her schoolmates. She couldn't have been more than fifteen, the angles of the face still childlike, long black hair sweeping down the back of her blazer. Something about it caught his attention. He couldn't take his eyes off its dark sheen, even when she looked round again, straight at him. The features were unfamiliar, but the soft, downy hair at the nape of her neck had him squirming in pain. It was nothing tangible, nothing instantly familiar, but something about it was cut from the ghost of another. He stared at the back of her head, shaking, praying, literally praying she would get off and leave him be.

It'd been a long time since he'd last been alone with a TV set. He adjusted the sound to silence so that only the pictures remained. Without the usual white noise, it was hard to fathom the motivation for what he saw people do. Audiences clapped wildly. Faces blamed each other. Children ran about in homes, gardens, forests. Sports people rushed around to silent cheers. Presenters smiled through their own triumphs. Cartoon characters fought duels that seemed to have no winners, no point. Images moved past at a phenomenal rate, so much quicker and more manic than the seascape he'd dived with earlier.

After watching for a while, he swung his feet off the bed as if he had something to do somewhere, then stopped. There was nothing and nowhere. He turned the TV off, lay back down, waiting for sleep to carry him off to safety.

Did people ever mention it? Any kind of change in You? They have in me. I feel it, within and without.

Nothing looks the same.

Nothing.

The sky, the earth, every shade and shadow. Colours somehow brighter, a light in everything. Everything glowing. The world and all in it changed. Everything amplified, sweeter, louder, greater. All senses aroused. Something strange in reality, as if nature had left the usual four seasons behind and entered a new one.

A fifth season.

Can you feel it? I never asked. So many things I wanted to and never asked. What does the world look like through your eyes? Is it as brilliant, as full of colour and memory as mine? Is the sky as special to you as it is to me? Do the clouds tell of moods, of experiences somewhere far off, in times past, and yet others too, times that belong to something in me that is not history? I look up into the blue and it seems to swallow me. Like I was part of it. Like I was home at last.

No illusion. No trick of the senses. For six months it's been brewing. Mounting. Within and without. Everything I do. Everything I see, think of, do for You, for others. Everything I partake of in the world, everything I touch and touches me, everything multiplying, building in and of itself. Light in everything. Shining outwards. This thing we have, not just ours. Like light, giving of itself. Like light, not just illuminating the world, but touching it, warming it, changing it, for good.

hungry for an extinguished light

Wednesday

He lay on the bed, some hours from sleep, watching early morning TV. The sound was still off. The presenters must've had a fight off-camera, their eyes never meeting, silent mouths tight-lipped. Their guest looked uncomfortable. The thousandth commercial break came along, selling Christmas already. Pictures flashed by at top speed, snippets of music videos, an ad for a compilation album – "Love... Available at Woolworth's".

Looking up at the clear contents of the bottle beside his bed, for the first time he saw death there, the one huge drop enough to kill him. The pretty label and frosted glass hid a slow, clear end. Alcohol poisoning. Man made. All he would have to do was swallow, hold it down. No pills or guns or knives. Nothing instant. No magic moment. Man doing the hard work.

What day was it? How many left? Twenty? More, less? Why wait? Because of the anniversary or because he was a coward? How did death get to be so welcoming, so convincing? His head dropped back on the bed. Up through the floor, the sound of female voices reached him. His eyes shut, but he wished he could do more, shut his ears, mouth, mind to all that was external, disappear inside himself, even for a second.

Getting up, he realised he didn't have the guts to chance seeing the child again downstairs. The idea of cancelling all his breakfasts came to him, a compromise to suit all. He'd speak to Sophie before sleep, whenever that would come again, let the roadside caff feed him from now on.

Slipping out the door, he noticed a tiny fly which had bounced off the TV screen all morning was still glued to it, hungry for an extinguished light.

Sophie appeared from behind the house as he came back from the shops, the dogs at her side, jumping like puppies.

"Morning," she smiled. "Not hungry today?"

"Morning. I meant to talk to you."

"Come in out of the cold." She unlocked the door, let the dogs in first. "Never introduced you to my boys. Phoenix, and that's Harrison. Twins."

"Nice names."

"My daughters chose them when they were girls, after their favourite actors. Hate to be reminded of it now." She went into the lounge, unbuttoning her jacket, dogs bounding in after her. "You were saying?"

"Just thought I'd cancel all breakfasts from now on. I'm not one for eating much. Save you trouble..."

"Don't be silly. It's no trouble. You eat when you want, don't if you don't." She smiled at him strangely, glasses magnifying her eyes a fraction, just enough to unsettle him. "How's your van?" He realised he hadn't even thought of it in the last few days, much less done any phoning round. "Only my daughter said something after I gave you the phone book. If you have no luck finding a mechanic, we know someone who knows someone who could probably fix it."

"It's not a popular model."

"Don't worry. You planning to stay a few more days?"

He barely had the strength to nod, much less move house again.

"Right. I'll call them today, get you mobile... Not that I want you to go, don't get me wrong. Stay as long as you like. Boys don't seem to mind you coming and going." She nodded at the dogs curled up beside the bar, something wolfish in the shape of their heads not letting him surrender faith in their repose.

Carrier bag emptied onto the bed, he started sifting through the pile of papers and mags inside. A local newspaper ran headlines about fire crews doing a grand job and Exmoor ponies helping to curb spreading weeds on the local trails. An ad for Swift's Travel Shop offered day trips to Cairo, "Bedouin tent luncheon, Concorde back. See Pyramids/Sphinx". A style mag, weighing as much as a book, caught his attention with a story about older women importing African boyfriends. He read a motorcycle magazine cover to cover, but sleep would not come.

In a copy of GQ, he found a photo-shoot, a couple of models lounging round a staged flat, the man in various fashions, the woman in various states of undress. Something about her reminded him of a woman he'd known once, years back, someone with whom sex had always been a true pleasure. He put his hand inside his trousers, tried to stir up his imagination, connect the photos with something which had lived once.

It'd been a long time since he'd so much as bothered to remember physical needs, but the forced struggle for pleasure didn't last long, deliver anything worth while, just surprise at how little release he'd been able to produce. Life was truly fading, he thought, wiping his hand on an old shirt.

Lifting a cigarette to his lips, he could smell both sperm and tobacco on his fingers, life and death in the same hand.



Twisting the key in the ignition, he promised this would be the last time he'd take the van out before its service. The motor started eventually, but ran as if on last legs.

He crawled gently along the coastal road, back into Peacehaven, looking for a DIY store or a petrol station that sold logs for fireplaces. Some way in, he found a timber suppliers, drove out ten minutes later with a load of discounted off-cuts. He could feel the extra weight slowing the machine as he drove out of town, back towards the fort.

On the very edge of town something made him take his foot off the gas, pull up by a retirement trailer park on slopes fading off into a deep valley. The thing he'd seen, rolling past a petrol station, was a sign on a building next to it. BRIGHTON MOTEL. A motel, the first he'd seen anywhere the length of the country. Here, in this dead-end place. How fucking apt. How perfect.

He parked in Newhaven, wandered along a ran-down pedestrian street, all pet, charity and discount travel shops. The supermarket was small, catering for an old-fashioned clientele, its tiny delicatessen section holding none of the things he wanted. Pushing his trolley round, the edge of his hand touched that of a woman moving in the opposite direction. He couldn't believe how much shock his body went through in that one instant of contact, the touch of another human enough to paralyse him with its strangeness.

He was alone on the clifftop, even the coast guard building empty. Dumping the load of wood inside the concrete disk furthest from it, he looked out to the world. Half of it was sea, half land, his little vantage point towering over it all. Winds seemed a little softer than yesterday, the sun low and dim, the forces of nature having an off day.



Clouds rolled in, covering the darkened sky in a blanket of vivid grey-blue. Straight ahead, they were torn apart by a pink streak of sunset, all the colours reflected in the sea. He sat with the remains of a sausage on a long, thin branch in his hand, wondering how he was going to get home. The vodka went down so much better into a full belly, lungs filled with fresh, frozen air. He'd already downed half the bottle, and, feeling a little sobered by the onset of night, wanted more. The van would not be safe down there in the dark, but what difference did it make if it got stolen or not. Money was no object, time no issue, comfort no concern of his. Only the briefcase mattered, and that was locked and hidden back in his wardrobe.

Dry planks burnt quickly, but there was still plenty left in the van for another round. Poking the flames about, he couldn't decide whether the heat he felt in his thighs and torso was fire or alcohol. It felt like neither, like it came from some other source.



Having bussed back, he lay down on the bed, hoping for a little sleep to shorten the night. Focusing eyes or thought on anything was hard, the bottle inside the rucksack at his feet near-empty. His hands were black, covered in a mix of soot and grease, like the hands of a murderer.

He could feel his nose running, a cold he must've caught since coming here. It wasn't the icy nights out. Months of those had done him no harm out in the Highlands. Must've been people had done the infecting. He opened his shirt, poured the remains of the vodka onto the palm of his hand, rubbed it into his chest. It was a trick taught him by someone long ago. The smell rose up, straight for his sinuses, let him hope the cold'd be gone by the morning.

A few cigarettes later, sensing sleep was far off, he reached for another bottle, for the nth time wondering what to do with a night that had no new day the other side of it.

I keep waking at four, five in the morning, as if my body was disturbed by Your absence from its side, walk around, watching sunrises, eating hot fresh bread every day. I don't feel tired, despite the lack of sleep.

Called You again last night. Felt so stupid, weak, for giving in to need. I had to hear You, though I had nothing to say, nor did You, just hanging on the phone like teenagers. I know it's only a month, I know it's not much, but I swear it tests.

Felt so low after that call, felt like I'd let you down. I know it was just momentary, this sense of failure, I know it's necessary to keep feelings keen, but it burns and brands. I know it's only a little test of time, but my heart feels so swollen, so much of You physically missing from my side, I can't stop it fearing sometimes. I miss Your smile more than anything, more than anything I could ever explain.

from unkind elements

Thursday

Sunrise had turned the sea a dirty grey, mud sifting beneath the surface, waves crashing against the undercliff. The force with which they struck did not just seem, but was fiercely personal. At night the wind had been stronger, the waves, as the tide rolled in, much more impressive. Now it was easing off, the lightening sky speckled with cloud. He was dying for another cigarette, anything just to kill the time of waiting, but his throat was sore from all those he'd smoked already. All he could do was stand, shaking from the cold and the hours, stare at each crest as it rolled slowly up, either breaking early, sinking beneath the concrete lip a few feet away, or slapping hard against the defences, launching with a loud snap into the air. He'd spent the late part of the night rushing back and forth, escaping the twenty foot monsters, heart racing with something other than echoes for once. Now, sober, a little exhausted, he felt hungry. By the time he got back, it'd probably be time for breakfast anyway.

After the climb to the top of the cliff, he looked back east, towards the clean, unspoilt faces of Beachy Head. Today might be good day to go visit, while the weather was still sound, pick the van up on the way back.

Sophie cornered him as he came back from the caff.

"Have you found a repair shop for your van?"

He looked up, thrown for a second.

"No."

"Your van isn't outside."

"I left it in Seaford last night."

"So you still need a mechanic?"

"Yes."

"I spoke to a friend, but they can't help you 'till the weekend."

He nodded.

"Like I said, there's no hurry." He was about to ask if any buses went to Beachy Head, but bit his tongue in time. He didn't want to cast any suspicions. Instead, he tried to think of some other tourist chit-chat he could offer up, but disinterested, she cut him off.

"Good. If you can be here on Sunday morning for breakfast, he'll talk to you about the repairs. See you later."



He woke on the top deck of a bus as it tilted back, struggling up a steep hill. Looking ahead, he saw it weaving its way round a forest, thick, naked branches slapping it on the roof and windows. He couldn't tell if he'd been asleep for a minute or an hour. The sun warmed his face, making him drowsy. There was something else, something which had come in dream form, but with the bus disappearing into the woods, the branches still trying to break the windows, he couldn't fathom what it was. He got up, pressed the stop button, felt the bus lurch and pull in by a concrete shelter.

He found himself in the middle of a village, something straight off a rural postcard. Low stone walls round front gardens. Bare fruit trees. A pond in the middle of the green. A little church the other side of it. Across the road, a tourist sign pointed towards the cliffs.

He followed along an unpaved road, mud tracks hard-dried, past more cottages, to a place where the village ended and broad hills opened up, the gullies wide, the sea tall behind them. To the east, the ridges of Beachy Head climbed for miles. Hours of walking opened up, but he stopped, looked around, retreated towards the bus stop. This was not why he'd left the Highlands. Not to go traipsing across another windblown, lonely landscape.

The seafront hotel bar opened up into a luxuriously furnished patio. Everything was flooded with low, winter light. Sunk down into an armchair, he sipped tomato juice, blew cigarette smoke in the direction of the transparent ceiling. The thick carpets and dark wood made the place feel comfortable, safe, in a moneyed kind of way.

A few tables away, a grey-haired scrap of a man kept staring his way with a smile. Just as he averted his eyes, soundlessly begging to be left alone, the pensioner got up and approached, the old back as stiff as a soldier's.

"Hello. Are you a guest here?" The thin face smiled, eyes lit up beneath thick brows and slicked-back hair.

"No. Just having a drink."

He thought about asking the man to sit down, but there was no need, a heavy chair being dragged along already.

"Are you local?"

"No."

"I'm more of a neighbour myself. I live in Eastbourne, but come here just for the odd drink, you know... How'd you like the place?"

"Don't know. What's it called?"

"Seaford. Nice town. Nice people. Even in the summer, not too many noisy holidaymakers come down. Good for rest." The man looked out to the road and pebbled beach outside. To the left, land climbed straight for the sky, cliffs coming out of nowhere. To the right, Newhaven harbour and fort framed the coast. "D'you play golf?"

"No."

"There's a wonderful course up the top there." The man pointed with a pale, gnarled finger towards the steep incline on their left. "Up on the Seven Sisters. Hard work on the old legs, but those views..."

"Seven Sisters?"

"The cliffs. Seven cliffs, seven sisters."

"And that way?" he asked, looking towards the harbour.

"What, Newhaven? Used to be a busy little place, years ago, before the shipping trade died down. And all the other trades with it... There was even a slave factory down there."

"Slave factory?"

"If you follow the beach, then turn off, before you get to the harbour you'll see some old buildings. Foundations, really, not much of them left. Used to be a water mill there... The name escapes me. Tide Mill, I think. People used to live and work in chains, for nothing. White folks, poor. Slaves, they were, living and dying like rats." The man seemed to be enjoying the tale and its air of grizzly exotica. "Won't find it in any tourist pamphlet. No sign posts for it, maybe, but it's history. Nothing odd, really. It was us started the slave trade as it was."

"And when was this?" He stared down into the glass of thick juice, bits of pepper still floating on the surface.

"When was what?"

"This slave labour place. When did it operate?"

"Oh, back in the eighteen hundreds at least." A gnarled hand waved centuries away.

Beams of warm, honeyed light flashed at them from over the sea. The man and his words seemed distant by comparison, small and quiet. He said something about a friend's dog, lost in the ruins of the mill, probably drowned in one of the many pools there, then fell into a mild stupor, a glazed look in the old eyes. The mouth sighed, gaped open, lost in contemplation of something far off, the top part of the man's dentures suddenly dropping from the roof of the mouth. The jaw stayed open, tongue toying comically with the teeth before lifting them back into place with a snap.

The seafront swung in a great arch between cliffs, miles of pebbled beach empty, rows of parked cars all facing the sea. Walking out of the bar, he saw an elderly couple resting inside a shiny red Nissan, the man with a newspaper over the steering wheel, the woman staring calmly out at the fading light of day. What was it about the seaside made it so attractive to people retiring, escaping the city? Was it memories of childhood, of ices, of innocence? Of day trips in their teens, twenties, running round, romancing? Or something deeper, something in that unbound horizon? Maybe something beyond it promised mysteries, the way they hoped the secretive screen of death did? Was it then that god really died, when all the seas got charted, when people came all the way round their small world and found nothing infinite, the circle closed? Was it that they hid from in their cars and houses? From unkind elements, from the truth that was already here, in their pained joints, frozen limbs, tired feet?

Ahead, the pavement, road and town came to an end, the beach curving round derelict land up ahead. The old slave mill. He stopped, thought about going to wander amongst those ruins, saw a cab driving in his direction. Instinct made him put his arm out to hail it. The cab drove past, slowed, u-turned. He gave the driver the name of the B&B, watched scenery accelerate as sleep drew on again, teasing with the chance of a minute's peace.

Key in the door, he remembered the van he was meant to collect on his way back. There'd be plenty of time to do it in the night, plenty of wood yet in it for another fire.

Walking past the lounge, he glanced in, saw the little girl standing by the door to the dining room, motionless. A much older woman, seventy odd, sat in the chair beside her, both of them staring his way, though not at him, absence in both their gazes. Something about the image hit him with a strong sense of déjà vu. He froze for a second, felt as if he was looking at still life cast in evening shadow, a picture he knew from some forgotten place. Feeling rude for staring, he nodded to the old lady, one of the hands in her lap lifting to acknowledge his greeting.

A door opened down the hall, light coming through, followed by a young woman, wavy blonde hair bouncing behind her, the pale, freckled face supported by a roll-neck sweater.

"Hi," she blurted out in greeting, turned past him into the lounge. "C'mon, we're late." Picking up the girl, she stuck a finger under her chin, pulled down the scarf tied tightly round the little neck, turned to the woman in the chair. "Gran, we're going."

Just as he realised the scene did not need him in it, Sophie came through the same far door, smiled, stood beside him.

"See you've met the family. That's my mother, Louise, and my daughter Chris. Say hello..." All three smiled in his direction, then, one by one, looked away. "Everything all right?"

"Yes, thanks." Looking away himself, he saw Kevin's silhouette down the dark end of the hall, leaning against a door frame, cigarette burning in the hand. Before he could begin to feel surrounded, Sophie moved them all along.

"C'mon, you lot..."

He muttered a goodbye, turned up the stairs, hand fumbling in the pocket for his keys.

The air in his room seemed thinner somehow, hard to breathe in, yet the light seemed cleaner, less oppressive. No one would come to disturb him here. No unexpected faces. He pulled the case out of the wardrobe, sat on the bed, felt a tiredness so overwhelming he couldn't even think of sleep. To think would be to need it right now, and something told him it wouldn't come that easy. All he could do was sit, wait, try not to choke on emotion the pursuit of memory forced on him again.



He was on a bus again, heading for Beachy Head, the old man from the hotel in Seaford sitting next to him, saying something he paid no attention to. He knew Sophie's frail mother was also riding this same bus, sitting somewhere ahead. He wanted to introduce the two, tried to look past rows of people, find her for him, but could only see the little girl. Couldn't remember her name, the great-grand daughter, sitting alone, a navy school hat on her head, the broad rim covering a sad, stern little face, staring dead ahead, hiding all kinds of fear. He could see it without getting up, felt panic overwhelming him, the girl, alone, on a bus full of strangers, heading for those monstrous cliffs.

Then he was in his bed, music shocking him out of sleep, stereo bursting into song as his arm struck the remote control lying beside the pillow. He half sat up, resting on his elbows, trying to throw off the sense of danger and responsibility, but even with the stereo silenced, he couldn't air air the darkness of those awful echoes.

With the light on, he lay back down, tried to calm his breathing. Same as with the cold, this place had infected him with dreams. He'd slept peacefully for months, the days always utterly still, the imagination settled, only the waking nights crawling with angels and demons. And now, two afternoons, two dreams in a row. It was hard to say what kind of change it was, for better or worse. Christ knew what kind of visions would come yet, but there was always the chance she'd pay him a visit one time, show herself before it was too late. He'd only dreamt of her once in the whole year, when he'd gone to sleep bothered by something trivial, something that wasn't to do with the past. Only then had the dream with her jumped him, shocking him out of sleep just like that song, leaving him desperately trying to cling to images that faded much too quickly, awake for hours, shaken to pieces. Since then, he'd tried to trick his own subconscious endless times, tried steering thought in countless directions before sleep, always away from her, just so he could see that face again. It never worked. Her likeness was somewhere deep in his memory, perfectly preserved, but he could only access it when his waking brain was caught unawares, like that old line about love, the dream only coming when unlooked for.

One of his arms felt dead, wrapped round the case lying on his belly. Shaking it back to life, he saw scratches on the forearm which hadn't been there when he'd dozed off.

He didn't want to think about the kind of dreams might have made him do that to himself. Feet off the bed, he tied his boots, the dead arm still causing grief, stood up, opened a window to let the smoke out. The moon was already up, glowing a warm, pinkish colour, like a child's nightlight, there to keep the darkness from overwhelming completely.

Before sleep I rubbed my forehead against Your photograph. It felt smooth and warm, like skin, like live skin, more real than the shapes and colours in the picture itself. Felt soothing. Couldn't see You in it, no more than a likeness, but I could feel You for certain.

Then I dreamt about a girl I knew as a kid, pretty as a picture, mad as hell, bad for herself and all those around her. Then there was You, one son born to us already, another on the way. We decided to name it Sawaseen, boy or girl, a name like that, again I've no idea where it came from. Then I was kissing You goodbye, sitting on a bed, going somewhere, the kiss so hot, I could feel it in my dream, so hot we got back into bed again even though You were carrying already, Your belly so full, laughing, so beautifully full. I carried the dream through the day as long as I could, though it faded fast, trying to keep the light of it with me.

child a child of daylight

Friday

Wind stopped shoving him round as he descended the cliff top, past the Marina, down to a wide, rocky beach and road that ran all the way to Brighton. His legs were worn out, but he didn't want to stop before the Pier, its name in lights clearly visible a mile off.

A little electric railway ran along the shore, tracks rusting out of season. A tiny roller-coaster wove its way through a giant, hollow apple, the paint washed off, streaks of corrosion running down its sides. Further on, an empty playground, a slide and a beat-up go-cart track waited for the good old days to return, all shuttered and boarded up beneath a sign "Marina Drive Amusements Now Open".

Half a mile from the pier, a row of hi-tech street lamps lined the pavement, a concession to the new century, the pier itself straight out of a Victorian picture book.

He descended some stairs, feet sinking in the pebbled beach, headed slowly for the forest of black iron supports beneath the pier itself. Planks creaked and rumbled overhead. Exhausted, he fell like a stone, knees giving way, his own weight no longer supportable. The pain he felt as his head hit the rocks was an instant of blessing, something he didn't have to worry about too much, could just surrender to.



A couple woke him, tussling on the pebbles nearby. Without opening his eyes, he could hear them fumbling, the woman letting out little giggling noises. Then she stopped, the sound of the embrace turning to struggle, angry noises coming from her mouth. Then silence. No more movement. He could hear the man breathe out, laugh to himself, the noise of gulls somewhere overhead, then the man again, whispering something, little shoving movements following the words, then silence again. Suddenly afraid that it might be dark already, he opened his eyes, but rays of daylight still came through the boards overhead. He turned to look at the couple. The man was staring back at him, the face young, twisted with disgust over something, but without anger in it, accepting.

He let his head fall back on the stones, eyes on the roof of wood overhead, feeling like he'd been in a car crash. All his muscles ached with tension, all bones bent or broken. His sleep pattern had gone to pieces of late, the body unable to catch up, recover any kind of rhythm, the booze and rare meals not helping. The wish to lie like that forever, like a fossil, overwhelmed him, though he'd wished the wish a million times before and knew nothing would happen.

The thought twisted his guts, made him move, the purpose behind action to escape conclusions. Not their horror, but the commonplace uselessness of them.

Off the ground, beating salt and fine dust off his clothes, he headed back the way he came, walking as quickly as the loose surface would allow. The short sleep meant there was no point heading back to bed yet, no chance of real rest.

Off the beach, he crossed the drive, climbed some stairs to the road carrying cars and buses back to cliff-top towns. A long wall of Victorian terraced houses, many of them hotels, stretched off into the distance. He crossed over again, went into the first pub he could find.

At the bar, he ordered a triple vodka and side order of tomato juice, found a window seat, the view over the beach and pier perfect. Setting, the sun filled a narrow space between the horizon and a screen of cloud with blinding orange, but, as always, the view only lasted enough to tickle him with its warmth. The afterglow teased with that which was past, the sky a palette of pure colour, framed by the odd tower of incandescent billow.

Once the view lost his full attention, he looked behind him, noticed only men around, all young, hair cut short, their dress sense all of a kind. Yes, of course. He'd always heard Brighton was the gay capital of England.

For a moment, he tried to work out what to say if someone came up and said anything, made any kind of approach, but caught and stopped himself. A pub was a pub, a place to watch the sun go down and the seafront lights go up, not a pick-up joint, not anything to have to work tactics around. He downed the second vodka, lit a cigarette, got

ready to kill the third shot and leave. Nothing to worry about, but no point staying either. Not good to give the wrong kind of impression.

But before he could drain the last of his glasses, someone pulled up a chair to his table. Hoping it was just another admirer of the view, he looked up. The man was young, younger than him, no more than twenty. Designer shirt, a bit of stubble cultivated to mature the soft, yet handsome features. No way somebody like this would have anything to do with me, he thought with relief. Not the state I'm in.

"Are you a student?" The voice was kind, honestly curious.

"No."

"Michael." The hand reaching across the table was manicured, but the grip strong.

"Zen."

"Cool name. Where you from?"

Zen tried to think of a short, safe answer.

"London."

"This your first time in Brighton?"

"No." Michael nodded, the smile on his lips friendly enough to force Zen to politely respond to the questions.

"And you?"

"I'm studying. And doing a bit of DJing on the side, but it's hard work getting gigs. The scene is busy. Where are you staying?"

Zen looked up, then thought the honest answer might have the desired effect.

"Peacehaven."

"Why so far out?"

"It's not far out. Quiet... I only came in here for a quick drink."

"You don't like this bar?"

Zen stared for a second into the friendly blue eyes.

"It's fine."

"There's loads of other places around."

"I only came in for the one."

"You sure?" Michael's gaze moved from Zen's face to the table, as if making a fair opening for words of rejection.

"Yeah."

"You're missing out."

"I know." Zen saw a little smile appear on Michael's lips, then his hands on the armrests, moving the chair back and away. "I'm sorry."

"I'll see you around."

"You won't. I'm only passing through. Really."

"It's cool."

"Can I buy you a drink?" Zen was up himself, suddenly keen to do something to make up for this complete misunderstanding. As the words left his lips, he realised they were the very last thing he should've said, but it was too late.

"No, you're all right."

"Really. What would you like?"

"Anything."

Zen placed the order with the barman, a set of double shots.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know this was..." Michael looked at him, the smile back in the blue irises. "Really. Don't mean to fuck you around. I'm just a little lost, that's all."

"Lost?"

Again, Zen realised his mouth was spouting all the wrong lines.

"I don't mean... No. Bad things... Bad things have happened. Sometime ago. Lost my wife and kid."

"Really?"

"Well, we were engaged. And then... Then she got sick. Before the birth. Very sick... I'm sorry, I'm blathering. Here," Zen handed money over the bar, raised his glass. "Your health, Michael. Your good health."



Lights in the hallway made him stand outside for a while, waiting for everyone to disappear before putting the key in the door. He was so drunk he could hardly see the keyhole, didn't want anyone to meet and see him in such a state. Before he could get his aim straight, someone walked through the hall. He turned, stumbled round the house and down towards the edge, freezing wind making him sway even more.

There was no way he'd be able to light a cigarette facing it head on, so he sat down, back against the fence, the bottle he'd picked up in Brighton in his lap. From here, the house looked homely, standing alone, a few lights on

downstairs. The vast hill towered in the dark beyond it. Without company, he tried to sing a song to himself, just something to combat the freezing whistling of wind in his ears, but found he couldn't hold the tune.

He gave up eventually, sorry he hadn't got round to bringing the van back, missing what little shelter he still had left.

You're never really alone in one of these tower blocks, the walls so thin. I lay on the couch this evening, couldn't concentrate on anything, listened to the background noises I hear every day. Dogs barking eight floors down the staircase. Sounds of a family meal in the flat below. Rusty swings in the playground outside. The old lift door slamming, engines whining. Someone explaining something to somebody somewhere. I heard a woman's howl coming through, couldn't decide if it was hysterical laughter or hysterical crying. My neighbour maybe dying and I wouldn't know a thing about it. The locals call these estates "ant farms", and though I know I should be laughing along, the only thing makes this place bearable now is knowing London's waiting.

If I could, I'd ship this bed back with me. Which night was it do you think it happened? They say a woman knows when. The night we fell asleep with me still inside You, wrapped so close in each other I'd swear we dreamt the same dream?

Or maybe on some morning? Our child a child of daylight.

not even multiple miracles

Saturday

Got up at five by mistake, fully rested with next to no sleep. On the tram heading for work an hour early, saw the sun rising over Warsaw. So beautiful. Hummed Dylan's "Walking down the line" to myself, the tram freezing, teeth chattering. "I saw the morning light, I saw the morning light, but it's not because I'm early to rise, Lord, I didn't sleep last night", the blues refrain transformed into a song of celebration.

Had an hour to kill, sat in the only place open at that hour, McDonald's in those tunnels below the Central Station. Looked around at all the poor, homeless bastards spend their lives in that dark maze, drawn towards the beautiful dream that are McD's golden arches like moths to a flame. Tried to hide in a book, thinking it was still an hour earlier where You were, thinking of Your dreams. Thought about mine. Saw my own reflection in a mirror. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, maybe the terrible coffee, but my whole face was glowing, my eyes changed, my mouth. What have You lit inside me? What is this wonder in a place of so many buried dreams? Why am I not afraid?

Lying back in bed, he had the journal up in front of his eyes, the way his mother had once told him was bad for them. He put the book down on his chest, thought of the family he hadn't thought of in ages, but only for a second. Recovering the van seemed more important, along with shopping that needed doing. These were things with some connection left to him. The rest did not need wondering about.

Eyes closed, he moved thoughts around in his mind like Chinese medicine balls, rolling them around, listening to the sounds they made, sounds of little or no consequence. Get up. Breakfast. Walk back, get the van. Find a supermarket, stock up on fags and wine.

Noon, the first day of the weekend, the local Co-op car park was full of family saloons. It meant he had to park a fair way from the entrance.

Struggling back with carrierbags full of meat and booze, he glanced inside the window of the gym next door. People pushed weights, rowed away, pounded along treadmills. He stopped, turned round to look at mile after endless mile of yellow and green South Downs hills resting beneath a clear sky, then back to the glass cage full of sweat. Moving again, he noticed other shoppers pushing trolleys out of the supermarket to their cars for unloading. So simple, he thought, fingers being lacerated by the plastic bags. For all his supposedly profound thoughts on nature and man, something as simple as that had escaped him.



Sitting on the first floor of a restaurant in the Marina, looking out to waves moving back and forth like a loom in the dark, he still felt like he'd only just woken up. It took him forever to look through the menu and decide. A second after the waitress took his order, he forgot what he'd asked for.

By a multiplex cinema he found a giant, blow-up Santa figure. It stood on six separate legs like a spider, the space beneath its torso filled with volunteers collecting toys for orphans. He walked over to the monster, looked over the fluffy toys on display, merchandise provided by a local shop, its adverts plastered all over. Proceeds would go to charity, profits to the shops, the Santa back in his box for another year. He knew none of that meant anything to a kid in a home somewhere, tried to squeeze himself for a drop of kindness or maybe the strength to reason against guilty generosity, but found a vacuum within.

A bus took him to Brighton Pier. He walked up to the brightly lit entrance, stalls with candy floss and greasy mini-doughnuts staffed by students clearly wishing they were somewhere else on Saturday night. A huge, loud hall filled with video games and gambling machines sang and danced before him just past the entrance. He followed the walkway around it, past a palm reader's wooden wagon and a couple of photo-op cut-outs. One was of a Baywatch scene, the other of a newlywed couple, both with holes where the heads should've been. Ads for Horatio's Bar covered

the amusement hall. "Live Music every Saturday – Listen to the best of music that satellite has to offer". The double-speak was hard to resist.

Inside, the Bar was nothing more than a pub filled with ugly young things, tired from the day out, drinking, trying to out-fun each other. The TV sets weren't yet showing any live music, only something called Toughman XFX, pair after pair of past-it wrestlers slugging it out in some kind of no-rules contest. He wanted to leave, but the show was so miserably hypnotic he ordered a tomato juice and stayed to watch. An old, bald giant of a man, trunks like a giant nappy below a pitiful belly, was on the verge of tears as his opponent went to work on the injuries his body must've been riddled with.

A bunch of girls, all in pink, rushed in, the bride-to-be covered with condoms and L-plates.

"All right, soldier!"

"Hey, handsome."

He left them to it, his gaze down on the floor, their laughter bursting behind him like a monster wave.

On the other side of the pier, old rowing boats were beached by a fishing museum. He climbed into one, lit a cigarette, looked back to the halls and fairground hanging over the black sea. The sound of a strange, jazzy piano floated towards him on the uneven wind, the air playing tricks with the music.

He sat hypnotised for a while, the sound of young crowds passing behind him, Brighton getting ready to party through the freezing night. The clock tower over the pier said nine. He got up, walked on along rows of arches beneath the main drive, each one a bar or club or fish and chip place. Small crowds of people his age walked back and forth, shaking in clothes meant for the dance floor, a few even sitting on the beach, huddled round each other. There was another pier about half a mile on, dark and derelict. Before he got to it, a basketball court stopped him, teenagers tossing a ball about in the wind. He sat by on a low wall, people resting, smoking, taking turns at the floodlit baskets. A tall black guy, playing alone, was talking to himself, a hands-free mobile phone wired up to his ear.

Around eleven, three cabs rolled up. A group of Indian or Pakistani drivers got out, followed by their wives and kids. They got a ball out, started shooting, the women in shining saris under the floodlights, preparing a birthday cake for someone. Out of its box, they sat it on the roof of one of the taxis, lit a candle in the hard wind, had a little kid help someone blow it out. A couple of young guys came along, started practicing Capoeira on the empty side of the court. A few young foreigners, one of them with a dodgy leg, joined in forming a team against the taxi drivers.

Someone took the women and kids home, the rough-playing drivers losing in anger. The silly scene made him laugh, but by the time the bottle in his hands ran dry, looking at the empty court, it seemed like he was the only person in town with nowhere to go.

Away from the beach, he walked past the Brighton Centre, up West Street, crowds of drunken students and working youths mixing badly. A fight staggered out of a fried chicken place, police trying to stop blokes from embarrassing themselves and their women from crying hysterically. At the Clock Tower he turned, chased down a bus with Peacehaven on it.

It sped along, making him feel a little dizzy, the upper deck full of kids heading back to the cliff-top towns ahead. Behind him a teenager was regaling his friend with stories of the night before, being turned away from a club, fighting in the street, finding a private party, the booze, the drugs, names rolling past, the voice utterly in love with the mechanics of it all. A real fight was taking place up front, some kid's gold wrist chain ripped off in full view of everyone, the kid crying, getting beaten for it, the bracelet hurled back, more violence, girls screaming, piling in to pull the throng apart. The bus driver could see it all in his periscope mirror, but only put his foot down over the cliffs, the whole unsteady spectacle battered by winds from a thousand miles away.

maybe many times somewhere else

Sunday

Went for a walk this morning, the sky awful low, grey. Cold. Walked all the way to the steel works where my old man worked as an draughtsman on loan from Sheffield. Remembered once, visiting him in London, asking to see some of his drawings. I thought they'd all be full of colour, you know, pictures of people, houses, forests, but they were just blueprints for steel beams, supports, that sort of thing. I remember the disappointment. Was that moment part of the decision to study painting? Make the world prettier, more colourful?

Ended up walking as far as the river. Clumps of yellow foam, some kind of industrial waste, floated on the grey sludge. Hard to believe people had done something like that, right in the heart of the city, not one person out there weeping. No one with a word of complaint. It felt horrible, as if there was something like that river separating me from the things I need.

Then, walking back, under this flyover I saw "I YOU CLEOPATRA – LITTLE CAESAR" graffitied on one of the support pillars and it cheered me right up. Never lose your sense of humour. Never lose hope.

Shaved and washed, he sat for an hour, making the faces from last night before pass before his eyes like a puppet show. Not for any kind of record. Just to make time bearable. Nine a.m. rolled around and already he feared the day beyond breakfast, beyond the appointment made for him by Sophie. Time with others seemed contained, seemed to unravel in one direction. Beyond that, it would once again fly apart, leaving him alone with everything that was in the case lying open on the bed.

He picked himself up, buttoned his shirt, left the room feeling like nothing left outside of it was real any more.

Four tables had been pulled together in the dining room, seating up to eight. Only Kevin was in, eyes buried in one of a pile of Sunday papers littering the table cloth. Just as he looked away, the other man looked up and nodded a greeting, but it was by then too late to return it, the instant of mutual acknowledgement gone. He sat down at one of the tables had been left alone. Chris came in, neatly dressed, a disarming smile making him stare in wonder.

"Hi. Would you like to join us?" With a toss of her pulled back hair she glanced back to the set of tables. "Breakfast'll be served soon."

"I'm all right, thanks."

"Steven'll be here in a little while." The words revealed something of plans he thought were private. He stared at the carpet he could see through the lounge door, feeling exposed. "Would you like anything to drink?"

"Coffee... Black."

After she'd walked away, he felt a furious pang of regret. Regret that that she hadn't insisted on him joining the other table, that he hadn't been nicer, hadn't just said yes in the first place.

Sian ran in, climbed onto a chair beside Kevin, started playing with her cutlery. The sound of metal clinking away in the sunlit room, or rather the source of it, shocked him into recollection of something that had happened yesterday. During his afternoon sleep, he'd dreamt of a woman, a child, all faces unfamiliar. He'd woken with his arms held straight up, cradling the dream child, the embrace empty. How could he dream something like that, wake like that, and not remember, block the whole thing out of his mind? Who was in control of these things? What blind, self-protecting instinct? How could a man's temperature drop as quickly as his had done just now, cold chills shuddering through him, heart trying to beat life back into the body, threatening to self-destruct even as it kept life going?

He got up, rushed out to avoid bumping into Chris, cigarette lit before he stepped out the front door.

One was not enough. He lit a second, wished for a sip of coffee as smoke swelled in his lungs, grinding in his throat.

Looking up at the utterly clear sky, trying to recover the dream across its blank screen, he heard a van pull up to the gate. It was an old, white Ford Transit. On its side, a huge, overweight Snoopy sat cross-legged, arms held up, chubby fingers touching in mock meditation, the words 'The Stiffs Racing Team' in big red letters below it. A tall woman in jeans and black leather blazer got out, short blonde hair in her eyes. She opened the gate, walked towards him. As she neared, he could see her wide lips drawn straight in fury, blue eyes throwing some his way. The van rolled in as the front door slammed behind her, making him jump a little. Wondering what to do with the two butts in his hand, he walked up and flicked them away towards the road, closing the gate as an afterthought. As he turned, a young man was rounding the corner of the house, medium height, arms and shoulders impossibly wide, a forearm in full plaster cast, head completely shaved. Another followed a few seconds later, well over six foot, jet black hair, jeans and jacket. Instead of turning for the door, he approached, skin dark, eyes blue, the hard face almost ugly in a masculine way made it almost handsome.

"Thanks." The voice was light and quiet. The hand extended in greeting gripped hard, the thick wrist making his pale, hairless limb appear like a child's by comparison. "You're the Polish fella." The accent was strange, a mix of London and somewhere else, maybe many times somewhere else.

"Yes."

"Steven."

"Zen."

"Daddy!" The squealing shout came from the door, Sian jumping down the steps towards them.

"Hey you..."

Steven swept her up and spun her round, the little feet just clear of Zen's cigarette. "How's my little Baywatch babe?"

"What'ya got for me?"

"Nothing. Told you I'm not Santa and Christmas isn't here yet... Now scoot. You'll catch a cold running about with no coat on."

"Why's Charlie got that thing on his arm?" She stalled for time.

"He broke it at work."

"Why's Liz mad?"

"Tell you in a second. Now get inside." He unwrapped her arms from his neck, dropped her to the floor, slapped her bum as she ran back to the house. Zen saw Chris standing in the door, waiting. Steven held up an open palm in greeting, turned back to him.

"Sophie says you need help."

"My van needs servicing."

"Have a look?" He started towards the back of the house.

Zen's van looked a like a toy next to the big Ford, but Steven appraised it with a serious eye.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing much. Just needs a thorough service, I think. Running real rough each day."

"You had it long?"

"Couple of months... Used to belong to a flower shop."

"Must smell nice."

"They used it to bring in fertiliser from a horse farm. Only cost three hundred quid though."

Sian's puzzled face appeared in the dining room window. Steven tried to shoo it away, but it took Chris to draw it back. Her eyes remain focused on them for a second, then blinked and looked left, as if to say Come back in.

"Drives all right?"

"Just about."

"Tuesday good for you? Gotta pick up my car from the place they service this old thing," he said, nodding at the Ford. "They'll fix it, no time. You drop me off there, I'll give you a lift back."

"It's a Belgian import."

"Shouldn't be a problem. D'you know Brighton at all?"

"Not really."

"Ship Street tell you anything?"

"No."

"Here." He pulled a business card from his wallet. It had the name of a sports shop on it, a little map on the back. "To the left of this place is a little cafe, the Bully. Meet me in there noon Tuesday."

"Sure."

"Now let's go eat. Not that I'm hungry... Just want to get Sophie's cooking over and done with."

Sat at the enlarged table, he felt a million miles away from the faces around him, thinking "This is why...". Steven had requested he join them and he'd failed to refuse. Didn't have the guts to say No again, have it in him to be unsociable, and this, this was why he was where he was, because of his nature, weak and pliable and sweet. Nice Guys and all that. No once noticed, but cold chills were crawling all over his body, the pins and needles of an ache he couldn't get used to.

A fresh mug of coffee sat before him, steaming, as he listened to Steven tell Sophie about Charlie's plaster cast.

"...in office blocks they have these hollow floors, cables running beneath the tiles, so they can't lay normal carpets. They do them in sections, squares, so they can be lifted up anywhere along the floor, the cables got at, carpet tiles stuck down with non-drying glue. Charles here was replacing some electrics, took the tiles off, then stood there to look out a window at some girl walking past, got stuck without realising. When he went to move, of course, Whomp! Went down like a prize fighter on the take." Even Liz couldn't help smiling as she lifted a spoonful of cereal to her mouth. "We're suing the construction company for improper staff safety training procedures."

"All fine and well, messing about with lawyers..." Sophie interrupted, knife and fork suspended in mid air above her plate. "What I want to know is why Charlie keeps going from one crap job to the next, when he could be working for you instead."

"Pride, Mum." Liz, the angry woman Zen had seen earlier, lifted her steel-grey eyes first to Charlie's face, then back to her mother's. "He thinks not working for Steven makes him independent. Changing jobs all the time keeps

him from any kind of security. And he likes it that way. Keeps him in young women that only want..." She stopped herself, everyone, including Sian, following her words with surprised attentiveness. "Keeps the boys in adventures."

Steven smiled to himself, blue eyes lit up. Chris looked blank, said nothing. Charlie too remained silent, showing no concern for anything around the table, one working hand spooning fried egg into his mouth. Sian looked them all over, Zen waiting for the little eyes to meet his, though they never did. Kevin kept his on Sophie who, with curiosity, looked at her other daughter, Liz apparently unconcerned, smiling a broad smile down at the little girl sitting beside her.

"Wait, kid. Like your mum, you'll be too beautiful for your own good one day. Have boys like these two chasing you, doing stupid things to impress you with 'till you don't have the strength to run any more..." Steven's laughter started rumbling behind grinning teeth, and she looked up, smiling back.

Zen sat in front of a bowl of cornflakes gone soggy, desperate to move again, somewhere with less children and smiling people. He'd thought he could take it, take the friendly environment, but what was the point? The arrangement with the van would keep him here for a couple more days, but he could hide them out, in Brighton or elsewhere, keep spending the money still bulging in his pockets. The motel on the edge of town was waiting.

"Zen. How'd you like Peacehaven?" Steven asked.

"It's fine." He was expected to fill more silence, and again he didn't have it in him to refuse. "Quiet... I like it."

"Your parents Polish?" Sophie asked.

"No. One of them is."

"And your name. Where'd you get a wonderful name like Zen?" He felt more pins and needles first tickle, then hurt him, too cold to let him blush.

"It's short for Zenon, after my grandfather."

"Is it a popular name?"

"Kind of. My first is Grzegorz, but I never use it..."

"Sounds like glass grinding in your mouth," Charlie chipped in.

"Gregory." Steven said. "Had a Polish mate once with a name like that... But Zen's all right with us," he smiled down at his daughter. She nodded with theatrical exaggeration, cheeks bulging with cereal. Zen had the feeling Steven was playing word games with him, but could never meet the man's eyes to check for sincerity. The subject was changed quickly. "How's the course, Chrissie?"

"Good."

"People sorted themselves out?"

"Kinda' scary going back to study with all these eighteen-year-olds running around..."

"Is it?" Steven asked, his tone disbelieving.

"No, not really." she fumbled. Liz looked first at her sister, then at Steven, then down to her plate again. Zen tried to work out what the relationship between them all was. Chris had to be Sian's mother, but something told him Steven was with Liz. They'd arrived together, sat together, Steven quizzing Chris like they hadn't seen each other for a while. "I'm the youngest on the post graduate course. Mostly thirty, forty year olds."

"Psychotherapy's an old woman's game," Steven quipped, chastised again by Liz's gaze.

"Your sense of humour today. I'm done," she announced to the table, got up, started collecting plates. Chris followed, the two sisters working together. Zen watched, their hips level with his eyes, Chris' paper-thin next to Liz's slim curves.

"There's a some kind of charity abseil further up, Newhaven way." Sophie turned to Steven. "Maybe we can stroll along, see what's happening... The wind doesn't seem too strong today."

"Some boys from the shop are doing it. We promised to go see, but only for a while. Gotta race on later, and we need to pick up another van for tomorrow."

"Well, we'll just take a quick look. What's happening tomorrow?"

"Delivery. Specials for the Christmas rush. Gotta drive them back from Southampton."

The conversation was way beyond him now. Kevin got up and left. Sian followed, came back into the room wrapped round Chris' legs.

"Mum, can I go with Dad today? Please..."

Zen didn't wait for an answer, excused himself and drew away from the table in a daze.

Upstairs, the only thing he could think of was to tidy the room and pack. He emptied the ashtray, collected empty bottles in a plastic carrier beneath the bed, sat down, thinking of sleep. All through breakfast he couldn't get out of his head the memory of waking, arms holding the imaginary baby. He lay back down again, thinking he should draw the curtains, too short on enthusiasm to bother. Daylight wasn't the problem. How could he forget something like that, that shocking? Now he remembered clearly, trying to get to sleep afterwards, the image of eyes opening on that empty embrace held out to the sky. How could he block it out his conscious mind? Was he losing control?

The twin dogs barked, their voices moving around below his window, followed by those of the rest of the party. He closed his eyes, realised however much he feared losing his mind, losing the last thing left him, he did not fear dreams. Maybe another would come again, as shocking, as real as the one had woken him yesterday. It didn't matter any more. All that mattered was dying right, and for that he would need plenty of strength, of sleep, of reminders why he was suffering what he was suffering.

Spent the weekend at a friend's house in the country, just to get away from the silence back at the flat. It was fabulous, a hundred year old cottage in a snowed under village wrecked by booze and poverty, but not without charm, a bunch of Andzia's friends drinking, getting honestly merry. In the night, we decided to go for a stroll to a frozen river. Just outside the village, the woods opened out onto what looked like steppes, straight out of Solzhenitsyn, two feet of snow everywhere as far as the eye could see, the cold right up against the skin. It was amazing. We stood under a completely cloud covered sky, three am, and we could see. There was light. Where did it come from, dozens of miles from the nearest town? Starlight through all that cloud? Impossible. Was it trapped in the snow? Or somewhere else? Still can't work it out.

Three days without calling You. Three days without cigarettes. If You have to quit, I do too. I keep staring at Your picture. The drawings I made of You should be enough. I should fear less. But Your picture with me this morning helps. You look so sad, so strong in it. I stare at it, trying to turn Your eyes towards me, as if that would secure all.

live to rest

Monday

Two hours later he realised it was two hours later. Time had hit limbo. Alone in his room, needing nothing for company, he'd hardly moved since waking yesterday afternoon. Almost twenty four hours on, he was no nearer to sleep than this time then, his body expending no energy, demanding no fuel. The occasional trip across the hall to the toilet had been an expedition, far off. Without alcohol, he'd arrived at a state other than sobriety, a dull, emotionless canvas to lie back on and acquiesce. He'd lost two hours to time's heavy rod and it felt good, to be granted the right to lose something he actually wanted lost, to coast to a place as close to peace as he could possibly imagine. Everything was still. No sound of wind or traffic bothered him through the double glazing. He couldn't hear his own heart. Only the little ball of hellfire kept moving across the sky outside, raining down light and life.

So, it was true, he thought, staring down at hands still stained with soot and grease from last night's spit-roasted scraps. Man could get used to anything. But was man used to anything still a man? Maybe in that hid some definition of insanity. Staying alive, under any circumstances, by creating whatever smokescreens were necessary to sustain the illusion that life, of any kind, was the highest good. Was better than death. It took an awful lot of sanity to choose the latter over the former, to admit things could get so fucked up, so insane around you that only death made sense. All men had to do it sooner or later. Mate life with death. Reach some kind of mortal mean.

Perhaps man could get used to anything by denying his own self, but not him. Not here. Not after the wonders he'd been witness to.

He grabbed the case, rummaged around the pile of papers and notes inside, pulled out the journal. At the back, a list of quotes hid in a mess of hectic scribbles.

*"We don't care about life
The pig also lives
We want a life of dignity"*

Polish Rural Maxim

He hunted out another.

*"Man is born tired and lives to rest.
Maria Lewinska*



Sleep had caught him like a fainting fit, without warning, however many hours ago. Not knowing when he'd slipped from consciousness, he couldn't say how long he'd slept. However long it'd been, sleep had returned his brain to some activity, right back to himself and all attendant grief. It shocked, jolted him, as if pain had just been recharging instead of waning for the last two days, the fresh wave of agony made worse by the sense of having been cheated, lulled into a false sense of security.

Without thinking of reason or consequence, he slid off the bed, started dressing, listening only for the sound of van keys jangling in his pocket. If pain would not go away, he would go to its source. Go all the way back.



The suburban street was dark, rows of large, semi-detached houses fronted by well-kept gardens. The van sat parked in a side street, facing one of the doors opposite. He'd stayed inside for longer than he'd intended, hands resting on the wheel's polished rim, as if to thank the machine for carrying him so far beyond the call of duty.

Eventually, he got up the nerve to get out. Closing the door quietly, he shivered as his naked head met black, winter air. He walked up to where a young, leafless tree poked up through the pavement, providing insignificant cover. The street was ordinary, each house as plain as the next. Same gates, gardens, doors, windows. Same red brick. Same dark red slate. All designs the same, the same shapes, patterns, a million such houses all round, all identical, and yet it was behind the door opposite that she'd been raised, she'd moved, breathed, formed. Near the corner, a Gothic, brown-brick church watched over the sleeping district, but it was this address, this little spot where real miracles had been born.

A lamp glowed behind stained glass window panes, the hallway dark, heavy curtains hiding the front room. He traced the interior from memory, travelled to the kitchen out the back, felt the heavy dog smell in his nostrils, then up the stairs, the study, bedrooms, the one facing the street, the one that was hers. Were any of the family home or was the lamp on a timer switch? There was no way of telling. No way but to stand by, keep watch over the last place he'd ever choose to call home.

The smell of tobacco on his fingertips was stronger than the taste of the cigarette itself, stronger than the bitter flavour of vodka deep in his gums. Bottle in hand, he stood swaying along with the tree, feeling sober and grateful for it, not wanting to distil anything, hide anything, hungry now only for uncut essence. All the drink had done was make him care nothing for the occasional car driving past, headlights turning against him, blinding for a second.

Staring at what he'd decided was an empty house, he found it hard to believe his eyes when someone moved behind the stained glass, followed by a faint light coming on in the kitchen at the back. The tiny change of stalled image made his heart near enough stop, then beat for dear life as a dark shape moved up the stairs, another lamp turned on behind incompletely drawn curtains in the upstairs bedroom. He saw a slice of wallpaper, the edge of a painting, a head of long, dark hair pass by.

It's a fallacy that a man is born the day he leaves his mother's womb. He is born when something, someone new awakens his true senses. Then he becomes himself. Then the potential begins to breathe.

Everybody lives for something, is driven by something, some need, the absence of something, maybe hiding in money, power, sex. Sex especially. People often look for themselves in that. I know what that something is now. I know what it is the human kingdom of the blind is missing, is yearning for. I have seen it, and thus I am king.

We don't ever know just how much need we have inside till we're found and then nothing is ever the same. Something within stretches, expands, and can never again shrink to fit round our old lives, our old consciousness. Nothing.

I remember one Sunday here, in this flat, jazz real low on the radio, You asleep on the couch, a pencil, a sharpener, a sketchbook, Indian summer light bouncing off buildings opposite, flooding the room with warmth. Anybody ever asks, I've seen it. Eight floors up over this grim city, it found me. The closest thing to heaven imaginable. And the best thing about it, I knew. Right then, knew it for what it was.

Another fallacy. We don't know what we have 'till we lose it. Crap. I knew. I've always known, since the day You said You were mine. Like I was born to receive this beauty.

I used to imagine, with other women, a specific time and place when everything would be perfect. Even for a moment. Maybe some quiet Saturday afternoon, sitting on the bank of a river somewhere, the sky overhead just beginning to darken. Or sitting on the porch of a house, on holiday, silence all around, running my hands through her hair, whoever she was. In those moments I looked for perfection, but it never came.

And then, just when I thought it beyond me, You stopped my dreams in their tracks. Six months of being dazzled and no end in sight. No longer my imagination trying to impress itself on the world, but the other way round.

all meaning

Tuesday

If yesterday's trip to London had been a crawl back into the night, the return journey to Brighton was the opposite.

Pulling away from her street had been no problem, no move of any kind of distance. He'd driven slowly all the way, catching the sunrise over Brighton without hurry this time, utterly calm after the first night of sleep for months. No dreams to bother him. No doubts.

Rolling past the green on Grand Parade, the Pavilion's domes glowed with yellow light against a rose-pink sky. He smiled at the world. The night and its one sliver of the sight of her had cleansed him somehow. He knew it was temporary, knew it would burst with the force of a bubble in the eye of some terrible storm soon enough, but for the time being he could plead a little ignorance with the world.

Even traffic lights looked brighter than they'd done for ages. The beach rolled into view, the Pier entrance twinkling with a myriad of coloured bulbs. He passed by, turned right, along the seafront, following the map on the back of the card Steven had given him.

Outside the Metropole, he found a parking space, pulled over carefully, handling the van with patience, grateful even for this inanimate thing to express affection towards. There were hours still to go before the meeting. He smoked, watched a window cleaner working on the entrance to the hotel's facade, wrapped in warm clothing, squeegee sliding over the reflected horizon. It seemed like a fine job. Simple. Straightforward. Not anti-social. Working with the elements. Water, earth, air, even fire involved in the making of glass itself, recovering its pure form for the pleasure of others.

Walking through the narrow, winding Lanes, it was people not shops that held his attention. The crowds moving past seemed absorbed by the multitude of tiny places selling wedding rings, perfumes and other trinkets, so much window shopping to be done it was hard not to envy them their sport. In the window of a beauty salon, a guy in a cheap suit was having the nails on one hand manicured, the other holding a mobile phone to his ear. Something in the senseless hurry of the image made him stop and stare a while.

In North Street, charity shops advertising half-price sales made him turn back.

Straying close to a shoe shop door, he was rooted to the spot for a few moments by the sweet smell of leather and polish. For some reason it reminded him of a time when spending had made sense, investing in the future. He remembered shopping for shoes with her, the difficulty of finding a good design, the joy of coming across one which fitted and pleased them both. It was that, that joint sense of success which had made the purchase into something special, something so simple, it was all meaning.

He found the street and shop marked on the map Steven had given him, an old warehouse converted into a sports equipment store. The windowless walls were covered with a giant, Marvel Comic style mural. The same Buddha Snoopy he'd seen on the van's side presided over the entrance, holding the name 'Speed Trap' in its upraised hands. Behind it, swirls of colour drifted off in a psychedelic haze, revealing pictures of deities playing at various extreme sports. A six-armed Hindu goddess juggled letters that spelt PLAYGIRL. Chairman Mao flew a dragon kite. Jesus rode a BMX. Faces he didn't recognize kept appearing out of the clouds, real somehow, full of human imperfections, clearly people the artist knew personally. Charlie was there, grimacing at Muhammed riding a motorised skateboard. Steven far off in the top corner, small, floating away on a cloud. He walked up to the door, opening hours graffitied across a steel shutter. Articles about the shop had been screen-printed onto metal plates that hung beside it. One about the opening, a picture of the shop as it was now, crowds of people round, somebody talking about its philosophy. Another, smaller, from a local newspaper, mentioning the opening of an organic fruit and veg market in another part of town, a picture of Liz next to an interview he didn't have the patience to read though.

He stepped back from the door, took in the pictures and stories of people living the kinds of lives he'd once dreamt of, wished them well.

A greasy spoon called the Hungry Bully occupied the shop next door, a yin/yang circle painted over the entrance, a round Coke logo beside it. A row of seats lined the window, people sitting, looking out onto the street. A chubby businessman in a well-cut suit and flash tie sat next to a tired-looking old man in a felt hat, both of them reading the Sun, both eating bacon sarnies. He walked in, ordered a simple breakfast, sat facing the door.

The meal over, he fidgeted at his table, hungry for a cigarette. People kept coming and going, but no one lit up. He zipped his coat back up, went outside.

The sports shop's shutters were open. He strolled over, looked through the glass doors. Crowds of bicycles lined up along carpeted walkways, accessories and other sports equipment to the sides, a blank video wall at the back, a platform with sofas and a coffee machine atop it. In each corner at the back of the hangar, an old Mercedes stretch limo had been mercilessly jumped upon by endless feet and tyres. A hang-glider wing flew suspended from the ceiling, a group of battered crash-test dummies clinging to it for dear life. Through the door he could feel a whopping great bass

line thump through the vast space. Steven saw him first from the platform at the back, got up from one of the couches, jumped down the ramps.

As he unlocked the glass doors, top and bottom, music burst out.

"Found us all right, then."

"Yeah. I was in the cafe, just came out for a cigarette."

"You can smoke here." Steven locked the door behind him. "Ashtray over there," he pointed to the glass counters at the front of the shop, a couple of young guys smoking already, one of them hovering round. Zen watched Steven disappear behind the video wall. The music died suddenly. He noticed someone hunched over a set of decks up on the platform, changing records over, the noise from a wall of speakers below kicking in again. Pictures of sportsmen climbed the walls along with ads, racing banners, flags, bits of tagging and graffiti, some of it all the way up to the windows below the ceiling. Steven appeared up on the platform, spoke to one of the guys seated on the sofas, appeared a moment later back on the shop floor.

"Had breakfast?" He adjusted his collar, Zen forced to look up to meet the blue eyes.

"A moment ago."

"Good."

Outside, an old man approached. It was the same guy Zen'd seen in the caff' window. He recognised the felt hat, the face beneath the brim disfigured by a lifetime of joyless drinking.

"Steven." The old voice was coarse and worn, but the tone of pleading in it that of a child. The tall man turned slowly, smile still on. "Look, I know what you'd said last night, but..."

"Fred, how are you?"

"Good."

"You sure? You look rough, man. Sure you been sleeping all right?"

"Yeah..." The man nodded, eyes not lifting past Steven's chest.

"Look like you've been through some wars."

"I have. Yesterday, round the Old Steine..."

"What happened? Sally decked you again?"

"Nah, some kids jumped me. Took all the money you borrowed me yesterday. All of it..."

The last word ignited an unpleasant smile on Steven's lips. The smell of alcohol on the man's breath, along with his earlier meal next door, suggested the truth was different.

"'Orrible place, Brighton, innit?"

"It is."

"Even for tough guys like us. Even for us old timers."

"Steven..."

"People think it's changed, but it ain't. Just like the old days. Just like me and you remember."

"Sure. Sure it is..."

"I wouldn't blame the kids. People going on about the kids all the time, but it's us set the example. And we can't undo that. Anything but that." The felt hat nodded, face sagging, eyes dim. Steven sucked his teeth in disgust. "Time to move on, Fred. Just get the hell out. Not a nice place for decent folk no more. People just got no respect."

The last few words hissed out, Steven put his hand on Zen's elbow, led him gently towards the seafront.

"People keep telling him he's his own worst enemy. What the fuck do people know."

Zen looked back to the crumpled figure by the door, thought about asking for more background, but found he didn't care that much about the old man or his story. Something in the surrendered set of the shoulders made him feel no pity.

"Where're you parked?"

"Just across here."

"D'you know where Shoreham is?"

"Never heard of it."

"Couple of miles that way." Steven pointed west, along the steel-blue sea. Zen stubbed his cigarette out on the pavement, slung the butt into a nearby wheelie bin. It was the same bin into which he'd dumped his empties earlier, getting ready for the handover.

"Just don't expect speed," he said as they waited to cross the busy seafront. "The van's still not well."

Steven smiled without a word, nodded at someone driving past in a green Beetle.

He said nothing about the mattress in the back either, silence settling between them like silt. Zen tried to work out where it was Hove finished and some new town began, but couldn't see the joints, the whole seafront a mass of indistinguishable buildings and mini junctions. At least going the other way the coast had cliffs for colour, but here the flat land was perfect for ports, warehouses and pubs to support it all.

Miles of sub-industrial landscape rolled slowly past, old docks interspersed with car dealerships and DIY superstores. Here and there, rows of little suburban houses looked out to sea, the main road mere feet from their doors.

"That's it," Steven said, pointing to a large Ford place on the corner of a junction. Zen flicked the indicator stalk, pulled into a forecourt crowded with Fiestas, Mondeos and Transits. Parking up, he breathed a sigh of relief, like the owner of a sick pet getting it to a vet in time.

They walked around the side to a row of repair bays, Steven nodding back to people in blue overalls.

"Neil around?" he shouted over the noise of an electric wheel nut drill.

"Go get 'im for you now," one of the young guys shouted back and ran off. Zen looked around the bay, the back wall completely covered with a mosaic of rear light clusters, every kind there was, hundreds of them. It reminded him of when he was a kid, the fascination with different makes of car and their rear lights, colours winking at eye-level with a promise of an adult world of wonders to come. Now, here he was, in the graveyard of the same instruments, indifferent.

"Neil..." At the sound of Steven's voice, Zen turned, saw a young man roll towards them in a motorised wheelchair, head supported by a neck brace, one hand steering the buzzing vehicle with a joystick. The smiling face was far too big for the neck and shoulders, a once muscular body eaten away by whatever it was had put him in the chair.

"Ere..." the voice strained, but happy. "Come see this." They went over to another workshop, an old, champagne-brown Ford up over an engine bay, someone below working on the undercarriage. "Spanish import."

Steven ran his hand along the chrome bumper, turned to Zen.

"Nellie's got a soft spot for old Cortinas."

"Took delivery yesterday. Pretty, innit? Manual shift."

"It's a peach."

"Not a spot of rust. Look at them rims. Pristine, man. Fuck knows what the guy did with it, parked it in his living room."

"Expensive?"

"Paid a couple of pesetas over the odds, but what's that matter to connoisseurs. Christmas gift from the old man."

"Must remember to get into his good books some day... Nel, meet Zen. Got a bit of bother with his van."

Without saying anything, Neil returned Zen's smile, then turned it back to Steven.

"No problem. Your banger's ready."

"Where?"

"Out back." Neil reached into his lap for a key, held it up to Steven. "C'mon."

Outside, among a fleet of highly polished saloons and hatchbacks, he stopped his chair by an old, uncared for Rover Vitesse. The car stood out, its silver paintwork covered in dirt and scars from many past prangs.

"It's all done, steam cleaned, polished. Timings were a little out, but nothing these pinkies can't fix. And a new set of header pipes."

"Got time for lunch?"

"Sure. Just take a piss and I'll be right with you. Got some news."

"I'll come help you."

"Fuck off," Neil replied with a smile. "Give me the keys to the van. That little Suzi in the courtyard, innit?"

"Yeah," Zen replied, gently handing the keys over, "Needs a tune-up, new oil..."

"Never tell a doctor how to do his job." Neil interrupted, choking on a little giggle. "Back in a mo'."

"Get in," Steven said.

Zen, used to the imported van, came around the right hand side of the car, had to double-back. If the outside of the Rover was beat and battered, the interior was spotless, the seat covers dusted, all the plastic polished to a shine. Steven stuck the key in, the old V8 ticking over like a racing tank. He had his eyes closed, listening to it for a second before engaging reverse, turning in his seat, guiding the car out of its space. It crawled along, engine booming up to the forecourt exit. Zen opened his door, lit up again, thought about asking what was wrong with Neil. Did it matter? Normally he'd have said no, but today, still full of the peace he'd found in the night, he could allow a little interest in the world again.

"Neil... Is he ill?"

"No, just suffering from a particularly nasty case of bad luck." Steven looked at him, the smile without malice. "He was pissing about on Eastbourne Pier with some mates, years ago. They found one of them punch bag arcade machines, you know the one where you stick on a boxing glove, try to lay out a big pad that pops up. He had the bright idea of headbutting it. Took a run up, hit it all wrong. The impact collapsed a vertebrae in his spine, sliced through the nerve cord. Common injury for American football players, apparently." Steven paused, but it wasn't a pause that needed filling with any kind of response. Zen smoked, watching sunshine bouncing off a little slice of sea visible between buildings on the other side of the main street. "Lost a lot of muscle, did his liver in, but he got through it. Wife and kid helped. They modified the garage, got him back to work. Wouldn't let anyone else work on my cars now... How about you?" Zen looked at Steven, trying to catch the sense of the question. "Got time for a quick pub lunch?"

He felt like saying Yes. It couldn't hurt to float along, get into drink early, now that he'd had some sleep and no driving to do for a few days. But, for whatever reason, his head shook against the idea. It was only after Steven said "All right," that he bothered to consider the decision, the need to be alone after last night, dwell in the little pool of light he'd managed to find again. Be closer to her for a while.

As Neil rolled up the forecourt, he felt grateful he'd had the guts to say No. Not because of the disabled man, but because for once he'd managed to counter his embarrassing lack of backbone. The big man prised himself from the car, looked back in.

“Can you sit yourself in the back? Easier for me to load him up here.”

“Sure.”

Standing outside, he watched Steven pick Neil up, fit him gently into the passenger seat, fold up the chair and drop it into the boot with the straightforward touch of the familiar. Though the car was big, what with Steven’s lanky frame in one seat, the other shoved back for Neil’s comfort, he had a hard time getting in. Steven glanced at the rear view mirror, moved his own seat a little forward.

“All right, Nel, first we drop off Zen at Sophie’s, then we can pop down to the Owl.”

Zen shook his head.

“No, it’s all right. Just take me some place I can catch a bus.”

“Wouldn’t hear of it. Can’t have your customers busing it now, can we?”

“No, mate, we can’t... Your van’ll be ready by Friday latest. You got a number I can call?”

“He’s staying at Sophie’s. Bell him there.”

“All-rightey.”

Steven fastened Neil’s seatbelt, put the car into gear, rolled towards the coastal road. Neil leaned forward, pushed a button on the hi-fi panel, giggling like a naughty child. The digital display announced the next artist and song.

“Fucking machine...” he mumbled. Letters rolled across the display, ‘*Britney Spears... Crazy...*’ “Spoilt my surprise. Heard you had a soft spot for blondes.”

As they sat waiting for the light to turn green, all eyes were suddenly drawn to the car next to them, a red hatchback, the driver with his seat so close to the steering wheel he was almost chewing on it. Neil reached over, put his hand over the horn button on the wheel, eyes on the lights. Just as they turned amber, he pushed and held it down, making the other driver jolt in his seat, neck pinned by the over-stretched seatbelt.

“Do’im,” he ordered.

Steven stood hard on the gas before letting go of the clutch. The G-force as they shot away shoved Zen back, shifting gears drowning out the sound of the music, Neil giggling, grins glinting in the rear view mirror. Looking out, sun shining low over the horizon, Zen too allowed himself a smile, his thoughts and all their weight left behind for a second.



In the end, it came down to cold logic. All he wanted was to understand, regardless of the alcohol boosting round his veins, how peace could crumble in what felt like an instant, leave him faster than daylight had left the sky outside. How nothing seemed answerable, bound by any reasonable laws. Sitting on his bed, choking on the nth cigarette of the day, he wanted to know how any kind of feeling could abandon him absolutely. All his moods had vanished the moment he’d walked back into the B&B. Everything drained. He couldn’t even find the words to fit round the vacuum.

Christ, my heart’s turning cartwheels, desperate to say something (and only part of it’s drink). I want to be silent. I want to be capable. I want to contain this thing tearing through me every second I know Why I’m alive, but can’t.

I want to shout from rooftops.

None of what I’m feeling makes sense. Why me. Why You. Do You understand?

Yesterday I sifted through old family records my aunt had passed on to me. Pictures, military orders, school books, telegrams, the first seventy years of the 20th century in family documents. Found a large diploma, honouring my grandfather with a medal for a tactical manoeuvre in the 1st World War, decorated with pictures of swords and cannons and hand-driven machine guns. Then, in the same pile of papers, I found an ancient postcard with some Russian handwriting on it. It was a picture of a blonde girl playing with a doll in a cot, the words “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world” in English beneath. How should I feel? All these contrasts. Languages. Ideologies.

I am lost.

Good god on earth, I need You.

There’s You, calm on the phone, me calm on the phone, and these thousand miles between us driving me right up the wall. A million words yet to be said between us, and none of them the heart of the thing. I love you. All I ever wanted, all that’s ever been and ever will be. I love you.

more of the world again

Wednesday

Falling asleep at the breakfast table, he tried to focus, work out what he was doing there. Hunger was part of the reason. A need for distraction, after a whole night awake, cold, wandering along the undercliff, throwing rocks and bottles at the sea. A need for company too. Was it too much to admit he still felt jealousy, or envy, whichever it was, of people like Steven or Neil, of those moving through a world of others, of actions that had a context rooted in the here and now? Not like him, each day blank, only the nights spent chasing after ghosts. Nights like the last, when not even spooks could be found, maybe he himself a ghost already. Ghost man walking. Did lost souls ever have other lost souls for company, like angels, or did they always suffer alone? He tried to think back to all the ghost stories he knew, but couldn't think of a single one which let the poor things get together.

Sophie came in, carrying the pasta in a bowl of heated milk he'd requested, disturbing a train of thought that was getting him nowhere anyway.

"Hope that's how you like it."

"Thanks."

"You eat tuff like this in Poland?"

"People sprinkle sugar on top, or put jam in."

Sophie nodded, as if what he was saying made sense.

"Maybe I should change Sian's diet. How's your holiday?"

"Fine."

"Good. Enjoy."

She walked off, leaving him feeling sick, wishing he'd been able to keep up the chat a little longer, keep the presence of a smiling human being near him. But already she was off, serving a suited businessman sitting by the window, out of Zen's earshot, nodding towards the view outside, obviously talking about the weather or something equally pleasant. Whatever it was, was making her laugh and stay a little longer by the table.

He felt sorry for himself, spooning the tasteless pasta into his mouth, gaze caught by light reflecting off the chrome lighter lying beside his plate. He picked it up, rubbed it between finger and thumb, feeling round the multitude of tiny dents and scratches. They caught the light, splicing it into rays of green and red. He'd had it since new, a gift from an ex. Each tiny marking was somehow related to him, his own history. Etched in steel. It made him feel a little better, seeing his own sorry reflection in it, thinking back to every hand which had ever held it, every situation it'd been in, made him feel more of the world again.

Back in his room, sat up in bed, he waited for sleep. It was almost funny how tired he felt. Utterly exhausted of purpose. The case lay on the floor, the journal beside him.

Each day I am away from You I get weaker. My head spins more, my body shakes with fever. Every day is a test of stamina and resilience and faith. We spoke on the phone, and You sounded sad, and it took everything I had to stop me getting on the first plane out. Your absence is making me sick. I can't sleep. My appetite a distant memory. I eat, same as ever, but it is habit, nothing more. Food has no taste. I don't know where that got to.

Every day I fight with fear and every day I win. Every day I trust and trust more. Every day a struggle that seems worth it, tempers me, my character, a challenge like no other, to hold on to faith and sanity and this thing exists between us, this thing You fired up in me. I sit alone, wondering what the hell I've done to deserve this, You, this happiness, come up empty of answers, just knowing that all I can do is answer the call and be here, and wait 'till we're both back home again.

as loaded as

Thursday

Got home late last night. Walked past the church on the corner, thick snow falling across the beams of lights turned up at the spire. It looked like one of those kitsch bubble lamps with flakes of tinfoil floating in it. Millions and millions of them.

Stood staring at it for ages. Snow is wondrous. Walking along, you hear your own footsteps, your own passage through the world.

Then, walking to my door, I saw a thick belt on the ground where snow had melted, took off a glove, touched the earth. Either a hot water pipe or a sewer. Everywhere the ground sparkled, everywhere but where man had dug his own veins into it.

Stumbling along Brighton seafront, he tried to fill his empty gut with vodka. Did the liquid spend any time in the stomach, or was it siphoned straight to the liver? He wasn't sure. His head was at the point of drunkenness when nothing but stupid questions pressed on the conscious, and he either had to sober up or drink his way through.

The night was mild, the wind weak, cloud cover keeping the temperature reasonable. It was after ten, queues for nightclubs building already, music and steam pouring out of louvered vents into the sky. Metal cables, stretched along the masts of boats shored up on the beach, beat against them in the wind, the sound sharp, eerie.

He headed for the basketball court. It was the only place he could think of where strangers gathered, where some semblance of company could still be found.

Even at a distance, sitting down on the low wall that separated the court from the curving walkway, Steven's tall frame was instantly recognisable. He didn't bother trying to work out if his presence there was a good thing or not, kept on walking. A few people were shooting at the floodlit baskets, four or five others sitting down. Charlie was there, arm still in its cast, good hand holding both a bottle of beer and a cigarette. Steven saw Zen first, interrupted the conversation he was having with a young, curly haired guy.

"Sightseeing? Welcome." He moved people aside to make room, "Beer?"

From a large holdall by his feet he pulled out a bottle of Grolsh, but Zen shook his head, offered up the vodka he had in his hand.

"Got us a Slav here. Ta' very much." He took the bottle, uncapped it, drew a sizeable swig, offered it to the rest of his party. They shook their heads in disgust, only the curly-haired guy next to him following suit. "You play?" Steven asked, nodding towards the court.

"Once upon a time." Zen looked down to his heavy hiking boots. "But not with these on."

"Where'd you play?"

"Back in school, in Poland."

"You Polish or English?"

"Both. And you?"

"How come both?" Steven's eyes were on the quick two-on-two game before them.

"My mother is Polish... How 'bout you?" Zen repeated, looking up at Steven's face, the skin dark, features distinctly un-English, hard bones all over the place.

"Similar. Half-Mexican." He started clapping as a middle-aged man, greying hair clipped short, landed a tough three pointer. "C'mon, Dervish! Getting cold here, man. Finish it off."

Zen tried to compose another question, but could think of nothing worth wasting his breath on.

"Dervish!" Steven cheered as another long range shot went down for the grey haired man. "You old mare! You just came in for me." Charlie was trying to get his right hand into a left hand side jean pocket, the cast causing problems with the twisting motion. "C'mon, Popeye, cough up."

"Patience, Chief, or I'll have to whip your ass myself in a minute. You don't wanna be seen losing to a cripple."

"Big talk for a man with the worst run of luck in his whole life, innit?" Charlie looked up, smiling, handed over the money with a sucking of the teeth. "Sure you don't want to throw around?"

The question was addressed at Zen, but though there was nothing he'd've liked more just then than to join them, he shook his drunken head, knowing he was in no fit state to handle words, much less a ball.

"You can keep Lucky Charles here company then... C'mon, Darren." He looked down on the curly haired man he'd been talking to, but Darren shook his head.

"Cheers, but I'm done. Meeting the lads for a few movies tonight."

Steven nodded, bounced the ball over to the basket. Charlie and Darren got up without a word, taking the bag full of beers.

"Ere, boys, leave us a couple..." Dervish panted beside Zen, steam rising from his sweating forehead. Darren turned back, put a couple of bottles down beside him. "Cheers... You a friend of the big man's?"

Zen struggled to give a sensible answer.
 “No... Staying at a place in Peacehaven.”
 “Bates’ B&B?”
 “What?”
 “Bates. Sophie’s surname. Used to be called that, when it first opened. Not exactly great for business, but Steven insisted.”
 “Is it his?”
 “Not really. You got a fag?” Zen handed him an open packet. “Cheers... No, it’s Sophie’s. You met the daughters yet?”
 “Who?”
 “Chrissie and Liz.”
 “Yes.”
 He wanted to hear more, but had the feeling it’d be wrong to push, and anyway, as they watched Steven shooting baskets alone, Dervish’s tongue seemed to be unwinding all by itself.
 “You down here on holiday or something?” He took his first good look at Zen, the hair, the army jacket, black trousers hanging over heavy hiking boots.
 “Yeah.”
 “In Peacehaven? What are you, fuzzy?”
 “What?”
 “You a cop?”
 “Why’d you say that?”
 “Just the look of ya... Some bad business there, not long ago. A Rasta from London hiding out. Came down, killed a girl with a machete up Bedford Square. Big news, it was... What are you then, if you ain’t a copper?”
 “Nothing any more.”
 “Unemployed?”
 “Taking time off.”
 “What was you before?”
 “A security guard.”
 Dervish nodded, sucked on his cigarette, all the time staring Steven’s way. Lots of people were passing, a few stopping to look on their way from pub to club. A girl asked to have a go, Steven obliging without a word. A few minutes later, three large guys in clean shirts and trousers, shoes shining in the spotlights, stumbled down a walkway from the raised seafront.
 “Ere, let us have a few shots,” one of them shouted in a drunken Dublin accent. Steven held the ball out in his fingers. The guy took and bounced it around nervously before throwing and hitting a clean basket. He turned to cheer at his companions, one of them chasing wildly as the ball rolled away.
 “You boys play?” Steven asked without introductions. The other guy looked at his stocky friend, considering the offer. “Here, give us that...” One of the boys threw the ball back, Steven catching it in one hand, rolling it back to where Dervish and Zen were sitting. Dervish laughed and threw the end of his cigarette away.
 Steven strolled slowly to the other end of the court, where four young guys were involved in a skilful, but messy game of two-on-two.
 “You start, Lenny,” he shouted to the chubby guy the other end, his team mates watching nervously.
 “What’d you do, then?” Zen asked Dervish after a long silence, keeping his eyes on the game, sipping from his own bottle.
 “Used to have my own business... Know anything about bikes?”
 “Motorcycles?”
 “No. Bicycles... Road bikes was our speciality. Closed us down.” Dervish nodded towards the tallest man on the court, standing under the opponent’s basket, hands on knees, laughing as his proteges scored another wild basket. The younger guys had obvious advantages, but it was clear the Irish lads, even if they had no intention of winning, were going to play hard. Their smooth soled shoes slid all over the court, causing as many fouls as their unskilled hands and drunken momentum did. Steven seemed at once still and active, apparently nowhere and yet always where he was needed, passing balls he knew were not going to be caught, making mad shots he knew were not going down, yet still somehow doing enough to stay level. “Now I’m managing the Trap for him... Poetic, innit?” He took out a little cigarillo case, turned to Zen. “Sure you ain’t fuzz?”
 “No.”
 “Well, then, fancy one of these?” Dervish popped open the case, a stack of ready-made joints rolling about inside. “If you were fuzzy, there’d be no need to ask... Don’t know a single cop doesn’t smoke this shit.”
 Zen hesitated, wondered why, seeing it was only hours ago he’d wished for another kind of drug, one could calm, distance him from things for a while. He took out a slim, neat rollie, said a quick prayer that it be strong and not wash through him like so much cheap, badly rolled hash in the past. Dervish took one himself, snapped closed the case and lit up. Zen followed suit, eyes carefully scanning, checking for cars or beat bobbies. He wanted to believe it was because he could not afford problems with the law now, this late into things, but inside knew it was just the “square” fear of someone completely unused to breaking rules.

Steven put the finishing touch to what had turned into a messy, haphazard victory. The Irish lads cheered the winning basket, slapping each other on sweaty backs, shirts by now hanging out of their belts, buttons long ago lost, none of them seemingly bothered to be looking a right state. He walked over to where Dervish, joint in mouth, was returning earlier compliments by clapping, picked up the last bottle of beer, walked it back to his team mates. One of the lads shook it like it was champagne, struggling with the wire catch before letting more than half of it spray all over his mates.

"Fuck knows what club they were heading to before, but not even the Gloucester will take them in now." Steven commented, having escaped just in time.

"Spoils to the victor," Dervish, laughing, offered up the cigarillo case. Steven shook his head.

"Any voddy left?"

Sitting down, it was hard for Zen to extract the second bottle he had in his pocket, adding it to the one still standing beside him.

"Special occasion, is it?" Dervish asked, choking on smoke and cold wind. Zen nodded, staring down at the ball between his feet. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Steven pulling on his coat.

"Where we off to?" Dervish asked. "Wanna go get changed?"

Steven leaned down, picked up the ball.

"Nah, get a drink first."

"Pete's?" Dervish got up, stretched his arms, turned, flicked the last of his joint back towards the beach. "Pete's it is... You coming along with that arsenal?"

Zen looked up, the other two waiting for an answer. He felt the new drug melting through his muscles, his movements fluid, a sense of carefree will speaking for him.

"Sure..."

Steven let Dervish lead the way across the court, towards the walkway that led up to the road ahead. Zen dumped the last of his rollie in a bin they passed, lit up a fresh cigarette, drowning its dull taste with vodka.

A group of young guys walking along Kings Road, all dressed in loose skate gear, stopped them crossing over.

"All right, how're you doing?" asked the one leading the pack. "Been playing ball?"

"No, miniature golf," Dervish spat out. "Where you babykins heading at this late hour?"

"Nowhere special... How're you doing, Steve?"

"Fine," the tall man rolled the dreamy word out. "See you boys at the races Sunday," he added before turning slowly round, as if the conversation had somehow been closed.

Zen didn't look back to register reactions, his head slowly spinning with each new change of direction. He joined Steven at a pedestrian crossing, Dervish already past the red lights, waiting the other side of a traffic island.

They stopped at a bolted door to a hotel just round the corner. Dervish tapped on one of its windows. Someone came up the other side, pulled the top bolt back, opened it onto a small, dimly lit bar. Zen forced his dulled sight to take in the red carpets and brass, some empty seats, a couple of women sitting in silence at the only occupied table. A ragged, silver-haired man secured the door behind them, went around the bar, picked up a wire tray full of steaming glasses from an automatic washer. Steven placed the ball and empty vodka bottle on the counter.

"Been pushing the hard stuff on local youths again, I see," quipped the barman without a smile. "More of the same?"

"What're you drinking?" Steven asked, looking at Zen.

"Tomato juice, vodka on the side."

"Usual for me, usual for my colleague here."

Dervish accepted the order with a drunken, grimacing smile, went to sit down at one of the empty tables, rubbing hands along either arm to warm himself up. Zen waited by the bar to help carry the drinks.

"You only drink spirits?" Steven asked.

"Anything with a low sugar content. Got problems with my teeth."

"Sweet."

Zen tried to work out whether the sensation of sobriety was real or dope-induced illusion. He felt extremely lucid, watching the barman lining up their glasses. Steven turned to the two women sitting at a nearby table, said "Always found flat shoes to be a thing of great beauty..." with perfect sincerity to the one nearest to them. The short haired brunette turned to smile back from behind her cigarette, "Why, thank you, Mr Spencer," the smile revealing all the age the dim air of the place otherwise concealed. Steven lifted up his glass, Zen finally guessing what the two women were doing here alone.

Steven walked back to their table, Dervish vanished somewhere. Zen took out a roll of notes from his pocket to pay for the round, but the tired-looking barman just shook his head and walked out back with the ball and the empty bottle.

He sat down on a little stool next to their table, sipped his vodka, savouring flavours heightened by the dope. Steven popped open the beer bottle, Dervish arriving back seconds later.

"Fuck me. Pissed so long, I nearly lost interest in my own cock... Cheers." He lifted the bottle, pointed at Steven with a circular motion of the forefinger. Steven reached into a pocket of his coat, pulled out a slim CD case, handed it over.

“You heard from Neil yet?” he asked Zen.

“He called today. Some problem with a part, but the van should be ready tomorrow.” He heard Dervish’s voice behind him, asking the barman to play a certain track.

“You seen much of Brighton yet?”

Zen shook his head.

“What about you? Lived here long?”

“A few years.” They both turned to look at Dervish as he stood propped against the bar, singing along to a Pixies song. ‘*Hey... Been trying to meet you...*’. “It’s a nice enough place, but changing fast. Turning into a rabid cross between Blackpool and Gomorrah. Where you from in London?”

“New Cross.”

“Foul place.”

“That’s why I left.”

“Man tired of London ...” Zen tried to work out where the quiet voice was going, the old quote as loaded as the pause that followed. “Left London myself the minute I heard Chrissie was pregnant. No place to raise new life in either.”

Dervish came up, saving Zen from having to digest that last thought.

“Where’s Naomi?” Steven asked, looking up.

“Home.”

“Whose home?”

“Hers. Revising.”

“That’s all?”

“What do you think?”

“Think nothing but what you tell me.”

Dervish stayed silent for a moment, unmoving, the bottle hanging from a dropped arm.

“I don’t know...”

“So that’s why you’ve been hanging round all night with a face like a squeezed lemon. Did she call?”

“Yeah.”

“What’d you say?”

“Nothing. Left the mobile off.”

“What’d you wanna do now?”

“Not talk or think about it...”

Steven kept staring at Dervish, as if he didn’t want the conversation to end there, but Dervish didn’t respond. Instead, he turned to Zen and asked with bored curiosity.

“So, security work. Think I should quit working for this tyrant and try it?”

Zen turned to see the barman coming over with four bottles, vodka, gin, tonic and beer, put them on the table and walk off without a word.

“I don’t recommend it much.”

“Where’d you work, in a supermarket or something?”

“No. An auction house round the back of Pall Mall.”

“What, like Christie’s?”

“Yeah.”

“Get to catch any international art thieves?” Dervish mocked, draining the last of his original bottle.

“No.”

“Sounds crap then.”

Zen nodded.

“So why do it?” Steven asked, but though there were all sorts of truths Zen could offer up, none seemed to suit. He felt a little inkling of his old self, wanting to defend the choice, explain that it wasn’t always like that, he hadn’t always been this pitiful, but instead found himself staring down at the paisley pattern on the carpet, waiting for another uncomfortable silence to build. It didn’t matter, though. Anything was better than having to go back to his little room, wade through another bottomless night.

“Not much in the way of casual work for fine arts graduates,” he mumbled eventually.

“Bit ironic, innit?” Dervish sneered. “Finely educated man like yourself in uniform, guarding precious works of others’ genius.”

“Wearing clip-on tie...”

“There you go.”

“Just one of those twists of fate you keep hearing about.”

“Get to see any famous paintings?”

“No.”

“Boring, then.”

“Depends on what you think is boring.”

“You arty layabouts and your definitions of what is and isn’t boring. Pile of crap. Probably slept all night.”

“And helped ourselves to the bar in the basement.”

“There you go. Cheeky, lazy, thieving layabouts.”

“Some did, some didn’t.”
 “And you was one of the ones who didn’t, so now you’s sore about being a good little soldier.”
 “No. Not what I was there for.”
 “Right. You was just a good little worker in a clip-on tie...”
 “How you like life at Sophie’s?” Just as Zen thought he’d managed to shrug off the spotlight, Steven’s smiling lips dealt him another question.
 “Fine.”
 “All the women getting on your nerves yet?”
 Zen thought long and hard about a reply.
 “Does Chris live there?”
 “No. She has her flat near here, but she likes hanging round her mum’s.”
 “She’s Sophie’s daughter?”
 Steven nodded.
 “And Liz?”
 “Liz too.”
 “And who are you to all of them?”
 Steven burst out laughing, glanced at Dervish, as if waiting for his lieutenant to answer, but Dervish said nothing, looking even more bored than before.
 “What am I?”
 “Dream come true,” Dervish chipped in suddenly, then paused, as if wanting to repair any offence he might’ve just caused. A new song burst into life behind them. “Look, don’t know what your plans are, but I could do with something to eat. Any chance we could...”
 “What’d you fancy?” Steven interrupted back.
 “Coming on for midnight. The Lemon’s closing.”
 “They’ll cook us a burger.” Steven saw Dervish hesitate. He didn’t wait for an answer. “Pete,” he called over to the barman, “You got anything for a sandwich out back?”
 “Yeah, sure.”
 “There you go.”
 “Can’t we get back to the house?” Dervish moaned.
 “Why drag us here, then?”
 “I don’t know. Today... Bunch of crap, man. Don’t know what I want.”
 “Pete? Can you ring for a cab... Go get my CD back.”
 “Feel tired, man. Wanna grab a shower, maybe catch a movie with the boys.” Dervish retreated towards the bar.
 “Zen?” Steven lifted his glass in his direction. “You a night owl, ain’t ya’? Come, we’ll find something sugar-free to go with that napalm you got in your pocket. And if Dervish keeps on being a pain in the ass, just smack him one. He responds well to sudden outbursts of violence, the little child...”
 “He’s on his way.” The barman called over from the phone.
 “Cheers.” Steven got up, carried the bottles back, reached over to shake his hand. “I’ll send someone over tomorrow for the ball and the bill.”
 “See ya’s... Let yourselves out, I’ll lock up in a sec’. Love to Lizzie.”

sky full of cold stars

Friday

Brighton slept through midnight, suburban streets rushing by, sped by drugs and the taxi's manic speed. Zen sat beside Steven on the back seat, Dervish up front arguing with the driver over a football incident from years back.

"...Professional players oughtta check their wage packets, do some fucking maths. Money they're on should be enough to calm 'em down a bit. Bit of verbal ain't no reason to go kicking paying supporters around."

"They should've knighted him for it! Just 'cause you get a French guy playing in the Premier League, doesn't mean he should accept abuse twenty-four-seven."

"Already said what I think they should do. See an anger management therapist. Go meditate. Write some poetry..."

"Fucking funny. The wankers were BNP members. Nazi's, man."

"He didn't know that at the time, though, did'e? You just don't..."

"They have this discussion on average about every three months." Steven said quietly. "Got Dervish, your middle class footie fan loving the idea of occasional violence, and your taxi driver from Tottenham getting all righteous about lines ought not be crossed. In a moment they'll ask your opinion. You have one?"

"No."

"Zenny," Dervish called, turning in his seat, "You know what we're talking about... Was Cantona right booting those racist cunts? Should the FA have suspended him?" Zen said nothing, smiled an involuntary smile, unable to decide if his opinion was really called for, if he should say what he really thought, or make a joke, maybe friendly, maybe lightly ridiculing.

The chance to decide was lost as they pulled up at the top of a tall hill, parked cars crowding a junction of narrow streets. The driver turned on a light, filled out a little notepad, handed it back to Steven. Dervish was already outside.

"See you when, man?" The driver asked.

"Got nothing better to do Saturday night, come by. Friend of Liz's having a party."

"Here?"

"Yeah. You like Prince?"

"What, that midget ponce? Yeah, guess the music's all right..."

"It's a theme night, so come dressed in glitter and purple spandex and you get a prezzie."

Gary chortled.

"Not sure Sheryl'll like the idea. Ladies seeing me all dolled up..."

Zen didn't hear the end of the conversation, out of the car, staring up at a sky smudged with dim light. He saw Dervish on a porch, unlocking the door to a large house on the corner of the street. Lights were on in a room downstairs, but the rest of the house was dark. Steven got out, came around the front of the taxi as it reversed back and sped off back down the hill.

Zen followed through the little gate, past some old cars covered in tarpaulin and thick bushes littering up the front lawn, up a set of steps to the door Dervish had left ajar.

The first impression was that of untidiness, the huge hall plastered with old newspapers instead of wallpaper, the carpet pale and almost worn through in places. A crystal chandelier threw shards of light on it all, large canvases propped up against the walls, a stack of television sets of all shapes and sizes directly opposite the front door, three or four mountain bikes leaning against them. A staircase climbed to a balcony curving round the hall, allowing access to other rooms.

To the right, several doors were open, the nearest lit dimly from within, a movie soundtrack booming through loudspeakers.

"Come."

Dervish had disappeared. They went through to the lounge, half of it taken up by couches round a huge TV set, the other by a pool table, DJ's decks on top of it. The walls were dark aquamarine, giving a strange sensation of depth to a space lit only by the flickering screen, large windows uncovered by curtains. Charlie, Darren and a couple of guys he didn't know sat round, helping themselves from a coffee table loaded with bottles and plates.

"All right," Darren turned to greet them, his voice slowed by hash, clouds of it hanging in the air. Zen followed Steven into the kitchen, the ceiling high, doors between it and the lounge removed, a large wooden table by the window.

"Sit down."

Steven carefully scrubbed court dirt from his hands, then rummaged round an overhead cupboard, took out some glasses and a couple of small shots tumblers. From a tall, steel-fronted fridge he took out a bottle of Finlandia and some tomato juice. Pouring a tumblerful each, he said “Sobriety’s always been wildly over-rated,” and downed his. Zen took out the bottle he had in his pocket, poured another round as his appetite for drink returned. He watched his host take out some eggs, cheese and fresh veg, start working on an omelette.

“You live here?” he asked, the vodka grinding down his throat.

“Kind of... The house is now mostly occupied by the gentlemen you saw in the sitting room. They behave themselves, and are surprisingly keen on keeping the place tidy. Makes a nice change from most tenants I’ve had. Ah, Christ.” His eyes squinted, holding back tears over the onions.

“Been here long?” Zen wanted to kick himself for asking such plain dumb questions.

“Ah,” He sniffed, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, “Since I moved to Brighton. Place was meant for Chris and Sian, but like so many things, it didn’t happen... Kinda like it the way it is, but it’s no good for a little kid. Not of the nappy kind, anyway.” He threw a theatrical glance in the direction of the lounge. Zen held out a full tumbler, “Cheers,” the dark face twisting as he swallowed the cheap stuff. “Need something smaller,” he exhaled, looking up at the high ceilings. “Chris has her place. Don’t see me and Liz needing anything this big. She thinks it’s decadent.”

“What is?”

“This house. Loves it, really, but she’s right. Far too big for one family.” While Steven chopped more veg, Zen felt like someone had pulled the rug from under his feet for the thousandth time this year. He tried to recover some of the tranquillity he’d felt those couple of days ago, but staring inside himself, he didn’t even know where to start looking. “Think I’ll leave it to the boys. They wanna set up a housing commune... Place is full of ghosts anyway.”

Footsteps bounced down the staircase, Dervish storming into the kitchen, silver hair wet.

“Fucking starving.” He inhaled approvingly. “Want help?” Steven shook his head without looking up. “Shower?”

“Nah. Food be ready in a minute.”

Dervish smiled, took out a couple of beer bottles from the fridge, held one up to Zen walking through to the lounge.

“What kind of ghosts?” Zen asked, shaking his head.

“Ghosts? Ah, this place. They accumulate. Metaphorically speaking.”

“Are they always alone?”

“Again?”

“I was thinking about it the other day. Do they always haunt alone?”

“Never heard of ghosts working tandem.”

“So who was it lived here before?”

“No idea. I meant ghosts in a personal context... Heard lots about the guy who built this place, though. Nice enough fella, had a vision of his ideal house, planned everything himself. D’you notice the main hall is out of proportion to the rest of the house?” Zen looked up without answering, aware now that perhaps he had, but hadn’t given the observation any thought. “He only had so much property, but wanted this bloody great hall to impress people with as they came in. Dwarfed the other rooms, made them look even smaller than they are, and they ain’t small. Vain mullet. Kind of liked the ridiculousness of it at first, but, depending on how you look at it, it’s either too big or too small.” He turned back to the wok, tossed the frying veg into the air, started breaking in eggs.

Through another door, Zen saw the bikes in the hall. They seemed like a safe diversion.

“Have you always ran this cycle shop?”

“No. Did various other things before I moved down here.”

“Nice machines.”

“You interested?”

“Only in motorbikes. I mean, I was, a few years ago.”

“What’d you ride?”

“Nothing big.”

“Like what?” Steven’s pager buzzed. Zen waited for him to check the message before answering.

“Honda Bros.”

“D’you have the six fifty or the four?”

“The little one, for the insurance.”

“Sweet bike. Had one in the shop once, back in London. Couldn’t believe they’d turned into the Revere for the UK market. Went like stink. Reliable too. Most of the imports go to couriers now.”

He got up, started rifling through a cupboard. “See that...” He held out one of a pile of pictures he’d taken from it. Zen smiled an involuntary, drunken smile.

“Jota.”

“The nine hundred. Tamer, but sweeter than the twelve.”

“What happened?” Zen asked, studying the next picture, the same orange machine, its rear fine, the front completely totalled, half the frame ripped off. Steven went back to the wok, started sprinkling grated cheese over the top, then stuck it in the oven.

“Killed it out in the Brecon Beacons a few years back. My fault. Riding with friends on a bike should’ve been shelved... Brought it in from Manila for a collector, but the weather one weekend was fine, time on my hands. Hadn’t even been serviced. Rode up to Wales, felt something was wrong with it on the motorway. Bars shaking all the way. But it’s a twenty year old Laverda, so what’d you expect? Then we get to the twisties. Had a little tank-slapper, held on, then something else hits it, massive slapper about a second later. Seventy, eighty on a bend, then I look down and the whole front, bars, forks, the lot, is coming away in my hands.”

“Shit...”

“The headstock must’ve been cracked from a previous crash. Good thing I was moving fast. Got thrown clear over a wall, down a hill, waiting for either the forks or the rest of the bike to come land on my head. Mate from Cardiff following said it was the funniest thing he’d ever seen. My lanky arse cartwheeling over the Welsh countryside.” Zen handed him back the picture. “Nearly crashed himself, laughing so hard... I sold the engine later, some of the bits, but there wasn’t much left. Solid, them Italian horses, but them Welsh walls is solidier.”

“Were you all right?”

“Sure.”

“Can I see?”

Steven handed over the rest of the pictures. Fast bike followed fast bike, all shot in the same car park at different times of day.

“You owned all these?”

“They only passed through my hands.”

“When?” Zen both did and didn’t want to hear. To sit here and talk bikes was exactly the thing he needed, a night with some kind of fresh blood to it, yet at the same time, he felt jealous of a man who had all the things he didn’t. Woman, child, house. He felt like a prisoner on death row talking with a guard, the subject common to them both, but all of it unreal, far from the truth.

“Once did some Stateside imports.”

“Where?”

“Chelsea.”

“Just bikes?”

“All kindsa rubbish. Jeans to jeeps.”

“Closed about five years ago?”

“Probably... Sold up long before then.”

“Called the Depot?”

“Yeah.”

“I know the place. Used to ride up there sometimes, when I was in college.”

Steven got up to check on the omelette, cutting Zen short.

“How hungry are you?”

“Not at all.”

“What, you only subsist on liquids?”

“No. Just not hungry.”

“That’s no answer for a Polish guest to give a host, is it? ‘Guest in the house, God in the house’. Isn’t that what Polaks say?” Zen nodded, smiled, no longer surprised by anything the tall man had to say. “Oi, Derv! Come and get yours.”

As Steven cut and ladled the steaming mass onto three plates, Dervish busy cutting bread, Zen wished he could be alone, just for a moment, just to smoke a cigarette by himself, work a little in his head on what was happening here. Sitting, drinking vodka with the owner of a shop he used to visit as a fashion-hungry kid a decade ago. Coincidences. Chances. Drunk, stoned a little still, could he admit that it was actually pleasant, something to cherish, to take a little pleasure in? Dervish took his plate, walked back to the lounge. Steven swept the pictures up with one hand, set the plates down along with bread and a small bowl of tomatoes and cucumbers from the fridge.

“Were you OK after the crash?”

“Sure. Apart from a few bruises and a broken collarbone.”

“You ride now?”

“Nah. Took a break from it afterwards, then winter came. Then I met Chris. Things took turns. Never was much into bikes anyway. Cars were always the thing.” A wall mounted phone started ringing quietly. “Hold on.” He got up from his meal, picked up, “Hi... Yeah... No disasters then,” withdrew through the hall door into the back of the house.

Zen, left with the mini-trinity of bottles on the table, decided to leave right after the meal was finished. Spooning egg into his mouth, he wondered Why wait that long? Hunger was not the over-riding force keeping him here. Food did not interest him, nor any question of manners involved in leaving now. It was the right thing to do. But why? Why run? He’d promised himself not to, not in the time left. It wasn’t so much a question of manners, as of looking stupid. Or feeling stupid. To walk off, be sneered at by Steven and the rest did not matter. It was the self which didn’t want to clown around. You want to leave, wait and say goodbye, rather than sneak away, afraid of your own spineless self.

He stayed put, eating, sipping from his glass of tomato, trying half-heartedly to visualise some of the muted action he could hear coming round the lounge door. After a few minutes of trying to run from his own head, he heard the beep of a phone being turned off. Steven came back in, sat down, his chair turned sideways. He didn't go back to his meal, drink or guest, sat for a moment staring at a point somewhere between the floor and the bottom of the cooker unit, the dark face still. For a second, Zen forgot himself, concerned, until Steven turned in his seat, picked his glass up off the table and said,

"Here's to good news."

Zen took his, held it up, drank.

"Business?"

"No." Steven uncapped the tall bottle, refilled the glasses. "Liz. Calling from Montreal... You never drink anything apart from vodka?"

Zen felt thrown by the constant shift of question against question, fearing the personal. Not that he wanted to control the situation, or conceal all that much. His head was just spinning a little.

"Red wine is safe."

"Because of your teeth?" Zen nodded. "What's wrong with them?"

"Communism." The way he'd said it sounded all wrong, the wrong, attention-grabbing kind of intensity in the choice of word, but Steven was still paying attention, waiting for more details. "When I was kid, in Poland, there was no calcium. Not in anything, especially not in the watered-down milk. I was still a kid when my family came back to England, but the damage was done."

"What was your family doing in Poland? Thought your father is English."

"Welsh, actually. He went there to work on an engineering project back in the Seventies, met my mother. She was working as an interpreter and journalist. Got herself pregnant just to get the hell out. This was the time of early strikes, police shooting workers. Chaos. So she bought herself a ticket West. My older brother and me."

"So where do your teeth come into this?"

"When I was two, my mother took us back again. Felt too... Too much of a stranger abroad. But once you get out of a Soviet Block country, you don't return. Those were hard years. She couldn't find work, or a place for us. Flat. Schools. Then my father brought us back again, just before the start of martial law, in eighty one."

Steven nodded to show he understood, then nodded again to signal another round of drinks was up. Zen took his glass, glanced at the bottles on the table, saw something else there again, looking at the alcohol. Some kind of power drawing him down, not through hurt or drunkenness, but through talking, an unlocked tongue, getting carried away, same as ever, talking even when the brain said stop, retain some distance, keep yourself to yourself.

"Are we celebrating something, then?"

"Damn right." The smile on Steven's face exploded. They knocked glasses together. "So what'd you do before security work entered your life?"

The booze shot round Zen's head, the little voice telling him to be careful silenced by it. He was staring at his host, thoughts very far away, far from this table or any other real place.

"I taught."

"What?"

"English."

"In Poland?"

"Yes."

"That what you always wanted to do?" Steven asked, filling his mouth with more omelette, breaking bread between his fingers.

"No. Did art college."

"Which one?"

"Camberwell."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty five."

"Then you'd've missed her... Chris was there, but she's a little older than you. Transferred from St. Martin's. Said it was more cosy."

"A shithole. Crowds of happy little students roughing it on grants, before cashing in their middle-class destinies."

Steven laughed. Even so, Zen felt stupid, the vodka responsible for everything he said, even the rare moments of decent conversation.

"You've come to the right place if you want more of the same. Brighton, home to many fine art students in Diesels and G'Shocks... So, you taught, then made the surprise transition to security work."

Another switch of subject made him stop, look up from his meal, see Steven was paying attention. He didn't feel threatened. There was nothing left to lose save some flesh and the banknotes in his pockets.

"Working eighty four hours a week, doing fuck all, is a noble thing... What are we celebrating?"

"Liz got divorced today. Canada time." Steven got up, dropped his empty plate in the sink, opened a cupboard, brought out a bottle of unusual looking bourbon. "If you don't mind, I'll switch to this... Gonna be a lovely day."

"And Chris?"

Steven stopped smiling, looked up.

"Can of worms... Chris was first, but Liz is my last, my everything." Zen got the awful pun, smiled involuntarily.

"You just swap sisters like that?"

"No." He sipped his drink slowly, eyes still focused on the floor. "You like funny stories?"

"Sure."

"Their father died a few years back... Chris was with me at the time, Liz in Montreal. The two of them had had a fight, hadn't spoken in years. But they made up, just before the old man died. Good thing too. His death nearly killed Sophie." Zen listened, feeling the lives of strangers fleshing out in his imagination. "That's how we came to be here. Grandma Bates lives in a little care home in Peacehaven, so we agreed to sort out the B&B... Luke," he said to a young man just come through from the lounge, the head topped with spiky blond hair. "Meet Zen."

Luke shook Zen's hand with a limp lack of conviction, sat himself down at the table, started carefully rolling the ingredients he'd brought with him.

"All right... What, you a Buddhist?" His voice wavered between nose and mouth.

"That's my name. Zenon."

"Like the watch firm?"

"No, like my grandfather."

"Cool. Your granddad own it or somethin'?"

"Luke is usually a sharp cookie. Just gets a bit dull when the brakes fail to come on." Steven nodded down at the brown cube on the table, Zen smiling, Luke drawing his first inhale.

"What? You think it's a problem?" Luke asked, passing the joint to Zen.

"If I thought it was a problem, I'd have said."

"Rolls'em good, though, eh?"

Zen nodded in agreement on the first exhale.

"You're not watching the film?" Steven asked.

"Nah. Not my kind of thing."

"Pity."

Darren came in to get some more beers from a fridge. Seeing Steven at the table, he stopped.

"Ere, is it true Sian is named after Sean Penn?"

"Yeah. Sean for a boy, Sian for a girl."

"You a big fan?" Zen asked.

"No, it was a bet I made once."

"Remember the bet I made you that time the van caught a flat, out in Pembrokeshire or wherever it was?" Luke chipped in animatedly.

"Yeah."

"Longest bloody bike ride of my life. Thirty eight miles in the dark. Must've got blown into the weeds a dozen fucking times."

"And you lost the bet."

"Not one son of a bitch stopped to give us a lift. Thought that bloody road'd never end."

"Same as that time we cycled up to Newbury to check out the road building protest." Darren said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Must've been thirty miles there and thirty back, not to mention the walking round, looking for that camp site. That night, man. The fucking Pearl Harbor of cramp attacks. Foot first, then calf, then thigh, then the other foot. Felt like someone was beating me with a cricket bat."

"Yeah, the government getting you with their cosmic ray for fucking with their road building programme."

"Fuck you, Lucky Luke. One of these days try cycling up a hill, see what your rock'ard balls have to say for themselves then."

Darren, a collection of beer bottles cradled in his arms, went back into the lounge.

"Is it true you killed a whale once?" Luke turned on Steven.

"Whale?"

"Yeah. Somebody once said something..."

"One toke over the line, Luke."

"Nah, man, I heard something. I swear."

Head shaking in disbelief, Steven got up, disappeared into the house. Now Luke only had Zen to pick on.

"You coming to the races Sunday?"

"Which races?"

"Got the end of the season coming up. Downhill. You heard of our team, the Stiffs?"

Zen shook his head, declined another hit of the drug.

"Team's called the Stiffs, 'cause we ride bikes without suspension. You know what 'downhillin' is?"

"Cycling downhill on mountain bikes?"

"Right. Downhill's all fucked up now. All these kids now on three, four grand full-sus machines, bombing it down. No style, no technique, no class. We started training them on simpler bikes, without suspension, to help improve their skills, control. Then we got to like it so much, we started a new class. Racing little single-speed, twenty-inch stunt bikes down the same mountains as the fully-kitted pros. Got a national league going now, gone big time. Fucking

mental, man..." The grin on Luke's face said he was proud of the macho vision. "Another reason we're called the Stiffs is 'cause sooner or later..."

Listening, Zen realised everyone had done a runner. He was the only one left listening to the drugged drivel Luke was likely to keep spewing out for hours to come. Looking around the kitchen, trying to shut out the noise of Luke's voice, he noticed a glass door leading outside. He got up, wandered over, gave the handle a try.

"You need the key."

"Key?"

"It's in that drawer there. Inside the matchbox... Not the little one, the big one."

Zen unlocked the door, icy glass ringing nervously as he pushed it open.

"You're not going outside? It's freezing..."

The night was infinitely calm. He could see the stars as clearly as the glare from far off streetlights and his own spinning head would allow. The garden was an untidy network of little paths, trees and bushes crowding round the edges. At its far end, he looked over the wall, down a sharp drop, lines of rail tracks and depot garages seventy, eighty feet below.

Footsteps approached from behind.

"Chris said you liked the odd open-air tippie." Zen turned to see his host down on a bench, vodka bottle and Dervish's cigarillo case beside him.

"Chris?"

"You think living in someone's house people wouldn't notice your comings and goings?"

Zen realised whatever attempts he'd made at camouflaging his movements had been doomed to fail. Not that it mattered.

"Hope it didn't upset anyone."

"Not a lot could throw Chris or Mother Bates these days."

Zen walked over, took what was left of the second bottle, filled the shots glasses sitting on the bench.

"May I?" he asked, putting his hand on the tin box.

"Don't mind if I don't join you. Booze and hash make me dopey... Why choose this end of the country to hang around in?"

Zen lit up, inhaled the sweet smoke, welcomed the instant anaesthesia.

"Peacehaven just looked good on the map."

"Good for what?"

"Not important."

"Everybody in storytelling mood tonight."

"That's down to you."

"Maybe. Talk."

"Did you really kill a whale?"

Steven sighed, sat up straight on the bench.

"Did you know that whales sleep? They float on the surface, happy to believe there ain't nothing out there can come close to disturbing them... I was on a little-forty footer, off the Canaries, with a Spanish girl liked drinking a bit. I was asleep on deck, the night hot, sand off the Sahara blowing all over the place, in our clothes, hair, everywhere. Just didn't feel like being below deck until we could get clear out into the Atlantic and clean the births out... When you sail at night, one of you always stays up on watch, just in case a supertanker or a whale should come floating out of the dark. Warm currents round there, good for the big fishies like to make their bed for the night, got to watch the seas extra hard. Which is impossible do when one of you's asleep and the other pissed as all hell... My fault. Shouldn't have trusted her. Should've known better. Bad night."

"What happened?"

"Put two and two together."

"Was the boat fucked?"

"We hit a floating mountain."

"We're you both all right?"

"No. An on-board rescue beacon went off the moment the boat sank. According to their records, it took the coastguard two hours to find me. Longest two hours of my life. Searching for her, trying to keep afloat, looking out for the damn whale... Never saw either of them again."

For a while, neither of them said anything. Zen had the impression the story had taken a lot out of his host.

"And you?" Steven was the first to speak again. "What washed you up in a dead-end place like Peacehaven?"

Zen kept sucking on the joint, not looking anywhere, thinking the request over, thinking through things that kept evading him, logical lines of reasoning that said speak or stay silent, said to stay or leave, said none of it mattered. Steven remained motionless, looking at the far end of the garden. Zen moved the glasses and tin case aside, sat on the other end of the bench.

"Came back to see people... To watch."

"Back from where?"

"The Highlands."

"You lived up there?"

"No, just drove around. Slept in the van. Got high on the landscape."

"Why there?"

"You ever been?"

"A few times."

"Beautiful. Like a desert, but alive. This mad magic in the place."

"So why come back?"

Zen waited before answering, not because he didn't know what to say, but because he'd thought the subject over too many times. To answer straight away might've sounded rehearsed.

"Found too much peace up there."

"That possible?"

"Sometimes."

"When?"

"When it isn't what you need... I had to stop hiding out."

"Hiding from what?"

Zen had his elbows resting on knees, head hanging down, trying to make his thoughts work against the dulling effects of the drug and the crazy pressure of all his mind contained.

"Someone... Something... Everything I don't want to think about... Don't want to remember."

The conversation could've gone on, but he couldn't speak. Silence was safe, he thought for once. Silence couldn't hurt.



Doors locked behind them, Zen glanced into the lounge, but everyone was either gone or asleep. He sat down at the kitchen table, stared out the window, trying to focus on a sky full of cold stars.

"Want one?" Steven asked, getting the coffee machine ready.

"No."

Silence. The TV next door quiet. Absolute limbo. What was he feeling? No connection to the room he was in, none to the person who had suddenly got too close. The past was everything, and everything was past.

"Who was she?"

Zen flinched, Steven's words like an ice-cold hand on his back, reaching right through the spine and ribs, deep into things that didn't need unearthing.

"Nobody. Nobody any more."

"Does she live in Brighton?"

Zen shook his head.

"I just liked the name. The irony... No peace. No haven."

"And now?" Steven's voice was anything but prying, but it was still asking for too much.

"I'm gonna go." He followed the words with action, getting up, pocketing his fags and lighter. In his shoulders, he felt a year's worth of tension. They felt so tight, if anyone were to touch him, he felt sure the muscles would snap and break like he was made of splinters.

"Where?" The blue eyes were asking for more than an address.

"Good question."

"You around tomorrow?"

"Why?"

"Come by. Rescue me from the masses for a while."

Zen thought the request over, head spinning.

"When?"

"Whenever. Evening time."

He reached out, shook Steven's heavy hand, "Thanks," turned, feeling stupid for the nth time that night.

Outside, the letter box ringing in the door behind him, he pulled the hat low over his eyes, wondered why he'd choked just now. Surprise? Was it something in Steven, or was it just an excess of need? He wanted to talk, say more, explain why he was here in this sorry state, but didn't. Why? Why not? Such a colourful tale. He didn't want to take it to the grave with him, wanted it told, if for no other reason than to make it real again, through the telling, to have someone other than himself know what had happened. After a year of solitude, it felt as if he wasn't quite real any more, his own incredible story no more than personal myth. He desperately wanted to turn it back into something tangible. Besides, if no one but him knew and he vanished, then the story would vanish too. No lessons learnt, passed on, his suffering for nothing. Why not speak then? Why choke and walk away?

Stumbling back towards the seafront, lost in a maze of narrow streets, he felt grateful for this new puzzle to take him through to sunrise.



What is this thing we're longing for so much? Where does it come from? Its origins? D'you ever give them thought? Like some lost, lone angel, leading us on through an ill-fitting world. I look around. It doesn't belong. Nobody's interested, not any more, not really. Nobody has the time, the heart or the stomach for it. Business is business. Debt, drive, desire. Love going the way of god.

I can't believe what You, just one person, has managed to make me feel. I walk around at night, watching the city, amazed. How is it no one before You got me anywhere near this high? The girls and women I knew before you. There were many. Some were remarkable. Some I miss even now. Why not then? Not them? It's not chemicals, not mechanics. I can't believe just the existence of just one person can change the world whole. Change everything. But it does. I don't believe in miracles, magic. This is fact. By all definitions. I feel lost without You. Always will. Some things I have no doubts about.

He only needed to go downstairs, say he was signing out tomorrow. Leaving again was the right thing to do. Move along, out of the sphere of this family. Steven could be allowed some of his time, but not the rest of them. The rest he didn't want to know. The mother, the child, the female curves moving around the place, the eyes that sometimes met his. Swaying on the edge of the bed, he smoked with his eyes closed, actually dreaming of the time this would all be over. Dreaming of death. To dream of dying meant to really die in your own sleep, but what did it mean to daydream of death? Did it mean he was ready?

He would never be as ready as he wanted to be, never say the things he wanted to say, the way he wanted to say them, not even feel what he really wanted to feel. Nothing was straight nor pure anymore. Not even love itself.



The motel and the petrol station were part of the same complex. No more than forty years old, the ceilings low, the fittings and décor only a notch above those of the cafe he'd eaten in on his first day. Fake wood veneer, a few plants, imitation leather armchairs on the way through to a double glazed, conservatory-style restaurant. The grey-haired receptionist, large nose protruding from a fake-toothed smile, asked if he could help.

"Have you got any free rooms?"

"Sure. When for?"

"Tomorrow."

"How many nights?"

"A week. Anything with a sea view?"

"Certainly. For how many?"

"Just me."

"I'll show you what they look like..."

"Doesn't matter." He took the biro lying on the desk. "I'll pay now, move in tomorrow, if that's OK."

The receptionist took out a reservation card.

"You don't want to see the room?"

He shook his head, started filling in boxes full of alien symbols, wondering where he got the strength to keep managing such senseless scenes. From the bundle of notes in his pocket he counted out the price quoted, rounded it off with a few coins. While the man wrote out his receipt, he looked down at the four or five coins in his palm, some coppers and a twenty pence piece.

"D'you have a payphone here?"

"Just round that pillar."

He dialled, the phone answered before he even heard the line ringing.

"Radcliffe's."

"Hi. I have a van in for repairs."

"Name?"

"Moore."

Silence.

"Nothing by that name, mate."

For a second he thought he might've been cheated by Steven and Neil, but the idea was too ridiculous to take seriously.

"It's a white Suzuki Carry. Neil should know."

"Oh, yeah, the old thing." More silence. "All done, ready when you are."

"You open tomorrow?"

"Come ten a.m. onwards."

"I'll be there round eleven."

"See ya'."

He glanced back at the reception desk, holding another coin. The room, the last ever, was his. It was time to do something he hadn't stopped thinking about since the conversation with Steven. Carefully, he dialled 141 to block the motel's number from being registered by the exchange, then dialled on. Blood pounding through his ears made the ringing tone sound very far away. Nothing. No answer. The tiniest blessings refusing to materialise.

I called you, and there was no one there. Friday night. You, back home, with friends, pubs I'm dying to see the insides of for once. Never liked pubs. All the same lazy places full of lazy talk. Same everywhere, same unimaginative, time-warp dead ends.

I'm blabbering. Where are You? I'm calling no one. No one is calling me. The one person means anything is a thousand miles away, so beyond my reach, I can't get a handle on it. I have air here, I have every molecule tearing round inside me. If all is energy, then what is this thing sweeping through me? The highest frequency? I need to connect, to bond. I need Your voice, at least, need something of my home to make itself felt tonight.

shoulders to carry

Saturday

Camped with her papers in front of the television, Sophie turned as the front door closed behind him.

“See you got your van back.”

“Yeah.” He waited a second before asking. “I’d like to sign out.”

“All right.” She stretched up, dropping the pile of papers from her lap onto the table. “Time to pay for all those breakfasts you didn’t have.”

Five minutes later, as he came past the lounge, bags in hand, she didn’t so much as look up from her reading. He felt hurt. It was a tiny pain, burrowing through some shred of ego he still had knocking around somewhere, but it was good to acknowledge it, stay conscious of those shreds of old self could still cause him hassle. Maybe she didn’t hear him come down. Maybe she was waiting for him to say something on the way out. Maybe she didn’t care either way.

Throwing the bags into the van, he noticed even the sliding doors had been greased during the overhaul. Getting in behind the wheel, knowing the engine would turn over when asked to, it felt as if it wasn’t his any more, a different creature to the one he had travelled with him across the country. It felt ready for its next owner, one in just as good a shape as the machine.

The couple of minutes drive through the bungalow town was taken up thinking about recent sleights of fate. All coincidences. Meaningless coincidences. Meeting Steven on the beach. Coming across a motel in a place like Peacehaven. Maybe there was nothing puzzling about it. Nothing strange about Sophie retreating here after the death of her husband, her daughters near. Nothing strange about Steven paying a moment’s attention to a stray like him. Maybe it was one of the tall man’s habits, talking to strangers that passed through his territory.

Or maybe it was time to admit that the shadow he had become attracted curiosity, no matter how much he tried to hide. He was a freak, like the giant Santa, like Toughman XFX, and there was nothing extraordinary in that.

The old man in reception retrieved his reservation card, grabbed a key, slipped out from behind the desk. Before Zen could protest, the man grabbed his rucksack and briefcase, led them into corridors as narrow as those of a battleship.

Outside, they crossed a gravelled courtyard to a low building that housed the rooms, parking spaces right outside. His door was red, same as hers in London. The echo meant something for about a second, then he was in, the receptionist walking around, checking the lights, the old-fashioned radio, the small screen TV. The room was square, a small section on the right partitioned off for the bathroom. Night cabinets separated two beds, complete with ugly headrests, small reading lamps over the pillows. The smell of age hung over the room, of bodies too numerous to ever be disinfected from the walls and fabrics. Plain. Anonymous. Perfect.

“Hope you’ll be comfortable,” the old man said, smiling, the words utterly fresh and sincere. “Anything you need, just come by and ask, all right?”

Zen nodded, thought about tipping just as the man left, closing the door with an appreciative smile. A low mirror ran the length of the room to his right, a long shelf below it. Parting the orange curtains, he looked out, the lack of elevation the only difference between here and the B&B.

The sky was clouding over, the sun playing all kinds of light-show tricks against the tangle of ripped white and blue. He didn’t feel like going to sleep yet, maybe not at all. Was it his body refusing to waste time sleeping, knowing what was ahead, or something else, something without significance? He felt a time would come soon when he’d see much more of these four walls, but now was not yet it.



The road seemed familiar from his last, sleepy bus ride along the coast. Climbing a high hill, just out of Seaford, he recognised the woods which had woken him on the bus a week ago. Today they were grey and humble against the sweep of rolling hills, cliffs climbing high where the Seven Sisters reared for the sky.

Past the old village he'd turned at a week back, the road dropped down a steep hill the other side, a petrol station and a lane shooting off at the bottom, a sign directing traffic towards Beachy Head. For a minute, he drove along a winding road, tall hills parting, allowing glimpses of the sea between their grassy backs. Some fields, cottages on the edge of cliff a little way off. He swung left, climbing slowly along the empty, rising land, surprised by how many cars passed him by, the place almost crowded.

Eventually, where the cliff hills reached massive proportions, he stopped, assuming this was it, Beachy Head, the place of so many infamous deaths. The payphone near to where he'd parked was covered with ads for the Samaritans, reaching out the final hand of hope. It was nice, he thought. Nice to think someone out there still felt like caring.

Facing the horizon, the edge between sea and sky darkening, he stayed where he was, wind violently shepherding clouds before his eyes. The case and a bottle of red lay on the passenger seat beside him. His mind worked slowly on consequences as he picked up the bottle and twisted the corkscrew in. If he drank now, he'd have to have his afternoon sleep in the back. If he slept in the back, what were the chances of him getting anywhere near Steven's place later? Slight. The thought comforted him. He felt obliged to go, and obligations were things he no longer had the shoulders to carry.

Went drinking tonight. Got hit on by a student. Sat there, trying to repel her advances with tedium. Kept talking about grammar and semantics, but she got so drunk, it didn't seem to matter.

Thought about sex. Making Love. Lovemaking. All the difference in the wording. So many trying to make love happen through sex, instead of waiting for love to come first. There's a billion theorists out there, harping on about what they see fit, see best, but it's the one thing you can't conjure, drug or drink up, wish along, make happen. Can't make love happen.

You've managed to collapse my past.

The few times I've said the word not knowing what it meant, just knowing it was stillborn even as it left my lips. Not saying it out of obligation, just out of desire for it to be true. You never know just how much need you have till it finds you, till you get your fill. Jesus, I had no conception of my own passions, my own capacity for feeling.

Sat there in that pub, just humbled by someone's need to rub themselves up against someone else, never said it wasn't that at all, wasn't that they really needed.

shape my fate's in

Sunday

He'd sat parked outside Steven's house for at least an hour, drinking, waiting until he either fell asleep or worked up the courage to go in.

The double garage had clearly been soundproofed, the music coming from it muted, smoke pouring from air vents. People kept coming and going between it and the house, sound systems beating inside both. He opened the door, stepped out, forced to hold on to the handle, not by tiredness, but by drink.

On the lawn, next to the tarpaulined wrecks, motorcycles leaned against one another. Lights were on inside each room, going through rainbows. He stood on the steps as if before a fortress, a bottle in each hand, wondering what he was doing here, whether he was going to find Steven, and even if, what they'd have to say to each other. But anything, any kind of action was better than standing here, swaying, asking stupid questions. Just as he was about to climb the steps, the doors opened, the hall flooded with purple and blue light. Music burst out, followed by a group of women, all in purple and white, running for the garage. He recognised Chris, hair done in Eighties-style waves. She raised a slim hand, gave a quick Hi and ran on.

Inside, the hall had been transformed. Disco lights had been attached to the railings above, an eight-foot Prince in concert on the wall of TV sets at the back, speakers here and in the lounge blasting out the soundtrack, a crowd dancing away under the turned-down lighting.

In the lounge, the television had been removed, couches arranged against the back wall, people sitting, standing, playing pool. There was no one he recognised, no one who noticed him.

In the kitchen, he almost missed Steven. The place was full, the tall man squeezed into the far corner. A dark-haired woman sat in his lap, head buried in his neck, as if asleep. Luke was nearby, talking to a girl sitting beside him, whispering something into her richly pierced ear.

Zen made his way through the smoke-filled room, Steven already beaming him a smile.

"Naomi, honey, time to give Grandpa's lap a rest," he said, lifting the sleepy head off his shoulders. The girl slumped off him slowly, helped by his long arms. "Find us a chair, Luke."

Luke used Steven's request to move the girl he was talking to onto his knees, shoving the empty chair Zen's way. Zen put the vodka bottles down on the table amongst other booze and snacks, ashtrays spilling over, a little pile of gifts by Steven's elbow guarded over like treasure.

Steven pushed a stack of plastic cups his way, shook his head as Zen tried to fill two with vodka.

"None for me, cheers."

"No?"

"Not tonight." He held up a bottle of Coke.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Steven answered, quickly glancing away, smiling at someone in the passing. "Someone's gotta stay sober, watch the law don't do a Mars Bar Faithfull on us... Cheers." He held his bottle up to Zen's cup. "Maybe you want something herbal?"

Zen shook his head. Alone, the answer would've been a straight Yes, but back here, the place crowded with faces he didn't know, fucked already, he wanted substances he knew he could handle. Glancing quickly round, recovering familiarity, he noticed Charlie was over by the hall door, hunched over his cast, heatedly discussing something with a group of mates. There were another ten, fifteen faces squeezed into the room, faces he was for once under no obligation to ever know. The thought relaxed him a little. He felt tension leave his shoulders, the drink going down a treat. Somebody shouted, "How the fuck do I keep getting into all these stupid kung-fu conversations," Steven smiling in their direction.

"How's your new bed?"

Zen had to think the question over, slow to realise the grapevine must've done its thing again.

"Dunno. Signed into the motel today, but..." He was having a hard time talking over the noise of music and conversation behind them.

"Sophie was sorry to lose such a polite customer... Wookie! Toss us up a carton of tomato," he shouted to a man by the door.

"The motel fits me better."

"What, your notion of lone holidaymaker?"

"No. Puts distance between some things." Someone placed a carton of juice in front of him. "Thanks... D'you always have parties in your garage?"

"Sometimes. It's a friend's birthday. She knows a few people, so we thought it might be wise to spread out. People always wanna shoot the DJ, but this way we have the easy listening here, and the hardcore shit out in the garage."

"Was Prince her idea?"

"She always wants a theme party. Me, I could listen to his early stuff forever. Like a cross between Clinton on helium and a dirty version of George Benson. Makes me feel like I'm nineteen again."

As Zen tried to work out Steven's age, Dervish approached the table.

"What you done to Naomi?" he boomed, voice rocked by booze and anger.

"Pardon?" Steven's eyes were up on his, the light in them gone, Dervish too drunk to see it.

"Seen her outside, man, going home, said something about talking to you."

"Girlie got drunk."

"And why is that? Spends half the night sitting in your lap, and now she's gone?" Dervish's hysterical voice was making hairs stand on the back of Zen's neck, attracting glances from the surrounding crowd. Steven said nothing, waiting for the lips to move before silencing them with a request. "I..."

"Derv, sit down."

"Fuck you." He knew he was being manipulated into submission, swung a foot lightly out to strike Steven's shin, but its target's reaction was that bit quicker, landing a swift kick to the crotch. Dervish went down on his knees, Steven staring him down again. The voice was one of shock, not pain. "Fuck, man..."

Steven grabbed him by the shoulders, beer bottle rolling away, spilling its contents all over the floor, held him in between his knees in a tight embrace, lips smiling, teeth clenched.

"Calm down. Didn't kick you hard, did I? You can still speak... And breed."

Dervish tried to wrench away, but the embrace held tight.

"How could you kick me in the balls, man?" His voice had instantly turned into that of a drunken man-child, surrendered to self-pity, tears about to start rolling down the wrinkling cheeks. Zen watched Steven's face, realised the embrace was meant to stop Dervish from seeing it, stop him knowing how close he'd come to trouble. "All the years we've been mates."

"Take the royal piss, don't ya," Steven was whispering in his ear so quietly, Zen could barely hear him. "You kicked first."

"I didn't kick you in the balls. You kicked me."

"What planet you on? Calm down. I remind you of this tomorrow, you'll be a hell of a lot more sore."

Dervish seemed inconsolable.

"What's it to you?"

"Jeez... Make mates work overtime, don't ya?" Steven smiled down at the body slumped in his arms. "Now, get up. Go on. Baby your age." Derv twisted on the floor, trying to lash out with his elbow, Steven easily deflecting the blows, laughing out loud. "Get on your feet, lover boy. Soldier. Go'an... Paul!" He shouted to someone else again. "Get Dervish a beer, take him to the garage, see where Naomi got to. Girl's too young to be babysitting all alone Saturday nights."

He looked out to the crowd, making sure everyone could see nothing was wrong, none of the bad frequencies impact and repeat elsewhere, but when he spoke, glancing at Zen, it was clear the scene had cost him energy.

"People always come at me with battering rams. I love booze personally, but too many children out there doing it."

"You're safe with me," was the first, dumb thing came to Zen's head. Steven smiled again, glancing quickly at the table, then back out into the crowd. "Which way's the bathroom?"

"One straight on, but I think it's full of randy kids. Some more upstairs, though."

Zen got up, chair shoved under the table. The purple crowd was thick all the way through to the hallway. Charlie only barely acknowledged his greeting as he passed, busy listening to someone talking rugby. Zen turned left, shoved past people dancing, sitting on the stairs, the smell of sweating bodies and hash floating over the dance floor.

There were six doors up on the landing, two each side, two to the back of the house, a couple adorned with tag-style 'Bog' signs. He was thankful for the door by the stairs being open, seeing as the gallery round the hall was littered with bodies, people cuddling or just looking down, legs threaded through the railing supports.

The door had a huge padlock on the inside, the key glued into it. A small shower cubicle was taken up with an antique music stand, the curtain half-torn down, a giant toy elephant dive-bombing it from the ceiling. A funfair mirror hanging on the wall made you look like Hitchcock. Relieving himself, he stared down at the cistern. A load of coloured marbles glued to it spelled out the words 'No A-Class'.

"What'd you want me to do, Dan?" Steven was speaking to a skinny, well-dressed man standing before him. A tall redhead in a cream-coloured leather skirt and white blouse smiled from his side at Zen, obviously too far gone to follow any sort of conversation. "That money's the problem?"

"Money can't be the problem." Where Steven was a big man with a quiet voice, this guy was the direct opposite. "Night clubs are a licence to print the fucking stuff. The overheads is nothing. Pay the breweries, the DJ's, keep the staff sorted and you're away. It'd be a piece of piss to get it up and running, fuck, TWO months from now. Summer's coming..."

"Dan, I'm not arguing. All I'm saying is find someone else... All right," he greeted Zen as he sat down.

"Dan, look around. This is a party..."

"That's what I'm talking about! You! Look at this place. I'm not going in with some meathead plonker don't know his E's from his elbow."

"I know you don't want to take No for an answer. I'm not saying No, 'cause all we're doing here is chatting. Now, you, Karen, go get a couple of drinks from the fridge over there, get merry, call me once the working week starts. Then we'll talk business, and you can ask me to go in with you and then I'll tell you No."

The skinny guy had to wait for a cue from Steven to start smiling, unsure of who the joke was meant to be on. The woman dragged him away, his mind visibly still on making deals as they disappeared in the crowd. Suddenly, a happy scream went up from the dance floor, the sound of a up-beat dance tune Zen recognised from an eighties teen film booming through the speakers in the other rooms.

"One o'clock. Punters get hungry for cheese."

"No 'YMCA', though, please."

Steven laughed.

"Jimbo has a wicked speed garage mix..."

"You're Steven, right?" A cheerful voice asked from behind Zen. He turned to see three bikers behind him, big grins accessorising designer jeans and leathers.

"Right."

"I'm Lewis, Paul Martlett's son." A hand came shooting over Zen's shoulder. Steven shook it, beaming a tired smile his way.

"And what should that tell me?"

"You used to own The Depot down in Putney, right? My father was one of your best customers. Bought a P-15 Mustang from you once, for an air show."

Steven made a show of trying to recollect.

"Oh, yeah, I remember. Took us forever to get that thing through customs... And to get the money out'ya dad."

Martlett Jnr laughed, eyes glistening with enthusiasm.

"I used to love that shop, man! Came down with him any time I had the chance. All the candy machines and jeans and guns and all the other shit you had there. Got my first Harley from you."

"Yeah?"

"One of those little AMC scooter thingies for my tenth."

Steven's face broke out in a wide grin.

"Now everything's clear. Retro piled upon retro... What you boys doing, honouring my house with a visit?"

"Weather was sweet, thought we'd run down to Brighton for the weekend. Maybe the last run of the year. Heard from someone I know down at the Sidewinder that you were having a party, thought we'd come along, say hello."

"That's real sweet. You must be tired," he said, getting up off his chair. "Do me a favour. Got this pile of prezzies here I'm guarding. You see anyone wearing purple, make sure they get one. That's the rules. I need to see off my friend here. You and the other musketeers, when I come back, we'll talk shop."

"Sure, man."

"Hey," one of the other bikers called out. "I've got a purple watch strap. Does that count?"

"For being such a keen bunny, you get two... Zen."

Steven grabbed one of the vodka bottles off the table, pushed off through the crowd, stopped by the door to whisper to Charlie. "Be gone a couple of hours. Cheryl's in the bathroom, Adam and them lot are busy upstairs, watch'em..." Charlie nodded, ignoring Zen completely as they moved on.

On the steps, Steven stopped, raised a hand to acknowledge the greeting from a young man at the gate. From behind the closed door, Zen heard Donna Summer start into 'I Feel Love'.

"See Chris anywhere?"

"She's in the garage," the man replied.

"Everything else all right?"

"Amos and Andy."

"If you see her, she asks, tell her I'll be back in a while. Any questions, bell Charlie."

"Sure thing."

Steven started crossing the street, then stopped, looked up at the clear sky. "When are you leaving us, exactly?"

"Soon."

"How? Off Beachy Head?"

"No. Nothing that obvious."

Steven lowered his head to look straight at him, the eyes calm, patient, then nodded once.

"Fancy a quick boat ride?"

Staring into the blue eyes, Zen didn't know what to say, other than that No did not feel like the right answer, and Yes felt weak. He was being tugged along, for reasons he hadn't yet been able to fathom, but it'd look stupid to turn back now.

"Whatever."

Steven smiled right through him, crossed over, the Vitesse parked in someone else's driveway. Inside, Steven handed him the bottle, fired up, reversed out of the driveway, engine ambling down the hill.

"You said the Highlands were like a desert." Zen, stunned again by the acuteness of Steven's memory, said nothing. He felt his privacy being invaded in a way impossible to resist. But when he thought about it, he was surprised to find he didn't care whether Steven asked anything or not, feeling utterly uninterested in himself.

"You get to thinking you could just wander out there forever... But you can't."

"Hide, but not run."

"No... Not even in a desert." Steven nodded, swinging the car round the Old Steine, booming up in the direction of Peacehaven. "Fell into a routine. Sleep days. Wake sunsets. Drink... Such a beautiful place. The weather perfect. Found myself..."

"What?"

"Wasn't real. Wandering round with..." Something snapped him out of the role of narrator, back into his own skin, a jolt of pain shutting his mouth and eyes tight. He wanted to say something about a ghost and a briefcase full of mementos, but it was too much, the story too fresh, too raw to peel away the layers.

Hiding behind the loud growl of the V8, he said nothing for a while. Even the bottle sitting in his lap was nothing, no anaesthetic any more.

They descended from the cliff into the Marina, a huge multi-storey car park on the right, private docks up ahead.

"I came back, that's all."

"To what?"

"To Peacehaven... To retire..."

"And drink yourself to death?"

They drove slowly over speed bumps, pulled into a parking space near blocks of small flats, all arranged round canals and mini docks.

"I told you. Not here. Nothing that unoriginal." Engine off, a massive fan could be heard whirring under the bonnet. Zen forced a smile onto his lips. "We going sailing?"

"Nah. Night's no good for sails."

Zen was the first to open the door, climb out. Steven locked the car, set the alarm, said, "This way," crossed a little green, then over a grassy ridge, masts poking up into the sky. Zen stared down at the boats rocking silently on dark water. A little gate barred access to the buildings and walkways in the heart of the marina. Steven took out a key, opened it, let Zen through. A raised walkway, masts swaying each side, led them towards a line of yellow and white houses perched on concrete supports, above tide levels. Steven waved cheerfully to a security camera, climbed down some dimly lit steps, past a few doors to the cabin-like dwellings.

"Half the boats and houses here just dirty money. Many a Londoner gets their laundry done here."

He stopped by the fifth door, lights out inside, tapped gently on the window. Nothing happened for a while, but Steven didn't seem bothered. He tapped again, asked Zen for the bottle in his hand. There was some shuffling inside, then a mighty bang, something heavy crashing to the floor, the noise of a TV set suddenly blasting into great noise, silenced after a few seconds. Eventually, a face appeared in the window, shoving the curtain aside.

"Jules, it's the Big Bad Wolf," Steven announced.

The latches clicked and the door opened quickly on a middle-aged man, dishevelled, in oversize boxers and black T-shirt.

"Steven!" The accent was Australian. "Nice to see you, mate. Come in..."

"See you're on the porn again, Jules." Inside the small house, a kitchen-come-living room area was in a state similar to its occupant. A large TV set was lying on the floor, half covered by a blanket, a chair beside it. "I told you in the past, put it on the table..."

"Can't, can I, with my back." The response was somewhat muted by the handover of the bottle.

"If you can still get the old fella up," Steven said, lifting the heavy set back onto the table, "You can do the same with this... Zen, meet another night watchman."

"Jules Pearson." The man introduced himself, looking thrown by the intrusion.

"Jules sits here, supposedly watching his nephew's boats, but all he does is drink and stares at naked women doing filthy things all day... Shut up, Jules," he cut the reply short. "I'm only jealous. You got the life of a cat here. I'd swap places right now if I had a family as generous as yours."

"Generous, my cock..."

"Jules' nephew Kenny, a mate of mine, owns this place. Keeps his dirty old uncle on the payroll." Steven was climbing the narrow stairs to the upper floor of the cottage, "Jules, we're taking Dick out."

"All right, whatever." Jules was already busy checking the cables connected to the set, testing it out. "If this is fucked though, you owe me a new one."

Steven was back downstairs, a plastic credit card on a black key fob in his hand.

"If Kenny ever comes here unannounced, he'll skin you alive for leaving the place such a dump."

"All right, all right, get out of here." Jules waved them along. "Pleasant sailing," he mumbled harshly in parting, a hard look in his eye.

"Ooh, you old witch, you. One of these day your curses will befall your own head."

The door slammed shut.

They walked down to a ramp onto a floating walkway, past numerous boats, eventually stopping by something straight out of a Duran Duran video. The red speedboat Steven had just remotely de-alarm and was climbing over the back of had its bus-wide nose pointed somewhere over the walls of the marina. Zen counted three outboard engines at the back, covered by a protective plate. The massive vessel stayed more or less still as Steven climbed all over it, untying the moorings.

"C'mon," he shouted.

Zen followed over the engines and onto the black couch that lined the rear. There were two steering wheels in the open cockpit, each with its own myriad of dials and gauges, everything black and chrome. A sliding shutter door between them led to the cabin below. Zen watched Steven mess about with a keypad, then slide the credit-card passkey along a sensor, the two dashboards coming alive in warm, back-lit yellow. Turning, the tall man said,

"Rare I ever come out and offend anyone with this monstrosity, but Kenny's about to dock it for winter. Even he has enough taste to only ever take it out at night."

"This is Dick?"

"Re-christened on account of the colour. You heard the joke about bankers and their equipment?" Zen shook his head. "They all have red dicks 'cause they're tight-fisted wankers. One of Kenny's oldest jokes. He comes from a long line of financiers. Comedy not their strongest point... Lift up that trap door." Zen pulled open a black panel in the floor, stared down into something could never have been called a mere mini-bar.

"What'd you want?"

"Coke. Help yourself to whatever."

Zen pulled out a bottle of Coke and another of vodka, glasses tucked safely into storm-proof holders. He tossed the soft drink to Steven.

"Cheers. Gotta wait a while, let the oil-cooled engines warm up a little." He twisted a couple of dials on the dash, Zen hit by a blast of warm air from various vents around the deck. "Ever been out on one of these?" Zen shook his head, eyes spinning round the black leather everything. "Fun. Seven hundred horsepower out on open seas almost makes you forgive the paintjob."

"Where'd you meet this guy?"

"Kenny? We used to work together in New York."

"What's it like over there?"

"I'll take England any day."

"Why there then?"

"Lost my licence when I was seventeen, went to the one place they'd still let me drive."

"New York?"

"Got a US passport, through my mother's family."

"How'd you lose your licence?"

"You never been pulled over for anything?"

"Nothing I couldn't apologise my way out of."

"Used to boost cars with some friends, all round London, just to race'em across town. In the old days, before Gatsos, Stingers and infra-red copters. If you got pulled, just legged it into the night. No risk of anyone putting bullets in your back."

"Racing across London?"

"Yep."

"But you got caught?"

Steven smiled.

"I was a cocky shit, and paid."

"What did you do in New York? Drove a cab?"

"Nah, nothing that colourful. I was young, idealistic. Wanted to get rich quick." Zen smirked. "Worked for a futures trading firm for a few years, looked after my pennies, came back and set up the Depot."

"That what you always wanted? To be rich?"

"Nah... When I was a little kid I wanted to be a politician." At the press of a button, the turbo charged motors whirled into life.

"A what?"

"You heard," Steven shouted over the noise of the revving motors. "My old man knew enough of them. Cocky fuckers. Appealed to me at the time."

"So what happened?"

"You never grow out of anything? Changed my mind. Decided man's not fit to govern man. Not on any kind of real scale. The bullshit's insurmountable."

"And is it surmountable where you are now?" Zen found questions and counter-questions composing themselves without any effort in his drunken skull.

"Managable." Steven said off-hand. "But you end up lying just the same, just to protect people. Honesty is misunderstood in theory, but practiced with great astuteness by humanity in general, i.e. rarely."

"But you're in charge."

Steven smiled without looking up from the dials, throttle hand shoving the boat forward, the exhausts near Zen's head putting out a mad noise. Up in his seat, he looked around at the passing boats, the concrete battlements round the Marina lit up like theatre stalls.

They raced the loud, breeze-sprayed mile or so back towards Brighton.

Steven brought the boat around between the two piers, the massive engines set at a purring idle. Zen, gulping down expensive vodka, gazed at the coast before them. Cliffs to the right were lit up, as far as the Seven Sisters, while land curved into an endless bay westwards, distant towns twinkling in the darkness.

"Brighton better than New York, you say?"

"Same kind of zoo."

"What'd you mean?"

"Simple kind of metaphor."

"A zoo?"

"Lions in them old Victorian houses, up on Marine Parade." Steven pointed without looking. "Rich, self-satisfied. Lazy. Then the hotels for other big cats, the fat cats, the sharks. Behind them, cheap flats and backpacker hostels for the cuddly little things, the sloths, the migrant birds... That way's Kemp Town, the gay, hippie quarter. The nice little dolphins live there, permanent smiles plastered to their faces. And beyond all that, street after street of whatever cattle's needed to keep the world fed."

"Simplistic."

"Could map and label the whole thing like London Zoo."

"Where do you fit in then, then?"

"Me? Pure ego. Can't be touched."

Zen smiled to show he got the self-satirising quip.

"You think what? People..."

"There is no people. No such thing. We're all mammals, and that's about all most people have in common."

Zen felt a surge of real sadness run through Steven's voice, wanted to comment, but there was something else in the face turned up at the sky, the words, some other aspect of what was going on underneath. He tried to get his head thinking against the booze and general abandonment to sensation, work out why this man would bother explaining himself in this much detail. It didn't feel natural, this interview session. Felt like Steven was dictating each question with his previous answer, pulling strings, the only thing unclear, in which direction?

"And up there?" Steven asked, watching Zen lying with his head right back, waves lapping behind him. "What the hell d'you think is hiding up there?"

"Don't know."

"People always say that when they know, but don't care to say."

Zen sat silent for a long time, the alcohol, the waves and the sound of music floating down from shore spinning his head.

"I'm not going to jump from Beachy Head," he found himself whispering. "Nothing that unoriginal."

"How then?"

"I'm gonna swim."

"Come again?"

"I've found a place, up in the Highlands. Deepest lake in Europe. Gonna help myself to a boat, swim out, rucksack loaded with earth, go for a one-way dive."

Steven stared back at the town, the sea calm, the yacht rocking sleepily under open skies.

"Guess I chose a pretty appropriate venue for tonight."

"Don't worry... Gotta get used to it."

"Why Scotland?"

"Far away. Peaceful. No one'll ever know... No harm done." Out in the gentle silence of the place, the cigarette he had in his mouth tasted good for the first time in weeks. "It'll be like a long sleep. Could always trust sleep to hide me. Staying up each night, waiting for the world to wake up. Seeing the sun come up again, nothing but sleep waiting with comfort... Drink..." he lifted the bottle to toast, "Helps. I feel her so close, when I'm drunk. Feel all my senses... All I ever felt aroused again. But it's silly." He ran his hand along the leather upholstery. "Under the circumstances."

"Then?"

"What then?"

"You believe in a life beyond?"

Zen shook his head.

"Death kills. That's it."

"You asked about ghosts before."

"That's just my own bullshit. Underwater, my ghost will be free to roam..." He gestured theatrically. "Free to follow her... I swear to god, there is evil. To kill what happened. The wonder."

After another silence, Zen asked,

"Can you take it out a little further? Be nice to see the stars without city lights getting in the way."

Without a word, Steven drained the last of the bottle, spun in his seat, edged the throttle forward. The boat moved slowly, the wheel spun to set their backs to land, then surged forward with neck-snapping speed. Zen suddenly appreciated the otherwise uncomfortable design of the seating, the high back rest saving him from flipping right out over the engines. Steven added a searchlight to their battery of on-board illumination, swiveled its handle down to point at the water ahead, the nose of the boat turned to the stars.

It seemed like mere seconds before they turned, Zen holding on to the edge of the deep seat. Brighton was miles behind, vanished in the twinkling blur the coast had become, the wash behind them pushing land away like a raft. Overhead, the stars had regained their rightful place in the scheme of things.

"You know what I see when I look up?" Steven asked quietly. "Liz... Up there right now, flying back from Montreal. That's all. That's all there is to see."

"You're gonna tell me what happened?"

"When?"

"Between you and the sisters."

Steven nodded.

"Got any questions, ask 'em."

"Are you happy?"

"I am now."

He'd said it looking straight back, making eye contact.

"The call yesterday."

"You mean about the divorce?"

"Were you married to Chris?"

"Nah. Never catch me signing one of them contracts. Not 'till you catch me signing one of them contracts... Most women I ever met tried to take life from me when they came near, in passing, in bed. Afraid. Especially the ones tried to please the most. Only some gave. Chris was one of the rare few. Such gentle confidence... Sian was born a little over a year after we met." Zen was adept now at letting things run through him, the lack of resistance helping make the pain bearable. "Left London, bought that house, just as old man Bates started dying. Like he'd been waiting just to see his granddaughter come along... And then I met Liz."

"You didn't know her before?"

"The sisters have a complex history. The first time I ever spoke to her was the day Sian was born, in the delivery ward."

"You met Liz the same day Chris had Sian?"

Steven nodded.

"Two wonders in one day. The greatest day of my life. Of any life. We didn't talk much, but I learned plenty that day. Plenty about the heady mechanics of things." He opened another bottle of Coke. "Michael died right after, and Sophie went off the rails. I suggested the bed and breakfast. The girls thought it was a joke, but it was close to her mother, close to us in Brighton, to London. Close enough to keep her sane."

"And you?"

"Me?"

"You and Liz?"

"We met a few times... Couldn't be in the same room with her without losing my head. Chris at home, with the newborn Sian, Sophie going nuts, and there's me in the heat of it all, falling for her. But I didn't try to stop it. No point." He paused, Zen unsure if the slight break in narrative was for his sake, or for something else. Theatrics maybe. Steven didn't seem the theatrical type. The smile was too ill-timed for dishonesty. Or maybe he knew exactly when to play the wild card for trust's sake. "Thought Chris was it, believed it, but just when you get cocky, life slaps you down for it. I thought I was happy, and then Liz showed up and blew everything... Chris had never, apart from that fight the sisters had ten years before, been so much as touched by failure. So pure. Never been close to any kind of real purity 'till I met her. But Liz was more like me. Never felt pure myself 'till she came along. It was ridiculous, the timing, the setting, but... I couldn't lie. Couldn't tell Chris I loved her any more. She'd ask and I'd know what she wanted to hear, what the right thing would've been to say, which white lie, but I couldn't. Couldn't stop thinking of the other sister."

"Sounds hard."

"I left Chris when Sian was seven months old and Michael five in the ground. Hardest decision I ever had to make. And in some ways, the easiest... Took another six months of waiting before Liz gave in. Long time all round."

"You just waited?"

"I have the patience of a saint."

Zen sat for a while, working out the historical permutations of the union, waiting for Steven to continue.

"Never minded flying. Putting my fate in the hands of people saw me as a seat number. Complete strangers. Never bothered me. Not 'till now. She's up there, somewhere, right this minute, flying home. Putting her on the plane there I had fear in my throat... Could wear all the times women have said they loved me round my neck like some kind of crocodile tooth necklace, but it doesn't mean shit."

"Everybody harps on about it."

"What?"

"Love. People say the word, but ask them to explain. They don't get shit. But we need explanations. When things go wrong, we need explanations."

"What else d'you need?"

Zen didn't have to think about the question, just let the answer present itself.

"Rest... The only thing keeping me going is the knowledge that soon it'll all be over."

"When?"

"Soon."

"Know any jokes?" Zen asked after a long pause, feeling booze dulling his thoughts again.

"Know a million, but my sense of comic timing stings like a butterfly, floats like a bee."

Zen felt a burst of laughter rise up and die long before it got clear of the throat.

"I know a funny story. You like funny stories?" Steven looked down from his swiveled perch without a word, not fooled by drunken bravura. "Met a woman, made a home, a baby... She was pregnant... Then, one day, everything... Everyone died."

"Died?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last year."

"In Poland?"

Zen nodded.

"How?"

"I went there, after Camberwell. Got this teaching job in Warsaw. Had fun, met lots of people, but... I'd stopped painting, didn't know what next, where... Then we met. In a pub, in the Old Town. Lots of ex-pats went there. Man U were playing that night... Not like you and Liz. Nothing at first sight. Not even my type. Thought I liked headstrong girls, loud, funny. She was... So quiet. Shy." Eyes closed, unable to see her face, Zen pieced words together from fragments of memory. He felt a huge frown forming on his forehead, the sound of his own words bringing back to life something had long ago turned into a twisted fairytale. "But something happened... Springtime. We spent days talking. Non-stop. I had this little, one room flat in tower block. Huge windows... Don't know what it was. Who suddenly spun the world. A week. Everything transformed." He stopped to light another cigarette, give Steven the chance to say something, interrupt, but the big man seemed to be waiting for more. "Something, some... Amplification. All my senses. She... I've never been religious. Not now, not ever. Nothing to do with that. More as in finding your..."

"Finding yourself."

"I wasn't lost." Zen answered instantly. "I know that now. Just 'cause I couldn't put names to it, doesn't mean I was lost, or blind."

"No."

"My life... Found this... Strength came from somewhere. Don't know. Felt... Divine." The word sounded perfectly final. He looked sideways at Steven's solemn, concentrated features focused on the sea around them.

"What happened?"

"Six months of everything... Everything good."

"Not long."

The stretch of silence between them let Zen catch his breath, recompose himself, recover responsibility for what he was saying. His own story.

"Felt like decades... I worked in a private language school. Had plenty of money. Food. Time. We had everything. Lacked for nothing. Travelled. Cooked. Went to the theatre... She couldn't understand a word, but we went, together." He was aware his mind was staggering all over the place, but couldn't help it, couldn't ever get any of it set out right. "She was in pain. Someone back in London had... Left her. Broken her heart. Most of my energy went into trying to heal that. I thought the new place, the distance, the timing would be enough... We'd travelled a thousand miles, right across Europe, to find each other... This home. Found it with someone born streets away from my parent's place in London... Can't tell you how it was. There are no words."

The cigarette had died right after he lit it, or so it seemed. He lit up another.

"Plan was to live there for a year, then move on somewhere, or come back here, set up home. I got painting again. I was feeling such... Then... The start of autumn, we found out she was pregnant. Thought I'd hit the ceiling of happiness before, but when I heard that... Found this stillness, this... Eye of a storm... We decided to go back, be with out nearest and dearest for Christmas. She went first, I stayed behind to work out my contract. Exactly this time last year. This month. A month, me still in Warsaw, she back in London, and then..." His hands gripped the edge of the bench, but it was not enough. He wanted to get up, take a few steps, but there was nowhere to go. "A week before I was due to fly out, her father called. Said they'd done tests at the prenatal clinic. Said not to come over. Said she was in shock."

"What kinds of tests?"

"Blood tests."

"The baby?"

"The baby... Her... HIV."

And that was that. The last piece of the puzzle. Easier than he'd thought, the telling. Much easier.

"She... Got it from him. The guy she'd been with before. Guy she loved. Photographer. Junkie. Half-Polish too. That's why she was in Warsaw in the first place. Looking for him... Only she never told me she'd found him. Had sex while we were together... Don't even know if I was the father. Never will... Don't blame anyone. Don't think... She did the best she could. Wasn't her fault. Can't choose love. Can't unchoose. Can't keep dreams going after we wake."

They sat for a long time in silence, dark wind and water whispering around them. Everything familiar, everything as it ever was.

"The day after that call I went to work. Don't know how, what kind of auto-pilot I was on." His voice was trembling like frozen glass. "For a couple of days there was someone out there walking, talking, in my body, but I can't remember a thing... Then I came back here. Got the first job I could a week before Christmas. Security. Working nights. Trying to work out what the hell had happened. Got no answers. Then went out to the Highlands. Just to prepare myself. Found... This weird peace. Could just wander round, pretending nothing had changed, pretending she was still at home and there was a way back. Found a way to live in the past. But you can't do that. Not with that disease inside you."

"How's your health?" The voice was the perfect blend of ice and sincerity.

"The shape my fate's in?" Zen asked, smiling. "Had the test done March."

"And?"

"Positive... Kind of relief, really."

"How?"

"Made sick sense. Only so much madness you can stand before something other than life is welcome."

"So she's alive?"

Zen nodded.

"You met since?"

"No. She phoned me after... After her father... We talked for a while. But what was there to say? Christ... And now. What if it's her with him? Imagine that. Imagine walking in on that. Don't even know who the father was, me or him. And it doesn't matter..." Steven sat, nodding. "Got weak a few times. Called the house, just to hear her, just to hear her voice, but the mother answered... That was all." He listened to the echo of his own words, disliked something about the way he was making himself sound. "It's not strength. Not any kind of... I just felt too... There was no point." Steven nodded. "A year of nights since. Had plenty of time to think. Work things out. Must've said more words to you tonight than I have to anyone all year."

"Who else'd you talk to?"

"Nobody."

"Your family?"

Zen looked up and smiled through a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"Not their fault, but... I don't need pity." He looked around the boat, then right back at Steven, eyes blurring with tiredness. "Just want to know... A year... A year I've spent trying to work out how something as wonderful as that could fuck up my heart so bad."

For an instant, his eyes clicked together, sleep snapping. He sprang up on the couch, Steven now staring straight at him.

"Wanna do something before you leave?"

"Like what?"

"Whatever you want. Take this boat out in daylight, push it sometime when the Coast Guard won't get suspicious. Fly some paragliders... See New York. Or the Mojave. Race the dunes on some crossers."

"No."

"Nothing?"

"Didn't come here to ride the fairground on the Pier." Steven was staring at him so intently, Zen had to look away. "All this..." he whispered over the rumble of engines, rubbing his hand across the leather seat covers, "This is real... But nowhere near enough. Every moment I stay alive I let it hurt me more... Love kills. This disease. Lovemaking. Making babies kills... Can't live with that."



If there'd been nothing else to say on the subject then, there was nothing to say as Brighton beach pebbles froze his legs and back.

After floating in silence for a while, they had docked and driven round here on Zen's insistence, both of them speechless all the way. He was trying to picture the boat out there, still having a hard time accommodating to solid ground. Steven seemed to be having no such problems, standing tall below him, looking out to sea, no light yet creeping over the horizon.

Inaudibly, his pager must've buzzed. He saw him unclip it, look down, read the message carefully.

"Got to get back for a mo', then pick Liz up from the airport. Coming to the races this afternoon?"

"No. I'll stay here a while. Watch the sunrise."

For a while nothing happened, then Steven walked away without a word. Zen could hear the moment his footsteps got off the pebbles and hit the paved seafront far behind him.



The street was wide. He didn't know it by name, but it seemed familiar. Cool daylight. Large, semi-detached houses the other side. Woods beyond them. Cars, making him wait before crossing. A house on the corner, large, a heavy, wooden roof sloping steeply. Walls of the second storey criss-crossed with black beams, Flemish style. Little porch, wooden stairs, door. Little girl in the door. Her sister. He couldn't remember her having a sister, but the welcome was nice anyway.

She led him through, the house pale, cluttered, yet lacking in colour. Piano, many papers, walls covered with frames, pictures he couldn't yet see. The girl turned, her face so low he had to stare down, a miniature of her, same grey eyes, dark fringe, staring at him.

Then upstairs, a landing, white winter light coming through open doors. Warm.

And then her. In a doorway. Next to him. Smiling shyly. Eyes looking up, saying sorry you got lost... Sorry you had to wait...

The warning siren of a reversing garbage truck did a perfect imitation of an alarm clock, shocking him out of sleep.

Eyes wide open, back against the pebbles, he watched clouds swirling across jet smoke trails. For the first time in months he had fallen asleep thinking of something other than his own history. First time in months he'd seen her face, all of it, not just sensations of skin, details, but the whole picture. Calm. The smile truly there. Was it a grey jumper she'd been wearing? Grey. Her hair definitely down.

Eyes closed again, her face, like the negative imprint of the sun sliding across the cornea, faded slowly. He replayed the dream time after time, reanimating it, knowing all along it would wear like any film, fade from imperfect memory. Trying to draw as much life from it as possible, he kept staring into impossible distance, knowing the world, the real world was still there, beyond closed eyelids, wanting to shut it out, stop it from prizing this last little shred of life from him.



The morning passed, moved him onto his side, whimpering. Death now. Man, such a fragile organism, easily killed by the tiniest thing, a pebble, a fish bone, a fingernail, seemed unable to unburden itself of life when life itself became wrong. He could stab his own belly, slit his wrists with the knife in his pocket, but the consequences were unacceptable. For those who would read about it in the paper. The chance of Steven feeling guilt at not having been a saviour. The chance of the body being identified, his family contacted, the prodigal son returned in a coffin. And for those who would find him. What it would do to them. The gracelessness of the action. Suicide in the most public of places. A family spot. The act sure to be interpreted as cowardly attention-seeking and not an understandable reaction to unbearable pain.

To die now, from natural causes, was the wish. A heart attack, an aneurysm, pneumonia, anything would do. To die in secret, without bothering a soul. The thought of it made him smile, cheeks grating against the cold pebbles, a little moan escaping his lips. Half-ache, half-delight. Just be found here, alone, pitiful, far too pitiful to make the papers before Christmas. Let the body be found, be returned to the family home. There would be no questions of blame that always followed suicide. It would be the kind of tragedy people could shake their heads at, their consciences unburdened, the story slipping into the past, case closed. Death in its sweetest form. There was never again going to be any doubt. Never. Death was a friend, a saviour, waiting in the wings, utterly trustworthy.

There was no way he could get up. The trap, the prison was perfect. Getting up would distract away from the beating of a heart that just would not leave the dream alone, but the pain itself drained him of all strength, left only enough to stay alive, to suffer. To fight the impossible, he turned on his side, looked at the horizon, counted at least three ships carrying cargo back and forth across it. Behind him, the main seafront road hummed with activity, the constant traffic crawling along, using that which was finite, changing its own environment permanently. For nothing, with no great purpose or design, killing itself in the process, just the way his own veins pumped poison round his body, the disease mad, killing the very thing that let it have a plane of existence.

That there was something in the universe so single minded in its insane appetite for oblivion he could accept, but that man could bury the world under a mountain of refuse, flood it with melting ice caps, kill himself and his own, however cruel, mother, was even more insane than that. A disease that lived to kill itself was unconscious, but man was different. This suicidal impulse could be fed by one thing only. A lack of respect. A lack of love for the self. It all, always, came down to love.



Dusk was magnificent, the light both sweet and mighty, clouds overhead glowing a wild pink. They looked like something off an eighteenth century landscape, yet fresh as floating snowcaps.

Stumbling up Steven's hill, back to the van, he saw the exploded remains of a cat or fox carcass in the middle of the road, blood and guts spread in a drying pool. It wasn't the gore that caught his attention, but the disorder. Everything else around was perfectly neat - the curb, pavement slabs, car bumpers, lights, grilles, garden gates, paths, doors, windows. Everything from man's hand perfectly aligned and executed and then this, this mess right in the middle of the road, bringing chaos into the emotional landscape.

Opening the driver's side door, he saw a card lying on the beige seat. "In London the next few days. Call if you want to kill time. Steven". There was a pager and a central London number, and a 'P.S.' note telling him to check his glove box. He opened the ill-fitting lid, found a little block of brown resin and a pack of Rizlas inside, sat still for a while before firing up the engine, desperate to get back to the motel, make sure the one thing he still cared about in the world was where he'd left it.

Why do I never see You in my dreams? It's almost like they are a parent, saying "All right, you've had enough fun for tonight. Get back in the house, get some rest, just so you can do it all over again tomorrow". I need sleep for contrast, some place where I can come back from and feel You again. Dreams making the heart fonder.

I was cleaning, washing the floor this afternoon, sweeping out the little corner where the shoes are. Remember the time You got there first, that Friday, took your boots off, the hole in your tights exposed, toes sticking

out, apologising, laughing with embarrassment? I wanted then to say 'Don't'. Don't ever apologise to me. You need never apologise again.

I stood there today, broom in hand, staring down at the same spot, thinking, Christ, how a little moment like that can change life, can be the thing you remember when all else fades. No dream can come close to what I see of You in the world.



I'm sleeping a lot, catching up. Even sleep a miracle. This other state. Imagine a world in which we didn't sleep, didn't dream. Why dream? Who came up with that? Lying in bed, waiting for sleep, looking at the dark, it's the same. Imagine a world where nothing but light was known, like some kind of perpetual polar day. I look at the world in the dark, and it is amazing. The shapes, shadows. All we know transformed again.

Waiting for sleep, the world makes me gasp at wonders, not like a child seeing things for the first time, but like a man, a conscious being with the means to take it all in.

Even though the parking spot wasn't as good as before, he could still see her window from the back of the van. He put out the third joint, feeling sick, the drug wrapping his heart in dirty, old rags, dulling all sensation, all meaning. He felt less pain, less of everything, knew this was the first and last time he'd roll anything from that brown chunk of resin. Something in the body would not forget the disease, the past, the fact that death was near, and as long as he could feel the shrapnel, the fallout of his old life, he could deal with the tragedy. But the drugged present, stripped of any kind of sensitivity, the mind drained of all self-control, felt like some new circle of hell.

Mouth hanging open, eyelids snapping, he hoped it would at least put him to sleep. His head felt ready to receive the first warped images that meant sleep was coming.

The heart slowed, limbs filled with lead, but nothing happened. Complete betrayal. Sleep, his old friend, leaving him alone with time. And when sleep was no refuge, what was left?

The van's tin walls echoed and amplified the sound of his laughter. He kept himself sane playing with the acoustics, making the sound as loud as he could, as ridiculous. Canned laughter. The one thing the world was never going to run low on was irony.

stomach for this world

Monday

Same as yesterday, he woke around dusk, feeling more tired than ever. He'd missed the whole day, lying in the tomb-like cargo bay, sapped of all energy. Maybe the drug had been part responsible, but he didn't even feel hungry.

Climbing through to the driver's cab, he didn't once look up at her window. A huge sense of shame, pathetic, dog-like shame at hanging around her home overwhelmed him. He turned the ignition, engine starting up sweetly, rolled away in search of a phone box.



The Shakespeare's Head in Victoria had been through another renovation in the time he'd been away. Passing by its windows, he noticed the clientele of travelling low-life had remained unchanged.

The camping shop Steven had mentioned on the phone was just a little to the right of where he remembered. Inside, it smelt of canvas and wax polish, everything new and clean and still the way it looked in the brochures. A girl in a pink polo shirt with the shop logo in bright blue didn't know who Steven was. He thought of giving up, but having an excess of time to kill made him persevere. He described Steven, and again she shook her head, said she'd ask the manager. A small, chubby man in wire-rimmed glasses came round a sleeping bag-laden corner, smiled, said Yes, go out first door on the right, ask security. Again, he felt like giving the whole thing a miss. Seeing another dull watchman, not to mention speaking to one, would propel him back to an all too immediate past.

Outside, he turned left, saw the entrance to an block of Victorian flats, walls of grey granite inside, crystal chandeliers, a thick, navy carpet running up some mirrored stairs. For the third time he felt like turning away, wondering what kind of offices Steven would have hiding here, for the nth remembered he had nothing better to do.

Through the heavy, glass and brass doors, he walked into a sauna. Along with the radiators, the security guard had a fan heater going, sat on the desk, blowing right in his face. Once again, Zen asked for the tall man. Tearing himself unwillingly from the heater, the guard waddled over to a mirrored wall, pushed against it, opening a concealed basement fire door. Following, he caught a glimpse of himself, for a second unable to recognise the face staring back.

The stairway was narrow, walls of simple concrete lit by caged bulbs, luminous escape arrows pointing the way back out. At the bottom, a vast, low-ceilinged room opened up, crisscrossed by massive steel girders, the skeleton of the whole block. The guard led him through a maze of side corridors and walkways around the structure, a fine layer of dry dust over everything.

The door they eventually came to was unmarked, at the end of a long corridor, all the locks giving the impression no key had been turned in them for decades. Without a word, the guard knocked and walked back, leaving Zen alone before it was unlocked from within. A young, unsmiling man in white shirt and leather blazer opened it onto a large, windowless room. Steven was sat behind a low desk, papers were neatly stacked around a laptop, most of the bare, brick wall space supporting shelves heaving with files. The air was heavy with cigarette smoke and subterranean silence.

"Zen, meet Paul." The two strangers shook hands. "Have a seat," Steven nodded towards a couch behind the door. "Be back in a second."

Zen dropped onto the couch, feeling a hollow sort of calm for the first time that day. His first thought was that Steven had gone to see Paul out, make sure he found his way, but something about the other man's face made it seem as if he'd been halfway through a sentence he didn't want anyone else to hear.

Steven came back into the room a moment later, sat back at his desk.

"D'you have a lot of work to do?"

"A couple of hours worth," Steven replied, opening a mini fridge sitting on the floor. "Drink?"

"No, thanks."

"You wanna get out of here?"

"No. Had a rough night." Two postcard-sized pictures on the wall by the desk caught his attention. One was a colour photograph of a female tiger descending upon a zebra, the savannah sunset all yellows and oranges, each muscle in the massive limbs and torso in stark relief. It was amazing how human the body of the beast looked. The other was a black and white photo of a round faced man, hair slicked down, mouth in a Mona Lisa smile. "Who's that in the picture?"

"Old friend stops me from setting fire to all this junk sometimes."

“All this yours?” Zen asked, looking round the files surrounding them.
“A lifetime’s worth of accounts before you.”
“You keep all your own books?”
“Just double check some things... Never trust your doctor, lawyer or accountant.” Not once during the whole conversation did he look up from the computer screen.
“Funny world... Don’t trust doctors and lawyers.”
Floating off to sleep, Zen promised himself he would ask Steven why he’d invited him along again, what his purpose in having someone follow him round was. Why show him this place, buried under the city, covered in dust? To show off? To tell him something? Nothing fit. No answer rang true. The last thought before consciousness fell away came from somewhere outside of himself, some voice singing a lullaby, as if he’d found sleep again in this hidden place.



Zen’s eyes opened on the room exactly as they’d left it. His mouth tasted dry, foul, but he felt rested.
“Evening,” Steven greeted him, eyes fixed on the computer screen.
“Evening... Was I asleep long?”
“An hour.”
“You got anything to drink?”
“Sure. What’d you want?”
“Just water.”
Steven reached down, pulled a bottle from the fridge, threw it in a gentle arc over to the couch. Zen looked at it, puzzled, remembering something.
“I wanted to thank you.”
“What for?”
“Last night. On the beach. I dreamt about her. For the first time in ages.”
“Why thank me?”
“Somehow...” He couldn’t explain. “What time is it?”
Steven turned from the screen, smiled.
“Time we got going.”
He moved his hands over the keyboard, pushing buttons, closed the screen. Zen felt like he’d do anything right now not to have to move again, not to have to leave this warm, dry tomb.



The entrance to the basement flat was on the side of a building, derelict grass everywhere, a giant, smiling blonde with her blouse open over it advertising ‘Wonderbra – The Winter Heat Wave.’
Steven hammered on the door with the base of his fist, nearly shoving it through its frame. No one came to answer. He then took out a key and opened the door himself. The flat smelt of bleach and burning, the mixture turning Zen’s stomach for a second. The corridor was stacked ceiling-high with boxes of printer paper, bits of old computer equipment leading into the living room. Computer junk climbed up the fire damaged walls. In one spot, Zen could see where a picture frame had caught fire, an even, pale rectangle surrounded by black wisps where the flames had licked the wallpaper. It partly explained the heady smell in the place.
“Be with you in a second.” A man’s voice called out from the bedroom. Steven motioned for Zen to follow.
The bedroom was small, the only light that from a computer screen set up on the bed. A man of no more than thirty, small, chubby, was typing things on the keyboard he had placed on his crossed knees. The machine kept beeping in an annoyed way, as if it, and not the man, was pushing the buttons.
“How you doing, Steven?” The man asked without taking his eyes off the screen. “Good to see you.”
“All right. Where’s your phone?”
“Gone.”

“I know it’s gone. Been trying to ring you for days.”

“Sold it. No use to me. Thought someone else might get something out of it.”

“I’ll buy you another and bolt it to the wall if I have to. You insist on smoking whole calves in here, you need to phone for help when, not if, something else goes wrong.”

“Why’d you get wound up by things I do when you know I’ll do them before I do them? Domestic bliss turning you soft?”

“You said it,” Steven mumbled, walked back into the kitchen. Zen heard the fridge door being opened. “This thing is empty. What happened to this week’s shopping money?”

“Spent it on kebabs from that place on the high street. Not that tasty, I’ll admit, but then you’ve probably never tried my cooking either.”

Steven came back into the bedroom, sat down on a large cardboard box.

“You know you need a decent diet. What’d we talk about last time, how important it is. Especially...”

“Who’s this you’ve brought with you? Some kind of nutritionist? A culinary Columbus?”

“This is Zen, a friend of mine. Zen, meet Tim.”

“Zen?” Tim momentarily glanced away from the screen. “That stand for some kind of master status? This some kind of guru you’ve got for me? What you pushing this time, Steven? Some alternative therapy I haven’t yet heard about?”

“I didn’t come here to listen to your jokes, Tim, so cut it out. Got something else I need to...”

“Wait, wait.” Tim suddenly leapt off the bed, the keyboard tossed aside, the monitor crashing to the floor with a muted, electrified pop. Steven had tried and failed to catch it, Zen stared in surprise, Tim, oblivious, already searching through a pile of CD cases on the floor. With the screen out, the only light in the room was that filtering through the living room door, but Tim quickly found what he was looking for. “Wait ‘till you hear this.”

He stuck the disc into a portable CD player wired up to an old ghetto blaster, unplugged some things from the socket, replugged others, pressed play. The sound of guitars coming from the buzzing speakers was maudlin, but the look on Tim’s face was that of schoolboy rapture.

“Remember this? Dublin, what was it, ninety four, five?” Guitars suddenly exploded, a man’s calm voice repeating ‘We don’t need anybody else’ over and over again, like a threat and a promise all at once. “I found it in a charity shop off Edgware Road. Whipping Boy, remember?”

“I remember, Tim. Good find.”

“Good find? Spent months on the internet looking for this, phoned everybody I know, and then...” Tim, overwhelmed by the scale of his good fortune, fell silent, listening to the tune rock out. A quieter, softer melody followed.

“Tim, listen. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“I know. I know. That’s good. What you doing for Christmas? Coming on like a train, isn’t it? Every year, just get caught out. Get caught right out with my shopping. Might go home, you know.”

“You’re gonna go home?”

“Thought about it. Thinking about it.”

“Might be good.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“You want to come up to Brighton again? Spend it with us?”

“No. Not this year. No.”

“You sure about this going home business, though?”

“Just can’t... Can’t face this... Another holiday. Haven’t got the stomach for it.”

“Tim...”

“Haven’t got the stomach for things.”

“Hey...”

“Haven’t got the stomach for this world. I’m tired, Steven.” Tim was smiling, but the smile was pure defence.

“Tired and bored.”

The CD stopped, a faint buzzing noise coming from the speakers. Tim jumped back on the bed, dragged the broken monitor up off the floor. The screen seemed intact, but every time he touched the keyboard, a nasty beep indicated some kind of system failure.

“I wanted to talk to you about something.” The look on Steven’s face was pure sadness.

“Not now.”

“Tim.”

“I’m not happy, man.”

“Why don’t we...”

“Hear that whistling noise outside? That’s not wind. It’s life, sucking.”

“Tim...”

“Wanker. Bringing tourists round here, like I was a monkey in a cage. Showing me off. Feel better? Feel better now?”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not. You’re not. You wish. And now... Asshole. Animal. Shit.”

“Listen.”
 “No, no, you listen. Bad news. Come here to bring bad news. I can smell it on you. Smell it on you!”
 “I can’t talk to you when you’re like this, Tim.”
 “And that’s the point. That’s the point. Move on. Fuck off. You, your mates, everybody.”
 “Why d’you always have to simplify things.”
 “All the same.”
 “People aren’t binary figures.”
 “Fucking go.”
 “Fucking stop swearing.”
 “You spoil my home. Spoil my Christmas. You and your stories. You and your friends. Bye, Steven. Bye, Zen man. Leave me alone. Well alone. Leave me well alone.”
 For a few moments, no one said or did anything. Steven was the first to speak.
 “You’re right. Time to go.”
 “Yeah,” Tim mumbled without conviction.
 “I’ll see you soon. Think about the Brighton thing.”
 “Yeah. You come visit... Never see you, you never call. You think what? My life is complete? What? Maybe it is. Maybe. But that’s no reason to keep on being a stranger...”
 Following Steven, Zen turned to take one last look inside the dark room. Tim’s fingers stabbed at every button on the keyboard, but received nothing in reply save a barrage of error beeps.



The bar was long, narrow, crowned with a battery of ale taps. Garish, blood red carpets, brass and leather ornaments, framed pictures of horses and boats over a monstrous, paisley wallpaper. A dim-looking barman in a bleached-out Guinness shirt waited for orders.

“I wanted you to see that.”
 “I know.” Zen replied, staring into his drink. “Who is he?”
 “A mate from way back. A friend.”
 “Does he live alone down there?”
 “Shouldn’t be, but he’s smart enough to fool whichever panel decides whether to section him or not, enough to keep out of hospital. A month ago he managed to get hold of a whole calf from some wholesalers. It was too big for the freezer, so he decided the only way to make it last through the winter was to smoke the whole carcass. Set up an airtight chamber in the living room, nearly burnt the place down to the ground.”
 “How long has he been this way?”
 Steven shook his head.
 “A few years... We’ve been friends a long time. Tim was once a genius little actor. Plenty of talent, but vulnerable. Plus, he had this thing for Isa, a girlfriend of mine. People thought he was gay, all these groupies hanging round, Tim ignoring them, harping on about wanting to keep himself free of any such bullshit, any celebrity. And all the time she was there, in our little circle of friends. He didn’t know what to do. After I left for the States, he thought Maybe, but she never let him near. He took a few too many escapist substances, had a few breakdowns. Quit acting altogether. Then... Got out of Middlesex hospital a few years ago, been in that flat ever since, playing with all that computer junk. Has a thousand different theories for why he keeps on programming and reprogramming these machines. Codes, secrets, mysteries, pots of silicon at the end of virtual rainbows. One day it’ll be a wacko like him stumbles on artificial intelligence or nano-viral machinery and buries us once and for all, but when that time comes, it won’t be him. Not because his brain lacks processing power, but ‘cause his heart ain’t in it... Which brings us to Isa. She’s the reason I wanted to see him tonight. She’s moving to Shanghai soon. Her husband’s law firm are opening offices there and he drew the short straw.”

“You wanted to tell him about that?”
 “Don’t know what I wanted. Knowing her, she may not come back, and knowing Tim, that’s going to hurt.”

“Triangles,” he said when Steven came back from the toilet. “You, Tim and this girl. You, Liz and Chris...”
 “Meant to be the most stable structure in geometry.”
 “Which way up, though? Tim not good enough. Chris not good enough... How is she now?”
 “Chris? Tough gossip.”
 “She... Need you still?”
 “You reckon that’s a clever question?”

“Don’t know if it’s clever.”

“She never talks about it, and I don’t invite the subject... Always been a stunner. Got plenty of men happy to be there for her.”

“To be second best?”

“Tough ground for chasing rainbows across, but she’ll find someone. Even though it’s hard for her, other things considered.”

“D’you ever miss her?”

“Chris? No, never.”

“And Liz?”

“Always.”

“She was worth the wait then.”

Steven nodded, smiling softly at his glass, looked up.

“Went climbing once, in Nepal. We waited three and a half weeks for an ascent that never happened. It failed in the end, not ‘cause the weather stayed bad, but ‘cause by the time the sun came out, people’s nerves were too frazzled. Besides the three and a half weeks on that mountain, there’d been nine months of planning and a month of altitude training to get through. Had some of the best times of my life, sitting on that approach. All the time in the world... Plenty of schooling as far as patience went.”

Zen sat motionless, saying nothing, but just as Steven was about to continue, he spoke up

“We were together. In Warsaw. All the time. She clung to me. This look in her eyes, like she didn’t want to see anything but herself reflected in mine... Happiness tearing me apart. And fear. But I couldn’t say anything. Not about the highs, or lows. Just had to be still. Say anything to anyone, you put pressure on them for a reply. But I knew. Told her how I felt a few times at the start, but her eyes would fill with so much anxiety, listening to words that had let her down badly before, I quit. Kept it stored up inside... I was sure there would come a time when trust was no longer... When all tests had been passed and we could curl up on the floor somewhere again and just say it.”

“The four-letter word?”

“People say Eskimos have a hundred, five hundred words for ‘snow’,” Zen said, nodding. “But that’s bullshit. It’s only a couple. And it’s enough. To say what you mean.”

Steven nodded back to show he had understood, but it still wasn’t enough. Language wasn’t the problem. They sat for a moment like that, out of its range, tracing separate trains of thought. Zen was the first to speak again.

“What is it for, then?”

Steven stared at him over a couple of empty glasses.

“Language?”

“No. Love.”

“Explain.”

“Do I need to?”

“Yes.”

“Been asking myself all year. All year. What is it for? What manifests? The place of good and evil in the world is simple mechanics. Pain, pleasure, right, wrong. All that I get. Why sex is fun, how friendships help. Why people don’t like being alone. Why they think death is the enemy. But... Love? What for? We’re just not ready. All these triangles. This force we can’t handle, can’t overcome. Can’t choose between. Doesn’t help procreation. Doesn’t help anything. Just fucks with the natural order of things. A trap. A perfect trap.”

“Questions like these...”

“Are of no importance to you. But me... For something so right to go so wrong. You don’t ask ‘till you need to. Is it just a set-up? A cosmic joke?”

Steven thought a moment before answering.

“It’s like asking why is the universe not just limited to our star system, our galaxy. Makes us sick to feel lost in something that vast. Things were better when we thought we were the heart of a small, God given universe, but so what? We’re still just kids. We know a few things about the workings of the world, but so does a ten year old schoolboy. Which is all we are. Kids. Think about it. What people knew a thousand years ago. What they’ll know in another millenium...”

“No,” Zen countered, shaking his head. “Maybe in science. Maths. Just volume of knowledge. But we know plenty already. More than enough. The big questions, all rhetorical now. About right and wrong. About honesty. Discipline. On a personal scale, all rhetorical...”

“You believe that?”

“Don’t know what to believe. You said the universe... Evolution? Where does love fit into that? Or hate? Why this? Why so much feeling when we’re in such bad shape?” Steven listened but didn’t nod. “How many more casualties? It’s a fucking Pandora’s Box. Too many blessings, too fast. I thought I was ready. Thought I got it. But we’re ignorant. Selling history cheap. People who have no history are kids. You’re right there. Kids shouldn’t be given toys this powerful. We know how to take basic care of one another, do right, but we’re just not smart, not mature enough.”

Steven stared at Zen for a long while, as if trying to read the other’s thoughts, trying to gauge what words, if any, could still make a difference.

"Don't go hunting for absolute truth. All you ever see of the world are the cards it deals you. Never the full pack. Many have tried to write the world off, but it just keeps on proving them wrong. Maybe one day, but not yet. Not you, not anybody..."

"No."

"No, what?"

"Could've done it a year ago. Or in March. Killed myself when I got the results. But I didn't. Wanted to know. Wanted to think about it, figure it out. How it could all just... How love could get it so wrong. Take me from such heights to such depths. How that was, you know? How that could be. Almost a year sitting in that building, night after night, reading, asking, thinking, remembering, trying to put it all together. All of it. And I have answers. I have. You're all right. You can manage. You can love and be loved. But others? The rest of us stupid fucks? My god... It just blows us away. Think about it. Think about all the great tragedies and all the little successes. That's all it has to its name. All love has. Little stabs at it. But no peace. No glory. Christ... It's a Trojan horse, and it shouldn't be. It shouldn't. The one thing should be beyond bullshit, and it isn't. Beyond fuck ups, beyond reproach. Should have some brains behind it. But it's insane. Love? Who the fuck needs love? And why so much? Why in such an imperfect world as this, why give us this bloody doomsday thing?"

Steven said nothing, just stared at Zen until the other man could no longer bear the gaze.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe I am. Either way, we should go."

"Where now?"

"Holland Park."

"What's in Holland Park?"

"Isa. Only going to show face, that's all. Then we can go get plastered."



Driving through West London, the silence between them was no longer the calm, stable substance Zen remembered from the trip to Shoreham. It might've been a dozen factors changing things. Frustration, drugs, lack of sleep, envy, fear, desperate pain, or maybe just plain old tiredness, exhaustion so complex there was no way to unravel and dig out of it. He had a feeling Steven was going to show him something miserable again, something he simply didn't have the strength to digest.

It took them a few minutes to find a parking space along the streets between Notting Hill and Shepherd's Bush, the terraced houses smart, front gardens full of exotic trees and shrubs. As they finally rolled up to an empty spot, Steven squeezing the car into it, Zen wasn't sure he was going to follow. Her house was nearby, a couple of postcodes away. He could always fold back into the past for a while.

Following Steven, he looked through half-drawn curtains at comfortable, well-off lives ticking along. On the corner of an intimate shopping arcade, they stopped by a restaurant. The windows were tinted, frames and doors a cool, grey-blue, failing to disguise a converted pub. A discreet sign, gold-leafed onto the glass, said 'Isa's'.

Steven pushed the door open, the interior almost completely gutted, all the furniture gone. The only light come from a staircase at the end of the L-shaped room.

They climbed towards the sound of a crowd of voices laughing along to music. Light came from hundreds of candles set up all over the place, on window ledges, wall-mounted holders, specially designed chandeliers. Trestle tables buckled beneath dishes and salads, the room packed, a couple of faces Zen recognised from whichever screen, everything expensive, the air itself heavy with rich perfume. The place terrified him, not for any kind of obvious superficiality, but for fear she might be here. He didn't know why. This scene was as far from what he remembered of her as possible.

Somebody came up to Steven, whispered in his ear.

"Gotta see someone. Grab a drink." He smiled, and was gone in the throng.

Zen walked back to the bar by the stairs, ordered a Bloody Mary. The young barman obliged, calmly shook his head when asked How much?

He turned to the room, invisible, not one person so much as giving him a glance. Time after time, a flashbulb went off, a photographer showing the digital display to his subjects for approval before moving on. Fifteen minutes here, Steven said. Then what? It was definitely time to go, but again, he was trapped by obligation. Or was he? What would happen if he disappeared? Steven would look for him, and then? No. This was the last he'd see of the tall guy. Why do it in this pathetic manner? He'd been... What? A help? A pal? What did it matter? All these lives here would mill on without him. The openings, middles and ends, the jokes and their punchlines.

"Hello." The young woman standing beside him was tall, the long hair and make up a work of expensive art. Her beauty was breathtaking, even beneath all that artifice. "A friend of Steven's I haven't yet met?"

"No."

The stare intensified, insincere behind coloured contacts, the pupils huge, either down to the lenses or chemicals ingested earlier.

"Enemy then? Let me shake your hand."

He did as told, handling the tiny fingers with utmost care.

"Isabella Lewis. Are you Charlie's replacement for tonight?"

"Who's Charlie?" Zen asked, his mouth faster than his memory.

"You must be new. What do you do, my skinhead friend?"

"Nothing."

"And where does that take our conversation?"

"No idea." Something was unnerving him.

"Right... Just a pet then."

He couldn't work out how to explain what little he really understood of his own presence in this room, but the vapid little comment made him not give a fuck about the ice queen breathing inches from his face. Watching her turn her cold blue eyes away, he realised it was the proximity of their bodies that was making him uncomfortable. She leaned gently against him, chin almost on his shoulder, forcing intimacy.

"You've just got to love him. His taste in toys... Oh, but pardon me. You said you two weren't friends."

"No."

"Too busy to bond, I'm sure. And now he's left you all alone."

"I was that long before I met him."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Didn't realise he'd become a patron saint of lost causes."

What was this act she was putting on? Why such animosity? Whatever the truth behind the violence of her words, he wasn't interested in competing, pretending he was some verbal heavy. Conflict was simply not part of his nature. He steered the conversation into neutral territory.

"You looking forward to China?"

"Cannot wait," she whispered. "It's not as bad as people think. Cute, in fact. Everyone looks the same and everyone wants to take your picture just 'cause you're blonde. Celebrity comes for free... But the same is true of this place." She glanced back into the room. "They're gonna love Al over there."

"Al?"

"My husband." The wide, sparkling smile allowed a glimpse of tongue behind parted teeth as she moved closer. "Tall. Broad-shouldered. Blond. Always liked blond men. That's him on the veranda, there." She angled her head so that it was touching his. He looked out, past the crowd, a man standing the other side of a glass window, talking to Steven, the two of them towering over everyone else. "Have you got a wife hidden anywhere?"

He didn't want to be there. Didn't have the strength to put up bullshit fronts. No, he didn't have a wife. His unborn child had been killed by fate, his woman by love and he was about to die by his own hand. Worst of all, he didn't have any way of spitting it all out, or getting away from the heat of this ice queen's skin next to his. Whatever she was up to, the tease, was starting to make him hurt like hell.

"Went to see my favourite palm reader yesterday." The whisper was soft, right into his ear. A small wave of the hand, a silent Hi to someone in the crowd. "She said nothing about blond men. Or skinheads. She did say a tall, dark stranger would come visit. Who do you think she meant? Some Chinese basketball player?"

"Steven a stranger to you?"

"You don't know the first thing about him, do you?"

The question hung in the air as Steven and Al started making their way towards them through the crowd. Did it hurt, that it was true? No. What hurt was that it didn't make sense. He longed for any old thing to still make sense. Be straight and pure.

Al was almost as tall as Steven, but much bigger in the arms and shoulders, unnaturally so. The hard set to his face was all honesty though.

"Hey, hon, look what the cat dragged in."

Isa glared at her husband for a second, then looked at Steven, her body instantly pulling away from Zen.

"Cats don't drag anything in these days... Hon. You've come to say goodbye to Al. How nice."

"He did, and now it'd be nice if he fucked off."

For the second time that night, the words were spat directly at Steven, but he was indifferent, staring at Isa with nothing but sadness in the blue eyes.

"Al, I wish you heaven, man. I really do. I hear the offices in Shanghai are all set up?"

"They are. Bags almost packed." Isa glanced at her husband, but it was more for alibi than anything else.

"The stage is all yours, then, Shylock." Steven whispered just loud enough to be heard, but before Al could spit back, he turned to Isa. "I wanted to have a chat, but I see security doesn't approve. I saw Tim just now."

"How is he?"

"OK. You'll be missed."

Her eyes skipped between Steven's, desperately trying to read something into them.

"No, I won't. None of us will. Times have changed, Steven. For the better. For me. You know that."

“I know.”

“You don’t remember, but they weren’t that hot for some of us, the old days. Not one bit.”

“I know. Or at least I’ll try to remember.”

“Do that. You do that.”

“Bye, Willow.”

Al’s eyes were all fury, but Isa’s seemed filled with something stronger as she watched them go. Zen saw it, turning back for a second, fear in the in the watery, ultramarine discs.



“Why’d you call her Willow?” Zen asked as they walked back to the car.

“It’s the pet name her mother used.”

“Why use it now?”

Steven unlocked the driver’s side door, put his hands on the roof.

“You think it was cruel?”

“Don’t know.” He did, but didn’t have the balls to say it.

“It was. And selfish too. The whole visit.” Steven stared right back at him as if nothing else needed explaining. And it was true, it didn’t, but still, Zen couldn’t keep up the eye contact. “Got some mates waiting in Soho. You any good at pool?”

“No.”

“Come. We’ll eat some calamari, lose a little cash at at blackjack, drive back to Brighton in time for the sunrise.”

“My van’s parked nearby.”

Steven looked at him for a few seconds, pushed off from the roof, opened his door.

“I’ll drop you off.”

“Thanks, but I need the walk.”

Steven nodded without hurry.

“See you around then.”

Zen smiled weakly, eventually managing to say something in reply, but the tall man had got in too quickly to hear.

straight nor pure

Tuesday

I don't know how I manage. I don't know how to describe what happens to the world with You in it. You called today and in five minutes You said everything I wanted to hear. I said next to nothing, and felt proud, proud of my own mouth being humble for once. Five minutes so complete, so immense, I don't know how it was I got up afterwards, went out, spoke to people, did everything on the kind of auto-pilot everyone's on. Your voice hidden inside me all the while, all the while still in that room, hearing You say You love me. That instant. How does the world manage to fit it all in?

A week left. One whole week in this little room, two beds, one empty, and nothing to do but drink and grieve. Could he last? That it made no sense was nothing to do with anything. Could he last another week, when everything had been laid to rest, everything sorted, settled, the only things needed taking care of now the motel bill and the one, most ordinary, everyday, commonplace event under the sun?

The case lay on the other bed. He took out the journal, opened it on the first page, waited for the cigarette to go out before putting pen to the inside of the cover.

Dear Mum, Dad and Michal

I've read enough about pogroms and atrocities to know how important it is for families to at least know what happened to the people they loved, be able to say goodbye. By the time you read this I will be gone, and I cannot make any of it all right, or explain why I've done what I've done and how. All I want is to pass on this journal. Sorry for the long break from the last letter, but there was nothing more I could say past the explanation of what had happened. I said then that I did not know if I would come back, but I do now.

I've spent the time since trying to understand why the things which happened happened, why love let me down. I have thought about it for a long time, and I can't feel anything would make me want to stay. Nothing I have left is healthy, nothing worth holding on to. Dad, you always loved the Stones – "Everybody's got to go". My grief tells me it's now.

I wished it could be different, wish I had the strength to come and be with you. But it's not even a question of that. I just don't want to. That's the truth, and I don't want to apologise for it. I don't want to die, really, but life is not an option either. Once I lived alone. Then I did it for two, for three hearts. But no one can live when there's no use left, not even for the self.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THIS HOPELESSNESS ANY MORE

I want to go while I still have some of what I felt then alive in me. It's all there. I love Her still. I cannot imagine a world where that emotion or the capacity for it does not exist. And this is the world presenting itself to me now. I did what I could. I should've been quicker with this letter, but I hope this explanation's enough. I hope you can manage it with others who will ask.

see the back

He had to carry on across the inside of the back cover.

I am sorry to deny you the chance to see me or even say goodbye, but I can't afford this much tidiness. Don't look for me. Doesn't matter whether you have a grave to lay flowers on anyway. Symbols don't count. There's so little that is important. And sometimes nothing at all.

Zenek

struck with wonders

Wednesday

It is only in the dark, in bed, without the faces, features given us by fate, that we can really touch each other. No need to worry over flaws, imperfections. In the dark you can be whoever you are meant to be. With whomever. Here, alone, in the same bed, my eyes closed, I shift to my side, imagine You here still, sleeping peacefully. In a week's time I'll be able to open my eyes and see You again. Christ, just reading that last line fills me with peace I can't contain. Coming home. Homecoming. Home.

It'd been a day since he'd eaten or slept. He was starting to need less and less fuel to keep going. He wanted to sleep, but either his flesh had no use for rest or it was just scared of any place where traces of conscious life dimmed, where oblivion seemed closer.

Between the orange curtains, gray clouds sparred with descending sunlight, beams punching through in places, standing on far-off waters. Dusk seemed to have a certain kind of stillness to it, as if night knew day was only a temporary thing. Light had to make an effort, expend energy. Darkness needed only patience. He remembered Steinbeck saying something opposite, how goodness was constant, evil always having to clutch at straws, but couldn't see any reason in it.

The knock on his door could've been a trick of the senses caused by sleep deprivation or hunger, but he was sure he'd heard it. There it was again. Someone outside. Maybe the receptionist with a request or question. He tried to think of another 'maybe', but there was no one else left anywhere outside that.

In the room-length mirror he checked the buttons of his shirt were evenly lined up, looked around, bottles stacked in a neat little crowd, everything else untouched. A draft tickled his bare feet as he approached the door. There was no spyhole, but even if there had been, he wouldn't have used it. That was the thought going through his head as he opened the door to a tall woman, short hair a little too golden to be called strawberry blonde, beautiful in a way that had nothing to do with prettiness.

"Hi. D'you remember me? We met at my mother's bed and breakfast."

He did now. The jeans, the arm hugging a black leather blazer, lines drawn up from a mouth that must've frowned as much as it laughed. Wide, unpainted lips smiling apologetically, making him feel embarrassed.

"Yes, of course." He'd heard enough about her to make it hard to know what to say next.

"Don't want to bother you, but Steven said you were here, and I wanted to ask you..."

"Has something happened?"

"No. Nothing like that." She glanced over his shoulder into the room, then behind her, then back to him again. "Can we go get a drink? Some place round here, I don't know..."

"Let me get my coat."

Leaving her standing outside was the least wrong thing he could think of doing. Was it something to do with Monday night in London? It seemed to take him far too long to turn his jumper back the right way round, squeeze it over his head. Scrabbling for cigarettes, he paused, exhaled anxiety, calmed the shivers starting in his back and shoulders. It was the surprise, he told himself. Just the surprise. He'd felt far more nervous having Izzie standing behind him, saying nothing even, than he did now. Whatever it was this woman wanted, he'd deal with it and get back to real life.

By the time he was on the other side of the door, pulling the woolly hat over his scalp, she was no more than a stranger.

Heading into streets he didn't know, her presence meant nothing. He took out a packet of cigarettes, offered her one, just to have something other than silence between them. She shook her head, hands in rib-high pockets.

"I don't know any pubs round here." Just as he said it, they saw one a couple of doors down the main road. With cold wind and dark skies coming in off the sea, it chose itself.

Bright lighting was meant to counter the atmosphere impressed on the place by low, black-painted roof beams. They found a table by a window, Liz accepting the offer of a drink with the weakest of smiles. Bringing the two fruit juices from the bar, he wished they had found someplace else. All the tables had spotlights right over them, denying any kind of comfort or anonymity.

"Cheers," she said. He had the impression she wasn't hesitating or looking for words, just comfortably occupying silence in a way he instantly connected with Steven. It was a silence he found unbearable, the state his nerves were in.

Just as he was about to blurt out something stupid, she looked up and met his gaze for the first time since the motel.

“Did he say anything about me?”

Zen had to study the question, turning it over in his mind like a precious stone.

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

Zen tried to work out what it was she wanted to hear.

“He talked about you.”

“We usually boast to strangers, rather than moan. I take it the things he said were complimentary.”

“He seemed... Inspired by you.”

“Inspired?”

“Yes.”

“Cool...”

“Anything else you wanted to know?”

She looked up for a second, before glancing away again.

Steven’s the wotter way around. He’s no good at cuddling people with small talk. But that’s not his weakness, it’s mine.”

“Have you known him long?”

“Didn’t he tell you that?”

“He didn’t draw things in detail.”

“Look, you want something stronger to drink?”

“No, this is fine,” he said, nodding down at the glass of tomato juice.

“Well, I do.” She got up, came back quickly with a pint of lager. “May I?” Her hand was on his packet of cigarettes.

“Sure.”

She lit up in haste, trying to make the action seem casual.

“I’ll just finish this and be out of your hair.” She snatched the cigarette from her lips. “Steven does things I often... Miss the significance of. People told me you two spent some time talking, and, being curious and self-centred, I wanted to know if one of those things was me.”

Even frowning, she seemed beautiful.

“He said the most incredible moment of his life was when his daughter was born and when he met you. Said something about... Being struck with wonders.”

For a second, she closed her eyes.

“That’s nice.”

“He said he was afraid. You, up in the air, flying... Said he missed you.”

“I know. I’m sorry. This must seem pathetic. This whole nutty conversation. But it’s been a tough week.”

“He said he was worried. About the way things turned out, with your sister.”

“He tell you about that?” She sounded more pleased than angry.

“He was concerned.”

“About what?”

“About your sense of loyalty.”

“He tell you about why I argued with her in the first place?”

“No.”

“Shit. This is so weird. I don’t normally bother strangers with questions about my love life.”

“It’s all right.”

“Thanks for not laughing.”

“It’s all right...”

“And the beer.”

She put the cigarette out, smiled, looked at Zen for a moment, got up.

“Been nice talking to you, Zen.” Her beer was only half finished. “I’d better go. Hope I haven’t interrupted your holiday.”

“Say Hi to Steven.”

“Something tells me I won’t be mentioning this conversation to him, but I’m sure he’d appreciate it.”

In the toilet, over the urinals, little posters advertised beer and nightclubs in Brighton. One had a picture of a beach at sunset, waves breaking in a brilliant shower of orange sparks. He’d never seen a beach or sunset like that, and never would. It was all filters and lenses, life in some arty hyper-reality. He trusted nothing any more. Not any sense or instinct. But what he understood of the world did not always have to be the same as what he felt, and he felt calm, as if, for once, not saying No to someone had added to the sum of peace in the world.

between hope and nostalgia

Thursday

Music would've been good, but he didn't have what it took to get up, search through his CD's. Same with television. Even mindless viewing required some effort, some desire to involve himself in the onscreen action. He remembered reading once that the heart only pumped blood out, return pressure provided by the force of other muscular activity. What did that mean? If he sat still for long enough, would blood just run cold in his veins? With only giving and no taking to do, would the stupid muscle just give up? Maybe lifting the wine bottle to his lips was enough. The occasional trip to the bathroom that felt like a long journey, not because of a lack of strength, but lack of desire. Summoning enough self respect not to relieve himself on the bed activity enough. Enough for the heart to keep at it.



He only had his eyes closed for a second, but when he opened them again, it was dark, as if the day had just been waiting for the opportunity to slip away. He couldn't blame it. There was nothing interesting about watching a man sit in one spot, moving an arm just often enough to maintain enough inebriation to keep from shaking or howling.

He'd planned to spend the night thinking back to women who'd come before her, reliving some less worn memories, but now that the time had come, he quit before he even started. It wasn't right. Nostalgia and hope the two things he no longer had any use for, things he felt betrayed by the most. Those women were living other lives now, looking different, sounding different, thinking about things, names and places he had no idea about. This was reality. Not what he remembered, or wanted to remember, but that which was true now. Hope and nostalgia were just lies, and there was no room for them in whatever present he had left.

Call her again. That would make sense. Give the night some shape, something you could focus on. But what was the point? He fell sideways across the bed, empty wine bottle falling soundlessly on the carpeted floor. Don't do anything by half, he thought. Prepare. Just not now. Later. Now he would sleep again. Get a little strength. Get off the battlefield for a moment, just so he could come back and pick on a few more windmills.

made in heaven, not earth

Friday

Having missed another breakfast in favour of a morning campfire over Newhaven Fort, he hoped the knock on the door was about that.

A tall, gaunt man with a motel name badge on his shirt stood before him, showing off his horse teeth in a smile. Zen waited for questions concerning his habits or his bill.

“A telephone message for you, sir.”

He handed over a small card, turned and left. Most of the sections were neatly filled out. Liz Bates. A call-back number. They’d misspelled his name, but he had to check twice, trying to remember how it should’ve looked. “Call me. Important.”

Back on the bed, he tried to work out if the tone of the message was rude or desperate. It wasn’t the lack of pleasantries he minded, more the sense of a code hidden in the text. He sat back, trying to crack it. What could she possibly want now? Was it the same kind of curiosity had drawn Steven to him? Somehow he couldn’t see that pattern repeating. Was it something else, something he hadn’t said the last time they’d met? There’d been nothing to say. Maybe that was the key. Maybe he was just a freak. Maybe she just wanted to gawp, question him, find out some secrets.

It didn’t matter. The moment he got the card, he knew he wasn’t going anywhere near a phone. He’d reached the level of instinctive decision-making, a place where nothing outside of his simple plan was important and therefore took care of itself, be it eating, sleeping or conversing. It was nice, not having to worry any more about details. What others wanted. How they perceived you. What would happen next. Without sentimentality muddying the past and hope tarting up the future, there was no doubt left.



He started dialling, then put the handset down, let the coin drop back out. The second time he remembered to dial 141 first, blocking his number from being recognised her end.

A woman answered, but the first hello didn’t tell him who it was. By the second, he knew it was her mother, put the handset down gently, as if that one small gesture was apology enough for disturbing that faraway home.

Christ, where are You? Feels like weeks since we spoke last. I know I should be strong, I know I mustn’t panic, but this is supposed to be a journal, so let’s be honest.

I’m shit scared. You said to call in a few days, so I did, and there’s no answer. I get worried. Something happened. Accident. Problems with the baby. I’m a thousand miles from You, but it feels like a million. Almost a month now. It’s taken its toll. You’re late from the cinema or a concert, probably, and I’m having nightmare visions. The other side of the looking glass is a world without You, and even when I’m brave enough to look, I can’t keep my eyes open for long.

With the stereo on, a few drinks in him already, he wasn’t sure if there had been another knock on his door or if it was his imagination. He closed the journal, pushed the volume down on the remote, waited. The knock was there again.

His desk lamp was on. The music had been loud. Impossible to pretend he was out.

He got up, opened the door.

“What time is it?” he asked eventually, trying to focus on Liz’s eyes.

“Whatever time it is, you blew me out.”

“What’s the matter?”

“All kinds of things.”

Whatever it was she wanted, it was rude to keep a guest standing out in the cold. He gestured for her to come in. As she walked past, he noticed the bottle of vodka in her hand. The room was filled with smoke, but apart from that, he was surprised at how tidy it looked. One bed was uncovered, messed up, the other immaculate, only the case weighing down the covers. She looked around, sat down beside it, held out the bottle.

"He said you like this stuff."

"That's nice."

"He told me everything else too." He looked up, met the grey eyes, let a whole new set of circumstances unfold before saying anything else. He didn't want to take the bottle, but there it was, held out, hanging in mid-air. "Tell me to fuck off, and I will, but I want to be straight with you."

He took the vodka, reached for the cigarettes on the bed, shivers of anxiety making him want to run out the door, drunk, barefoot. He could barely open the little box.

"Cigarette?"

She shook her head, the blonde hair pulled back in a severe ponytail. He took his one glass into the bathroom, rinsed it out, hands shaking. The face in the mirror over the basin wouldn't stop swaying.

Back in the room, he asked,

"Bloody Mary all right? I only have tomato juice."

"Fine."

For once, he had no problems handling silence. Enough was out in the open, enough motives made clear, to let him sit, waiting for someone else to make moves. Liz sipped her drink, looked around the room.

"Horrible place."

He tried to think of something clever to say reply, but it wasn't necessary.

"Are you angry?" Liz asked.

"No."

"I'm sorry if you feel your confidence's been betrayed."

"Feel a little let down. But not by him. What'd he say?"

"Told me what happened. Why you're here."

"And why is that?"

"Told me about her."

He stubbed his cigarette out, went over to the window, struggled to get it open, air the room a little. Clouds covered most of the sky, but a thin sliver of moon was visible, like a crooked smile.

Back on the bed, he watched her clutch the glass.

"What else did he tell you?"

"He said you don't sleep night-times. Thought I'd come by..."

"I'm not good company."

"We had a fight."

Again, he felt winded.

"Why?"

"Over this."

"You coming here?"

"Kind of."

He sniggered lightly again, amused at the thought of anyone arguing over his fate.

"You argue a lot?"

"No. Not easy with him... Bastard's like a coral reef. All pretty and calm on the surface... Can I have a bit more vodka in this?" Zen topped up her drink. "But I didn't come here to talk about that."

"No?"

"No. I wanted to hear..."

"What?" The feeling that people really were starting to rubberneck angered him. She sensed it too.

"Her."

"Who?"

"Tell me about her."

"Why? Cinemas empty this week?" The crack came out cold and stupid-sounding, but it seemed as if Liz was not here to spar.

"No. I just want..."

"What?"

She hesitated before answering.

"Something happened... A long while back."

"What?"

"Did he ever mention Carl?"

"No."

"He mention the fight between me and Chris?"

"Yes."

"He mention what we fought about?"

"No."

Suddenly, he saw a teenage girl twisting the reddened glass in her hands.

"It was a man... Important... Wrote years of my life off."

"And?" he whispered, looking down at the floor.

"I need to hear."

"Hear what?"

"Tell me about her."

"Why?"

"I have... This thing I feel." In spite of his own inebriation, watching her eyes wandering, he realised she'd already had plenty to drink. "Steven said you didn't get it. Well, I don't either."

"What don't you get? Steven?"

"No. The guy. Carl... He stole my heart. He hijacked it."

The look of panic on her face was melting through his year-old barriers.

"And what can I do?"

"I wanted to talk."

"Talk then."

"I thought it was all over." Zen nodded to show he understood. He understood so well, invisible shivers snaked along his back when he listened, thought about what she must've been through, her voice calm and emotive.

"He the guy you married?"

She looked up, her smile without a hint of light to it.

"No. That's Sal. He's different. A true sweetheart."

"But not the real thing?"

"No. Sal. He... Took good care of me. For years. My husband. But not Carl. Carl was different. And I was younger." Drink was untying her tongue. "Met Sal years after things with Carl had gone wrong, but I still needed to get away. Moved to Montral. Worked. Read. Did research. We had a cabin, a porch, a dog, a little boat. I got into gardening... Deeply dependent, shallowly happy."

"And then Steven came along."

She shook her head with a grimace.

"Got wise before then. We both did... And it cost him."

"Steven?"

"Sal... A great man."

"But not the one."

"No. I wanted him to be. Tried. Pretended... He was so good. So perfect. Everything I thought I'd ever want. Textbook Prince Charming. Textbook nice guy." Zen smiled to himself. "I wanted that home to last so much... Wanted something manageable."

"But you can't wish things into existence."

"No."

"And now?"

She held her breath for a few seconds.

"Now I'm afraid."

"Of?"

"I've thought about it..."

"What?"

She sat quiet for a moment.

"The pain was unbelievable. The shock. Something you trusted... Wondered if I'm doubting Steven. The aftermath of the thing with Carl. But no. It's not old pain I'm frightened of. Not love. Steven is mine. I know that. But... It doesn't feel the same. Maybe I've lost too much innocence."

"How does it feel?"

"Steven is different."

"How?"

"Most people hate his guts, but they still send him birthday cards."

"Like Dervish?"

"Yeah," she smiled. "Like Dervish. Nice bloke, but... Steven tends to bring out people's insecurities ... Even mine. Especially mine." Again, she sat for a long while, saying nothing, her legs up, crossed, glass resting on her ankles. "Can you love two people at the same time? Someone real and someone long gone?"

"I don't know."

"Is it betrayal?"

"Don't think so."

"Is it sane?"

Zen thought the question over.

"How many capacities in a human heart? Who says one person pushes another out?"

"Don't know what to say to him."

"You don't think he can handle it?"

"It's not him I'm afraid of." Suddenly, she looked around the room, as if seeing it for the first time. "Christ, this place is horrible."

"Suits me."

"You left my mother's for this?"

He wasn't going to get drawn into an explanation.

"I like it."

"Good for you, but it freaks me out. Don't know why... Doesn't matter. Can we go somewhere else?"

"Sure." The moment he said it, regret and self-disgust hit him again. Always ready to please, say yes, please, thank you. Nice guy. Mr. Nice Guy. The very thing put him where he was now, dead and alone.

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

"I am." She looked down at her glass, concerned. "Not used to drinking. I need to eat."

"Where?"

"Any veggie places round here?"

"Wimpy's?"

"Don't think so." She smiled, and there'd been nothing in ages had brought him as much satisfaction as that little bit of light in her eyes. Then it went out. "This place... This dead-end town freaks the hell out of me. My gran. Mum. Chris."

"We can go elsewhere."

"Don't want to take up your time."

"No such thing any more."

She looked up, tiredness in the silver eyes.

"Brighton? It's ten minutes down the road."

"I'm too fucked to drive."

"I'll pay for the cab."

"Money's not the thing."

Watching her buttoning her coat, he felt everything receding in time and distance. Everything had once again acquired the ring of echoes. He could have said No, could've said anything, and yet it wasn't important. Too late to change, get character. Too late to struggle with anything.



He looked out the cab window as the night rolled by, listened to her whisper.

"He's not what I wanted to want. If that makes any sense... I always thought it'd be someone like Sal. Someone who fit a certain idea I had."

"D'you love him? Steven, I mean."

She hesitated, but something told him it was not doubt, but guilt. She didn't want to admit to happiness, knowing what she knew of his history.

"It tears through me every time I see him... But it's not the same as with Carl."

"Worse?"

"No. Strange... I still dream about him."

"Who?"

"Carl. It shouldn't be happening. Not so many years later."

"Why not?"

"D'you dream of her?"

His hand was on the headrest in front of him.

"No. She doesn't haunt me there."

"Every so often I see him, and wake, and realise how much of my life's been a joke. An honest lie."

"Dreams that keep you awake at night."

"Yeah..."

"How'd you feel when they come?"

"Afraid."

"Of?"

"Afraid I haven't changed. Grown out of a pointless love."

"I don't think it was that."

"Maybe... I spoke to people afterwards. Found out things about him made it easier to let go, but... Kept betting on the fact that I'd put all that past behind me, but it's not past."

"Easy to promise eternities when the going's good."

“Sorry?”

“Talk about the everlasting when you’re happy... But when things go wrong, leave, crumble away, the real thing is tested then. Then you know. Real love. Not the fair-weather kind, but the kind does not quit or break... Easy. Easy hearts.”

“Tell me about her.”

He heard the request, but the rest of the journey was spent in silence, a cigarette rolling around in his fingers, Liz with her eyes on the black sea.



“That’s Steven’s place, across the road.” They got a window seat, a small table overlooking a wide, quiet street. Zen looked up from the menu to the brown brick building opposite, ‘The Cartel’ written in back-lit letters over the front door, the design the same as the sign over Sophie’s B&B.

“Another one? What is it?”

“Used to be a timber shop... It still sells timber, but not only that.”

“Timber?”

She nodded.

“And organic fruit. Veg. Furniture. Toys. Organic cider. Wine... Bet you didn’t know there were vineyards round here

“Vineyards?”

“Yeah.”

“Anything else?” He asked with skeptical wonder.

“We run a local recycling scheme, a school mini-van service. Just kitted out a couple of electric milk floats for the job. Traffic round her at school run times is unbelievable...”

“Who you trying to save, people or the planet?”

“We’re not into saving anything.”

“We?”

“I help out there sometimes.”

“You a shopkeeper too?”

“Done many things in my time.”

A waitress approached.

“Hi, Liz, how you going?”

“Hey, Becks. Good. Veg moussaka and blackcurrant juice for me. We’ve brought our own bottle...” The waitress smiled at the vodka on the table between them. “Zen?”

“Just tomato juice, if you have it. And a spare glass.”

“How’s things?” Liz asked the waitress.

“Hate Fridays. Whole bloody weekend at work. Why don’t you finally open that coffee shop in the Cartel? I’d come and work for you.”

Liz shook her head.

“Why not?” Becks pressed. “Open at nine, close at five. It’d be perfect...”

“Last thing Brighton needs is another café full of mums and screaming pansies.”

“You’re just a mean spoilsport... Get you your drinks.” Becks collected their menus, shimmied away between small, packed tables.

“That’s one thing I never want to do again. Catering.”

“Done that too?”

“Done many, pointless things...” She seemed to hesitate before continuing, one hand playing with the cutlery. “I also work as a therapist.”

“A what?”

“A counsellor, in a local clinic...” Zen’s face broke out in a big, drunken grin. “What?”

“So that’s what this is about.”

“No.”

“No?”

“You mean me, working on you? No,” she shook her head convincingly. “I’d never do that.”

“No?”

“There is a code. There are rules. You can’t go round manipulating people.”

“Of course you can’t. There are rules. Shouldn’t lie. Shouldn’t cheat... Isn’t your sister doing this psychiatry lark?”

“Psychotherapy. Yes. Just started doing her diploma, not far from this place.”

“Keep things in the family, don’t you?”

The waitress brought their drinks, Zen mixing the blackcurrant for Liz, pouring a separate glass for himself. Without a word, she took a cigarette from the packet on the table, lit up, stared out the window for a while.

“I’m not trying to fuck with you.”

“No. I know.”

“Steven... He thinks...”

“Tell me about him.”

She waited until the cigarette was almost finished.

“Hadrn’t even met him ‘till Sian was born.”

“Yeah, he said something about that day. He said you wouldn’t talk to him.”

“I talked to him all right.” Anger came through clipped speech. “How would you feel? It was stupid. Insane. After ten years of bad blood, I make it up with Chris, Dad’s on his death bed, just waiting to see his first grandchild, and then, on top of all that... See, it was Chris that stole Carl. Maybe not stole, but he left me for her. She thought she was in love with him, really in love. Only she wasn’t. I was.” Zen stopped smiling. “Chris was only seventeen, I was still at university. But I was so proud, and so hard, on everybody. Ten years of not talking. Ten years... For a while I hated her, even though their relationship didn’t last long. She tried to make contact, apologise, but first I was in Israel, and then Canada, hardly making an effort at reconciliation. I knew she’d been cheated too. Knew she’d left him right after they got together. Then, when I came back from Montreal and she was pregnant and happy with Steven... Pretty, huh? Meet your sister’s partner and steal him the same time their child is being born. How sick would you have to be.”

“It’s not sick. We don’t get to choose.”

Liz shook her head.

“He would come up to see me. I was back in London then. We’d just go for coffee. He would sit, smile. Not say much. Like he was visiting me in some prison of my own making. I couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t believe he could just be so sure, no, not sure, I was sure too, but so... Determined. All the time Chris was here, alone, phoning me, telling me all about how she missed him, how she needed him back, how Sian needed him back. How she’d always miss him. And Steven hanging around, waiting. I was going to go nuts. He was so close. I was counting on her guessing, way back, suspecting at least. But it was a complete shock. Complete. When we talked. When I had to finally tell her. She’s spent a lot of time at my mother’s place since... I didn’t want it. Didn’t want him. Not like that. Not at that price. My little, grown-up sister. A mother herself... Now she says she couldn’t wish the father of her child a better partner than me.”

The last words were whispered, Liz’s right hand still playing with a fork on the table. They stayed silent until Liz’s food arrived.

When the plate was sat before her, all she did was stare at it.

“He’s a freak...” she whispered. “You know where he made his money?”

“He mentioned something about New York.”

“Yeah, and now he’s got the Cartel, and the Trap. You know how that place is run?”

Zen didn’t and didn’t care, but it was clear Liz was desperate to get onto some kind of neutral, painless ground as she started spooning little bits of food into her mouth.

“He met some guys in Reno once. They had an inner city project going, building up mountain bikes, from second-hand parts, keeping kids off the street. He started up trade. They shipped him exotic things you couldn’t get here, they got money for more kit. Did this with one city first, now he’s got five projects going, all over the States. Gets tax relief ‘cause of their charitable status, feeds it all back.”

“Steven runs a charity?”

Liz shook her head.

“You know what Dervish used to pay the mechanics in his shop? Hundred and twenty quid a week. Steven pays double that. Dervish has all the money and half the hassle he had running his own place, and still moans about Steven shutting him down. Steven says the ideal would be to build a network of shops like the Trap, have them running as co-ops, but he’s studied various projects, knows they have to stay small to survive. Doesn’t want to be another Body Shop. Do business with people he’s never shaken hands with.”

“Told me he wanted to be a politician as a kid.”

“You heard of his father? Paul Spencer?”

Zen shook his head.

“Funny guy. Connected. His mother the most stunning woman you’ve ever seen. Half Mexican. Clean heroin keeps her looking young. Fucking madhouse. And Steven...”

She said his name with both wonder and admiration.

“Doesn’t he have any weaknesses?”

She smiled.

“Cultivates the damn things.” Her eyes were wandering a little again, her hands more animated. “Anything artistic, in fact. He can’t... Expand into anything that isn’t him. Used to manage a couple of bands, way back, but it wasn’t his thing. The ego business.”

“That’s good.”
 She paused, chewing the food a little slower.
 “I’m sorry.”
 “Why?”
 “I feel...” She looked up with hurt in her eyes.
 “Like you’re boasting?” He smiled calmly, masking everything else. “I like to hear. Like to see other people doing well.” He topped up their glasses, lit up. “Don’t know why people in trouble want to hear songs, or whatever, about other people in trouble. I’d rather... See luck in good hands.”
 “Tell me about her.”
 “It’s not a happy story.”
 “I didn’t come here to hear happy stories.”
 “Not a good subject.”
 “Tell me.”
 “No.”
 “Why tell Steven?”
 “An explanation... Felt necessary.”
 “But not for me.”
 “Old hat now.”
 “Why not stay?”
 “Here?”
 “Alive.”
 “Same reasons I don’t want to tell you about her.”
 “You should talk.”
 “Why?”
 “You shouldn’t do this alone.”
 “I know.”
 “Have some pity for yourself...”
 Things were accelerating beyond his control. He breathed in, stared at her plate.
 “It wouldn’t change shit.”
 “Are you sure?”
 “I have no faith.”
 “You have strength. There are medicines. There is hope.”
 “No. Nothing.”
 “There are other people...”
 “Doesn’t matter. I’m running on empty. On an empty past. Something dead. Literally... I’m sorry. I wish... Don’t know why I’m sorry. Please, eat your food.”
 “I don’t want to sound like I know what I’m talking about, because I don’t, but...”
 “It’s not just a disease or war, not some... Conventional thing. I’m...” He wanted to say that it was love killing him, but it would sound way too melodramatic. “One hell of a fate.” was the best he could manage.
 Halfway through, she pushed her plate away, walked over to the till at the back of the restaurant. He watched her take money out of her back pocket, pay, wave to the chefs visible through the food hatch. Returning to their table, she avoided meeting his eyes.
 “Can we go?” She spoke quietly, her eyes on the cigarette packet in the middle of the table. “I didn’t mean to push.”
 He got up, cigarettes in one hand, bottle in the other. Without a word, she passed him in the door he was holding open, walked down the street.
 Turning the corner after her, he realised it was a blessing, having a woman within reach. Such a tiny, little blessing.

 The road round the corner sloped towards the seafront, nothing but black sky where the sea should’ve been. As his feet picked up momentum, she turned, climbed a set of steps towards a front door.
 “It’s coming up to eleven. Pubs are shutting. I’ll call you a cab when you’re bored of my company.”
 She went in without looking back, up a narrow, ridiculously steep staircase. He watched her disappear without making a move himself. Why follow? Why get into this? It was pointless, for him at least. But for her? What was she trying to prove? That just because all was hunky-dory between her and Steven, that that was the universal rule? That all could be rescued? Did she mean well or just to patronise him? No. Her intelligence wouldn’t allow it, that much seemed clear. Her feet seemed planted. But she was arrogant. Happiness made her arrogant in the same, naïve way he remembered in himself not so long ago. It was terrible, this amount of faith in feeling.
 He started climbing, ready to set records straight.
 There was another set of stairs beyond the first, even narrower, leading to the attic, a couple of bicycles propped at the bottom. She was already inside, pulling off her jacket, turning lights on. He followed, the flat divided by a corridor, bedroom on the left, kitchen on the right, a large living room with a fake fireplace at the end.
 “I’d like to apologise for the mess, but the place is always so bloody tidy... Come through.”

The living room had a sloping ceiling, an angled skylight showing a square of sky. He sat down on a soft armchair, looked up, trying to separate stars from the reflection of the streets below. Liz came in, holding some glasses, said nothing handing him his drink.

"What's in this?"

"Vodka and coke."

"Straight coke?"

"Yeah."

"Can't drink that. My teeth."

"Not even one?"

"No. Something like ten cubes of sugar in that one glass. Hurts like hell."

She went back into the kitchen.

"Only have fruit juices..."

"It's all right. Just have it on ice."

Shelving units, suspended from the walls instead of on the polished wood floor, dominated the room. Books, photo frames and other bric-a-brac were arranged in tidy patterns on the shelves.

"Easier to Hoover..." he commented on them glibly when she came back. "You read a lot."

"Compulsive book buyer. I was a compulsive book buyer. I'm better now." She took an ashtray from the dinner table at the other end of the room, placed on the rug in front of him, went over to turn on the fireplace.

"I like the skylight," he said, his head hanging back, staring straight up into it.

"The one in the bedroom's a pain. Seagulls wake us at four every morning, screaming. But you can't have everything."

"Not even being engaged to Steven?"

"We're not engaged."

"No, I know... Steven said he turned you down." He lowered his head, paused. "Only joking."

"Funny, ha, ha."

Head hanging down, he searched for something else to break the silence with. On the floor by the armchair, a black suitcase still had the airline tag attached to its strap.

"How is your ex-husband? All right?"

"Don't know. Thought we'd sit, get to talk... But the trip went by so quickly. Five days, saw some friends, run around a few courts, settled old bills... We met once. Talked about nothing. It was horrible. He has someone new, sharing our old house, but he never once said a word about her, never once mentioned how he felt. We slept in the same bed for five years."

"You don't get to choose."

"I know."

"And you're lucky."

"Doesn't stop me feeling... Responsible." She looked up from the rug, eyes a little dazed and confused. "Then the whole thing with Chris kicked off back here... I thought the world was taking the piss. Punishing me for leaving Sal."

"Love doesn't know what the fuck it's doing." Liz looked up, an unhappy glaze over her eyes, but Zen kept talking anyway. "Matches up all the wrong people. Count them. How many situations? With Chris and me and your husband. You and this Carl bloke. And how much happiness for how many? You and Steven?"

"My parents."

"That's two. Any more?"

"Lots of people I know."

"The real thing?"

"Someone tells me they love..."

"You believe them?"

"If they say..."

"What they say doesn't mean anything. It isn't for everybody."

"What'd you mean?"

"People think it's just waiting to hit them over the head. Bless them for being them. Out of nowhere, for nothing. But it only comes to the chosen few, and even then the wrong few... How often d'you see it? Hear people talk about it? Not everyone can feel or fire up this kind of thing in others, and when they do, it's almost always just one way."

"That's unfair..."

"I should know. That's what my mother used to say when she hit me over the head when I was a kid. 'Life's unfair, life's unfair.' Who's unfair? If anything under the sun, then love should get it right. But it doesn't. Not everybody's special enough, and even those special enough to feel it still get chased out of the toy store for being too poor."

"Nice metaphor, but..."

"Thought I was lost. Thought there was something wrong with me, something cold. And then she comes along, and out of the blue... And then leaves 'cause she's in love with someone else, someone who doesn't want her either... Spent many nights since reading, everything, novels, newspapers, journals, history books, anything. Anything

might give me some clue. How love could keep getting it so wrong. I know about nature, evolution. But love shouldn't... Shouldn't just honour a few, and even then, so badly. It fails us, or we fail it, either way, it's a match made in heaven, not earth, not anything for us to enjoy."

"It's not that simple."

"It shows you heaven, then dumps you back down again, like fools, morons, to walk around, spouting shit about where you've been and what you've seen and how you've felt..."

"Tell me about her."

believe in resurrections

Saturday

“Why?”

“You’re angry.”

“I’m not.”

“I can see it.”

“There’s nothing to see.”

“Then tell me about her.”

“The half-life... Persists. That’s all. Talking won’t change that.”

“I don’t want to change it, I want to know more, to understand!”

“Now who’s angry.”

“And what? You’re beyond anger?”

“Maybe... I just want to rest. Nothing I regret or want to fight.”

“Then tell me about her.”

She got up, swaying with drink, refilled his glass.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Once I had a language...” He could hear his own breathing, struggling. “But not any more.”

“Why her?”

He thought the question over for a long while.

“I don’t know.”

“Not true.” The accusation of lying hurt him.

“Why her? Why not someone else? Just as smart. Just as pretty. There were others before her. Many. Why not any of them? Why her? Why not another plain old human being? What did she do? How did she cast this thing...” Liz stared at him. “I don’t know. And you? Why you, not Chris, for Steven? What’s so special about you?”

“That’s not for me to say.”

“Who for, then?” He whispered. “This blessing... Why so blind? I wanted it. I know she wanted it. With me. Not that junkie. The pain he’d put her through... I know she didn’t want it, but he’d cast his spell and that was it... There was so much that could’ve been good. So much strength to go round. What it does to your heart, to be found. And then... Five minutes, and it’s over. A year I’ve lasted, trying to work it out. A year’s enough.”

“When my husband had his breakdown, Dad was in hospital... I had to go, make amends with Chris. Hadn’t spoken for years... After I got over losing Carl, I felt nothing. Felt as if the world had been emptied of happiness. All my future could hold was unrequited love, either me or someone else getting more heartbreak.”

“And then you met Steven and against all odds, goodness triumphed.” The sarcasm in his voice came out brutal and cold. “Like I said. Some are cut out for happiness, others just watch.”

“It’s not like that with love...”

“How is it not?”

“You don’t know how many chances you get. One life, but how many chances?”

“Don’t believe in resurrections.”

“What d’you mean?”

“Look at Steven. Fully formed. Never had anyone play him for a chump.”

“Everybody gets played for a chump sometimes. I did too.”

“It’s not the same.”

“How is it not?”

“Do you know what a write-off is? Something that can maybe be repaired, but isn’t worth it. Something that simply needs replacing.”

“Crap.”

“I wish.”

“Damn right you do.”

His body seemed to expel air, without sound or hurry, as if it was no longer necessary.

“It’s not wishes, just reason... Dawned on me so many times, I’ve got used to the idea. Too used, maybe... I’m tired. The world doesn’t scare or involve me any more.”

“Not true.”

Zen smiled.

“Look. I am. I’m tired...”

“Then why talk to me?”

“Nice to talk sometimes... Hear the dice rolled good for some.”

“So stay. End yourself, and that’s it. Have you considered that? Really considered oblivion? Considered the possibility that you’ve lived with your plan for so long, you haven’t left room for alternatives?”

Liz’s drunken enthusiasm warned him a little.

“Your glass is half full. Mine isn’t. That’s all...”

“Not all.”

“Right...”

“What about your family?”

“They can’t help.”

“You ever thought of giving them a chance?”

Zen shook his head.

“I know how tired I feel. Like I somehow overshot old age... Remember how you felt when your man left?”

She lit up another cigarette.

“Perfectly.”

“And?”

“I went through everything. But I didn’t give up.”

“No?”

“Delight. Hate. Fury. Limbo... But in the end I knew it was real, even if he was a fake. In the end I didn’t give up, couldn’t give up. Even after that had happened with Sal, and Chris... You must reconsider.”

She got up, left the room. He heard the door to what he assumed was the toilet, got off the armchair, crouched down by the fake fireplace. It was time to leave, get out of the motel in the morning. No signing out, just pack and go, spend a few more days, his hands like now, in front of roaring camp fires, in silent anonymity, and then vanish for good, a stone in water, the ripples nothing in time.

He stared into the flames. To go on a funeral pyre, the van set alight, let it burn with his body atop it. It would be spectacular, but too complicated to put into action. Where to leave such a mess? How to make sure his remains could not be identified, make sure he was dead by the time the fire started consuming his remains? Rip all the engine and frame numbers off the van, all number plates? His dental records might still give him away. Blowing the mouth off with a shotgun would solve the problem of teeth and instant death, but where to get such a gun?

His mind was cartwheeling all over the place. He had to get get out of here, set his plans back in order.

Rushing down the stairs, opening the front door, he whispered goodbyes under his breath. In truth, he could only do harm. Maybe he could repair a little of that harm with words, but the other side of those little plaster jobs lay more damage, more people he’d cast his shadow on. Liz would recover far quicker than he imagined anyway. He was sure of it. Steven or some other friend who dropped by all the time would be back soon. His footsteps would leave no echo in this place, no more than an unpleasant memory.

as if a god-child was playing

Sunday

The sun had come around again. With the journal safely beneath him, keeping his backside from the cold of the concrete circle, he fed every item from the case into the fire. The tickets stubs, sculpture, photos. His sketchbooks burned quickly. The photographs he'd left 'till last, even though he didn't look at them as they flew in. There was no need. He knew them all too well, all life sucked from the images, all connection to reality. With a long stick, he poked at the wooden logs, the extra lighter fluid in his rucksack unnecessary, the clothes he'd soaked in it earlier just ashes now. The ones on his back were the only things left, along with the rucksack and journal. The case would soon take the rest of the fluid, be the pyre's final centrepiece.

He picked up the journal, opened it on one of the last pages.

In four days time it'll be Your birthday, and I can't get You on the phone to ask if there's anything You want me to bring over.

The only thing I need now is to hear Your voice, know You're all right. Looking outside my window today, clouds passed across the sky as the sun was setting behind my building. It shone on the blocks opposite, light going on and off, repeatedly, as if a god-child was playing with a dimmer switch. My emotions are like that. Going from hope to terror, terror to hope. Writing this should help, communicating, but if it does, the help is so little I can't feel a thing. I just need to hear You're all right. All else just pales.

help you to your end

Monday

A flattened lump of burnt black leather covered the ashes at his feet. There was a thick screen of mist around him, a halo thinning out overhead, but for now the world seemed tiny, curved right at the edges of the hill, as if he was sitting on a little, grey comet.

It was an optical illusion, yet he couldn't stop trembling. Already, the world was barring him from seeing any more of itself, putting the blinkers on, the blindfold.

Within half an hour, the cloud had lifted, leaving a clear, pale day in its wake, but it made no difference to his disturbed senses. He had to stay tight, keep his wits together. Only a couple more days, hours in double figures, each one vital, each demanding attention, not paranoia. And yet he couldn't help feeling like the world he had always delighted in staring at, touching, painting in minute detail, had already turned his back on him. Stripped of everything, the absolute solitude of death was already here. He welcomed it with shivers of delirious excitement.

I should be able to do something. Something to stop this fear. Either get rid of it, or its cause. Where are You? I'm failing. In strength. You mentioned nothing about leaving for the weekend. What's happened. An accident? I had a vision. Watching your father's car wrecked by the side of a motorway. Anything takes You from me, I will not be able to stick around this world. No one needs me here half as much as I need You. I know it's sad, but nevertheless true.

I can't drink or talk or do anything to dispel what I'm feeling. I'm powerless. It's foul. The air in this flat is so full of tension, of need, if that phone were to ring now, I think the whole building would explode. Yet when will You ring? What is going on? Why can I not find the strength to silence this demon fear? I am no hero, but I should be man enough for this test. Why am I failing? There You are, waiting. There is a child, waiting for me to be a father. In this world, it will need one hell of a dad to lead the way. Where are You? Why can't I see anything anymore?



Lying sideways in the concrete circle, wrapped in the sleeping bag, he smiled as the distant sea changed colour. Clouds cut off enough sunlight from the waves to turn them from emerald green to a silty grey. Or maybe it was something else, maybe silt itself washing to the surface, maybe the tides doing their thing, currents floating in off the Atlantic.

It didn't matter. He smiled, because there was nothing else left to do. Couldn't cry. Didn't want to move.

He smiled, thinking of small things. So many moments had lain undisturbed. The more he thought, the more he remembered. Teaching her how to trim the flowers he'd bought her once, searing the stalk ends over a stove. How she used to love scalding hot baths. How he'd struggle to get in with her, and she'd laugh and try to put cold water in and he'd stop her, being half-seriously macho about burning his balls every time. The smell of dogs in her kitchen back in London. Her parents hadn't impressed themselves on his memory as much as the dogs, and he smiled to see her cuddling them after months of absence. Meeting her friends, sitting back, quiet, wanting to make a good impression. Seeing men drawn to her, feeling delightful pangs of possessiveness, wrapped up in the certainty she was his, even at a distance. Her smile on top of the first mountain they'd climbed together, delighted, grateful. A highland shelter, watching stars vainly checking themselves out in the surface of an alpine lake.

Memory. An endless museum. He scanned back through the places they'd passed through, the shops, bars, street corners, each little snapshot of their world launching another image, another slice of life. Everything so clear, yet her face still escaped him. He could remember each detail, nose, eyes, lips, but the face whole he could not resurrect. He knew it was there, buried in the mind, so deep in his flesh he could almost touch it, but only dreams seemed capable of accessing the images.

His body shook, repressing memories of them alone in an empty sleeper train compartment, rocking to the rhythm of the rails. He could bear the recollection of sight, but not touch. Maybe it was the flesh itself rebelling against what it knew was next. He could recall moments of emotional experience, his imagination bear the thought of death, because it could not comprehend oblivion in full. The body knew though, knew death, and reeled from anything that reeked of it. The mind, ever hopeful, just never considered that there was no Other Side, that all the universe wanted was the molecules back.



For the second time that day, fear had woken him. Fear of what he knew was coming soon. So soon. The sun had set, air turning to ice in minutes. He'd wrapped himself around the rebuilt fire, zipped up in the bag, unable to beat the cold rising from the concrete. His body was fighting itself, both desperately needing and reeling from sleep. Clouds up above seemed huge, still catching light from far beneath the horizon, all pinks, reds, whites even, the day itself clutching at straws.

Head on the ground, he saw a few more logs land on the fire, then a dark face come into view, smiling. "Hello, Steven." After days of mute silence, he felt his voice sounded weak and pathetic. Clearing his throat sent him into a small fit of coughing.

"Catch a death lying out here."

Zen wanted to smile, but couldn't find anything in Steven's voice to invite such a response. He lifted himself off the floor, leaned against the wall that ran around the depression in the disk. It seemed weak and impolite to remain prostrate.

"How'd you find me?"

"You told me about this place."

"Did I?"

"For a man who doesn't want to be found, you certainly leave a lot of clues around."

"Me and my big mouth," Zen said, trying a smile again.

"Quite. You forgot this." His portable hi-fi was hanging by its handle from Steven's finger.

"Oh, yeah. Keep it."

He tried to work out how Steven had got it out of the motel room, could see him picking the lock, sneaking in, but the image was more like something out of a movie he'd seen a long time ago. Two dimensional again. Watching the tall man sitting on the other side of the fire, he wanted to say something, but couldn't think of what it was. There was nothing to say, just an ongoing need to fill silence between people. Stupid and weak.

"Didn't want to be found."

It dawned on him that this might be an errand. Maybe Liz had sent him here, to try and keep on fucking with his fate. He hoped Steven had better judgement.

"Tough to the last. No self-pity."

"Pity is appreciated, but really..." Again, he failed to pitch his voice right, making an honest plea sound like a capricious demand.

"Fair enough. Don't want to waste precious moments. A few days back you asked me a few questions."

"What questions?"

"I wonder if you could return the favour. Won't take long. Question number one. Fella shows up in this little van. Goes by a funny name, has some unusual sleeping habits. Looks like a fucking vagabond." Zen couldn't ever remember Steven swearing. The word was like an explosion, the intentional payload delivered, the shock value. "What does he want? He pops up a couple of times in places where people go about their business, gets to tagging along. Then spouts this story, this mad little story of loss and despair. What does he want, this boy, with his tale?"

The voice was even quieter than usual, something new and bad happening.

"Question number two... Was it Sophie? The house? Am I right? You thought a request for some money, for treatments for your sorry condition might come through if only you made it sincere enough? Or was it Chris caught your eye? You haven't said a word about any donations to your cause, so I'm assuming it's that... You can hardly get laid with a story like yours, but maybe you're one of those damaged fucks go round hitting people for pity. Is that it? Chris? With the kid and the broken heart and all that shit. And a painter too. What a coincidence... She's the one mentioned you first to me. Did you know that? Your whole night owl routine was irresistible."

Zen closed his eyes, Steven's voice floating on the sound bed of air, fire and far-off water.

"Question number three... This is a good one. Why am I curious? No? No guesses... Liz. I wanted to hear this story of yours, just to get a handle on something similar happened to her once. She must've mentioned it, the tiff

between the sisters and that Carl boy. I wanted a little insight into this obsessive little thing you both had going. And, of course, get brownie points off of Liz for taking an active interest in the lemming that you are. Fake or no fake. She's got a soft spot for lost causes. Just so plain old good... Me on the other hand, and this is what I'm really driving at, I'm a favourite with the heavenly host. One of the few who turn... Repentant. Not always been good. Far from it sometimes. But I've done my best to change. Done my best. And still, sometimes, just sometimes, people do things that demand action. Demand I protect my own."

Zen had no idea what to say or think even. All the words were recognisable, but none of the meaning, the direction they were taking them in.

"Anyway, I was curious. Curious to see you put a foot wrong. See how you'd react... London, for example. All I have so far is your word, remember. Can't blame me for being suspicious. You leg it from there, which is fair enough, but I'm still curious. So I ask for help from a friend at the motel. For a little eye to be kept on you, you solitary little munchkin. And you'll never guess what happens next. Or will you? Nah, I know you know the answer to this question. Liz, sweet little Fanny Nightingale, has to get involved. And you, you should've known better. Didn't you think I'd be interested? Back and forth in your room. Up in our flat... You seem to want everyone to put themselves in your shoes. Well, do the same for me. What do you see? No? Imagination run dry? Take a look at this from all angles. All angles. Maybe I'm feeling threatened, but that's too obvious. Pity ain't enough for me to get jealous over. Chris? Now there I would worry. That would be harsh, knowing what you know about the poor girl. Fishing for her affections. Or maybe you're just a sucker for stories yourself? Like listening. An emotional Peeping Tom. Picking your way into people's pasts. Breaking into heads. An emotional voyeur. A parasite... But even if, even if all you are is a little thief of secrets, what's to be done now? What would you do in my shoes? You've got your van fixed, got under people's skin, now what? Should I chase you out of town? Let you just move on down the coast?"

The question sat between them for a while.

"You come knocking on my door, into my house, telling porkies... Taking advantage. Liberties... Do I forgive and forget, or do I fight fire with fire? What's the enlightened thing to do here?"

Zen waited for his sentence in silence.

"Personally, I'm grateful. Not often I get curious about people, certainly not freaks. You a freak or not? Hard to call... Just how much truth is there in what you say? Maybe you really did want to fuck, infect the world with this ugly little thing you have floating round you. You and I both know women are suckers for any kind of 'lost little soldier boy' story. Even one that can get them killed... Maybe it's even worked for you before. I mean, where were you really before you graced us with this visit? Who were you fucking with then?" Picking up a wooden stick, he rolled some of the logs around, the fire dimmed rather than stoked. "All these unanswered questions... I wonder, are you going to be any kind of help, or do I have to do all the guesswork myself? What should I do with you? Can't get you arrested. The kind of violence you bring into the world doesn't leave any evidence behind. Not yet, anyway... Maybe you've raped someone already. Maybe you're fucked up enough to do that. You wouldn't be the first. Maybe the women in my life have just been lucky so far... If you were me, what steps would you take then? I mean, rape is one thing, but if you really are infected... Understand, I'm not blaming you. It's not personal yet. I know you're just a victim. Something about your face... But it doesn't change anything. What I believe. What matters is what I know.

"So what happens next, Cinderella? D'you turn back into your shitty little self at the eleventh hour? Own up? I've got to know. You must understand that... Fucking with lives like you do. I mean, fuck the sanctity of life." Again, the swearword exploded in the air between them. "Life means shit. How you live, that's the crux. What you do with it. And not just your own, but others. You have to be stopped. Someone has to take you off this trip you're on. That's what I think... Who knows what fragile souls you might yet do harm to if you're allowed to move on. Now, I know you know the answer to that question. So, I'll leave you with just the one. Knowing what you know of Liz, do you think she'd stomach the news I'd helped you to your end?"

The words sprung Zen's tired eyes open. Now the world really had turned psycho. Steven was still smiling, face lit up by the fire, looking his usual self, but the words were far from usual, far from sane.

"If I kill you... I know it sounds funny, but don't laugh. If I do it, then my promise to you is that I'll tell her. I think that's fair. If I keep it secret, it means I don't really believe in what I'm doing. And if you're gonna take a life, then you've got to be sure you're doing the right thing. That you're the good guy. So... I have to tell her. She knows things about my past would make some people blush. But she also knows we don't live in toy-town. At worst, we could involve a story of a struggle. You could help with that. If you fight, it's an admission of guilt. Proves me even more right. But then, is it an accident, or do I admit there was no other way? I mean, I can't keep an eye on you everywhere you go. Can't let you just walk away... What do I do? Absolute honesty or accident scenario? Help me here. We could do this together. This is what your redemption will cost. Your freedom from lies. See what I'm prepared to sacrifice for you? If she doesn't... If she leaves, then I have to face YOUR reality, YOUR fate, and not break, not turn into a sad little attention seeker."

The voice and face were finished with all friendly theatricals. There was nothing but menace in them now.

"And don't say no. Not that I'm giving you a choice, it's just easier that way. You'd be doing me a favour... Not often a man gets a chance to test his balls this way. It's exciting, I admit. Being forced into a corner... What kind of a man would I be if I let you walk? What kind of a father, a partner to any woman? I've built a home, brought a child into the world and now I've got some weeding to do. Maybe you want to own up, beg, all that bollocks. Maybe even cry a little. Maybe even fight back. Whatever happens, you have this idea it won't work. And it's the right idea. I'd like your co-operation. There's no hurry... I'm not ignorant of what you're going through. Plenty of time to make your

peace... The end question. Consider it. I'm giving you a chance to make amends. No good shaking like a leaf. No good anywhere now..."

Zen shook his head along with the rest of his body, but it seemed to take him forever to gather up words with which to reply.

"I'm not... Shaking... Not fear." He was having a hard time talking, jaw locked with effort to counter the fits. "I'm just sorry."

"Sorry for?"

"Sorry about."

"About what?"

"So much should've been so good..." A little, desperate waver shook his voice. "But it's not. You're right. You don't trust me. I don't know the first thing about you..."

Steven's face contacted into a frown as he watched Zen start to come apart, shaking in something that looked like an apoplectic fit, even the skin starting to change colour, pale and swollen. He watched the body inside the sleeping bag clamped round itself, the face staring at the flames, trembling like mad.

After a while, a hand emerged, picked a cigarette out of a pack on the ground, lit up slowly.

"It was good, watching Liz fighting these things." Zen looked at the cigarette with disdain, put it back in his mouth. He felt the shakes slowly ebb away, leaving behind the pins and needles of anxiety and disgust. "What's the point? Don't mind if it's... If life is happy. But this much dying? What do you want? Do you believe in anything you say?" Steven stared back without an answer, without so much as a flinch. "Fuck... No comedy, all errors... Tell Liz what you want. Nice guys... Come last, go first. And still apologise for it."

To Zen, everything suddenly seemed distant, as if he was again watching a two dimensional film. Nothing seemed real, no memory or thought of future, just the present folding into meaningless movement. Steven's face, the fire, the sea coming and going, clouds and sky over them all. He felt sick. To think of death, face it, seemed preferable to a place where another minute of life had no importance, where everything had literally paled into insignificance, dead already.

As if reading his thoughts, Steven got slowly up, out of his field of vision. Zen waited for something to happen. Lay there waiting for arms to lift him, toss him over the cliff, strike.

When nothing happened for however many minutes, he waited for the same arms to come rest on his shoulders, apologise, take him out of limbo.

After an hour or so, he forgot all about them.

like blessings in life

Tuesday

"Hello, Speed Trap. How can I help?"

"Ben?"

"Afternoon, Liz."

"Is Steven there?"

"Nah. Haven't seen him all day."

"Anybody else been looking for him?"

"No one I know of."

"A guy with a funny name? Real short crop."

"I know the one you mean. Not seen him for ages."

"If you hear from either of them, call me."

"Will do. Don't stress..."

"Thanks, Agony Ben."

She put the phone down, stared at the street far below the kitchen window. Steven's car was parked on the corner.

Cardigan wrapped round her with one arm, she walked over to the car, looked in. It was empty. Maybe he was looking for her at the Cartel, but why there when he knew her schedule, knew she'd be at home, waiting? She'd only seen him when he climbed into bed the night before, and by the time she'd woken, he was gone. He'd called during the day, left a message on her mobile. His voice had been right as rain, but when wasn't it? She knew something was up, knew he'd tell her when the time was right, just didn't have his Sphinx-like patience to tide her over until it came.

She touched the bonnet. The metal was still warm, meaning he couldn't have gone far. As she took her hand away, a single, ear-piercing squeal came from the alarm, indicator lights flashing a warning, making her jump away as if burnt. She swung around, back down the road to the seafront, to where a familiar, slow laugh was approaching. Standing still, holding herself, angry for about a second, she turned her head sideways as his chest pressed against it, arms wrapped round her, the car's alarm remote control dangling from his hand.

"Fucker. Scared the bejesus out of me."

"Teach you to go peeking into people's cars. How are you?"

"Where you been all day?"

"It's only three. Went for a walk, is all."

"I'm freezing..."

He picked her up, spun and set her down, hand in the small of the back pushing towards her front door.

"Everybody sending through extra gear Christmas. Coast guard nervous, checking everything ten times before it touches dry land. Derv's been there since yesterday, trying to get the container released. I reckon the son of a bitch's just dragging his feet, happy to have a little break from the shop. Thinks it's a complimentary business trip... I'd skin him for it, but I can't be arsed driving to Southampton, and Charlie's still immobile."

Liz listened from the kitchen, dropping dirty dishes in to soak. She came back into the living room, stood behind his chair, wrapped her arms round his neck. For once, she was the one towering over.

"Hey... Period pain already?" She nodded. "Saw him yesterday."

She was happy to find her heart beating steady, showing nothing, even if there might've been something there to show. She sat down in his lap, their eyes almost level. Maybe to rest. Maybe to get close to his eyes, see everything.

"Where?"

"Up near Newhaven Fort. Keeps building little scout fires in those old turret gun placements."

"How was he?"

She ran her hand through the black bristle of his hair.

"Awful, all things considered... You wanna hear?"

"No, but talk anyhow."

"I thought he might've been a fraud."

"A what?"

"His story. I thought it might've been a put-on."

"You're joking."

"You trust too much sometimes."

"What'd you mean?"

"What if he had been nothing more than a travelling con artist? What if he was bullshitting us all along?"

Liz's body tensed in his lap.

"You have to trust sometimes. Too much even." He was about to interrupt, but she cut him dead. "Like you. Like me you."

For a moment, they stared each other out.

"This is different. What if he'd hurt Chris or Sophie, or Sian? I had to be sure."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. Just talked."

"And were you happy with what you heard?"

"Happy's the wrong word... I'd half-hoped he was a fake."

"And what would you have done if he had been?"

He put his face against her breastbone, an inch away from her heart. He'd known all along the poor bastard'd been no liar, the threat of murder only meant to put the fear of everything in the man, meant to help him feel disgust, distance from the world, help make suicide less painful. Anaesthesia and euthanasia in one.

But now, Liz's chest swelling and shrinking against his cheek, he didn't know what to say. He'd meant to tell her everything, everything about the trip to London, the choices he'd made about who they'd see, his motivations for harassing Zen up on that clifftop, yet now that he was here, her flesh so real in his arms, he didn't know how to talk about death. It all seemed so ridiculous. So childish. So insane.



Where are You? Five days now and no word. Phone ringing, no one calling back to the messages I leave. I know I mustn't panic. I know I need strength. I know it's probably nothing, but where are You? I feel terror now. Real terror. Any minute You will call and I'll kick myself all over this flat for being dumb, but five days. Can't even write the thoughts going through my head. Whatever's happened, I want to know. Even if it is something. My imagination is feeding me thoughts I cannot handle. I need You. In a dark hour, a man needs light.

He ripped a clean sheet from the back of the journal, dropped the closed book into a Jiffy bag. Resting the page on the envelope, he tried to make his handwriting as tidy and legible as possible. It was the last time he'd ever have to lift a pen.

Thinking over what to write, he looked though the windscreen, down the seafront to where the shop was, trying to remember something real about the recipient, something that would help him get the words right.

Steven

Last night. Lots of questions apart from the ones you asked. Read the contents of this envelope if you need any more convincing. Doesn't matter to me, but maybe it'll melt through your fury, calm you down a bit. Give others a chance.

If it's not necessary, fine. If you don't give a fuck, then I'm even more sorry. Either way, I want you to seal it up and stick it in a post box for me afterwards. The address is on there and I think I've stuck enough stamps on it to cover the cost.

I know this may just seem like more attention seeking. I don't know why I'm doing it either. What I'm hoping to do or achieve. Don't get all that much, that's probably clear, but I know I never once told you a lie. I hope you understand why that's important. Why it's that's the last thing of any kind of importance.

Zen

He slipped the page in with the journal, got out, left the door unlocked. It felt good to leave the van without having to worry about anyone breaking in anymore.

Walking along the seafront, he felt energised, as if at the last, everything was falling into place. He'd eaten, stayed sober, not even smoked that much. His throat was sore, but it was small complaint tonight. He'd slept a few hours, worried a little about the long road back up to Scotland, but then the night was long, the van working fine, all necessary items packed away. Looking at the streets of Brighton for the last time, he neither thought nor cared. By this time tomorrow, he would be thinking about nothing, caring for nothing any more. To do the same a little early made no difference.

A woman in full make-up jogged past him three times, panting madly. Her ridiculous features made him smile. Walking past the basketball court, he couldn't help looking down to see who was there, but it was empty, steel hoop nets rattling in the wind.

Up ahead, the clock over the Pier said it was coming up for nine. The shop would've been closed long ago. He crossed the busy road, walked slowly along, turned the corner, past the hotel bar, all the time expecting to see someone he recognised, prove Steven right in his assessment of him as attention seeker. No familiar faces appeared until he looked up to find Steven up on the mural covering the shop building. There he was, along with a couple of other faces, Carl and James, Liz even, up on top of a cloud, something he hadn't noticed before. All two dimensional again, he thought, pushing the envelope through the flap at the bottom of the shutter door.

Walking away, he realised the envelope only had his parents' address on it. If someone other than Steven found it, it might never reach him, might be thrown away or posted on as it was. He didn't want it delivered to his parents with the note to Steven inside it.

An ad covering a phone box a little way down the street promised 'Interesting Shopping' in a local mall. He stared without so much as a comment passing through his thoughts, waiting for whoever was inside to finish their call. It took forever, but he didn't mind. The air was cold, the sky overhead clear enough to show stars, even in the light-polluted air. So many stars, and yet nowhere near enough to counter the black void between them. That's all the universe was, just a few lights, lost for a while in space, like blessings in life. Not enough, when you thought about it. Nowhere near enough.

The man and his dog slipped out of the box and he yanked the heavy door, shut himself in. First he dialled the number on the card Steven had given him. A young man's voice answered, confirming that he was through to the paging service, asked for the message.

"An urgent letter for you at the Trap. Please get it tonight. Zen."

The man read it back, thanked him for using the service and hung up first.

How much ceremony would the next moment need? He'd cared for ceremony, always, always careful to give extraordinary things their due. It was the night before her birthday. A year since everything had gone to hell. But now? Did it matter? Or was it time to admit that it didn't make a blind bit of difference whether he rushed anything or not, not with things the way they were.

The ringing tone did not sound the same as normal. Volume, pitch, frequency, whatever, all of it extraordinary. By the sixth ring, he got ready to leave a message. By the seventh, someone picked up.

"Hello?" The voice waited for an answer, but he knew it was her mother. "Hello..."

He hung up, the handset both burning and freezing at the same time. In the very next instant, without thinking, he picked up and dialled again.

There were five rings this time.

"Hello?" The world did not make sense. Could not honour the scale of feelings. Had no right to exist. "Hello? Zen? It's me." There were no words. The ones which existed were not enough. "Zen? Where are you? Are you OK? Please, say something..."

He lowered the handset, let the metal coated cable take its weight, left it hanging there, unable to hang up, weak to the very end.

"Hello..."

deliver oblivion

Wednesday

It was the last service station before Glasgow. He'd visited half a dozen already in the course of the night, filling up, stretching numb muscles, swallowing cold savouries and bitter vending machine coffees. They were all the same, the same brightly lit oases for the driven and the insomniac. Fish and chip counters decorated with plastic flotsam, open-plan cafes done out in paint-thin brass and oak, steel and neon hinting at a better future in video games arcades.

Chewing his way through a cold sausage roll in the food court, he watched a suited salesman pull up in a sports saloon, grab a coffee, put money into a games machine parked in a corridor. Behind the steering wheel, the seat shoved round by pneumatic motors, speakers howling music and horsepower, the man muscled pixels round an imaginary racetrack. Remembering the conversation that first night at Steven's, Zen laughed, feeling saner than ever.

Steven put his hand, palm down, on Liz's stomach.

"Bad?"

"Aha."

"Sleep any?"

She kept staring past his head at the skylight, angled glass sprinkled with a reflection of the city lights below. She'd been awake for half an hour at least, but only now noticed the usual screaming of the gulls outside.

"Lots... Feel like a need a million more hours yet."

"So what's with the open eyes?"

"Had a dream. It woke me up."

"Serious?"

She turned, hid her face in the cave between his ribcage and the bed. He started running his hands through her hair, gently pressing the scalp with his fingers, an action sure to calm and send her back to sleep.

"Dreams that keep you awake at night..."

"Shh. Listen." Bending down, he kissed the top of her ear. "A dozen shopping days 'till Christmas. I've got to go in. Gonna get up, run a few errands, come back, make you some late breakfast. Salmon, from Frankie's, if you like. You stay put. Sleep." She wasn't holding on tight, but he still found it hard to unwrap himself from her embrace. He picked up the glass and saucer with painkillers from the floor, sat her up, lifted her deadweight head. "C'mon. Drink up. I'll call the surgery, tell them to cancel your appointments for today..."

"No. Don't wanna stay here on my own." She remembered the journal still lying on the living room table. They'd both read through the night before, both gone to sleep without a word.

"You're not going to be here on your own, you're gonna sleep."

"Can't. Don't go."

Steven said nothing for a second, watching light rising up though the room.

"Look, cut you a deal. Go in, get through half a day, take care of what you've got to take care of, and get back here by two or three. I'll do the same, sort everything for tomorrow, take a day off together. Go up to Kew, see George. Or just stay here, eat grapes, fudge cake."

She kept running her nails up and down his forearm, just hard enough to make him shiver.

"You have no idea..." Her voice was warm, quiet, full of declarations didn't need wording.

And she was right, he thought, pulled back down towards her, floating. Moments like these, she could deliver oblivion.



The little hotel dining room had a fine view over the bay and the Atlantic beyond it, cottage-adorned hills framing the scene. Dark clouds hung low over Skye, the sky below them a bruised yellow, making him worry about the weather on the loch.

Waiting for his table be cleared, he picked through a couple of local leaflets. According to one, the bay was called Silver Sands, famous for its beauty and the treacherous currents fed by fast waters seeping out of Loch Morar. The loch was the deepest freshwater lake in Europe. There was nothing in the leaflets about it, but that's what a couple of locals had boasted when he'd passed through a month back.

The leaflets had pictures, maps, little tales of religious wars, bygone industries and sightings of prehistoric monsters, but history no longer concerned him. Trying to slowly savour a harsh-tasting, post-meal cigarette, he came across a small entry about a nearby loch. Loch Nevis. The translation from Gaelic meant "Bay of Heaven", next to it a picture of a sheltered bay across from Loch Morar. Quietly, so that no one walking past would hear, he whispered,

"No. Not deep enough... Not to hide me from you."

For the first time that morning her mobile rang. As she put it to her ear, she saw Speed Trap's number on the display.

"Yeah?"

"Liz?"

"Yes, Charles, what's the matter?"

"Steven. Any idea where he is?"

"What's up?"

"Someone looking for him."

"Page him then."

"I have."

"And?"

"No answer. She's been waiting here for half an hour."

"Who?"

"Some girl here looking for that Polish kid."

"Who?"

"Any idea where he might be?" He sounded impatient, hurrying her along.

"Wait... He's not here. Hang on." She was having a hard time computing, especially this morning.

"You wanna speak to her?"

"She say who she is?"

"No."

Was it someone Zen had met here? A sister? There'd been no mention of a sister in the opening letter of the journal.

"Is she alone?"

"Yeah. Look..."

"How old?"

"I don't know. Ask her yourself. I've just opened, got tills to put out, deliveries coming in..."

"Put her in a cab and send her here."

"What?"

"Send her over."

"To your place?"

"Yes."

"Your doorbell will ring in ten minutes flat."

They hung up the same instant, Liz pausing for a second before going through the phone's memory, finding 'S.Pager' and dialling. An operator answered, thanked her for using the service, asked her for the message.

"Call this instant. Urgent. Really. Liz."

The operator read the message back, all of it sounding even more ridiculous coming from the metronome stranger, thanked her and hung up.

Walking back to the van, his eyes were down on his boots and the hotel forecourt. He wanted to look up. To his right were the bay's silver sands and the Atlantic beyond them. The desire to look up was there, but not the strength. No one was any good at goodbyes.

Opening the sliding side door, dropping down on the mattress, he could lift his eyes again. Wind beat on the hollow shell of the machine, making it hum, but something told him the lullaby would not work today.

Liz climbed all four flights of stairs slowly, taking her time, making sure not to get out of breath. Composure was all. Walking though her own door, needlessly checking the entry phone handset was securely on, she felt a certain wolfish sense of domestic pride in her surroundings. It surprised her, the way her instincts betrayed she was no longer a girl.

The same instincts told her it was the woman she'd read about in the journal. It could be someone else, of course, a woman from another time and place, but knowing what she knew about his life of late, it didn't follow. How the woman had found them, and why now, she'd find out soon enough. For now she had to wrestle with what the meeting meant. What kinds of revelations. Screens and silences. Nothing she couldn't handle though, she thought, trying to stay calm, looking out the kitchen window to the street below. Just 'I don't know, I'm not sure,' sticking to the truth, things she could get through her teeth without choking or faltering.

But just as she tried to relax into acceptance, find a way out of herself, let her arms and shoulders melt into self-confidence, the doorbell rang, once, no cab visible between trees in the street below. She picked up the entry phone receiver,

"Hey, it's Darren. Got your friend here."

She pressed the key button, heard the lock buzz and release downstairs, went back into the kitchen.

It took seconds for the front door to open. She spoke without turning from the kitchen counter,

"Come through to the living room... Sit yourselves down."

She looked up from the cups on the worktop just for an instant, caught sight of Darren's goateed, smiling face pass by the door, then a flash of black hair following.

A couple of seconds later, he came back in.

"Hey, boss. Your friend's sat and sorted. I've got to get back."

"How'd you get here?"

"Charlie told me to take the van. Thought it'd be quicker."

"Thanks." She managed a quick smile to please the boy, or maybe to pacify herself.

"See ya'," he beamed, and was gone, shutting the door gently behind him.

"Would you like tea or coffee?" Without thinking, she found herself shouting through to the living room.

"Tea." The voice was quiet, tired.

Pouring the water, she considered holding whatever conversation was brewing in the same vein. Speaking from behind solid walls. Nameless. Anonymous. For some reason, she felt a great desire not to have a face go with the story she'd been told, not because of any ridiculous sense of expectation or disappointment, but out of pure instinct, pure intuition. And why the hell not? This was a bizarre situation, so why not play it that way? But how to explain? How to arrange such a thing, without giving the impression that something was wrong?

"Hi."

The woman was young, pale faced, though the complexion seemed to complement rather than diminish her tired looks. Grey eyes stared back from beneath a black fringe, dimmed by fear and guilt, no questions left about identity.

"Thanks..."

She took the mug, sitting straight, head hanging a little low. Liz took the hostess smile off her face, sat facing the street windows.

"Liz." The woman shook her hand. "How are you?"

"OK. And you?" Liz nodded casually. "Is he here?"

"No."

"Are you a friend?"

"He..." Liz'd known the conversation would be hard, but hadn't anticipated the technical difficulties involved in bridging the information gap between them. "He was here a while back."

"Was?"

"Yes. He left yesterday."

"D'you know where went?"

"My partner... I'm waiting for him to call now. He should know."

"This must seem strange to you. This visit. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry."

“How well’d you know him?” the woman asked, smiling a little.

“Not well. Or long. But well enough.”

The woman lowered her head, processing words, looking for new ones with which to continue.

“How was he?”

Liz wondered how on earth she could answer the question without burying the moment in grief, but as she waited, exercising all of her intellect, the phone rang.

“Excuse me a second.”

She took the cordless handset to the bedroom, left the sliding door open out of courtesy.

“Liz?”

“Yeah.” She felt a stream of tears suddenly assault the back of her eyes, desperate for an outlet.

“What’s the matter?”

“Why didn’t you call?”

“I did. Kept trying your mobile, left you a message.” She realised that sitting in the office earlier, she’d turned the volume down to stop the ringer from startling her out of her skin. The mobile was still in her coat pocket.

“You OK?”

“Yeah. Where are you?”

“In Jim’s office. I’ll be back soon. It’ll take half an hour to get a few things signed, then I’ve got to hike back to the shop. Got this Christmas competition going. Some journo’s coming to talk. I’d tell her to come back later, but it’s for an ad for this kiddie thing. I’ll come get you soon as I can, all right?”

“Hurry up.”

“Sure...”

She pressed a button on the phone, cutting the line her end, refusing to think about the tears ready to come as she walked back into the living room.

“Sorry about that. He can’t make it here right now. But I’ll find out what I can later...” The woman had a cigarette in her hand, using the ashtray Liz’d put out earlier. Sweet smelling smoke floated over the table. “How did you know he was here?”

“He phoned last night. Hung up before we had a chance to speak, but I dialled 1471, traced the payphone, the one opposite that shop. I got the train this morning, asked around. The guy with his arm in a sling helped.” What were the odds, Liz thought. Things pulled along by near-enough invisible strings. “Did he work there?”

“No.” She glanced at the cigarettes.

“Would you like one?”

She shook her head.

“He’s a friend of my partner’s.”

“Was he staying with you?”

The time had come to decide between lies or truth. Neither was a black or white option.

“No. He was just visiting.” She wanted to say more, but had no idea how to get past the fact they were strangers, that this was just a one-off meeting and her curiosity way out of place. But it was human, and nothing to be ashamed of, she thought. Nothing to have to hide. “Never thought I’d get to meet you in person.”

“Was he OK? I mean, was he... Together?”

“Not really.”

“I haven’t even asked... Don’t know how.”

“What is it?”

“D’you know if he had the test?”

Liz nodded, this time unable to hold the woman’s pained gaze. The silence which followed tested the limits of their resilience, pain clearly visible on the woman’s face, the kind of pain came only with loss of some desperate kind of hope. She was managing well, facing a reality she’d probably always suspected as inevitable, holding it together, but it was a kind of capability gave Liz absolutely no satisfaction in seeing exercised.

“He didn’t blame you. Said he understood... What couldn’t be changed. He wasn’t angry.” Was she sure? Did that last comment matter? “And you? How’s... Your health?”

“Doing all right, so far. The treatments are getting easier to live with... Not a pretty story.”

Liz remembered the journal she’d put inside her bedroom desk earlier. Should she surrender it? Would he have wanted that? Maybe. But what would the reaction be? Did the woman even know it existed? She remembered something at the beginning, about it being a secret. Or maybe he’d told her about it, but didn’t write it down. What would it achieve? Was it up to her to change his final wishes? Dictate history? Did this woman simply have the right to know? Looking at the reddened eyes, face drained by what looked like lack of sleep, she was glad she’d put the book away. Her history would have to be spared this document. Enough was enough.

The woman stubbed out her cigarette, took out a pen and a purse from her handbag.

“Here’s my father’s card. It’s in London. The number’s on there... I live right above the shop. I’ll write my mobile number as well... Please, can you give this to Zen if you see him again? I just want to talk. Explain.”

Again, another exhausting gap.

“Of course I will.”

“Did he say anything about where he was going?”

Liz shook her head. She knew all too well, but also knew there was no way to put any of it into words.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s me should be apologising. Such mess. Such an awful mess... Thank you.”

The woman seemed to hesitate, as if stuck on the verge of tears she refused to let past, then got up, put her pen and purse back in her bag, swung it onto her shoulder. Liz smiled the widest, most sincere smile she could muster, watched her walk out in silence.

Even after the door had shut, a certain air of effort still permeated the room, helping her hold things together in the sudden solitude of her own home.



The day was close to over, and time with it also. Sitting up, the van empty of everything save the mattress and his rucksack, he saw a sky darker than it should’ve been at this hour, covered with grey-black cloud, sped along by strong winds coming in off the Atlantic. The sky had always been a friend, like sleep, always something to wonder at, but today, both of them failed to show. Sleep had not come and the clouds looked like they were just waiting for him to clamber out before letting loose. It wasn’t like they’d be crying or anything. He didn’t need their tears. It was simply betrayal.

He’d hoped for some kind of crazed peace to come, anaesthetise him in these last few hours, but all he felt was the terror of being no more. Apart from this year, life had been a true time of innocence. It wasn’t people or events rolling out before him now, but images, colours, smells, all the sensual things he held dearest. So much wonder, it was impossible to believe this last year had been real, that it was all coming to a great, big, ugly close. But it was. Denial was not going to help. Innocence was over, and experience had hit him with all it had.

He shoved the sliding bay door aside, climbed out into a slight wind, pulled the rucksack out. Little drops of rain landed on his face, but the sensation was not unpleasant. Far off over the ocean, light beams searched the waters, promising a few stars yet.

Keys left in the ignition, he walked away from the petrol station, little stressed charges running along his spine every couple of seconds.

“This is hard...” he whispered through clenched teeth, crossing the road towards the little river that run off the loch, “I take it all back. All my promises. All vows... Let me rest.”

The silence in the flat told Steven to step quietly as he shut the front door behind him. Liz was in the bedroom, asleep. The smell of cigarettes drew him into the living room, the two cups and the card still on the table. He read the name, address in West London, tried to remember seeing the shop in his travels. Taking the cups through to the kitchen, he noticed traces of different coloured lipstick on the rims. He unpacked the cake from its box, the plate of sandwiches wrapped in tin foil, took them both through to the living room.

As quietly as he could, he lit the gas fire, then a few of the candles on the mantelpiece. Dusk was coming on. He wanted her to wake to light and warmth. Staring into the fire, clearing his head of the days business, he looked at the card again. A salesperson? Liz might’ve been planning some kind of surprise Christmas gift, but then she wouldn’t have left the card out like that for him to find. Something else? An old friend dropping by? She’d sounded distressed on the phone. Withheld something. The message she’d sent through earlier was starting to worry him.

She still looked asleep when he took her wrist in his hand, held it for a while. Her eyes opened, red from crying. She smiled, drew him down to on top of her. With his head next to hers, he couldn’t hear any noise coming from her lips, but her chest kept jumping in panic.

“Oh Jesus, Steven...”

Night deepened. Wind chased up slick waves along the long, narrow loch, icy gusts of rain making smoking difficult. There were tiny breaks in the cloud, but no stars in them, the moon nowhere to be seen.

The narrow tarmac road had finished its climb up the steep banks, only a footpath left up ahead. Further and further away from civilisation. He thought of everyone left behind, everyone who'd ever taken the time to think about death and done it with guts. It was easy enough to get to the very moment and not once think of what it was, the end. Easy to pull a trigger, jump without looking down, swallow pills and sleep, never once think anything. But he didn't want that. Didn't want to be absent from it, not because of any kind of machismo, but because if he failed now, showed nothing, no strength, then maybe this thing inside him was just obsession, weakness, an invention of a psyche too weak to live in the real world. If he didn't get a hold of himself now, like some must've done in the past, in this moment, the last of the last, then it meant he was hollow as well as broken, had held onto nothing and was nothing. He'd failed so many, but now he had to breathe deep, get a grip. If he managed it, lived up to this final instant, then the world of imperfections won still, but it would be no moral victory.

He said her name out loud, shivered beneath the sound of it in the silent place. The word held meaning that was far more than just label, contained substance that touched him deeper than a set of letters had any right to.

She picked at the tiny triangles of sandwich for Steven's sake. He'd told her to eat, and she obeyed, trusting him more than her own body.

"OK, you can stop nibbling now. Want some cake?" She nodded. Cake was the very last thing on her mind. He cut a slice for her, made sure she took the plate in her hands. "In China, they mourn when someone is born, and celebrate when they die."

"Who's the cheerful one tonight..." It was the best she could do as far as humour went.

"What'd you think we should do with it?" The journal was again lying on the table beside them. Calm as ever, Steven sipped his coffee, Liz holding the stiff drink he'd just made for her.

"Do what he asked."

"You don't think she'd like to see it?"

"I think it's the last thing she needs right now," she said with conviction, wondering what was behind these questions. The Steven she knew was more than sensitive enough to understand that all too well.

"It would hurt her at first, I know. But if someone has to tell her that he's gone, then maybe this would help her understand why."

"It'd make her feel guilty..."

"It'd make her feel like a goddess. She'd have to appreciate it... Hell, anybody wrote anything like this about me, I'd want to see it. No matter what."

"You're not just anybody."

"You think we should just honour his last request and just mail it on to his family?"

"Yes."

"What if he knew about today's visit? Would it make a difference?"

"He could've sent it to her himself."

"Maybe he didn't think she was remotely interested."

"I think he knew well enough what she felt and didn't feel... It might bury her, you understand? Might make her follow him... Not 'cause she needs him, but 'cause she might start imagining she does after all."

Steven was staring at the table, and she had the sudden feeling he was only talking to keep her from being pulled down by the emotional whirlpool of silence, that he didn't believe a word of what he was suggesting. Spooning some more cake into her mouth, she realised he was simply trying to keep her spirits up with both the food and the conversation.

"What do you want me to tell her?" Steven asked.

"I'll speak to her."

"What will you say?"

"The truth, I suppose. She has the right to know what happened. Didn't want to tell her today. Not when she's here, alone... Tomorrow, maybe."



The only thing he'd saved from the contents of the case was the watch she'd given him. Its white face said half seven. He tipped the rucksack upside down, let the collapsed dinghy and plastic oars fall onto grass. The oar was far too soft to use as a spade, so he collected enough rocks to make the rucksack straps strain, then stood over the dinghy. The little spot he'd found was flat, offering a clear view of the vast loch and the black hills the other side. Maybe it was better that there be no moon, else he might be spotted going out, raising alarm. No, this place was perfect, he thought with grimness that shut out all other emotions. A tree beside him, some earth, rocks nearby. Earth, water, air. A little campfire would be nice, but he hadn't thought to bring any wood with him. Far off somewhere, an old him got angry at the old him, but all those emotions didn't seem to matter anymore. He took a swig of vodka to counter the inconvenient hunger he felt in the pit of his stomach, crouched down beside the crumpled dinghy. He'd brought the pump with him, but decided to use his lungs. It was only right he sail on his own breath.

"I called George. He's expecting us for dinner at half eight."
"Quarter to now," Liz whispered without moving.



The chambers full, he stood up, head spinning from the effort and hurt, screwed the two-piece oar together, pushed the dinghy towards water. He swung the rucksack onto his back, clipped the cross straps together, picked up an extra large rock he'd found and dumped it in the bottom of the dinghy. Once he'd stepped in, nothing but his footprints would remain.

The dinghy bounced around as he jumped in, waves calm close to shore, no match for his, however inept, rowing.

"What am I thinking? In this moment, the last of the last, what am I thinking?"

Liz stopped at the door, closed her eyes. Steven stared at her from the living room.

"C'mon," he said with a cocked head.

"No."

"George's waiting."

"I don't want to go."

He paused, watching her leaning against the door, blocking the way.

"Won't be long. The cake isn't going anywhere..."

Cold wood pressed against her cheek, smelling of oil paint, of new beginnings, of homes.

"Steven."

"What?"

"That thing, you know you said. About The Chinese mourning life and celebrating death."

"Yes."

"You believe that?"

"You ever known me to joke?"

She watched, waiting for the grin to appear on his narrow lips, but they remained drawn tight.



Without thinking, he'd reached the middle of the loch. It was narrow, between two little islands close to each shore, like a gate to somewhere magical. Taking a sip from the bottle of vodka he'd brought along, he checked the watch. Five past eight. Time had gone.

Boat tossed around by waves, he tucked the oar safely into the strap of the dinghy to stop it floating off. Lighting a cigarette, he thought about people left behind. Steven with the journal. Liz. Sophie. Everyone else. Mates. Parents. Women whose smiles he remembered so vividly. Hers, denied him still.

He knew the cigarette would take five minutes to smoke. It took five seconds to go through all those faces and be left with the absence of the one, the one he still could not make come alive. Even her voice, the one he'd heard just a day ago, was nothing but echo, was far away, nowhere in the noise of this place. He could hear wind, water, even the tobacco crackle as he sucked on the filter, shaking so much he could barely get it in and out his lips. But not her, calling him back. The cigarette was already half-way gone. What thought, then, at the last?

Her name pushed itself into his thoughts. A name for everything that had turned into pain. Nothing but that left.

No, that a lie too. He felt more. Much more, cutting through all the goodbyes, all the loss. A grace so pure, nothing could soil it, no matter what he told himself or others. Can't leave on a lie. He smiled. Can't live or leave on a lie.

With one hand, he put the cigarette out on the plastic side of the dinghy. It melted a tiny hole, spouting hardly any air. Body shaking with alien power, he took the bottle by its neck, smashed it against the rock that would drag the boat down after him. Waited a moment. Just to conjure up enough strength left, enough life, to do this one, last cowardly thing. Stabbing the glass in, the soft wall burst with stale air.

He tried to say something, but the whisper was mistimed. The heavy rucksack dragged him down as he fell back into the water, tumbling, head-first. Noise filled his ears, water his nostrils and mouth, cold darkness shoving her name right back down his throat.

Thursday 14th December

It seemed like such an ordinary morning, pale light creeping in through the brown curtains, the usual sound of seagulls outside our window. NO, not our window (why did I write that?). I still cannot believe we spent the night in that god awful motel. If he had told me we weren't going to George's before we left, I'd have never agreed, never, to spend the night in the same room as the one he'd stayed in. God. The very same bed. We pulled the two singles together and with the lights off we talked. What was he trying to show me? How ordinary it all was, or how special? Or both? This duality he keeps harping on about. God, how true. We talked of broken hearts and marriage, about death and babies.

After he fell asleep, I moved his legs up, so he was all curled into himself, like a child. I'd never seen him like that before. So vulnerable and beautiful. I kept talking, whispering things, sweet things, tender little nothings I'm always that little bit too scared to tell him to his face. It seems like I want to take care of him everywhere, even in his dreams.

I couldn't sleep, not because of fear or tears or anything like that, but for him. Another day together. Two and a half years gone already. No, not gone, somehow saved, secured, ours. I'm so free of the past I feel like a kid myself. How does it all work, all these destinies tearing about? Zen's? Mine? Chris'? Were the ancients right? Polytheism? Does everybody get their own god to arrange the world for them?

I finally fell asleep, just for a short while, and when I woke he was there, looking at me. The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes were his. So sad. And that smile. My God, the life of me.

The End...